

the MEADOW



the MEADOW
2015

TRUCKEE MEADOWS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Reno, Nevada

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AMERICANA, 1971

Caitlin Turner

Nothing ever happens here.
Rocks and half-eaten fruit are
tossed on a corrugated tin roof,

topped by a painted sign that announces
Peaches! fervent as a Baptist revival.
Its Coca-Cola steeple and rays of power lines

jut out of the dyed-blue sky
like a promise.

Forty years away, I cross the same stretch
of highway toward Memphis,
trying to find God in the red urgency

of We Cash Checks and Family Dollars signs,
telling myself that splendor can be a sunlit storefront,
a photograph can be a prayer.

BADLANDS

Caitlin Turner

Waking up in the morning
underwater
and I am certain that the cracks
in my palms are rivers,
pointing out the directions
we should drift.

But sometimes I want you closer,
in a driveway or doorway
with sunlight floating through
your open mouth.
Something weightless and familiar,
to stand in the kitchen
without speaking,
to laugh and drink until
the sky becomes a
color that no one has ever named.

(I tell you that I don't miss you
anymore when you wander,
but even then, I know that to not
touch your hand is a mistake.
To walk one in front of the other
is a mistake.)

While I stay awake at night waiting for
the paintings to speak, you
wait for them to sigh.
By dark your body is smaller and glowing.
You are headlights going south.

VIRGINIA CITY CEMETERY

Atom Richards

The only way to get to the ghost
town is to traverse the grade.
On the way up, I tell her, "I'm going the long way,"
to make our time last.

"By 'long way' (she makes air quotes with her fingers)
do you mean far out into the desert
where you can bury my body
and no one will know?"

On New Year's Day,
we walk on warped wooden sidewalks
of this old mining town.
The rotting planks complain under our heels.

The last time I held a girl's moist hand,
my father still breathed Nevada's cold dry air.
Her hand is slightly cold in my warm palm.
It sweats first.

Along twisted broken asphalt,
smattered with snow,
we finish our trek to visit the dead,
to read the names on their stones,
organic bodies that were replaced with granite
angels and timelines,

their graves now covered by hard crunchy snow,
held down in place by the crystal blue sky—the sun
attempts to bring us warmth.
We breathe thin air.

I quietly hope we'll meet
and visit the dead again.

THE COMSTOCK LASTS

Milla van der Have

One more warm day. Once more
the fay-like hum of the tarantula
hawks, those wearied spirits

of garden, once more the hummingbird
and the apparitions of lizards
on stone, once more the wind astride

in the trees and perhaps you and I can
conjure up an image of horse, wild
upon the lands. Bring them

to our grass, if you will, the stallion
lingering, his strong-ridged back
turned towards us and huddled

in a corner at the far-end, the mares. One
more day like that, a young colt still
unwieldy on its newborn legs.

MORNING AFTER HALLOWEEN, NORTH LAS VEGAS

Tee Iseninger

The neighbors are out in legion, the mothers climbing into two-tone Subarus whose odometers march in step with each dollar the husbands bring home, their receipt-stapled bags stuffed with fur things, sateen things, things they bought on credit only days ago and have now have scrubbed the right amount to remove chocolate stains but keep the like-new luster, and the fathers look away as they pull out of the short drive-ways, continue their own important work of scraping the dried entrails of pumpkin off the front porches, pretending at raking the rest of the leaves before giving it up for a nap.

The children have given nothing up to the morning. Their eyes bloodshot their skin buzzing they play at the same dry-run demonry and candied drunkenness of the night before, but more earnestly now, unencumbered by bulky costumes and polite parties, now that the sugar has had a chance to work through their small, beating bodies and glaze them in bravery.

1987, and I was 14 and in the dark dance hall with the made-up girls, the monsters and witches, third coke in an hour clutched so hard I couldn't feel my fingers, Randy there again with his clear bottle, says *have some*, pours it in the can, and then does it again, and I limber, and the rest of the night is a blotted shine of myself in the bathroom mirror, in *The Reflex*, the dry heaves and princess tit-pinching, until Randy and I are laughing, coughing in the wet middle of Tonopah Avenue cold, our shoulders aching, the doors locked and still more than an hour until our parents would come.

The Subarus are pulling back in, loaded with new bags, last night's princesses running out barefoot to the driveway, boys still out back, wild-eyed, wielding what they can find, and the mothers hand over two or three bags, say, *You can help scramble eggs*, breakfast for dinner again. And the fathers are waking up, rolling toward the window, blinking in the glare of their boys' twirling weapons, wondering again if they should paint the house that shade of skin-beige or sky-blue.

THE POTOMAC

Travis Truax

At the bridge you grinned
like a woman returning home
after five years gone.

In the little space
between our footsteps
we both felt the gap
that happens
when a body
is too far removed
from the land that bore it.

You grabbed my hand
like a train switching tracks
as we stopped
to watch the boats
tool along the cold water.
The cedar-white oars,
like daylight against the dark river
reminded you of years
you drifted off
the coast of Florida
and the feel of a long rhythm
you once lived by.

You mentioned twice
what the ocean meant
to you, and the feel
of Miami's bay
where you rowed
till sundown
every day of senior-year.
There is no home, you said
like the long, impossible one
you spend your life
looking for.

An autumn moon snuck up
above Georgetown

as we walked—
huddled against October
toward a warm and patient place.

OPENING DAY

Sean Prentiss

This morning, a deer sprinted
Across the old, cracked road—
As if chased—
His hide stretched
Across October ribs.
His eyes darted as his hooves
Chattered across road
Then sunk deep into soil.
Soon, he calmed and walked to where
Corn turned to apple trees.
His heart slowed. There
He took the opportunity to graze
Upon fallen apples—

FUBAR

Toni Graham

Give . . . wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.

—Proverbs 31:6-7

In LAX on his way to the gate, Slater slips on something and nearly bumps into a young woman with an orange tan, wearing backless high-heeled shoes and towing a Yorkie on a rhinestone leash. She stands holding an iPhone, blocking the flow of foot traffic, stock still, right in front of one of those airport news shops. As she inexplicably holds the phone in front of her face, smiles, and snaps her own photo, Slater stops to examine the bottom of his shoe and realizes he has stepped in dog crap.

The woman does not notice or pretends not to notice her dog has defecated, so as Slater walks on he says, “Excuse me! Your dog pooped here!” For a moment, she lifts her chin and meets Slater’s glance, but then looks away. By this time Slater has passed her up, so he calls over his shoulder, “Don’t foul the footpath!”

He’s on his way back to Oklahoma, having just spent the weekend in Santa Monica, most recently photographing Frank Gehry’s residence. Beth had been unable to come along on the trip, needing to act as hostess for a long-planned baby shower for one of her friends’ daughters, which is the primary reason he chose this particular weekend—he does not want her or anyone else to find out about the real deal, the thing that *actually* brought him to Southern California. Well, the old saw is true: It only hurts when he laughs, so he made sure last night not to watch any comedies on the hotel-room television. He looks at his watch and realizes he has time to kill—might as well grab an early lunch. He heads for the bar where he knows he can order a quick burger and a double Manhattan.

When he takes a seat, the surge of pain stuns Slater. His body from the rib cage to the navel thrums with a burning ache. Must be the elastic pressure belt the surgeon has made him wear. How will he be able to hide the thing from Beth—it’s not as if coming to bed with a girdle on is something that heretofore has been within the realm of possibility. He stifles the groan he feels on the verge of emitting and orders a Rusty Nail—where did that come from? He has not drunk a Scotch and Drambuie since he was young and still teaching at Pratt, and he had fully intended to order his usual Manhattan. The pain must have called up a weird unconscious association—there is something toxic sounding about a rusted nail, the taint of tetanus. *Discomfort*, my ass.

The woman to his left turns her face ever-so-slightly away from Slater as she reads the *L.A. Times* and sips a glass of white wine. Don't worry, I'm not going to land on you, Slater thinks. It occurs to him that maybe she smells dog do, so he leans down and wipes off his shoe, then rolls up the paper napkin and wings it over the bar and into a garbage receptacle. He thanks the bartender for the drink and takes a long pull from the Rusty Nail; the slow heat from his throat to his chest provides a winning contrast to the ugly burn tearing through his torso—his “core” as the guys at the gym now say.

What would his father say if he had lived to know that his only son has plunked down beaucoup bucks to have fat sucked and lasered from his midsection? The answer could not be clearer; Poppy would say his son has turned into a vain ponce, that no real man would spend money on womanly medical procedures. But his father had also claimed that any man who would commit suicide had to be what his father termed a “sister man”—that only a sissy would be too afraid to live. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going,” his father often said, and at times employed other 1950s clichés, such as “A quitter never wins and a winner never quits,” truisms which even then Slater viewed as tired pap and an offshoot of social Darwinism—not what one might expect from a hardcore labor union man like his dad. As for his father deliberately overdosing on sleeping pills: Slater might more easily have predicted Poppy joining the Taliban, or having a sex change operation, or even becoming a Republican.

But Poppy was always a complex guy, no doubt about that. He had been for the most part a kind and doting father when Slater was a kid, taking him to Dodgers' games and fishing at Breezy Point jetty and even serving as Scout Master to his Cub Scout troop. He called Slater Davey-Man or Slugger and never missed one of Slater's baseball games or soccer matches. He hired a metal band for Slater's bar mitzvah party, a downer for the oldsters, but bliss for Slater and the other 13-year olds. But as a father he had a dark side, too, what Slater's grief counselor called a “Jungian shadow.” He could become sadistic, without warning and for no apparent reason. When Slater was going through his cowboy phase in the first grade, his very favorite song was the country standard: “Red River Valley”—ironic now that he has ended up living in Oklahoma. One day, young Slater was sitting at the kitchen table in their flat when they still lived in Flatbush, drawing with crayons on butcher-block paper. Another of Poppy's contradictions: he played piano beautifully and even composed his own music, not what you might think of as your standard-issue longshoreman. Slater had at times sat next to Poppy on the piano bench, watching him play. On the day of the coloring crayons, David had drawn wobbly lines across the page and was drawing crude replicas of what he thought looked like musical notes.

“How 'bout that!” Poppy had exclaimed. “Did you know you've written down the music for ‘Red River Valley’?”

Slater can still remember the astonished pleasure resulting from his father's revelation. At six years of age, not once had he considered that

his father would tell him anything untrue—this possibility had never entered his mind. With the magical thinking of young children, accepting that he had accidentally duplicated his favorite piece was conceivable, in some giddy, unanticipated way.

But Poppy had not been content to leave the joke there, inside their family flat. His father insisted that David take the piece to school with him the next day, tell the teacher that the crayoned page contained the song “Red River Valley,” and ask her to play the tune on the piano to the class during music time. Feeling shy, David had said he did not want to, but Poppy insisted. The inevitable had happened: Slater took the sheet to the young, freckled woman who was his first-grade teacher, explained that it contained “Red River Valley,” and earnestly requested that she play the song during music time. Slater does not remember everything about his life as a six-year old, but this moment has a grotesque clarity. The teacher’s facial expression had gone from surprised to blank to contemplative, and then she told him sweetly that she had something else planned for today, but that she would try to play the piece some other time. That had been satisfactory to David, but when he arrived home that evening, his father immediately asked if the teacher played the cowboy song for the class. When Slater reported on the events, his father laughed long and hard, his wolfish teeth flashing. Not until many years later did Slater recall the incident and realize his father had punked him.

Conversely, Poppy had brought up his kids to do the right thing, and in particular, never to lie. And Slater never has been a liar, has always aimed to be a mensch. But ever since Poppy killed himself, Slater has found himself in uncharted waters. Though he cannot get it up with Beth, he lusts inappropriately after women in his circle; he skips his office hour sometimes and leaves students in the lurch, and last, but certainly not least, he skulks off to California and has liposuction. While it is true that plenty of straight guys have “procedures” these days, Slater had never imagined that *he* would be one of those men.

He does not really give a damn whether the woman next to him at the bar knows what he has done, so he removes from the inside pocket of his jacket the brochure the surgeon’s assistant gave Slater when he left the surgery suite Friday.

After a surgery like liposuction, patients may be bloated and feel distended. Liposuction surgery is really a controlled injury—body fluid rushes to the site and the injured tissue becomes like a sponge. Your physician has gone under the carpet of skin and taken away the fat undercoating, so the raw surface oozes serum on the inside.

Before he came to Santa Monica for the lipo, he had studied up on the procedure and probably should have decided then and there not to go ahead with it. When Slater read the Internet info about the process, all he could think of was the liquefaction that takes place after a serious earthquake. During the Loma Prieta earthquake in ’89, because San Francisco’s Marina District had been built upon superficial sandy materials that were used to fill the old lagoon in 1915, liquefaction had caused water-saturated, fine grain sands and silts to behave as viscous fluids rather

than solids. This liquidity caused entire buildings to sink into the muck. Slater's flesh feels equally unstable, roiling and suppurating beneath the pressure belt.

He chugs the rest of his drink and tries to catch the eye of the bartender, then pulls a notebook from his attaché case. Making lists has for Slater become like yoga for many others; the process calms his nerves and evens him out. He thinks for a moment, then writes in his notebook,

Things About LA:

Surprisingly good buildings—Santa Monica Heritage Museum
kind of cool.

Breast implants ubiquitous, even the hotel maids.

Very, very white teeth.

Bartenders and waitresses ready for their close-up.

Armpits on display—sleeves at a premium.

Hug each other constantly, just like on Leno.

What he should make is a list of ideas about how to hide the lipo from Beth. It's not as if he can claim that he had undergone the procedure on a spur-of-the moment impulse just because he happened to be in Santa Monica—she would know that one has to schedule this sort of thing in advance, which he had. And maybe the worst part—the part that would be the coup de grace, is the financial aspect of the caper. He paid more than \$7,000 for so-called “smart lipo.” He borrowed from his 403B and has all the paperwork routed to his box on campus, but he is not so foolish as to expect that he will not be caught out by Beth someday. As for the bruising: Well, he'll just have to remove the pressure belt at night and sleep in a T-shirt. It's not as if there is much chance of them having sex, anyway.

He slides the notebook back into his attaché case and pulls out a stack of mail that he had grabbed from his campus box before he left Hope Springs. There's this week's *The Nation*—he'll have something to read on the plane on the way home. And there are the usual bills. But most of the mail he receives these days seems to come from only four sources: the AARP, though he refuses to join; hearing aid companies; burial insurance companies; and funeral directors. When he opens a brochure from one of the burial insurance companies, out falls a return postcard that the recipient is expected to return to the company, asking for more information. He scrawls at the bottom of the postcard: Remove me from your mailing list. And while you're at it, drop dead yourself.

“Oh! Do you go to Dr. Beauchamp, too?”

The attractive woman on the stool next to him has tapped him on the arm and is smiling like a killer, displaying her lovely teeth, probably porcelain veneers, from the looks of them.

Slater is caught off guard. “How'd you . . . ?”

She points to the lipo brochure, which has Dr. Beauchamp's name and address printed on it, and Slater nods, not knowing what to say.

“Dr. Mike is my plastic surgeon, too!” she says. “I had my thighs done.”

Slater exerts a tremendous effort not to look down at her thighs. “I guess that makes us homeys, then,” he says, raising his glass to her. She clinks her wine glass against his nearly empty Rusty Nail.

“Did he give you anything for the pain?” she says. Her gaze morphs into a feral stare.

Oh lord—he gets it now—all she wants is to score some Vicodin off him. He does not wait for her to ask, just pulls the bottle from the pocket of his blazer, snaps off the lid with his thumb, hands off one tab to the woman and washes down another with his cocktail.

She emits a husky laugh, extends one slim, tanned hand to shake Slater’s hand, and with the other hand pops the Vico and washes it quickly down with wine. He notices she has those long, squared-off fingernails he has seen a lot of in L.A.

“I’m Stella,” she says.

“Stella by Starlight,” Slater says—always one of his favorite songs.

She looks at him with a frown of incomprehension. “I’m sorry?”

Shite, it’s the age gap, again. She must be part of the Diddy generation, or at best a Michael Bublé fan. Well, never mind. “Another round for the lady and me,” Slater tells the barkeep.

Slater wakes just as the plane begins its descent to Will Rogers. He remembers missing his flight from LAX, a flurry of phone calls home, and catching an evening flight, but the time between his leaving the airport bar and getting on the plane is a tad blurry. His last clear memory is of looking at the LAX sign from the plane window as they took off. Yes, he has been *lax*, no doubt about that.

Apparently he fell asleep soon after he took his seat on the flight home. Slater had managed to get the window, and the middle seat is miraculously empty. The little old lady on the aisle already unbuckled her seatbelt and looks as if she wants to vault for the door. Old gal probably has a weak bladder. The sky outside the window is black, though his original flight was to have landed in the afternoon.

Face it, Slater, you went on a bender. He would have guessed, had he even thought about such a thing, that his days of benders were over, not to mention picking up strange women was a thing of the long ago past, when he was still single. But one thing he does remember from the late ‘60s and early ‘70s is that drugs and alcohol have a way of making strange bedfellows. Not that he and the woman in LAX made it to bed—*thank you Jesus*, as Oklahomans are wont to say. But a series of nearly unfathomable events went down in that airport bar—this much he does remember. There was the Vicodin and the second round of cocktails. There were still more cocktails after that, followed by a highly, highly ill-advised second Vicodin each, at which point they vacated their bar stools and moved to a small table in the back of the bar. And, yes!—they had made out, and had apparently made out for hours, as he and Stella both missed their flights.

He remembers the taste of vanilla and the scent of jasmine—god, it had been a feast of the senses, and he has a shameful memory of fon-

dling the woman's breasts, and even of her giving him some crotch action. Jesus, from where has all this come? There's that phrase you hear all the time now: spiraling out of control. Well, he had spiraled, all right, big-time. At the same moment that he flushes with shame, his oozing torso begins to throb beneath the pressure belt. He reaches into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulls out the Vicodin container, opens it and tips it toward his palm. Holy crap, only two pills remain! He had at least 25 when he entered the airport this morning. Stella must have weaseled the rest out of him—he's been rolled. Reflexively, he checks his wallet. While there is no cash left, that is not exactly surprising—cocktails at the airport bar had been an unprecedented 18 bucks a pop. His credit cards are all there; at least there's that. He swallows a pill without water, the tablet scraping against his throat.

After his elderly row-mate has made it to the aisle and started moving forward, Slater wrenches his bag from beneath the seat in front of him and scooches out to deplane. The pain of his sluicing mid-section is nothing when compared to the anguish that overtakes him now as he steps from the plane and back into his real life. He remembers that acronym FUBAR. Yes, his situation now is *fucked up beyond all repair*. At 59 and having been married for 30 of those years, he has learned that after crossing certain bridges, there is no way back, period, end of story, that's all she wrote. And the fact is, he has never before cheated on Beth, understanding from the get-go that to do so would change things so irreparably that there would be no recovery. Enough damage to their marriage had been done in the early 70s during the *Bob-and-Carol-and-Ted-and-Alice* days, when he and Beth had experimented a bit sexually, but at least then, they had both been in on the poor decisions and bad behavior. Recovering from that folly had taken years. But does necking in the airport really count as cheating? It seems more like momentary foolishness he should just forget about. He steps onto the escalator going down to the parking garage, his bag feeling as if it weighs ten stone, his torso vibrating with pain. He has 90 minutes driving time between OKC and Hope Springs during which he has to think of a way to hide two huge misdemeanors from Beth: the lipo and the interlude with Stella. No, don't even think of her name ever again. Take a page from Slick Willy and think of her as "that woman." Better yet: don't think of her at all.

Something edges into Slater's periphery of pain. Not only is his torso on fire, but his feet hurt, too. The sensation of gnawing, throbbing pain in his mid-section is now accompanied by a sharp, lancing stinging from his heels. He finds himself limping, hobbled, toddling off the escalator like some decrepit grey-beard.

And now this recollection comes to him, too, rising from the brown-out in which he has found himself: He had nearly missed a second flight out of LAX, and only *that woman* checking the time on her cell phone and yelping, had alerted him to the imminence of his outbound flight. He'd had to run 40 gates hell to leather in order to board before the doors shut. Evidently while he was asleep on the plane, blisters had formed on his heels, now pulsing with pain and doubtless weeping like the flesh of

his mid-section. His limping involuntarily slows as he drags himself toward the lot where he parked his car. People push past him impatiently. I can't make it, Slater realizes, shuffling off to the side and leaning against a wall. He is forced to remove his shoes and carry them, like a teenager sneaking back into the house after curfew. He slips his sunglasses out of his pocket and puts them on so he can avoid eye contact with anyone, and limps back to one of the airport shops, where he is forced to buy a pair of fleecy little slippers and pull them onto his battered feet.

Beth is lying on the sofa when Slater lets himself through the front door. No lights are on, but the television disperses a flickering blue glow throughout the living room. He cannot discern whether her eyes are open.

Slater hears the voice of Dr. G, Medical Examiner. "Was it *natural*?" the doctor queries in her high-pitched voice. "Was it *trauma*? Or was it a *combination* of natural and trauma?"

"Bethie?" Slater says. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," she answers immediately, her voice flat as if she's pissed off. Off goes the TV, and on goes the lamp on the end table. Over the archway between the living room and dining room hangs a banner several feet wide, consisting of individual plastic letters linked together by pink ribbon, the letters spelling out "**It's a girl!**" For a moment, his gut ices over, but then he remembers the baby shower. "How was the party?" he says.

She does not answer, but sits up, points at Slater's feet, and says "What's the deal?"

"Blisters," he says, "bad ones. I had to run for my plane—bought these at Will Rogers."

"Good grief, Dave—did you have to buy *red* slippers? You look like a clown."

"That's all they had. Left over from the holidays, I guess." He sees now that clinging to the ceiling above Beth's head is a Mylar balloon in the shape of a baby bottle, the nipple a lurid pink.

"How was your trip?" Beth says.

"Okay, but I'm exhausted," he says. "Mechanical trouble with the plane was the last thing I needed." He forces a laugh. "Unless you count blisters."

"Did you see Gehry?"

He says no, that he just shot the house and did some research in the library. "I'm going to take a quick shower and then hit the rack—you coming?" He does not wait for her response, but drops his bag and heads for the bathroom, where he can stash the pressure belt in the linen closet and from the hamper scrounge a T-shirt under which he can hide the oozing lipo area. He first turns on the hot water, then undresses on the fluffy red bathmat that matches his unfortunate new slippers.

Do I tell her, or not? About either of the things I've done? He decides he needs to sleep on the matter and stoops to pick up his trousers and remove the last Vicodin from a pocket. He steps into the tub, swallows the tab and drinks from the shower, then lets water pound on his head and

steam overcome him. He gives himself over to blind sensation, no past no future. *In the here and now*, as they used to say in the '60s.

Slater already taught his morning seminar and is fulfilling his mandatory afternoon office hour. He hopes no one comes into his office today: failing students begging for mercy; truants offering trumped up excuses or asking for Incompletes; TAs overwhelmed by their responsibilities; students or former students asking for letters of recommendation—often the latter are the very worst students, who if they had any brains would know better than to ask for a rec letter from the professor teaching a course for which the student did not earn an “A”; and the perennial students who just want to talk—these students want badly to secure positions as designers or PAs in good firms as soon as they graduate, or want to bag assistant professorships somewhere. They mistakenly assume he holds the key to how these students, often untalented, can succeed in their professional desires. He often offers benign banalities such as, “Do your best work—worry about the work, not the rewards,” or “Brilliant designs will always rise to the top like cream—be brilliant.” He seldom tells them the truth: that maybe one or two students in a section of 60 will ever be good enough to succeed in the private or public sectors or academe—that they may as well have gone to trade school in HVAC. Many of them have read *The Fountainhead* and have a weird-ass misperception of what it is to be an architect.

He does still have passion for teaching, and knocks himself out trying to reach the students, to help along the weaker students by teaching them everything he knows, and to discover the talented ones and help them find their way. But in his less inspired moments, he sometimes feels as if at least some of the time he might be casting pearls before swine.

Being a professor of architecture has changed a great deal since Slater was appointed assistant professor at Pratt nearly 30 years ago. In those days, he was still idealistic: O, visions of Taliesin! At that time, 95% of his students were male. The few female students were often homely, hairy, serious young woman wearing Birkenstocks, who sometimes smelled of onions or of rank perspiration. Things were simpler, then. He had very few female students until the 80s, and until the late 90s, most of the women ended up transferring out of architecture. Now his seminars are packed with bright, often beautiful young women, many of whom shamelessly flirt with him and/or make crude passes. He wasn't trained for this shit. The university offers regular mandated seminars on sexual harassment, but these consist only of trotting out the lawyers, who lecture the professors about how to cover their asses, liability wise. What Slater feels is actually needed is behavioral specialists who teach faculty how to deal with advances from students. It would not hurt, either, if there were some special advice available on how to avoid being attracted to some of these girls. Things are especially complicated these days, since many of the male faculty are taking daily-dose versions of ED meds like Cialis and are likely to pop a woody at inappropriate moments. Slater would likely fall into this category himself, if not for the fact that both Viagra and Cialis

had given him headaches that felt as if a stiletto and a steel drum were simultaneously at work in his cranium.

He has closed the door to his office, hoping to deter students from coming in. If a student knocks and enters his office, university policy dictates that—whether the student is male or female—professors are to prop their doors open wide so there can be no perception of or accusations of sexual impropriety. Students sometimes claim they have been the victim of molestation by professors, and it is also not unheard of for a disgruntled graduate student to come to campus and gun down a professor who declines a dissertation or assigns a failing grade. Three years ago, one of his suite mates, a visiting scholar from Rutgers, had been shot dead in his office; Slater had heard the gun go off. While most often the litigious students or the gun-toting students are nut-jobs, what is also true is that certain faculty offices are stocked with the equivalent of the Hollywood casting couch. One colleague's office door is closed many hours in the afternoon several times a week, after which a pretty red-haired young woman is seen to leave the office, carrying an armload of books and wearing a stagy "scholarly" expression on her face. The buzz in the department is that semen stains glow white upon the dark cushions of the guy's office sofa.

Well, who can blame the guy? Isn't Slater sick of his currently sexless existence, the life of a eunuch? When tension builds up to an untenable level, he makes a move on Beth, or submits to one of her advances, but invariably he can't cut the mustard. Things have been this way since the day of Poppy's funeral, and while he understands his dysfunction to be a byproduct of his grief, that awareness does not help the problem in any significant manner. Beth has obviously begun to resent—maybe even hate—him, and he has started to realize the feeling is somewhat mutual. He is sick of being expected to make love to Beth and no one but Beth. Enough is frickin enough for godsake.

Above his desk hang photos of Wright and Pei and Gehry and of Julia Morgan, along with posters featuring Fallingwater and the Louvre pyramid. He stares at them, oddly transfixed by them, though the photos have hung there for years. He suddenly feels bogus, as if he should instead have a Ringling Brothers poster hanging there, or maybe a poster featuring a third-string rock band or a movie poster of Brando astride a Harley. He might as well have a vulgar velvet painting of a clown, something fit for the "bonus room" in the cheesiest of suburban tract houses. He is irrelevant in his own profession and an outsider in his own life.

His father would have preferred castration to sitting at a desk or gabbling in a classroom or lecture hall, his arms as unmuscled as a girl's. A longshoreman's trade was a masculine undertaking, a job that was vigorous and kinetic.

From one of the desk drawers, Slater removes a small, framed black and white photo of his parents on their wedding day. Years ago, the photo stood on the desk top, but he soon realized that none of his colleagues kept family photos in their offices. Also, the students asked too many questions and Slater grew sick of making the same small talk. Mom and

Poppy were married during World War II and wear their uniforms in the photo. Poppy, a curly-haired sailor, is sporting his Navy dress whites, and Mom, a lovely, red-lipped WAVE, wears a dark suit nipped in at the waist, and an unflattering military cap. She always expressed regret about not being married in a white gown and veil, but war was war, she said. At least his parents had not been the sort of dorks who wanted to “renew their vows” twenty years later, aging people donning the youthful attire of dewy brides and grooms. In this instant, he recalls something he has not thought about in years: After the war, Mom had made David a little suit of clothes out of the fabric from his parents’ military uniforms: a child-sized Navy blue suit with short pants—somewhere there is still a photo of Slater in the getup. He can remember being proud of the suit, but embarrassed by the headgear: Mom had for some inexplicable reason made a tartan Glengarry cap, trailing ribbon and all, and everyone but David had found the headgear adorable.

He continues scrutinizing his parents’ wedding photo. Are there visible signs of what in his father’s psyche would drive Poppy to annihilate himself only months after Mom’s death? Or maybe he is searching for clues to what it is about a couple that can bind them together for 50 years.

There is a knock on Slater’s office door, followed by a female voice. “Dr. Slater?” The voice is thin and high-register; she’s probably an undergrad. At first, he does not respond. “Dr. Slater?” she repeats. He calls out for her to come in.

Out of his unconscious rises a random phrase he remembers from long ago—he’ll Google it later: *swift and secure flight*.

Slater sits at a table in Siesta Sancho’s with two women from the Wednesday night suicide-survivors support group. He and an ex-pat Californian, Holly, and an Oklahoma gal named SueAnn have begun having margaritas weekly after group for a post-game recap. Tonight, Slater has declined a cocktail and substituted a club soda with lime, unnerved by the booze fest in L.A. His mid-section throbs, but the pressure belt is not visible under his shirt. No one seems to have noticed that his spare tire is gone.

Slater spies a young woman with an iPhone pointed directly at him. He recognizes her as one of his grad students, sitting at the bar along with some other girls. Every now and then, he spots students photographing him about town with their smartphone cameras. Who knew that when he left New York, he would go on to garner paparazzi in Oklahoma, any semblance of privacy kaput? He gives the girl a mock salute and she quickly turns away.

“Sometimes, going to group starts to seem like self-indulgent whining,” Slater says.

For a moment, neither woman speaks and Slater hears the steady crunching sound of Holly chewing the ice from her margarita.

“Do you mean me?” SueAnn says, her round little face reddening. “I guess I shouldn’t have been complaining about Gilbert again.”

Slater feels a ping of regret—why does he never consider how other

people might respond to things he says? “No, no—I didn’t mean you, hon—we’re always interested in what you have to say.”

Holly says, “Dave, is that why you said almost nothing tonight in group—because you didn’t want to whine? Or maybe there was something you didn’t want to say?”

“Nah, nothing like that,” Slater says, telling her he is simply over-tired from a trip to California for book research.

SueAnn, who always seems cognizant of uneasiness in others, chooses a topic-changing gambit. “I saw your wife today when I was at work in the store,” she tells Slater. “I recognized her from the time I saw you together at the Farmer’s Market, but I don’t think she recognized me.”

Slater had not realized that Beth shopped at the Dollar Thrift-O—well, who can guess about someone else’s life, even their spouse’s? He cuts to the chase: “Was she alone?”

SueAnn confirms that Beth was by herself. “What did she buy?” he asks.

Poor SueAnn actually stutters her answer and seems extremely discomfited; her face again turns a deep red. “I don’t know—I wasn’t the one who rang her up,” she says. “But she’s a real pretty lady, very nice looking.”

“I cheated on her in L.A.,” he announces. SueAnn’s and Holly’s faces register shock, and Holly even covers the bottom half of her face with her hands. But this much he knows for sure: They are not even half as surprised as he is. Until the very moment the confession spilled from his mouth, he would have sworn on Poppy’s grave he was not going to tell anyone about his misconduct.

“But . . .” SueAnne says, not finishing her thought. She and Holly both wear the bug-eyed, slack-jawed expressions of actors miming surprise on a TV sitcom.

Slater touches the arm of a waiter passing by the table. “I’ll have a Rusty Nail, please.” Slater and the women sit in silence. The pressure belt sears his waist like a branding iron.

As he walks from Sancho’s to his car, even though his heels are now bandaged, Slater still feels the pain of each step forward, and has to suffer the indignity of walking with a stuttering gait like some old gaffer. But in this instant, out of nowhere, the stabbing sensation in his feet calls forth something. Slater is a kid—maybe four or five—and he is limping along with Poppy, the bottoms of Slater’s feet radiating with pain. He is wearing his brand new summer sandals, which his mother, with what Slater years later realized was Depression-era mentality, has insisted buying a size too large in order for Slater to “grow into them”—a phrase that actually means the shoes will be too large for several months and will then begin to fit properly, just as the weather becomes too cold for sandals. The friction of the sandals slipping and sliding and rubbing against his feet has raised hellish blisters.

It’s just Slater and Poppy, and they are walking from the green DeSoto across a parking lot that is paved with hot asphalt. They are in Queens,

at Rockaway Beach. Where was Mom that day?—he cannot now guess why he and his father went to Rockaway on their own. But he does remember the smells: The smell of sand and salt water and sweet taffy and popcorn and Sea and Ski sunscreen—still called “suntan lotion” in those days. God, the sensory montage intoxicates him even in this moment. He begged his father to take him directly to Playland, saving the beach for later, but his father, always mesmerized by the ocean, tugged at Slater’s hand. In those days, Rockaway was still known as the Irish Riviera, and the surfing culture had not yet sprung up. But Rockaway’s Playland was amusement-park heaven to the boyish Slater, even more than Coney Island. One of the most calamitous events of Slater’s life was Playland being torn down in ’87 and replaced by houses.

On this particular day at Rockaway, Slater had been able to think only of the carousel and a bag of salted peanuts in a striped paper sack. He envisioned himself astride a huge wooden steed, goading the painted horse with the leather strap and galloping along on the carousel, munching peanuts at the same time. His mouth now waters. But another sensation set in for Davey Slater at that point in time: he and his father stepped onto the sandy beach, and David trudged forward, sand bunching in his sandals and settling in lumps that rubbed against the watery blisters on the bottom of his feet. Tears burned his eyes, but he did not want his father to see him crying.

“Never mind, buddy,” Poppy told Slater. “We’ll do the beach later—let’s schlep over to the rides.” His father picked up Slater and hoisted him to his broad shoulders, rescuing his son’s stinging feet from the hot sand. Poppy wore a white cotton T-shirt, smooth and soft under Slater’s bare legs. One of his father’s cartoonishly large forearms bore a garish tattoo featuring a large anchor and the words U.S. Navy—this in the days before tattoos were within the purview of young hipsters, but were still somewhat *louche* emblems of working class men and G.I.s. From the T-shirt rose the new-mown-fragrant scent of the Tide detergent in which Mom washed the family’s clothing. Being astride his strong father’s powerful longshoreman’s shoulders was even more thrilling than riding a carousel horse, and Slater was infused with a nearly beatific joy.

Two smells of that instant now enter Slater’s nose again, not remembered, but actually present—the primary scents of everyone’s father in the 50s—Prell shampoo and Old Spice.

He slogs forward, his feet and midsection blow-torcing his body, heading toward his car, which will take him to his house, where he will have to talk with Beth. Another of the slogans Poppy sometimes repeated was that people never lie so much as after a hunt or before a war.

Slater has tried for more than a year to tamp down thoughts of his father. He knows that memory is the ultimate gill net, ready to snare you and yank you away from your source of air. But lately he has been slipping down, sinking into that opal-dark pool. He does not seem to be able to remember *himself* in a very good light. What floats up is the recollection of the time he called his father an asshole, or the time when he was fifteen and took money out of his mother’s pocketbook.

Limping, Slater makes his way toward his Odyssey, which is parked in the front of the Sancho's lot. The neon sign on the front of the seafood restaurant across the street from Siesta Sancho's looks as if it hovers near the roof of his car. The blue neon fish swimming across the façade of Cap'n Cabral's seems to swim along Slater's car, the illusion simply a matter of perspective. In the days when David and Poppy used to fish at Breezy Point, his father had explained to him that when fish are taken out of water, they suffocate not because they cannot breathe the oxygen available in the air, but because their gill arches collapse and there is not enough surface area for diffusion to take place; the breaking down is a fundamental principle of engineering. The luminous fish swims out of Slater's sight.

THE ELEPHANT MAN'S SIGNATURE

A. Loudermilk

He has one good hand. Mid-signature,
dotting his *i*, he thinks of his mother.
His one good hand is small like hers
yet gestures wide like a lighthouse beam
swinging back to his teacup like a key
into a keyhole. He coos at her navel
as he dreams his mother recumbent—
his doctor's mantelpiece horizon-wide,
woods endless beyond the limelight.

INKLING

A. Loudermilk

She used to have one a long time ago.

It left a lot of little footprints
and an unreadable diary. It ate
cud, rarely blinked, peed on
a plate and climbed curtains.

It recoiled from technology.
At the foot of her bed it slept
squatting, its one hand raised.

She called it her reincarnated toothache.
She misses it most as the grid flickers.

It glowed in the dark.

THE EXPANDED AREAS OF THE SCULPTURE

Darren Demaree

The apple
is open
& that gives

meaning
to the seeds
& the seams

of perfection.
Some fruit
we do know

can be eaten
until we see
it opened up

by the curious
violence
of thumbs.

STOPWATCH REALISM

Genevieve Zimantas

Either nothing is real or it all is
at once. There is a delay between the inside
and the outside of perception which
makes it difficult to say which one
we can trust. In or out is another way
to say you or me. He died smiling
so he'll always be living, but he died
so he never was at all. We cannot equate
being with memory. Everything green
keeps growing on the faith that rain
will come again, from a precipitation
system in the sky like a sprinkler set with
its own sense of time. Still, every breath
is an act of predicting. After all, we only
lease the land we're buried in-
side of a cedar plank box. For you to die
there have to be trees. For me to die
there has to be a way to write the ending
after the end of everything. And where
does that leave us? I will wear black
to the service but you should know,
this sadness means nothing to me.

SLEEPWALKING

Genevieve Zimantas

Evening came to the park like cool
clean sheets across my legs and the distant bells
of childhood laughter stilled with sleep
as cottage lights went out. I was thinking
of the way time slows around moments
and the moonlight caught the trilliums hooked
them muted stars in an evergreen sea.
I was thinking of animals breathing
and my lungs swept sweet air into my chest
to help me run. I was thinking of lightning
storms and my bones lush with summer wishes
sang sonnets to clouds growling overhead.
Then the rain fell the first gentle notes
of May and I knew where I was and I picked
myself up and walked into the silence
and away from my bed.

BLACK SHEEP CAFÉ

Lori Lamothe

The woman across the room is signing copies
of instability's cookbook, her pen name

a nervous breakdown of broken chords.
You push your chair out of earshot

from a murder of crows dressed in matching
feathers, foiling their random forays

into intimacy as if *distance* is your superhero
power. Still, it's hard not to notice

how night yawns bottomless from your cup,
how you've swirled lesser transgressions

into darkness for good measure—the Thanksgiving
you leapt out of protocol and wrapped both hands

around your sister's spidery version of *nice*,
the Easter you set your hair on fire

and tap danced his unspoken name
across a polished table. Or maybe not.

Maybe all you ever did was touch knife to fork,
lay your napkin in your lap and pass the condiments

clockwise. Either way, the past blurs beyond
recording, the keys to reality whirring

player piano songs, the music of seconds
unraveling too fast for transcription.

On the far side of the fish bowl,
bolts of sky billow waves of blue,

rolling out oceans of color any of us
could sail from here to beauty's horizon.

GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE

Lori Lamothe

Open one eye and shut memory.
I'm hungover on fever.

All my late-night Kamikaze
love notes, my shotgun epiphanies

ricochet across the day's blank slate.
Regret flies its banner across thought

in shades of Technicolor—all those lingerie
siren songs, those karaoke tambourine fests,

all that dancing naked on red tables,
dousing lit-match dreams with desire's gasoline. . .

Dawn rises with its hammer but the sky
falls back onto the day's soft mattress.

Sleep comes on little cat feet and forgetting
drifts across the wind's blue blanket.

BLUE TOOTH

Susan Gubernat

I can't tell the schizophrenics
from the cell phone users anymore:

everyone is talking
into the air.

*And who is the third who walks
always beside you?*

Look, I'm trying to be rational here.
I ended a friendship once
over angels. My friend
believed in them.

All I could summon
was a chitinous wing,
a clamshell and its shadow.

Some hold them up to their ears,
then bring them close to their mouths
as if talking back to the sea.

Some gesture wildly
at a building, at a tree,
as if in the orchestra pit, conducting.

But from the theater's front row I saw the wires
attached at the base of the singer's spine
so that she flew always tilted forward, just a little,
so unlikely up there,
so cast down

as if still pining for the ground.

PEELING STARS

Sara Seelmeyer

When you were young, you made wishes on the foil stars
stuck to the top of your spelling tests. At home,

you peeled them off, pressed them to your ears,
pretended you were wearing diamond earrings.

Later, the clerk at Sears fitted you for your first bra.
She pulled the measuring tape too tight, leaving indents,

red and tender, in your skin. The bra was white, with delicate
lace, and a tiny pink flower made of ribbon. The first time

you washed it, the flower unraveled, ribbon hanging limply
from your chest. In middle school, you stole cheap lipsticks

from the Kroger down the street, used each one once before throwing
them away. The only one you kept, Silver City Rose,

the shade your mother wore. Before college, you moved into an apartment
with a bay window. At night, you pressed your hands to the glass

and looked at the stars. You wanted to peel each one from the sky,
but the stars always disappeared too quickly into dawn.

IN THE SHAPE OF HERCULES

Sara Seelmeyer

Your mother's boyfriend pulls up in his '78 Bronco,
can of Red Bull in one cup holder, half-empty bottle
of Canadian Mist in the other. You slide over the pleather
seats, Minnie Mouse backpack spilling over with library books
full of mythology. On the cover of one, Hercules
holds a sword above his head, ready to kill the Hydra
at his feet. The letter you learned in school today was h.
H for hot like the asphalt outside your apartment,
hot like tears, which come quick after each of Mother's slaps.
You sing the alphabet at the top of your lungs
until your sister jabs her elbow into your ribs, hard.
H is for hot, h is for hard, h is for hell, and heroic,
and Hamal, the name of Mother's last boyfriend,
who smelled like a sick mix of sugar and burnt plastic.
The new boyfriend smells like chicken and vanilla
extract and Sunday mornings before church. He hands back
a jumbo bag of Funyuns, tells you, *Baby, eat these and hush up*,
puts on a Marvin Gaye album, and turns the volume
as loud as it will go. You pass a store that sells used furs
and decide one day you will have a minx coat
like Josephine Baker. You will have a pearl necklace
and high heeled shoes, and a big apartment by the zoo.
At night, when you lie on your roof, you will trace the stars
into constellations: the Big Dipper, the Great Wolf, the Hydra
and Hercules. When you look at the stars you will know
you are shining just as brightly as they are,
but for now, you are here, in your pint sized body,
pants too big, shirt too small, licking the salt
from the Funyuns off your fingers, and pretending
that the hand-me-down coat you are wrapped in
is somehow made of fur.

PREEMIE

Taylor Graham

Born too early; the joints
of his legs tangled clumps
ligament to bone.

He stands up
to fall, to prop himself
back up on elbows, and stand
again. His brother
gambols as lambs should.

He lies between sun and sparse
grass, taking in both
in brief spurts
of mother's milk.

The brown deepens in his eyes,
blood in his veins,
each hour he's a little less
transparent.

His mother moves off
half a dozen yards to better
grass—worlds away
to a lamb so tiny; leaving
him alone. He hums to himself.
He's the center
Of the corner of her eye.

FIRST ANIMALS

Oakley Merideth

*What are we first? First, animals; and next
Intelligences at a leap...*

—George Meredith

As if it spoke

another wisp

of candle ash

your light is the first drool
poured red and pooled
at my threshold. To step through

light

is to measure your story
in character length and forego
words. A wave rolled through
the cathedral roof & stained glass
moistened into splinters. That is our
charm, to capture each shard and stand still
and silent.

First animals
were prehistoric

latter animals like us
jump all thought, our teeth on
our hearts
ready to dig.

THE LAST OF THE OPEN-HEART ASTRONOMERS

Christopher Locke

Mowing a dark sea
of lawn behind your home,
you sweat and shove the engine
like a raw-mouthed god, push it
churning above a great furnace
of yellow jackets until they are so
enraptured, so possessed, they burst
skyward to fan a tornado of cursing
debris. So you turn from your
machine, the grass, the cloud
of pain engulfing you with its
miniature complaints, and run
blind towards some other country,
one that only speaks in low, soft
tones, and you can't believe,
as your knees decide to pray,
that you've become this helpless,
this incapable, until they descend
on you like evening, and tired of
naming stars, you close your eyes.

MY OWN BOSS

Robert Lee Kendrick

Humid air rings the parking lot lights,
six blue embers by black power lines.
I load crusted drop cloths & five gallon buckets
to fill the bed of my truck, count the small
echoes on asphalt. Not a car on the street,

the paint on my arms more white from the moon.
No work in the morning, nowhere to go
but home. Stephanie said I'd never get anywhere
until I went it alone. Then she made sure that I did.

Pull in the garage, unload the sprayer & roller pans,
clean off sixteen hours with a hose, hear the drywall
settle in an empty house. Three more hours & I'll see
the sun break over the creek, nurse my coffee
to the neighbor's dog tugging his chain.

APPLIED PHYSICS

Robert Lee Kendrick

Shattered tree limbs cover the ground, six weeks
of wind with no rain. Sun whitened stones
fill the creek bed, grip the thin inches of water & wait
for the first drop to break this hard
drought. Steph has almost half of the assets now,
just some numbers on statements & a house left to cleave.
I tend for sale sign, the yellowing grass,
the credit card out of balance. Today, I gather the branches.
So many shorn pieces of maple and oak, in almost predictable arcs.

SETTLEMENT

Dave Andersen

My new neighbors don't know shit. They think they're better than me, probably because the girl drives a Prius and her tiny boyfriend drives a Civic. Just because I don't have a job or a car doesn't mean I don't have money or culture or whatever those yuppies think is so important. I'll have more money than they can count once the settlement comes through—should be any day now. That's what my lawyer, Jerry Stacks, keeps telling me, anyway. He has a weird lisp and wears a beat-up Seattle Supersonics T-shirt constantly. "Shane, we got them right where we want them," is what he told me a few months back. If he didn't take his third, I'd probably bank five, maybe six million bucks—enough to buy a crane to crush that disgusting Prius. I've got a huge heart though, so I'll probably slip a check under their door. I'll make sure it's enough to buy a dozen eco-bullshit cars and enough for the little guy to step-up to an Accord, or maybe even a Camry.

I should've had the cash a year ago, but Stacks is always ranting about how suing the state of Washington is hard because of bureaucracy and whatnot. I'm going to give Stacks the what-for if he keeps wasting time. I don't care about some bureaucrat; I need to get paid, son. Besides, Stacks is going to bank a third of six million bucks, so he needs to get his ass in gear. Good thing my disability doesn't run out for a good while. I get a few c-notes from the state each month to help with my three herniated discs and my doc gives me a ton of narcotics to help control my pain and suffering. And as soon as my cash comes through, I'll be the only millionaire younger than 24 in Tacoma.

The yuppies moved in a week ago, and they haven't had the decency to stop by for a beer or even say hello. Very lame. Very suspicious. I thought about knocking on their door to see if they wanted to head to the Lava Lounge for a couple ice cold Budweiser's, but I decided to play it cool since making the first move hasn't done me many favors. I asked out my ex-girlfriend Lisa after I bought a lap dance from her at the New Players Club on Gravelly Lake Drive, but she broke up with me a few days later because I called too much. She never said how much was "too much," but I guess it doesn't matter. My brother Dale says all chicks are a little crazy; he says it's just a question of degree. After that weirdo Lisa dumped me, I was really sad and extra-stoned, so I told Dale about the whole ordeal. He said, "Bro, show me a hot chick, and I'll show you a guy who's tired of fucking her." Not sure what he meant, but I decided right then and there to stay single for a while.

The boyfriend reminds me of Michael J. Fox—probably about five three, 120 pounds, with feathered hair. Complete tool. His girlfriend is another story. She's beautiful. Really curvy and sort of thick; she could probably knock the cover off a softball. Just my type. Once I get the settlement, I'll charm her away from that boyfriend of hers and we'll get out of this dump. We'll sell the Prius to some hippie, buy a Chevy convert-

ible, and head down the coast blasting Van Morrison until we find a place in Oregon to settle—Washington is too depressing. Too rainy.

My flip-phone buzzed on the coffee table. The caller ID said “Dale.” Dammit, I’d hoped my lawyer was calling. Stacks, that son of a bitch—he’d ignored my calls for three straight months. His secretary always says he’s in court. If I had a car, I’d drive to his office and beat some answers out of him. But I can’t buy a car until he comes through with my dough, so I guess he’s safe for another few days. Until then, I’ll keep walking to physical therapy and popping Percocet. After two years on painkillers, my doctor made me see a pain management specialist. The pain doc makes me pick up my prescription once a week. I bet the pharmacist at Rite Aid thinks I’m a total junkie.

“Yeah,” I said into the phone.

“I’m outside,” Dale said, “car broke down half a block away. Get down here and help me push.”

I was in no condition to push anything. Since that bus pulled out in front of me and jacked up my back, I can’t do much of anything. I knew Dale would give me an earful when I refused to help. He’s always busting my chops about something. When the front end of my Chevy S-10 hit the backend of the bus, my truck looked like it was trying to fuck the bus from behind. At least that’s what Dale said, but I told him that in the end, it was me who got the shaft; if the bus driver had used a blinker, I wouldn’t have a busted-up back and I wouldn’t need to sue for pain and suffering.

I grabbed four Percocet from the coffee table and tossed them in my mouth. I found a half-full Rainier Light on an end table, took a swig, and swallowed the pills—I needed to clear my head. I walked downstairs and limped through the parking lot. The Prius sat in its regular parking spot. Michael J. Fox must be at work. Or maybe he’s out volunteering, helping the homeless or some bullshit. Nothing pisses me off more than do-gooders.

I stopped at the Prius and looked inside—the interior was spotless. I bet her handwriting is amazing. She usually gets home by six; she wasn’t due home for a couple more hours. She probably called in sick or took one of those so-called “mental health days” that Dale’s wife, Stacy, has mentioned when she claims she wants to help me find my center or when she starts in on me about purpose. All I know is that I’d go berserk if I stared at a computer forty hours a week for the rest of my life. I majored in Criminal Justice at Highline Community College so I could join the Department of Homeland Security, but once I heard special agents only make about 50 or 60 grand a year, I said no thanks, amigo. No big deal—my last job was great: I drove a Frito Lay truck, delivering chips to grocery stores south to Olympia and north to Seattle. If someone in the grocery business was worth knowing in this state, you bet your ass we were tight—we probably even played softball together in the B division in South Tacoma against the heaviest hitters in whole damn state. Besides, getting paid thirteen bucks an hour to drive around and listen to Boston, Foreigner, and Led Zeppelin all day was beautiful. If the bus driver had

used his blinker, I'd probably be playing air guitar to Stairway to Heaven right now.

I limped to Dale's car. "Dude, I can't push anything," I said.

"Push," he said.

"If anyone sees me pushing a car, I'm screwed."

Dale said, "Do you see anyone on a stakeout waiting for your lazy ass? Push."

I looked around carefully. Stacks said I could never be too careful. He said the bureaucrats and cheapskates working for the state were a bunch of criminals who'd hire investigators to prove I was faking my pain and suffering. Good thing x-rays don't lie, but still, I had millions on the line.

I said, "I'll supervise." I didn't like Stacks, but I sure as hell trusted him. Just a few more days and Dale and Michael J. Fox would see why. The heinous purple Civic pulled up behind Dale's Chevy Nova. I eyed the Honda and couldn't believe a guy who drove this poser-ride landed a super hot girlfriend. The car probably had a subwoofer behind the seat.

He stepped out and said, "You guys need help?"

"That'd be great," Dale said, "since my brother has a backache." I wondered why he used finger quotes when he said "backache."

"No problem," said Michael J. Fox. I could tell he was a sneaky little bastard just by looking at him. I watched them push Dale's Nova into the parking lot of my apartment complex.

I limped along as they pushed. The boyfriend looked at me and said, "You live next to me and my sister, right? I'm Brent. I've been meaning to stop by, but my sister, Missy, has the flu."

He shook my hand. Firm grip, I thought, for a weak and pathetic little man who lives with his sister. Then it hit me. If she's Brent's sister, I can have her whenever I want. I smiled. "Nice meeting you, Brent," I said.

Missy. Have you ever met a Missy who wasn't top-notch? They don't exist. I pictured Missy naked. Maybe I'd stop by tomorrow and say hi. I'd start things off as friends—I didn't want anything serious, not yet—and once the cash was in the bank, we'd move down to Oregon. I wouldn't tell her I was rich until after she was officially my girlfriend.

GENESIS

Joseph Fasano

Do it with a cold heart, Chekhov asked us, once,
 meaning the end,
 meaning this is the end
of the nineteenth century, still, and when you wander out
 to a field where the peasants
 have sheaved the wheat
just east of Petersburg, Labinsk, Odessa, and you look up
 into the mid-industrial heavens,
they are there, still: Orion, Andromeda, the great guardians
 of beginnings and endings

in the cold laws that roll the great arms
 of the galaxies.
Indifference, yes: That's what Kafka
meant, of course—starving, terrified, weighing eighty-nine
 pounds in the linens of his deathbed
 in the sanatorium
at Kierling—when he brushed the snow
 from the wool of Max's shoulders
and breathed into his face
the breath of a history's beginning: *burn them, all of them*,

Bruder. And he almost did.
I know it's not
the kind of story the truly ruined
 can sing out to, but once,
 in the wreckage of upstate New York, I thought I saw
the soul. Or that's what I would have whispered to you
 then, at seventeen, in that dim, topless bar
in Middletown, New York,
 where a woman had stumbled
 on stage

to straddle the stuffed and luminous body
 of a panther, its legs hidden by a portable
 scrim, while her sisters
poured a cheap, boxed wine
 across her shoulders, while she whipped that liquid out
into the open mouths of the crowd.
I am trying to say this
 simply: I was seventeen.
And when she'd searched in herself
 enough to find the one end the body believes

it is banished
or built for, when she'd arched her back as though to let go
of all desire before desire could rise up
and abandon her,
the panther arched its back with her
and kicked up its front paws,
sliding her, not without grace, onto a polished pole
behind her shoulders, and then—how can I say this
coldly?—just walked away.
You would have wanted so badly

to believe, wouldn't you, at seventeen,
your fingernails crusted with buck blood?
You would have wanted to visit that place in you
where the kingdom of the actual
becomes, a moment,
yours, because you've forgiven it?
You would have wanted to open up
and become your country's story?
And when you stumbled out in the laughing arms
of those truckers,

when you wiped the last drop of cheap merlot
out of your eyes
to see—what?—someone handing a cigarette to a boy
with the perfect, luminous skin of a panther
unzipping down his chest,
you would have thought, as I did, how cruel it is
that things outlast their endings;
you would have wandered back to that iron bridge
above the river
and listened to water falling, all night, toward

some city, and thought how there is no language
in your country for form, for
its wildness, for its freedom;
you would have thought, as I did, that revolution
means nothing
but imprisonment, emptiness, failure.
And you would have been wrong.

For weeks now
I have tried to say this coldly—the way Kafka,
in his friend's arms, dreamt of fire;

the way Chekhov, in his doctor's,
was the blank page, the bitter end
the great erasers dream of, the pure light
with its cold

and perfect ink. If the soul is not a blue-eyed boy
clutching his *Rolling Stones* wallet in his left,
wine-stained paw
in the dun light of a small-town alley
but the fire in his gut when he stares into the truck-stop mirror
and asks the conditions he was given

to be the spirit
adoring its innocence, its history, its prison, then the soul is not
enough. And is. And offers
little. And forgives
nothing. What I know of it is this much, only: Tonight, in
his lost sleep,
in his last house,
my father will be listening to the evening
as it turns him toward the whitetails
in his garden,

and when he turns back to stumble home again
through his body,
when he kneels down before the mansion
of what happens, he will look up through the parting
of the moon's wings
and see there is nothing to protect him
from such splendor.
And I will not be there.
Listen: When Chekhov lay dying
in the boyish hands

of his doctor, he had a copy of the icy light
in one hand, a copy of *The Seagull*
in the other.
And nothing but his thinness there to weigh them. *Do it*
with a cold heart, he swore
once, meaning the end, meaning the rest, meaning you step
into your living
and the afterlife is over. But I don't know. I don't
know. I don't know.
I would like, yes, to tell you about

the black wings furred around the collar bones
of my father tonight, wherever he has wandered
in his lost sleep.
I would like to kneel down again
with his body
by a river
and listen to him brushing the shadows from my cold jaw
while the river crashes through the darkness

of our country
and we believe, together, it is

hymnal. I would like, just once,
to love the silence
and the coldness
of that music. But when I close my eyes I can think of nothing
but servitude, gratitude,
fire. I can think of nothing
but that boy stepping back into his panther suit
in a coming rain
in an alley in Anywhere, New York,
flicking his cigarette onto the asphalt

while a red light
flickers on above him
and he turns back again into story; nothing but the darkening
whorls of that river
below my boot soles
where I lingered, all night, in my fury; where the trout mouths
opened up for what I offered
them—car keys, buck
hair, thumb ring—the new moon tattering
the branches, the freighters howling out

into morning. *This is the end*, I thought
then, though I didn't,
and I might have walked back, as I walk back
now, to my father.
But I did not. Maybe the end is just
the end. Maybe, in the singing behind the singing
of this story, my ex-wife and the lover
she has taken, in that small field we have tended
of our linens, believe,
for a moment, it is simple,

that they have made themselves a nation
of betrayal. Naked, moonlit, embarrassed,
they take each other
in the end's arms
down those fathoms, those depths in them
they would never have fathomed would open.
And they drift there at the faithless heart of the world.
I have had to murder
all of my darlings to get back here. I have had to believe
redemption runs alone

to the unready. Listen: When Chekhov
lay staring into the end's
eyes, it was the coldness of his own art
that he saw there, the inscrutable river
of the given. And its darkness. And its fresh
scent. And its
lyre. But my father's life keeps the formlessness
of his country, that swallower of its own
abiding fire. Like forgiveness. Like
deliverance. Like redemption. Like the ashen end

of that young boy's cigarette
when he dashed it into the corner of that lost
night. Its small flames. Its fury. Its blank
rage. I remember
how I lifted it
for its last warmth, how the simple absurdity of it
sustained me. I remember
floundering out
onto those girders, how that woman
must have known it, once, when she looked

down, when she arched her back
into the nothing
of night's wine, a dark form that had lived, in its time,
below her. How she must have thought, in
the beginning, it had meant something—the body
being lifted up
by its own bliss, the dark depths
that all ruined things must rise from;
how she allowed herself, in the first
days, to be moved by it, a hunger

in the music
that might sustain her, a poverty that was its own sweet kind
of briar. I am thinking
of the soul like common
music, a boy's blood
in the pleather seat of a patrol
car, moonshine and whiskey in his split
fists, the furled suit of a panther
laid beside him. I am thinking of the starlight
in his bare back, sumac

in the buck-blood
 of a river, swirling with the thin milk
of a filly. I am thinking
 the moon that night, its ancient
face. How the night's bridge
 rose colder, rose higher.
How, when I stripped down to the promise
 of my body, when I turned to see what witnesses
might have followed me, what I saw there
 was a small form

 in a fire's arms: my father, his shoulders turned
like good oak, the rising flames unraveling
 between us. He was no
one. He was anyone. He was not
 gone. And because this body was the burning's
son, and no
one, because all of it would be forgotten, as it
 happened, I did it: I rose up again
and I danced for him. I danced for him
 and danced for him

and danced for him; I rose up again through the cold gaze
 of the doomed moon
and I danced it
 out, the common dance
of mourning; I danced there in the shadow of all
 endings, that wild place
I will never again
return to, where the river ran, the ravens called
 in choir; where the wildfire
of my fathers' blood

sang through me; where something, if you're
 anyone, does it for you; where I danced it out
and I danced it out
 in the wind's
filth, and the ruins, and the union's moon
 rose singing, and I burned for her
and I burned for her and I
 burned for her, and nothing, but
nothing, was below me, and I gave the maker over
 to the song.

SET THE WORLD AFLAME

Alexandra Akre

[I never expected this to happen]

A heart ripped open is an awful bloody thing to see. Razor-shredded in quickening hemorrhage. A heart battered and wrecked at last, but still pummeled against an unforgiving shoreline. There's an opaque world with a fluctuating color scheme hovering under her body when she weeps. Her twisted mouth chokes on formaldehyde and salt. An entire body is reduced to a symphony of broken bones and the vindictive rhythm continues. Her eyes blur and squint against the sun so that she can no longer see bright colors and in the winter she's a loaded pistol—volatile and precarious. *I loved him*, she whispers. Some days she'd go to sleep in a pink canopied bed and wake up to the sound of a train engine—she was sprawled on rusted railroad tracks with cold iron pressed to her graying cheek. Some days she'd climb dizzying heights and aimlessly chip away at the rotting planks beneath her. She was frozen blood and nerves, an erotic smell of grave mold and vanilla, holding onto lifeboats as the riptide whispered her name.

Once I saw her slumped against cathedral steps—holding onto matches with white-knuckled hands in a world that was burning.

IN MY RUCKSACK

Alexandra Akre

[Exodus]

I have three packs of Marlboros in case I want to die slowly.

I have an orange prescription bottle of pills in case I want to die quickly.

The darkness plays games with my eyes. The light plays games with my eyes. My red-rimmed eyes squint and hide behind cracked sunglasses and trust nothing now. I always felt like a swallow carrying her precious young in her mouth, holding these fragile eggs behind my nicotine-stained teeth like they could be my salvation—the one thing to crave/feed upon. I left you behind a swinging screen door, listening to the crude melody emerging from my splintered beak. I left you staring down at my deformed chalk outline on your front porch steps. I left you in a cloud of dirty gasoline-soaked feathers in the sweltering October heat, hoping you wouldn't drop those answers to pick up more questions.

I only have a 24 oz. spray can to aim at miles, miles, miles, of dirty alley walls and rusted boxcars on railroad tracks & this is why I'm not coming home.

A DRUNK AND A SHEPHERD

Zachary Campbell

It was a Friday afternoon during my sophomore year of high school, and I wanted to get drunk. When I had gotten out of school, I convinced my ma to drop me off at the nearest bus station. I had zero intentions of taking the bus, but it was the most convenient excuse available to me. My actual destination was my buddy Ian's place, which was about three miles away, and I had one very important stop to make. It was a decent size walk, but I didn't mind. The weather was gorgeous. It was the perfect spring day. I had a full pack of smokes and my CD player with me—two things that are essential to any good walk. I lit up a cigarette and started towards my first destination. When I had arrived, my heard began to pound. There is a peculiar feeling I got when I'm about to commit a crime—a heady mix of excitement and apprehension. I took the last drag of my cigarette, crushed it beneath my shoe, and looked up. The sign above me read "Scolari's Food and Drug." I took a deep breath and walked inside.

Now, before I go any further, I'd like to explain there is a certain methodology to stealing booze. Supermarkets are almost always easier than liquor stores or gas stations. There are simply more customers, less visible space, and more shit for employees to pay attention to. However, more important than location is the golden rule: know exactly what you're getting before you even walk in the fucking door. If you dawdle, employees are much more likely to notice you. In general, the less attention you are able to draw to yourself, the more likely you'll be able to simply walk out before any employee even considers you may have copped their shit. This idea should also reflect what accomplices you chose to bring and how you appear. Never go in alone or in a group larger than three—a lone, punk ass kid is suspicious as hell, and a large group is guaranteed to draw attention. And unless the store is directly next to a school, never, ever walk into that place with a backpack. If you do, you might as well have announced on a loudspeaker you came in there to rob the place.

So, I walked into the Scolari's, alone, with my obviously empty backpack hanging to one side. The liquor section was in the front of the store and directly to my left, but I would have to cross in front of every register to get there. Instead, I set my eyes straight ahead of me and walked directly to the back of the store. I took a left and worked my way to the liquor section from the outer edge of the store. As I entered the liquor section, it dawned on me I had no idea what I was going to steal. I tried to look casual. My backpack made that endeavor impossible. Nevertheless, I tried to browse the liquor section like I knew what I was doing. I was getting anxious, and I knew I had to make my move. I took a look around, and when I did, I locked eyes with the woman working the photo booth. I knew I was fucked. I looked away and began slinking back to the outer edge of the store in defeat. There would be no booze tonight. I had fucked up my mission.

I was walking along the back of the store when I spotted a display case to my right. The god of petty thieves and underage drinking must have been on my side because it was filled with bottles of Jose Cuervo Gold. I've never particularly liked tequila, but I wasn't about to pass on an opportunity for redemption. I looked around and, to my satisfaction, there wasn't a single motherfucker in sight. I slipped into the aisle near the display case and unzipped my backpack. One after another, I placed the bottles into it. A single bottle would have sufficed, but I was overcome with excitement. My backpack was full after three bottles, and I zipped it up, ready to get out posthaste. With every step I took there was an audible clank. I sounded like a fucking wind chime as I made my way out of the store. I tried, to no avail, to walk as quickly as I could while generating as little noise as possible. Without ever looking behind me, I exited the store and turned left. I let out a sigh of relief, and my pace slackened. I had done it. I had escaped the store, and I was on my way to get drunk.

A car slowed to a crawl beside me, and the driver rolled down his window.

"Hey kid, you know they're following you, right?" I looked behind me, and, sure as shit, there were two angry Scolari's employees tailing me from about twenty feet away.

I thanked him and kicked up my pace to an awkward jog. I couldn't bring myself to a full run for fear of breaking the bottles within my backpack. I never found out if this was true or not, but I had always heard that stores can't chase you beyond their parking lot. With this in mind, I made a beeline to the side walk. Either that shit about store property was true or they simply don't pay those fuckers enough to chase down some asshole kid because the moment I stepped foot on the sidewalk, the employees gave up their pursuit. I didn't care about the reason. I was just grateful I made it. Keeping up my awkward jog, I slipped off the main streets and dipped into the neighborhoods behind Ian's place. I lit the cigarette I needed and resumed my walk.

I approached Ian's house, walked up the stoop, and banged on his door. I was greeted by vicious barking from inside. It was Sachie, Ian's family dog. Sachie was this massive German shepherd who wanted nothing more than to rip out my throat. It wasn't really her fault. She wanted to murder anyone who wasn't Ian's family.

I stood outside and waited for Ian to put Sachie away in his room. He opened the door and ushered me in. He lived in a small house with his mother, Kathleen. The dojo next door owned the place, and the house was pale pink on the outside. It contained one bedroom, a common area where Ian's mother slept, and a small backroom whose purpose changed almost annually. At times Kathleen would use it as a massage room when she was in between gigs at one parlor or another. I wouldn't suggest trying to pass out on the table in there. I've tried. You fall right the fuck off. When Ian's mother was out of town, he used the room as solitary confinement for Sachie, lest she attempt to wreak havoc upon whatever kids from school Ian and I were trying to get drunk with. For tonight, though, the room would serve as our person drinking den, and I was glad of it.

I exchanged pleasantries with Kathleen before we headed into the backroom. Kathleen was an affable woman slowly approaching middle-age. She was one of those ladies who wouldn't look out of place in the metaphysics section of a bookstore—you know the type: heavy tokers who will espouse the benefits of natural medicine and spiritual healing and claim some bullshit or another about your “aura.” But it wasn't like she was a nut or anything. She wouldn't slap the Tylenol out of your hand and force you to carry around a crystal to balance your chaotic energies or whatever. It was something she kept to herself for the most part. She didn't start every conversation with “Well, as a spiritual person,” and then go off on some tangent that had fuck all to do with her spiritual beliefs. She was just a cool lady who happened to smoke a lot of bud, trying to raise her son the best she possibly could while struggling with the reality she very much had her own life she wanted to live.

It was impossible to hide from Ian's mother that we were going to be drinking. My backpack played music with every step I took towards the backroom. I think she at least appreciated the effort. Kathleen was smart like that. She knew we'd be doing this shit regardless, and I guess she figured it was safer here than an alley in downtown Reno. When we secured ourselves in the backroom, Ian and I started to slam back shots, and I relayed to him the tale of how our drinks had been acquired.

“Yeah, it was the first time I ever had a motherfucker follow me. Most of the time they just tell you to drop the shit and get the fuck out.”

“Shouldn't have lingered,” Ian said. Ian knew a good bit about stealing himself. Of course, I like to think I taught him, back when we would swipe tall cans from Savemart to drink before marching band practice. This was even back before Ian had a taste for beer and each sip would be accompanied by a grimace and remarks about piss. We would cop a few tall cans and head to the park, preferring the Steel Reserve 211s to the Sapporo because we had no taste.

“I'm just lucky that dude was looking out.” I poured another pair of drinks and then pushed one towards Ian.

“Why'd you take three bottles anyway? Two not good enough for you?”

“Man, I don't know. I guess you can never have too much?” I raised my glass to Ian before I threw the liquid down my throat. The tequila burned, but it was a good type of burn.

We downed a couple more drinks before Ian turned on his stereo, playing whatever grimy East Coast rapper we were into at the time. We began to bullshit about the normal stuff—which kids in our school we thought were assholes, which kids we surprisingly liked, what girls Ian had been with lately, what girl I had been recently losing my mind over. Back then, the only time we'd talk like real people was when we were the backroom drinking.

Ian and I are similar guys in a lot of respects. We're both a bit quiet and reserved, and we both had shitty relationships with our fathers. We didn't know how to communicate back then, at least past busting balls or deciding which chick sported the best ass. Drinking alleviated whatever wall we both had up, and most of my greatest memories come from just

sitting around getting drunk with this kid. These nights always started so simple, so meaningless, but they began to take on an almost sacred context. These nights shaped the stories we would retell for decades.

I was drinking hard, too hard. I didn't know my limits back then, but tonight was the night I was going to learn a little something about them. My friend Brandon texted me and told us he was in the neighborhood. We invited him over and snuck him through the back door. By then, Ian's mother was asleep, and I had drunk almost a full bottle to myself. Brandon had brought two girls with him: Carlee, his evil harpy of a girlfriend, and Vanessa, a fairly attractive friend of Carlee's. I had met Vanessa once before at Carlee's house. It had been my birthday, and I tried to hook up with her. All I accomplished that night was holding her hair back as she puked wine into Carlee's garden, but I felt tonight was a night of redemption. And Carlee—well, I never liked Carlee, but I always had to tolerate her. I mean, I don't even think Brandon really liked her. Brandon was one of those guys with a selective conscience. I could have counted the number of people he wouldn't fuck over on one hand. Don't get me wrong, the dude wasn't heartless or anything. Brandon just had this ability to distance himself from his actions and interactions. Ian could never do that. Ian was the type of cat who would feed a starving animal regardless of how many times the motherfucker bit his finger. This was the first time Ian met Carlee, but it wouldn't be the last. And she damn sure wasn't the last girl my friend would have to bandage his hand over.

"Fuck it. Let's take a shot," Brandon said. Brandon was always ready for a drink. I always was, too. Ian poured five drinks, and we all tipped back our glasses. By now, I had lost my composure, but I still continued to drink. Ian remained in control of himself, and he chatted up the newcomers. He always was the more social and charismatic one out of the two of us. I stared at Vanessa, hardly paying attention to the conversation at hand. I paid particular attention to her nose: it was too big for her face. I never liked to consider myself shallow, but I have always been a stickler for proportions. It bothered me, and I might have mentioned it—it would not surprise me if I had. Regardless, I was wasted enough to ignore this bias, and I tried to hit on her. I don't know what I said or what I did, but it must have been something really fucked up. Vanessa elbowed me straight in the face, and I probably deserved it. Maybe I didn't mention her nose, or maybe I had just said some especially mean shit to Carlee. Either way, I was too drunk to care, and we all had a good laugh about it.

Brandon and his she-devils left us shortly after. Ian and I polished off the last of the second bottle and listened to some more music. I knew the words to the song, and I tried to sing them.

"Zac, are you okay buddy?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah," I mumbled, hardly coherent.

I wasn't able to sing along. I thought I was, but later Ian would explain to me that I wasn't even forming words. I had begun to hiccup furiously. Ian understood what this meant, and he guided me to his bathroom. I started to vomit, and I was too far gone to take care of myself. I was puking all over his bathroom—Ian cleaned me up and cleaned up after me.

This wasn't the last time he would do so. When there was nothing left in my stomach, I dry-heaved. Ian brought me a glass of water, and he made me drink it. Once my breathing had finally settled, he guided me to his bedroom. Ian would come to do this for quite a number of drunken imbeciles—from kids new enough to the drink to actually have an excuse all the way to the older guys from the dojo who had lived long enough to know better. I was there for everything. There's still a burn on his living room carpet from some idiot knocking the hookah over. There were times I would come over just to smoke a bowl with Kathleen, and the three of us would watch Comedy Central for hours. I had a place there. I don't know how the hell I ever managed to earn it, but I did.

When Ian judged me fit enough, he made me lay in his bed. I passed out for a time, but my body wanted revenge for my mistreatment. The scariest thing about blacking out is that you don't know how or why or even remember you did something. This was the third and last time I ever blacked out in my life. I began to wander Ian's house, first around his bedroom, then to his hall closet. I fell down, and it must have woken Ian up. I began to crawl into his living room, but Ian kept me from waking his mother. He tried to get me to come back to his bedroom. I wouldn't. Sachie was sleeping next to the Ab Lounge across the room from Kathleen's futon. I settled down near Sachie and fell back asleep. I had never been in the same room as Sachie without her trying to disembowel me. The dog was smart enough to understand I was too paralytic to even constitute a threat. I let out a deep breath and was grateful. I was lucky to have made good with at least one girl that night.

BLACKBERRIES

Allison Thorpe

Doused in anger
You have gone
To pick blackberries
Spewing the trailed air
With your raging motes

I want to say that anger
Will translate
To the fruit you touch
Will eventually sour
The fragrant jam
Maybe crack the jelly jars
Spreading the spidery lines

I want to say this heat
That burdens your brow
Used to tangle our nights
Scorch the pleased arch
Of back and thigh
Drip from our skin
In sweltered delight

I want to say that fever died
One October morning
When the geese honked overhead
Or when I cleaned
The dust bunnies
From beneath the table
But the date escapes me

I want to say I'm sorry
And wave to where you are
Across this field
Of healthy green
Hope to get more
Than a tatter of smile
More than just two distant sailors
With nothing in common
But the black sea between them

LOOKING AT THE VALLEY BEHIND HER HOUSE WHILE CONTEMPLATING ABORTION

Chelsea E. Shepard

Sage brush turns blue-
green on the mountain

behind her house.
It's a big mound of dirt

and rock, filled with pollen
in the spring, that makes

her eyes turn red and water.
The university lets milk cows graze

back there, and they climb
the mound, chewing sage and dead

grass. Later in the season,
they will stay in the valley

and drink from a cool creek
that runs along her fence.

She'll watch men drop bombs
in a yellow and black helicopter

that will kill tiny mosquitoes
before they become a problem.

FOREIGN EXCHANGE

Tee Iseminger

Are there any more grapes? the new girl asks in the sweet ring of broken English, and she is looking at both of us but I know she is asking only him, and that beneath this one is a different question, and she is too close, her accent—Prague-ish, maybe Hungarian—coats the humid space between us, this pregnant air heavy enough to drag my heart down into my fingers, trap it there to beat against the almost empty bag of grapes clutched behind me, and the crack in his nervous laugh skips with her dumbly-serious blink.

Now into the circle of that thick silence the bell startles, the fat green doors of the gym throw open, pour restless bodies out into that air, shut again. And then quickly, like he and I have done every last Friday of every year since sixth grade, we, this one-too-many of us now, slip around the corner of the blue cinder blocks, unnoticed. And by the time the ring of the third period bell reaches us up on Route 17, ducking behind trees of neighbors, into the outbuildings of cattle yards, bending our bodies under warped, barbed-wire fences, it too is only a faint and maybe imagined warning.

And it's there where I so clumsy with envy tear the pale skin of one thigh on a rusted metal rosette, surprised to feel nothing over the heady rush of thinking to tilt that leg just so, just enough this way, to lead the bright thin line of blood down the inside of my leg to dry there—a thing for him to notice, finally, to remember about the stain of childhood promises.

Bold with new fortune I climb up onto a roadside stoop, a sheared-off telephone pole, and sit with my legs apart to show just a bit of the blood, which is now only a smudged trail disappearing under my yellow shorts, but anyway she has kept going, is busy again picking road drainage flowers by the culvert, and he is becoming more blood-blind, and she is a stranger, an intrigue, a colorful new thing in an old, beige, caked-over place.

He turns for a moment to me and I manage to think of the grapes, pull them out, offer one and take one myself—there, a bond—and he pushes his tongue into one end and splits it open, wiggles it at me, eyebrows high, irises sparkling. And there they are, finally, the words crawling up from the pit of my stomach. And they nearly reach him, now, but too soon he winks, then turns and makes his way down the road to her fertile mouth, a reply on the tip of his tongue.

INDISCRETION AT THE DINNER PARTY

Sandra Kolankiewicz

Just a long, red hair on the plate before
I serve myself after dishing it out
to the others. Somehow I know you brought
it home today along with your paycheck,
always holding back for yourself more than
you say, giving me the rest to placate
the butcher, the baker, the carpenter.
Shall I wave the thread aloft as you pour
the wine, chatting? Wittily remark while
standing at the oven, another's mane
cast over the white wedding china
as the floor disappears and the sounds
of the children bickering in the next room fall
down with me to the basement where the white
crickets live in the dark, singing through
the winter, the cats sneaking down to hunt them.

I CANNOT REMEMBER IF I LOVED YOU

Sara Seelmeyer

Here is the first letter you wrote me, ink faded and paper worn.

On our first date, you showed me that old illusion.

Do you see the rabbit or the duck? you asked.

When I said I saw a rabbit with ears like a duck's bill,
you wrote me that letter, told me gray areas don't exist,
said I should always see one or the other, never both.

Here is the Polaroid we took at the pier. The water
behind us is as dark as your eyes.

I remember your palms, pressed against my hips,
cigarette breath mixing with Wal-Mart cologne,
the nausea at the back of my throat the first time
you slipped your calloused fingers under the waistband
of my skirt.

Here is the corsage, dried and brown. When I hold it close,
I can still smell the roses.

BETWEEN GERMANY AND POLAND

William Doreski

The gap between Germany
and Poland is no wider
than the part in your hair. Rain sifts
fact from fiction. You linger
over coffee brewed to rival
jet fuel. You insist that Google
Maps no longer include
townships abandoned when cops
smashed down the doors to nab
anyone who voted Democrat.
You claim that the waiter who served
your bowl of mussels wore
spywear and looked sideways to catch
your profile cast in shadow.
I argue over my salad
that coefficients don't apply
to factors based on the human.
You, with more serious math,
have cubed the effects of poverty
squared by terror. I can't count
that high. Not enough fingers
and toes. Puddles in the street catch
glimpses of another world
and display them to pedestrians
splashing to the nearest bar.
We snuggle into our booth
and pretend the Second World War
doesn't apply to us. The waiter
minces to our table and snatches
your credit card, presses it
to his heart. More black coffee
would cure us of the trembling
that always occurs at the border
between Germany and Poland—
the grumble of tanks displaced
by the angst of digestion,
the overcast of your gaze.

MAN MARRIES PET GOLDFISH AND TAKES IT TO BALTIMORE AQUARIUM FOR HONEYMOON

Kieley Smith

A stack of takeout boxes bore witness
as I cupped my hands around the silky
glass that proved your innocence.
I waited for the current to lift off
the golden veil from your scared eyes.
When you bumped against the wall,
I smashed my lips to the bowl's sweating rim,
drops soothing my tongue like holy water.

I walked you down the Plexiglas aisle,
all the other fish in the sea trailing behind,
stagnant in plastic columns above our heads.
Cradled against my chest, your baggie leaked
into my suit, droplets hitting the floor
and smearing under determined footfalls.

We're outside the glass wall now, sweetheart.
Do you see those sharp toothed whores
circling their tank, wanton, as gawkers dribble?
Each of them is soused with traitor's pride.
Watch them, and keep your eggs tucked deep
within your curved sides. Then, I can protect
us when you thrash in airless Ziploc folds.

I'll take you home, and plop you back
into that pretty, see-through bowl.
And every night, I'll lift you, I promise,
into a reverent, dripping kiss and return
you, belly-up, to the safety of the water.

THE ARTIST TO HER LOVER

Jessica Drake-Thomas

Based on a letter from Joan Mitchell to Michael Goldberg

I cleaned the house—made the bed,
thought about how I'd take the streetcar anywhere
if you were waiting at the end of the line.

I've been drinking the beer you left on the windowsill,
covering the opening where your mouth was
with my own chapped lips, as if
I could keep you safe behind my teeth.
The beer is warm and flat, but I keep drinking.

I've been thinking about the spaces in between—
the silences, the waiting, the dovetailing
of bones into a chest of drawers
filled with sea glass and sand and yellowing grass
and a midnight blue comforter.

I knock on all of your closed doors—I love you, let me in—
and I have crocheted webs around you, because often I have felt
that I'm traveling to a place where the streetcar doesn't run.

IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

Courtney Cliften

I can tell you that he obsesses over plants.
Kingdom, Class, Subclass, Genus, Species.
Brown hair falls right past his shoulders.
Preferably in a ponytail. So, a rubber band
Is kept around his wrist.

I can tell you that a Salvador Dali painting hangs
In his bedroom, even though art is my thing.
He hates waiting for me. So he usually picks me up
And carries me, instead. Once, before we fell
Asleep, he put his shoes on my front porch
Because he'd been wearing skiing socks.
I don't know what that means.

I can tell you that we never text, but tonight
I tell him I'm alone at the bar. Before long,
He's walking toward me. Carrying a flower
Only he could tell me the name of.
And he does: Viola Lithion. We drink
Until our words get drunk and clumsy. Until
I make eye contact, and we're face to face.
More specifically, mouth to mouth.

I'm telling you, I acted like nothing even happened.
But while balancing herself on my chair,
A subclass woman observes that he and I make
Just the cutest couple in all of America. Oh my God.
Thanks lady, we're actually just friends, I correct her.
Then, what was all that about? circling her bony finger
Much too close to my face. I roll my eyes and leave.

I can tell it's getting colder as I look at my breath.
He's behind me now, dressing me in his jacket.
He recently rented *In the Mind of Plants*, a documentary
Claiming plants are intelligent. He tells me we're watching it.
Together. Tonight. I ask if he's cold, as if I'd just
Hand his jacket back over. He's not, though. He's fine
In his skiing socks. This time, I can tell you,
It means this night didn't change everything.

HOOKED

C. C. Russell

You're in Nebraska, halfway to drunk on a cool spring evening that tears your heart out. There are squirrels skittering up the trees, their claws scraping across the bark; the not-so-soft voices of drunks walking home from the bars together—learning each other. The multitudes of names we have given.

Chadron. These lived-in outskirts. Across the pristinely weeded yard, voices echo through the still crisp air. Breezes carry our secrets. You stand listening to these snippets of story unaware of their unintended audience. The boasts that carry across time and air. The boasts we create in order to sleep with one another.

Tomorrow you will wake with a Bloody Mary hangover and reach across the gulf of sheets—hoping, almost, for the unremembered; for that sudden recoil against unexpected warmth.

THE SYCAMORE

Carli Simons

The sycamore tree in her back yard was taller and older than the surrounding trees. The branches opened wide and swung low, carrying large leaves to shield her from the sun. They would sometimes fall off in heavy winds or if her brother climbed too high and broke them. The bark was sporadic and thin, peeling off like scabs. She loved this tree. The first time she found someone to spend her life with he was an artist, and she admired the way he could spend months on a portrait perfecting every detail. A few months after they started dating she had taken him out in the yard and sat under the tree. He had stayed standing and looked at her with his face contorted, like he just swallowed something unpleasant. *I don't want to get my pants dirty*, he explained. She watched as he ran his hands over the rough bark and then the smooth fleshy part of the tree. *I think my parents like you*. He laughed and picked at the edge of a patch of bark. *I can't believe you never warned me about them*. She didn't answer, gazing up at him in confusion instead. *Well your family isn't exactly normal, is it?* Another brush of his finger and a small patch disconnected from the tree, leaving behind a bright green wound covered in clear sap. He liked the feeling of the bark giving way. *What do you mean?* She watched his hand closely as it inched its way to the deformation. *I just didn't expect such a nice girl like you to come from people like them*. His fingers were braver now, digging into the softest part of the tree and scraping his thumb nail along the bumps he found. *People like them?* He nodded, hand changing direction. *You know, atheists*. As the second patch of bark fell, this time easier than the first, she knew that he would never love this tree like she did.

THAT YEAR WE MOVED THE BED NEXT TO THE WINDOW

Tee Iseninger

SUMMER

This heat and the tangle of sheets
thrown away, the bed fully bared,
and both of us a sweat, a thirst,
the cinder of a fire-burned building.
Outside no rain falls but every
thing has fallen away with you
a slick and sticky need beside
me, our two books lying forever
open to the same page, forsaken
by this constant steam, these
August meteors. And of all this
while the desk where I once wrote
for hours, all those long, cool hours
before we had each other this way,
only vibrates now under the old fan,
drowning this constant, crackling hum
with its own. I say: I'll do it next
weekend—when things have cooled,
find a new place for the fan and begin
the poem, the story, the novel again.

FALL

Outside the leaves are deserting
the trees all at once. Stretched
naked by the window we watch
the conflagration—fire yellow
and orange on blue—a zenith
blue, like the stranded underwear
wedged between bed and chest,
who knows for how long or who
we had been when our eager feet
pushed it there. But still we flutter
in an evergreen mischief, your sharp
rake of fingers from scalp to arch,
driving away the people we hoped
we might be. And there is that desk,
still bare and now coated with a brown
neglect—an emptiness I reach toward
from under the welcome weight of you.

WINTER

So much white coming in, and here
are bits of snow melting on the carpet,
mud-crusted boots perched at the foot
of the bed and you with the soft fuzz
of scarves, gloves, socks in your beard,
you tucked under flannel, while frost
crawls along the icy edges of the window,
breaks, continues. This snow is not all
we know of drifting, is what you said.
And now it's just that the desk is simply
buried, buckling beneath the weight
of other people's books and half-opened
gifts, clothes to donate and homeless
things left over from some interrupted
cleaning. I say: After the New Year,
I think, when things have settled down,
when it's warmer without you in here,
I'll clear it off and start over again.

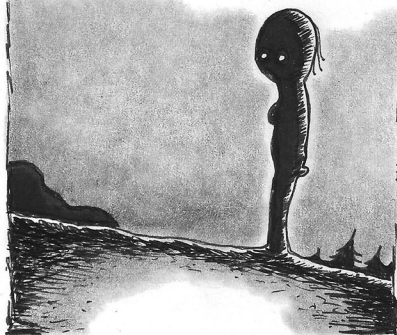
SPRING

These new leaves have kept the sun
away from the window, but any lure
of brightness beyond doesn't move
us. Instead we play in the warm, dim
shadows that lay sideways across
the bed in the early mornings, curling
tight like vines around one another's
old intentions, choking on the catch
in our throats meant to remind us
that there is only so much fragile life
left. The only infertile thing between us
now that desk, finally empty, ready,
and yet still I cannot go, not now,
because I smell faint like orange,
the way you like, and you to me like
moss, and green, and good.

As I look into my eyes
I see the truth and a
thousand lies.



The mirror breaks
with shattered glass
Like broken bones
on my path.



I place a finger on my
mouth

To keep the words from
falling out.



The broken nail I can't
disguise
or kiss the tears from
my eyes.



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Mend my nail,
dismiss the lies



Save my soul
from its demise.

CIRCUS

Joan Presley

Alex and I ate lunch together daily, usually in North Oakland because my car didn't always start and I didn't like long bus rides. That fall we'd been meeting up at the cemetery on Broadway Terrace to listen to the wind blow through the trees and to watch leaves float off their branches, spreading color across the graveyard, softening the place. But that day, Tuesday, October 28, he'd suggested Lake Merritt, saying he needed a change and wanted to watch the joggers. Before I could ask why, he volunteered that he intended to start running and needed to study both stride and gait choices. Long legs and butts was more probable. But I told him okay and maybe I'd jog too, since it seemed unlikely to me we'd ever actually get around to it, given our fitness levels.

We met in the park at 19th and Harrison across from the lake in a picnic spot underneath a full-branched fifty-foot high Oak tree. Its bottom limbs ran parallel to the ground within stepping-onto distance, creating a springboard into the next level of branches, which then led towards what looked like a clear pathway to the sky. I was standing on the lowest tree branch walking back and forth, half-wondering if I could make it to the top. I looked over towards Alex thinking how adorable he was, innocent little lamb, as he stuffed the last bite of his sandwich into his already full mouth. A drop of mayonnaise joined the mustard sauce crusted in the corner of his bottom lip. That's the picture I had two minutes before he yelled over to me, "Hey, you know what you should do?"

"What?"

I hear it still, that *what*, so curious and unsuspecting. I mark that spot as the last unguarded moment of my life.

"You should join the circus."

I don't think I answered before he said it again.

"You should join the circus because you're a loser, and that's what losers do."

His words, well, they hurt. My insides turned fetal, but I straightened up, refusing to buckle. I stared into his eyes and said, "Well okay then, I guess that's what I'll do."

I think he mumbled "Loser" one more time as I walked away.

Now freak masters, midgets, bearded ladies, and Pringles jumble together forever in my mind, and the last loving action I will always see him taking is a long draw from his Big Gulp, the ice rattling in the cup as he lifted the mammoth drink with both hands and set it back down next to the empty potato chip cylinder.

Alex was a government guy, a polo shirt and Dockers wearing investigator with a college degree and promotional promise. He probably had money in the bank. We had met at the deli, where I worked as a waitress, before I got fired. He and his briefcase-toting co-workers used to come in for lunch—usually ten or twelve guys, probably late twenties, early thirties, but already looking forty to me.

They'd push three tables together and talk, talk, laugh, laugh getting louder as they waited and, with only three of us making sandwiches, that could be awhile. Not all the guys were patient but Alex always was, and he set the tone, so he could often get them to shut the hell up. Those guys adored him: watching for cues, laughing at his jokes. He wasn't the boss per se, but he obviously led the pack.

Some of his buddies amused themselves by poking fun, and I more often than not served as their target. One loud-mouthed Asian guy liked to remind me to wash my hands and such. His partner would then say, "And maybe your hair," and they'd laugh, mouths wide open, day after day. When I delivered their meals this fat guy named Marcus tended to mention the holes in my boots, as if I wanted worn out shoes. At the same time, I did dress sort of counter-culture, so I pretended he just didn't get it, that the holes were intentional, a part of my get-up. The boots under scrutiny were my orange patent leather, and I always wore one wig or another. My favorite was a black butch-cut spiky short one. It never looked dirty to me.

Alex ordered his salami sandwiches with a smile and good eye contact and told his silly friends to leave me alone and let me serve them lunch. I'd never given him much romantic thought then, because he looked so mid-level business boring, but I consistently loaded his sandwiches with salami for his efforts on my behalf.

One day I noticed he'd started a mustache and beard. His hair looked longer too. Maybe three weeks later he showed up for lunch alone, wearing jeans with motorcycle leathers. He looked better, I must say. Then he began stopping by the deli in the evening after five o'clock, buying a beer or two, sometimes a pack of Marlboros, and lingering as he drank and smoked. He was more relaxed, friendlier. He flirted. I responded.

One August night I got stuck with the closing shift and, before I had finished my chores, Alex arrived riding a Harley. He invited me to join him. I climbed on; there went my job.

Turns out his assignment had changed to Narc, and he assumed I was a doper, like a person who might provide insight, or contacts even, to help with his new gig. If I'd been smarter I might have noticed how smoothly he'd transitioned to outlaw. A natural actor—why didn't I catch on? What would a man with a college degree and a future see in a girl like me?

I worked crummy little jobs for short bursts of time, often leaving due to funk and boredom, but sometimes involuntarily, having said or done something considered rude. I drove people away, covering my darkness with bad language and eyeliner. I felt reckless looking scary. Alex dug it, or said he did when he first went undercover. He laughed a lot more than at the kinds of things I tend to.

That first year we were together, I took him to the Freak Freely Festival at Redwood Park. At the time I believed he'd had fun, but he probably spent the afternoon writing down names. I got a little too buzzed to pay him much attention.

His freak flag disappeared at some point, and I can't recall exactly when that happened, but in retrospect he'd been restless and cranky with me for at least three months prior to recommending me for circus duty, so I knew at some level that something was sizzling and that it probably wasn't bacon.

I'd never told Alex I had a fascination with the circus, so how did he come up with his big idea in the first place? I hadn't even thought about circus stuff since about tenth grade when one time, right before I quit school, we had this art project. The idea was to decorate a large paper bag with pictures, either cut out or drawn, that would represent how we each thought the world saw us, or even how we would like to be seen, so you know predictable, movie stars, glamour girls, things like that. We put images or objects inside the bag to represent how we really felt but didn't show the world. My classmates inserted things like sweet baby dolls and smiling star Christmas ornaments into their bags. The only thing I put inside mine was a photo of the circus fat lady, which I'd snipped from the Ringling Brothers' brochure the summer before. I'd hung it over my bed and had been staring horrified at her rippling lard layers for months. I said it reminded me of what I didn't want to become, but really, somehow, felt I already had done or might do or could be. The teacher directed me to the school counselor, but I wouldn't talk.

After lunch that day at Lake Merritt, I walked the five blocks over to the Community Charitable Foundation on Telegraph Avenue for my after-noon shift. The trip is a blur, maybe from crying hard, or I could have been screaming and jumping in front of big trucks or something like that. I don't know. I'm guessing I must have stayed with the crowd, following directions: Walk, Don't Walk, because I materialized at my work station with no bruising or open wounds, and nobody like the police following me.

My job at the time was simple enough. I handed things to people. A nice monkey could have done it and most of the time my performance maintained that standard. We were giving away space heaters to assist low income people with their energy bills right then. About four o'clock a well-heeled lady and her teenage son showed up. I saw her in line and thought she must be in the wrong section, so I left my station and walked over to her.

"Ma'am, are you looking for the drop-off-your-goods location?" She huffed at me, like I didn't deserve syllables.

"We're here for a heater," her boy said.

"All right then." I excused myself and slunk back to my counter.

When they reached the front of the line, the woman said, "I pay taxes. I want a heater."

"Coming right up ma'am." I picked one out of the pile behind me, trying to behave, but then the boy piped in.

"We pay more than they do, you know."

I handed him the heater. "Okay, nice. Here you go. Stand barefoot in

water while you plug it in.”

She called for a supervisor. I took off my apron and left my employee badge on the counter because I knew where this was going. The previous quarter we’d given out batteries, and, in a somewhat parental tone, I’d reminded a dick customer not to eat them.

I called Alex two days later, but he didn’t pick up. I left this message: “Hey, I’m going to do it. Join the circus I mean.”

I went to bed hoping he’d be impressed at my bravado or as ensnared by my tragic existence as I was. I wanted him to love me again. I prayed he would call my bluff. I felt desperate, like a rescue dog gone homeless again.

My sleep was unsettled that night. It was full of singlet-wearing dwarves grabbing at me, an army of little strong men, but they were greasy too and toothless, like carnie’s might be. By morning I didn’t want to join the circus anymore. Why should I? I moped around for a while drinking coffee with Kahlua, thinking, “Fuck you, Alex. I’ll do what I want.” But what I wanted was him, and what he wanted was me, gone.

Plus, I needed a job. So I pulled out my old circus stuff and dug.

Would-be employees were directed to Feldman Entertainment. I called their Los Angeles office and was told to send my resume. I did so the following morning, and a Mr. Davis contacted me a week later, on Thursday afternoon. He told me what my job would entail: customer service, minimum wage. No animals, no glitter, no clown cars. He emphasized that I’d be easy to replace if I didn’t work out, but he also mentioned that circus people themselves tended not to be friendly or good with the public. If I could prove myself able, I’d be handy to him. If, on the other hand, I was looking for glory I’d be better off to master a skill that might lead to a future in performance. I assured him I wanted this job, and told him I was a proven, exceptional, people-loving representative. I hoped he wouldn’t check references.

I took a bus to the Emeryville Station the first Monday in December. I arrived early, around six a.m. The platform was mostly vacant, which surprised me. I’d expected lions’ cages or an elephant turd clean-up crew or something like that to be happening, I guess. I found out later the animals move by truck. The Company train was not scheduled to depart until eight fifteen, but devastated by Alex’s dismissal and my difficulty even breathing without him, I’d decided to start my life completely over and intended to act differently than I’d done in the past. Moving forward I’d arrive to commitments on time. I’d already quit smoking, and, while packing, I’d thrown away my wigs. I planned to read while we traveled, like nice girls do.

The train started boarding around seven thirty. We were headed down to Bakersfield then to Sacramento and on to Stockton for a three-day stint to finish up a West Coast tour. From there we would turn east for performances in various Midwest locations. People pushed trying to get into the carriage. Wanting to seem friendly, I’d let several cut ahead of

me, so when it came my turn to look for a seat, availability was limited. I'd hoped for a window, since I'd never seen the Central Valley before, but it quickly became clear that I'd be lucky to sit at all. I found a place next to an older-looking lady with swollen ankles who was surrounded by sequins and sewing materials. She worked throughout the trip mending seams and replacing buttons on costumes, but she never talked to me or even made eye contact, and I couldn't remember how to start a conversation.

The trip might have counted as training hours, because it got me ready to be ignored. I could have been invisible in that Company. Nobody talked to me. My boss said only what he had to, instructions mostly. Co-workers brushed by, always looking elsewhere. This crowd carried a certain hardness, like the brittle outer shell that I could sometimes still detach had actually grafted onto their backs, attaching at the spine. They were certainly not friendly, just like Mr. Davis had warned, although they did seem, clannishly, to like each other.

Social standing was determined by birth or by talent. Performing families assumed rank and stuck together. Clowns hung with clowns, acrobats with acrobats, and so on. Long term support crew could be likened to Army warrant officers. Their technical expertise gave them value. Outsiders with general skills, like me, nothing special, were bottom rung. My job was familiar but different. I had to wear a uniform: burnt sienna blouse tucked into tight-fitting pants with a cheery yellow, elephant-shaped nametag that greeted people with: *Hi! I'm Maxie* in jaunty letters. Underneath in a larger script our slogan warned: *Daring! Dazzling! Delightful!* My boss instructed me to smile at all times, like an idiot, and act excited, so I drank tons of coffee.

My inside attitude hadn't changed much. I only agreed to act differently which, fortunately, didn't turn out to be that hard. The crowd consisted primarily of seniors with their grandkids, everybody wearing their childhood grins, happy to be at the circus. I began to find them charming, and I'd never been charmed before, not counting Alex.

Oh, Alex. I ached for him. I searched the crowd every day hoping he'd come for me. He never did. I hung on because if he didn't want me what difference did it make where I was? And I thought he was probably right: I was sort of a loser. If losers belong with the circus, then I was properly placed.

A year and a half later, in mid-April, the train broke down outside Indianapolis so we pulled into town late. Usually the ring and set-up crews did load out alone with a machine-like precision that kept our company moving. But the breakdown caused nervous tension in our troupe. The tight-rope guys started grumbling, as we'd waited motionless on the tracks for three hours, about the folly of dancing across a wire forty feet above the ground exhausted and how, if things didn't get moving, they might have to sit a show or two out. The trapeze artists listened carefully and were just beginning to complain themselves when the general manager stepped in—deftly, I'd say—and announced that when we pulled into

the station all personnel, except those performers protected by contractual, safety-related downtime provisions, would help with load out.

He broke us into teams, and my team's assignment was to ensure that every costume in the show was delivered from train car to trailer intact. We unloaded, reloaded, went to the venue, unpacked, hung and categorized, placing garments properly to ensure smooth transitions between acts. I'd been so lonely for so long that I sucked up to teamwork and buzzed along, smiling and taking directions. My behavior baffled me some because I usually wasn't one of those shiny workers, like the person everybody wanted on their team. I was more negative and whiny and terrible to be around, but I went with it.

Sometime that night I caught a dose of show-business enthusiasm, or maybe I should say a drop of a dose. Regardless, it landed. These two teammates of mine, an energetic contortionist and a beefy, loud-mouthed ring master, oozed circus, insisting that the show made people happy and happiness made life worth living. They didn't talk down to me, so I listened and I heard—something.

The next morning the creative director called for a technical run-through to make sure all props were secured and performers were on their game. Transitions and sequences had to be repeated because people were tired, snapping and blaming each other for simple mistakes. I sat quietly and watched. I wasn't tired. I was consumed, pondering happiness and purpose, subjects about which I knew little.

I felt the air *whuff* as a large somebody plopped down next to me. A size fifteen red-tasseled bootie with polka-dot pantaloons blousing over it kicked my calf to say hello. I turned to the left and saw Jimbo. He asked if I minded. Hell no, I didn't. Who doesn't want a handsome clown sitting beside her?

He said, "Why are you the only one keeping your shit together?"

I didn't want to tell him that I had no friends to grouse with and wasn't familiar enough with the show to get blame crazy over mistakes. Instead, surprising myself, I asked if he'd like to go get a drink sometime. I hadn't reached out to anybody in so long.

When he said yes I had to ask him to repeat himself. He said, "Yes, I'd like that."

I watched his performance before our date to make sure we had something to talk about. Jimbo played the innocent to this older clown named Clarence. They did a pretend house-on-fire skit. Jimbo ran inside to rescue a baby doll. Clarence stood outside panicking. Jimbo, boxed in by flames, had to jump out the window. Clarence moved the mattress while Jimbo was mid-air, so he landed hard, *thud*, onto the dirt and sawdust floor only to have Clarence pick up a fully-charged "fire hose" and direct it into his face. The audience howled, but I didn't find it funny at all.

After the show, Jimbo and I left the stadium and walked four blocks south in a dimly lit industrial neighborhood towards a small bar we'd passed earlier when driving in from the station. We sat down and ordered a bottle of wine. I asked him about the cruelty in his act. He told me first of all that he hated this circus, this old-fashioned, mind-numbing cess-

pool of cruelty. He'd been there six months, solely to save money to go back to school and had to put up with Clarence, who was mean, self-centered, and not in touch with his inner clown.

Inner clown. I already liked this guy. I asked what he meant, though, being unfamiliar with the term.

"Yes, well, real clowns don't act, do they? They're vulnerable, let their shit shine through, you know? The audience can relate so they laugh."

He called it physical poetry and did a pantomime then of Clarence's reaction to his modern take on clowning. Transforming his muscular torso into a pot-bellied, bulging-eyed, Bluto, arms braced for swinging, Jimmy made me laugh so hard I almost fell off my bar stool.

But Clarence liked his hammer-in-the-face style just fine. He'd learned it from his father who'd learned it from his father. He didn't believe in "fixing things that weren't broken."

Jimmy had been working circuses since he was fifteen, when he and a couple of friends had invented an act called the human jump rope. The smallest of the friends, Tommie, had played the rope itself. Tommie lived in Cincinnati now, hooked on pain pills and dependent on a back brace. Jimmy felt bad about that and sent him money when he could. He was thoughtful in that way.

Jimmy looked at me when he spoke and watched my face as he listened. He started coming by my station during breaks just to talk. Our conversations flowed, lively from the start. I loved his visits. He'd wear his red rubber nose even if he wasn't in costume because it looked goofy, and he knew I'd laugh. He invited me to attend all his shows. I told him I would if I could do his make-up.

Three months later, we had a day off in San Diego and went together to the zoo, spending time mostly with the elephants. He loved animals and hated to see them, hit, chained, or ridden. He asked me if I'd ever consider joining him in an animal-free circus. He said, "Maybe we could have a freak-free life someday, in a genuine theatrical environment."

When I heard "freak free" my mind zoomed back to the festival at Redwood Park and Alex's double-cross: pretending to be falling in love with me, but really just gathering information about my friends for his files. It sounds lame now, but I suddenly wondered whether Jimmy might be pretending too. I told him I needed space. I didn't see him for two months.

The Company headed east again and when we got to Cincinnati, Jimmy asked if I'd go with him to see his old friend Tommie the Rope, who was lonely and ill. I had to go. I wanted to meet the Rope, and I missed Jimmy anyway. I watched him closely that day and saw nothing but sweet behavior towards his old friend; the patient way he lifted and then carried him outside to sit in the sunshine. Clearly, Jimmy wasn't Alex. We started dating again and, six months later, I married that clown.

I started to costume my husband for his performances. Clarence scoffed but others watched closely. Soon I began subtly outlining the Canton Triplet's eyes and powdering their faces. I offered suggestions to glam up their outfits and, somehow, looking more professional gave them confidence. It just did. Fumbles and misses became a thing of the past for

them, mostly. I started moonlighting, calling my business Maxie's Moxie. The trapeze artists, acrobats, and showgirls hired me. My heavy hand with eyeliner served me well.

Clarence finally went too far and Jimmy's arm got broken. Out of work he started to brood. Living with an unhappy clown, I really can't describe it. The Company wouldn't find Clarence at fault for his actions, so Jimmy wanted to quit. I felt nervous, not having walked away from anything since that day at Lake Merritt. Jimmy talked me through it.

We moved to San Francisco where he attended a clown intensive at the Circus Center and I took some classes at the Aveda Institute. Excellent jobs opened up for us: Circus Smirkus, Pickle Family, and the Zoppe Family Troupe. Our resumes fat with experience, Jimmy applied to Le Samovar, Europe's premiere clown college, and was offered a two-year fellowship. He studied advanced buffoonery while teaching introduction to physical theater. He dedicated himself to his students and his craft. He relished life on the continent, where circus sits next to art.

I'd run Maxie's all along and had gathered a big following in the state-side circuses. I lost my confidence upon arrival in Paris though, feeling like a backwater girl to big city couture. I stumbled professionally and started to slip back into myself. We lived on the east side of Paris, 20th arrondissement, close to the school, so I had contacts; I just didn't take advantage of them. I chose instead to take time off—to explore, so I said.

I didn't speak French, so I quit listening to most conversations. I'd never noticed how distracting other people could be. The silence gave me time to think, and what I found myself thinking about was: Alex. Circus. Loser. I hadn't known that was still there.

While Jimmy studied, I'd either walk or take the Metro, learning Paris from American touring books. My favorite spot was the Tuileries Gardens, where I lost myself for afternoons at a time in monuments, vegetation, and statues. I particularly loved Edmond Leveque's marble rendition of The Nymph. When I'd first seen her, I laughed and said "Hello, fellow loser," because nymphs, well, all that sexual misconduct and unquenchable thirst—not very ladylike. Even I would know that. I visited her often. She felt like kin to me.

Jimmy finally got a break from school, and I took him to see my talisman on a crisp April afternoon and told him why I loved her. He didn't like hearing that I still had loser leftovers and began telling me the parts of her story I didn't know: That she's a divine spirit who sings, dances, and lives with gusto; that she's not controlled by men or by feminine roles as assigned; that she prefers to live in springs, because they're bubbling with new life. In short, she's no loser.

He then patiently drew parallels between parts of her and me. His theory was that Alex's appraisal had been based upon distortion, a portion of my story that he reflected as the whole.

We returned to The Nymph again in May, but I didn't need to linger. Instead, we strolled along wide avenues past two hundred-year-old Oaks, their height neatly trimmed to protect the Parisian vista. I felt secured by that eight foot canopy, like my world fit just right. The garden was burst-

ing with Spring bulbs: hyacinth, iris, and daffodils in various stages of bud or bloom. At the Rose Garden we entered a mosaic work of tulips, a living-colored art form, spread perfectly in every direction. Right then, in the middle of that bona fide beauty, I couldn't find the loser in me.

LETTER IN SHADES OF A DESERT

Nathan Slinker

You would like this place. Daily life oscillates between ceremony and work—one man runs tests on the light, his son maps our bodies.

Everything is sand and dust—I dream often of a drowned forest—and yet, it's better than the city, the first city, after they took you.

The lamplighters' white veils reach past their knees. They wear sand-colored boots and seem to float through the dusk like human fog.

I have befriended a few others, but even they fear to care what happened, are content with clean groundwater and the massive silence wrapped

like an amber cloak around this outpost. I don't blame them. I'm mostly envious—still, I continue to excavate my floor...

In the afternoons, when most of the others are asleep, I gather boards from the trash heaps to lie across the pits—

I live like a spider above the past. Yesterday, I found in a metal box a beeswax candle in the shape of an old man's head,

and suspended within the wax, like the peculiar shrapnel of thought, petals from some purple flower.

But so what? Do you still sneak into that widow's house to play her piano while she's sedated? What would you play if she woke and found you?

Or if I did? I'm sorry for writing that.
Please send word if the haze clears and they allow passage out.

Here, the sun sets its dead belly on a western hill. The lamplighters will be coming. I stayed up all day to watch their twilit song.

LETTER WITH TWO VISIONS

Nathan Slinker

Something strange has been happening. Each morning—a blue glow striking boarded windows—an envelope slides under my door then disappears when I reach for it. If I open the door (a mistake I made twice) clouds of dark yellow finches blow into the living room. Looking through the peep-hole, I have repeatedly seen that colonel from the Spanish Civil War you were so obsessed with back in the city.

I awoke today thinking of the night we seared fire balloons across the long valley our fathers worked so hard to both hold and forget, and maybe this too—another in a series of messages from the past—is as full of heat as the emptiness my hands keep finding. Some of the finches are red throated,

some have already turned to glass. I'm learning sign language from a girl who says she can see music. She's only got one hand so I guess I'll never talk to anyone else this way. When she arrives each afternoon, I lay out pastels, tape blank paper to the dinner table. She draws pictures of birdsong—a vivid clamor in the quiet house.

I've come to partake, a little, in her terrible gift. Sometimes her own long scream loops through her like an old film. I know you'll understand this—I mean, Christ dear, those men in Madrid—they knew every way to use a saw.

LETTER WITH DILAPIDATION AND RIFLE

Nathan Slinker

Let's hope some staggering light falls into the understory of this. The radio says one of the mayor's rifles was stolen, says dig crews have unearthed an entire building on the outskirts. They're planning a grand project—surely some museum of failure. No pity here for our lost ways. Last week, I walked to the old farm. The woodshop,

where I learned how smooth our bodies could become, has finally completely collapsed, and a swath of something like cotton chokes the creek bed. Pine dust's thick resin scent—how long since we were both there, breaking ourselves into choirs we'd never hear? I clung to falling fences all afternoon, looking... Then just walked.

Do you still wake up at wrong hours with Bach in your head? Sometimes the skin stringing me to the past trembles too much like the violin. Someone's been using a chair from the hospital to electrocute geese and sheep on the government office's steps in some kind of protest that has everyone, me too, bewildered.

Every day, new rumors of a high village with no signal where they're taking the remaining women. I wish I could say the rifle was here with me, that I had dared... Whoever stole it—I hope it's put to use soon. The thief must mean well.

LETTER WITH RAIN

Nathan Slinker

All the city girls sleep on old mattresses in the hollow trunks of sequoias, and their dreams rattle my rain-dashed windows. Yes, I'm still translating

the rain. The girls have built fantastic contraptions throughout the forest to catch, divert, and siphon its endless fall. Looking outside, I pretend I'm a passenger on a small boat drifting through a jungle—so fecund

even my mouth grows moss. Hard, here, to imagine how thirsty I was in the huge, orange silence of that desert where I chased after artifacts in dark eyeliner, bruised with halos. Now I choke on clouds, and the girls from the trees leave locks of damp hair on my doorstep. What can I say?—

some days the forest still sings. You asked why I do this work, and this is all I know: maybe if I turn enough rain into words, I'll turn part of me, maybe the best part, into rain.

How else will I get out? This time, I truly felt I was writing a letter, but now, looking down at my hand as I finish, it's clear as water.

TOO BEAUTIFUL FOR THIS PLACE

Orville Williams

The first time Grant heard Piper meow he thought surely he'd misheard his daughter. When she meowed a second time, he wondered if she was messing with him. He found her imitation fascinating. Though not quite a mewling noise, it was more lyrical than a spoken meow. He knelt down so he was face-to-face with his daughter, but she took a step back and turned away from him. He tried to brush the hair out of her eyes with his hand, but she recoiled, making a slight hissing noise before slinking through and around the legs of Grandpa Ray. Even the fluidity of her movements resembled a cat's.

He searched his father-in-law's face for some clarification, assuming Ray had concocted the plan while Piper stayed with him. But Ray shrugged and looked as surprised by the situation as Grant.

The fall air was still and heavy, barbed with a chill. He began to beg for his daughter's forgiveness, but the sting of the air caused his faltering voice to stammer over the words. Piper peeked out from behind Ray's legs. Her eyes no longer possessed the gleam of innocence and excitement they had before Emma unexpectedly passed away. He clutched his jacket collar. He tightened it around his neck and held it closed.

"You're just gonna have to give it some time, son," Ray said, stroking Piper's head. "She'll be back to her playful self before you know it."

"And what am I supposed to do until then?" Grant said, still crouched and staring at Piper. He studied her, hoping to find anything recognizable. "What can I do to get you to forgive me, Piper?"

She meowed. The softness of her voice sounded more like singing than speaking. Piper crept forward, tilted her head, and prodded the ground with her foot. She pulled her arm into the shape of a question mark by hooking her hand at the wrist and resting her chin on top.

"What is it, honey?" Grant said. He extended a trembling hand toward hers, but Piper didn't return the gesture.

She meowed again. She wrinkled her nose, pursed her lips, and rolled her eyes before snaking her way around Ray and disappearing into the house.

"All right, so you want to tell me what that was about?" Grant said as he stood back up.

"Not sure. Never heard her make that sound until you came back."

"You're telling me you didn't have anything to do with the meowing?"

"I'm not the one who bailed on her the same day as her mother's funeral," he said. He puffed out his chest and placed his hands on his hips. Grant pinned his arms against his chest and rocked in place. "Dear lord, I turned my daughter into a cat."

"Come on, quit your bellyaching and focus." Ray began to pace around the porch, and Grant noticed his father-in-law's breathing had quickened. His short, rapid breaths caused his chest to heave. "That poor girl in there hasn't spoken once since she's been here. I'm happy she's at

least graduated to making audible noises.”

“What do you mean she hasn’t spoken?” Grant leaned over the porch rails. He wrung his hands like he was dry-washing them.

“I mean just that. Piper hasn’t said one word in the past ten weeks. Not one goddamn word. Bet those meows don’t sound too bad right about now, huh?”

“I guess not.” Grant didn’t understand how that was possible. Before Emma’s death they couldn’t get her to stop talking. They were lucky if she’d shut up long enough to fall asleep. She was curious about anything and everything. She wanted to know what everything was, how it worked, and why things were the way they were. Why is the sky blue? Why can’t dogs fly? Why can birds talk but rabbits can’t? Why don’t fish have legs? Why does Grandpa Ray’s house smell funny? Almost every time these questions were followed up with another inquisitive why.

“I suggest you learn how to speak feline,” Ray said, with a nervous chuckle.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Grant didn’t have an excuse for leaving after Emma died from a ruptured brain aneurysm. Her death was sudden and unexpected. Her only real symptom was periodic headaches in the weeks leading up to her death, but she must have downplayed their effects.

He couldn’t stand to look at Piper, let alone be around her after Emma died. Piper bore too much of a resemblance to Emma—they shared the same grayish-blue eyes, upturned nose, and smile that revealed the slightest presence of dimples. Every feature of her face reminded him of Emma, and dragged Grant through piles of memories that he hadn’t thought about in months, maybe years.

They met at the State Fair before either one of them could drive. Grant noticed Emma long before she saw him. He tended to date the shallow, cookie-cutter type over the jeans-and-T-shirt type. But there was something different about Emma and her black tank top, jeans, and cowboy boots. The simplicity of her style appealed to him. He liked that she didn’t feel the need to plaster on makeup or douse herself with perfume. Her natural beauty combined with the aroma of cherry Coke and corn dogs were intoxicating.

He noticed the large mustard stain on the front of her shirt and said, “Even if you are a little redneck and messy, you’re still the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.” He felt the same way that night at the fair as he did on the nights they decided to first sleep together and get married—mystified and frightened.

Grant wandered at night with black thoughts, trying to find some sort of solace. He turned to the three wise men for guidance—Jim Beam, Jack Daniels, and Johnnie Walker. He roamed through the town, along the train tracks, down by the river, passing between patches of light and shadow in a half-lit world. He didn’t just climb inside the bottle; he fucking burrowed himself in it, barricading himself from the rest of the world.

It wasn’t that they fought all the time, but when they did, their words

and insults swirled about the room. Their fights were typical relationship bullshit—not putting the toilet seat down, leaving dirty dishes in the sink, and never being around as much as he should—but their words were direct and purposeful. After all the shouting, a palpable feeling of dread and loneliness resonated throughout their house and suffocated their perfect, ordinary life together. The more Grant trampled over his past—their past—the more he drank and fell into oblivion.

On the evening of Emma's funeral, the pale, crescent-shaped moon barely breached the horizon. The first slivers of darkness revealed a sky freckled with stars, shrouding the earth in a blanket of gray. Everyone at the funeral flickered in the pallid light like apparitions. Grant went through the motions—shaking hands, hugging friends and family, accepting condolences, avoiding stares and whispers. After he played his part in the procession he gave Piper to Grandpa Ray before he wandered off again. Once the lingering haze of light was obliterated by the darkness of night, the sky became deranged and unrecognizable. Grant made it to the edge of town before he stumbled back to the graveyard and stopped at Emma's grave. He sat leaning against her headstone all night, drinking and weeping. He tried to picture the life they were supposed to have—Emma and him gray and withered, sitting in rocking chairs on the porch and watching Piper and their grandchildren in the front yard—but he could no longer conjure up any such images.

Piper took a few weeks to warm up to her father enough to not grimace every time he came near. He started to decipher Piper's different meows and catlike mannerisms. For instance, he learned when her meows had a singsong quality to them she was happy, or at least content, and when they sounded more like a high-pitch mew she was dissatisfied. But he still wasn't as good as Ray, who seemed to have full-on conversations with Piper without misinterpreting. The thing that neither of them could figure out, though, was where this fascination with felines originated. They hadn't ever seen Piper with a cat—toy or real—and she had never been an avid fan of any books, shows, or movies that starred a cat character.

Grant appreciated the extra time to get his house back in order, though he wanted his daughter back as soon as possible. He'd never actually skipped town after Emma's death, like most people assumed. He'd holed himself away inside the house during the day and wandered the streets at night. But he damn near destroyed their home in the process. He took a Louisville Slugger to anything that reminded him of Emma, which meant almost everything in the house. If it wasn't for the sharp memory brought about by a teacup with a chipped handle and tea stained rim, Grant would have ruined everything they owned.

When Emma was pregnant with Piper, Grant took her on a date to Patricia's Pottery Palace, a place she'd mentioned several times. It was as cheesy as the name suggested—its walls were covered in what looked like children's oil paintings of an Italian countryside. He still remembered how when he sat behind her he chuckled a little, because his arms could

barely reach around her ever-growing belly. Emma's face reddened out of embarrassment, but Grant thought she had never looked as beautiful. There were several things he regretted destroying, one of which was Emma's Precious Moments collection. From the afternoon she had brought them home, he bitched and moaned about them. Now that she was gone, he couldn't stand the sight of the little porcelain ornaments and figurines, so he took all of them out back and played homerun derby, shattering them one after the next and sending their remnants over the fence.

He wanted to make Piper's transition as smooth and pleasant as possible. He made a trip to the local pet store, where he purchased a litter box, cat bed, scratching post, food and water bowls, and multiple cat toys. He also did the best he could to stock the house with her favorite things—pizza rolls, Fuzzy Bear stuffed animal, Emma's high school sweatshirt, Blue's Clues coloring books, etc. Maybe she would forget about the whole cat ruse just long enough to show some type of human reaction.

Those first few nights Piper was back, he gave her plenty of space to get reacquainted with the house and his constant presence. He never occupied the same room as her unless she initiated it by coming into a room where he already was. If she was in the living room watching television, then he'd be in the garage fooling around with a piece of furniture that needed repair and fresh coat of paint. Though their interactions were always colored with feline qualities, he noticed that Piper constantly checked on his whereabouts—spying on him from doorways, relocating to areas of the house that were closest to where he was, and latching onto his legs anytime it even looked like he might leave the house.

To help further decode the different variations of her meows, he bought a book titled *How to Talk to Your Cat: The Guide to a More Fulfilling Relationship with Your Feline*. He started dedicating the majority of his time scouring the Internet for any information that might help him better understand Piper's behavior.

He didn't want to strain their relationship more than it had already been, so he decided not to force her to see a psychologist, though he consulted with a significant amount of so-called specialists about the situation. After speaking with people from a variety of fields, Grant determined they were all more fascinated with observing and studying a catlike child than they were with actually helping Piper.

But eventually he grew impatient and desperate for things to return to the way they were. He tried everything he could to bribe her to speak, going as far as offering to take her to Disney World and Disneyland back-to-back if she would respond with anything other than a meow. Each time one of his schemes failed, his anger and bitterness grew.

He managed to stay sober for several months after reappearing in Piper's life. But with each passing day of her not talking, his sobriety became less and less manageable. It wasn't that being drunk provided refuge for him. In fact, he loathed stumbling about incoherently. But he was willing to relinquish control of his faculties if it meant he wouldn't be bombarded

with memories of Emma and all the feelings attached to their past or her death. When he started drinking again, he drank pocket shots of Jack, thinking they'd be easier to conceal and discard. Before too long, though, his empties littered the living room floor surrounding his recliner.

One night, he had at least fifteen dead soldiers piled next to his chair when Piper skulked in and curled up on the couch.

"I'm hungry. Anything sound good to you, Piper?" Grant said with a slight slur. He pulled himself out of the chair. His knees wobbled, forcing him to stand with his arms straight out like wings to regain proper balance. "No wait . . . let me guess . . . you want that Meow Mix all the cats go ape-shit for in the commercials, huh?"

Piper remained quiet, blankly staring at Grant while he buckled over with laughter and slapped his thigh. When he realized she wasn't going to respond, he stumbled over to her and plopped down on the couch, almost sitting on her.

"What's your problem?" he said, raising his voice as he spoke. He wore a wry smile as he leaned toward Piper, towering over her. He nudged her leg and snorted when she averted her gaze from his. "You have to sing if you want your treats. Here, let me show you how it's done . . . Meow, meow, meow. Meow, meow, meow. Now you try."

Piper tried sliding away from Grant and off the couch, but he grabbed her ankle and pulled her back toward him.

"Why won't you just speak like a normal person?"

She didn't respond, but her face said everything—her stare was cold and flinty, her nostrils flared, and her jaw clenched. She tried maneuvering away from her father again, this time pushing against his chest. Grant didn't hold her when he noticed tears streaking down her cheeks.

"What's wrong? We can finally communicate now that I speak feline, too. Meow, meow, meow," he said. He cackled and rolled off the couch. He struggled to keep his eyes from shutting, but he heard Piper run off and close her bedroom door. He swore he saw Emma gliding about the living room like a specter, circling his motionless body. She was trying to tell him something, but he couldn't make out exactly what she was saying. He tried pushing himself up several times, but he couldn't make it to his feet.

Grant woke the next morning on the garage floor with his feet resting on the seat of his riding lawn mower. His ears rang and his head pounded, both of which made him disoriented and nauseous. He tried piecing his night together. He remembered seeing Emma, though he didn't fully understand how that was possible. He finally remembered bullying Piper. A wave of shame and remorse washed over him.

He had no idea of the time. He snuck into the house and poked his head into her room. Piper was still asleep. She had kicked her comforter to the floor and her head dangled off the side of the mattress. Grant tip-toed over to the bed and gently cradled Piper in his arms. As he did, an old Polaroid fell and floated underneath the bed. Grant grabbed the comforter off the floor and covered Piper before reaching for the picture.

The grainy photograph had a young girl dressed as a cat for Halloween—she wore a plastic cat nose with whiskers and a headband with cat ears. Although he had never seen the picture before, he recognized Emma. She couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old.

That afternoon Grant called Ray and confessed to everything—about bullying Piper, seeing Emma's spirit, and finding the picture. He asked Ray to watch Piper while he ran an errand to set things back on the right path once and for all.

Grant wanted to do it right. The first place Grant headed was a video store. He bought all the popular talking cats he enjoyed, or could remember—Garfield, Sylvester, Puss-in-Boots, Top Cat, The Aristocats, and Tigger. Then he headed to a costume store. He bought two adult cat costumes for himself and four child-sized costumes for Piper. Before heading home, he bought food that wouldn't require any type of cutlery—pizza, tacos, veggies, and, as a joke, fish sticks.

Ray was scheduled to drop Piper off twenty minutes after Grant made it home. He used the time to set everything out, displaying them in different parts of the house, so she couldn't possibly miss finding at least one thing before locking herself in her room. Grant finished putting his costume on when he heard Ray's truck pull into the driveway. His suit was an all-black onesie with footies and a hood that had a mouth, nose, whiskers, and ears on top. He made a pretty badass cat. Her costumes looked identical to his, only smaller and in a variety of different colors—black, gray, tabby, and white. He double-checked the mirror before heading to greet Piper at the door.

Piper opened the front door and walked inside. She had a scowl on her face. But it disappeared the moment she saw him wearing a full-blown cat suit. She rubbed her eyes and slunk closer to Grant. She tilted her head to the side and maneuvered her arm into a question mark. He got down on all fours and mimicked her movements. When he did the question mark move with his arm, Piper's face slipped, revealing a smile before catching herself.

"Meow," Grant said, in a deep, scratchy kind of voice. He crawled onto the couch. As he sat down, Piper leapt onto the cushion beside him. She curled up next to him and nuzzled her face against his chest. She made a sound Grant could only describe as purring.

EN ROUTE TO MY FATHER'S FUNERAL

Lori Howe

I leave the Interstate
for a probable future
of map-wrestling
in the weak dome light,
and the Kansas moon stands up
to look at me.

Silvered against it,
I feel a stray atom
from when we were all
still fish
twitch inside my bones.

All highways
head straight across Kansas—
long, quiet stretches,
the darkened arches of roofs.
I imagine the people asleep
in their beds,
and they wrap their blankets tight
inside me, turning over,
breathing deep.

At a pale crossroads,
in an open shop
two floors up,
a welder works into the night.
His arc is lonesome in the cool air,
gobbets of fire
like unformed angels
falling.

As a child,
I watched this same
mercurial rain
from my father's shop—
strange hobby, I'd thought,
for the silent man
who shared my own eyes,
my own wrists—
not knowing his fire
would buy my clothes
and shoes,
come autumn.

In the rearview mirror,
I arch to see the last drops
leap away.
Strange, I tell
the sleeping Kansans,
this aching,
this longing for a life
I swear I never loved.

ON A MEAL SET LATE IN FALL

Jeffrey Alfier

My parents dining table abides in chipped
white paint through all these decades. Spider webs

at the kitchen windows have gained footholds
neither mom nor dad ever bother to brush.

Spotted basil and blighted tomatoes,
their garden's last yield, linger in cracked

ceramic bowls. I sit with them as we take our meal.
I reach for bread, their eyes covering my hand.

HOW TO WRITE A POEM AND SAVE YOURSELF FROM DROWNING

Christopher Locke

Don't start with the dubious hieroglyphs
of someone else's dream. You need grounding.
Substance. Like my daughter throwing up,
her coughs and tight chokes a rusted screw
turning wet until the flakes give way, the sigh
of worry both my wife and I register, the second
time in one week she's been sick here in Mexico,
bacteria pounding her blood with its gray fists
and bilious demand. Yesterday, brass trumpets
popped the air in glinted voice as a funeral
procession marched slowly past our house,
the men in jeans and cowboy hats, the women
in great plods of garment flung bright around
their bodies. The back of a Chevy pick-up
foamed white with carnations and lilies
curling like an ocean's memory of happiness
as the pageant snaked onward. Yet the drivers
behind in gridlock were patient, unflinching:
silver crucifixes swinging from rearview mirrors
like stars ancient to things I could not understand.

FATHER, FEEDER

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Early April, 1918

You rise at four am, a bird stolen
from sleep. You make the sign
of the cross: forehead, shoulders,
heart. You put on overalls, shoes,
climb down stairs, grab the bucket.
You are pushing six years old.
In the western sky, the waning
moon toys with Jupiter; in the east,
the sun has begun to crawl back
from the night. Crickets hawk the air.
Sparrows gather at the burr oak tree.

First the chickens, corn & scraps,
then hay pulled down for the draught
horses, their feet puddling the dirt
floor, flanks glistening with dew.
Their bodies turn to you
for a rub, a pat, a handful
of oats offered as oblation.
You lead the milk cows to water,
then through the gate, to the small
pasture, the world they walk.

On the opposite side
of the earth, ancestors march,
guns riot, men talk and die.
But this is not your war.
Your war awaits many more turnings
of the sun; its long claw knows
your name; it will beckon. Today,
in this thin light, you have these hours
to stand at the edge of the world
alone, this food, these hands,
the words that arise from the thawing ground.

IN MEMORIAM OF RACER #7

Atom Richards

Father, I see you now in the mirror,
your green eyes stare back at mine,
my hair-line runs away from my reflection.
I shave it for a more modern appeal.
You let it bald naturally on top, short curly
hair round the sides of your head,
always with a beard,
 reds and flecks of gray.

Most of my childhood you returned
from work when I got out of bed.
Still wearing your airport authority electrician
clothes, sick colored green jeans, matching
polo, and grease under your fingernails.

Tired lines began to define your eyes.
You were always in the garage,
 when I came home from school.
Squinting, working on the race-car.
I'd say, *Working all night isn't fair.*
 You'd reply,

Rule #1, son. Life's not fair,
 like my own personal Socrates.
I still hear your voice
 as if you are standing next to me repeating
the lessons you taught me, saying again,
 Rule #2, when in doubt refer to Rule #1.

When I remember you, Pa,
the first thing that enters me is the smell
of clay and gasoline. My seven
 year old self's excitement.
And the dry feeling of Nevada
summers spent around a dirt-track,
the sounds of your race-cars screaming—past.

I found a word for those memories.
Petrichor: the scent of dry earth after rain
 it's like, when the water-truck's
 spray hits racetrack dust.

When I sleep, I dream of the dead.
My eyes look for images in all directions.
Those nights I move freely

through electrical synapses, a place
 where time doesn't divide us,
 but I wake with a jolt
my heart racing.

Still, I wonder if you gave thought
 to the odor of octane
or Nevada rain, when your heart stopped.
 Or the pills
that could have kept it going,
 like you kept the lights on
 and the engines revving.

FOUR KEYS

Marc Janssen

I

When I was young
I could abandon myself to sleep—
Recklessly sleep—
Rumpled and drooling, limp,
Eyes wildly searching the insides of lids
While my body lengthened.
Every day is kind of like that.

II

I kissed a girl when I was
Fourteen on a dare.
Our lips clumsily collided—
Off center and messy—
Nervous breath, hot—
She opened her eyes
And was indecisively smiling.
Every day is kind of like that

III

A sting to the back of the leg—
A sharp pain to the shoulder—
The mini rattle of thrown rocks
Skipping past and ahead of me
And the cruel laughter from behind.
Every day is kind of like that.

IV

I remember the stillness,
The limp body on the hot concrete—
The pool, filled with kids, suddenly silent—
John, doing his best.
But really he is only a kid
Not much older than me.
As he struggled, the sun, unmoved, beat down
While the water from the swimsuit
Darkened the ground then quickly evaporated.
Every day is kind of like that.

MONET'S ANGELS

Taylor Graham

Here, I'm holding the door for you.
You used to open doors for me—
canoeing a portage lake in storm,

following your dog on scent trails
in the dark, calling a stranger's
lost name. All those adventures.

Blindness opens the other senses.
I'll lead you out into natural daylight.
What does green smell like?

Do you hear the heartbeat
of that blackbird on the sidewalk?
Tell me the texture of morning

after rain has sharpened edges,
washed them soft as watercolor
halos against your cheek.

NOT AN ELEGY

Victoria Kellie

I know we are similar, the way
our hands have passed
over the warm curves of bottles
shaking with pleasure.

Unlike the dead, I am still
moaning, still lying
in a basement clutching a quart of gin,
groaning over the latest lover's mouth
pressed against a homely, homestead prayer.

This is how I remember you—
leaning over your corpse
trailing cigarette smoke through the morgue,
drunk before your funeral.

You were naked and white,
except for the limp dark gray film
of hair between your legs, crawling up your soft stomach.
Your head lolled to the side, too pale to have been napping.

On your mouth, a slow sleepy smile,
as though about to raise a finger
to your pallid lips, one last secret favor.

I imagined your milky eyes coming open—
that in death you miss the dry rattle of gin, your favorite
falling down your raw throat like an unguent.

I pressed my burning cigarette into your slack palm
a wound I knew you couldn't feel,
a shallow black hole to match my own.

You were buried in a cheap suit you never wore,
clutching a plastic rosary
someone had bought and hurriedly knotted
over your fingers only moments earlier—
you seemed to watch me, through the thin skin
of your eyelids

After the other shadows had passed over you
in black, and dry-eyed,
they lowered you, hurriedly, into the shallow
orifice of rocky earth.

Some nights, I still imagine you sleeping, fitfully, fussing in your bed
of cheap yellow satin.

Nursing the empty bottle I tucked in your casket
grinding what remains of your teeth
in the dark, smirking through the bones.

DRAGGED STARS

Terrell Jamal Terry

As sure as some stars cool
to coals, we are anywhere
on this world with precision.
I like the comfort of the not
too dark trail after a day of buttery sky.
But black drips of thoughts
play their part. I stir its music.
What does not make human sense
is that we won't be here.
It isn't true. It is.
Eyes really are windows.
The sparks that birthed you burst
through glass, and the pieces
which never cry are predatory,
existing without prism.
If you lost yourself you'd give up
or gain another. I need to be
surrounded by the scene.
Three deer cross the trail.
This is nice, after sniffing the noose
all day. Summery evil, winter soul.
Is that what you dream
when technically sleeping?
If we meet someone
before we're gone, it's better
to have met ourselves first.

GRANDMOTHER FINALLY DROWNED

Victoria Kellie

white and heavy as a cow,
her flaking feet caught in mud,
and the rest of her sunk,
flailing in the gray water
in the pond behind the barn, where
she was often found
wandering, looking
for her reflection.

The night of her funeral, firebugs cut
holes in the dark, flickering through
our fingers held aloft, for god,
or someone, as we mumbled hymns,
refused to eat.

My grandfather, red-eyed, drunk
as usual, shot bullets
from the handgun she had always feared
straight into the night, somehow
a concession to her memory.

His face was red and pitted,
he cried pitifully, remembering
her voice: a frightened tuneless humming,
a small stone drowning in dark water.

That night, voices trickled
quietly about the mornings when Grandmother rose
early to make his breakfast, not mentioning
her blank, black eyes, the bruises that stood,

through her nightgown, dark as the liver she fried
for his breakfast, the way her hands
were always sinking in dough for the shortbread
he loved, the paste sticky, cold to the bone—

the kitchen tiles were worn smooth where she stood,
all the years quietly tenderizing
his steak to death with a rubber mallet.

Now, Grandfather will sleep alone and he'll swear
her spirit flies out the open window,
tasting the world beyond the fence.

It makes me sick to watch him
crazed and slick with sweat
the way he lurches toward grief
only after her death,
leaning over the porch, cocking—
the gun, firing and firing
into something he can't see.

TURN, TURN

Jessica Morey-Collins

But the fourth bullet that entered Dillinger's body
turned into a tall, white horse. He saw
then how the whole world was no more
solid than this ocean pooling

suddenly at his feet. He faced west, looked
through earth to the sad, sank sun
and her slow burnout. The horse left

an elegant wake, conspired
moonlight with the hubris of water,
a pomp as residual as the tail feathers
of some terrestrial birds.

She tossed her forelock, locked his eyes.
He limped straight into the reflection
of the moon in her yawning pupil.

SAND BOX

Hannah Chalk

A darkened wide trail has soaked
through my grey T-shirt.

Sand that goes on for acres collects
on my sticky forehead and clothes.

Grass doesn't grow here. Not since Dale's
hands started to freeze from the chemo.

It hurt to bury them into the earth
and plant anything green.

Vick can't make herself tend
his now dried up and dead land.

She's lost all sense of time since he quit
trying and lost his breath on that cot
in their living room.

There's nothing to talk about without
the horses and cows.

No paying work to be done.
Just pull weeds and rake stale shit.

She yells at me to hurry, so I can
take down the panels of the arena.
Where Dale used to ride with us.

Once it's all torn down, we stare
across the sand that goes on and on.

I look at Vick's slack profile
and glazed over eyes, empty just like this place.

EVERYBODY LOVES MIKE

Courtney Cliften

My dad is a sitcom, and I am his harshest critic,
Slamming every thing he does as if I work for a bad magazine.

Headlines reading,

“Mike Spills Ketchup On White T-Shirt for the Third Time This Week.”

We sit around the table for our weekly
Family dinner and watch the scene
Unfold. After commenting that his wardrobe
Can no longer consist of red because of my bull-
Like nose piercing, I can tell, without even looking,
That he has goofy smile on display for his audience
Like the sign held high informing the studio to, “Applaud.”

“Mike Should Really Consider Just Purchasing a Laugh Track”

As the leading man in our full house,
Dad even has his own catchphrase.
When the boy I had been dating since the seventh grade
Dumped me, saying he hoped we could still be friends,
Dad came into my room, pressed an ice pack to my forehead,
Handed me two Advil and a glass of water. The only
Encouragement I received was a pat on the back followed
By his best attempt at a sympathetic tone repeating the phrase
I had already heard a million times. *Ice and Advil, Court.*

“Mike receives 1 Out of 5 Stars for Performance as Dad.”

I sit alone on my couch in my own apartment now.
The heartbreak that had me locked up in my room for hours
A few years back is just a flickering memory now,
Like the blue light from the TV reflecting off of my living room window,
I haven't seen Dad since last Thanksgiving when the gravy
had to be served in slices. I laugh at the thought of it now,
and I wait for the episode to begin, confident that if any type of dilemma
Occurs, it will be sorted out and fixed with a catchphrase.

IRON

Hannah Chalk

Sunlight just barely rises over the field
creating a dusty, yellow glow on the chipped
wood and barbed wire fences. A blood stain
rests in one of the stakes.

I'd once tried to climb over the fence
while my mother and father branded calves.
Running out of the house I could see my mother
standing over a calf with iron in her hands
and smoke rising from the calf's baby black hair.
The calf struggled against its tied legs
and bawled. The barbed wire bounced
when I jumped on it and my forehead met
the wood stake and now a scar runs through
my eyebrow where the hair won't grow.

Squeezing my hand, she looks at me and I wish
I'd gotten her green eyes. The rest of our face
looks the same. Holding her hand back, we watch
as a mamma Angus stands in the green pasture
licking her newly branded calf's curly black hair.
This year I held the iron between my hands.
We stand too long, a horse whinnies, demanding
breakfast. Lifting my slightly smaller hand to her mouth,
my mother licks my wrist, let's go, slaps my butt
and runs, knowing I'm chasing after her.

SWINGING OUT, KNOCKING BACK

M.L Brown

Of my mother, I have a mustard seed

One night in a hotel room

suspended in a tiny bulb of glass

I held my hand up to a lamp

and hung on a dime-store necklace

I could see through flesh to bone

I picture it at rest

That night I slept as if dead

in the limbo between collar bone and breast

I know this because

swinging out and knocking back

I woke up and wondered

as she bent to the ashtray on the floor

what a mustard seed had to do with God.

FISHBONE

Chera Hammons

We were too similar to get along.
At least that's how she explained it then,
when my sullen silence ended our arguments.
I didn't think it could be true for two
people who looked so different.
I didn't see myself in the shape of her nose
or her full hair. We spoke a different dictionary,
the quick sharp hurtful honesty of childhood grating
the frustration of a working mother who was tired.

She made me bathe before bedtime, when
my long brown locks, stringy and rough,
had become a bird's nest, she said, and streamed behind me
in a wet knot on the top of water.
Once I'd been wrapped in a towel she'd brush
my muddy strands behind me, and they pulled
in the comb's teeth, so that I squirmed and gasped.
She said I had a tender head. I could tell her mood
by how tender my head was.

My hair so tangled it had nearly dried by the time
she got it sorted into two or three ropes down to my waist,
depending on how she wanted to arrange it.
I liked best the thick plait she called "fishbone"
that would hang down my back heavy as a horse's tail,
the narrow strands of hair interlocking tiny fingers.
It took a long time to make. As we sat in silence

she'd tug and flip until she ran out of anything to weave together.
It was quiet, with the creaking of the hard chair
mimicking her craft, the ticking of the hall clock
a metronome to her hands. Slow tug and pull

there was not much to say, not yet, or for years.
As we sat silent within our own concerns
she braided my hair tight as she could, strand-by-strand,
a language she hoped I might understand.

STILL LIFE

Jerry D. Mathes II

Winner of the 2015 Novella Contest

Chapter One

I have always looked good in black. Suit jacket, shirt, slacks, and silk tie. I wore it all the time when Jen Swallows and I split Vegas like an atom. Not because I was an artist or a biker or a hipster, but because she liked it. I tie on a double Windsor and smooth the tie down. On the counter my stainless Seiko watch ticks next to an old letter with an APO address from Todd after he rejoined Marines and felt the need to confess his sins. We'd been friends since high school and shared some hard times. His sense of loyalty was no better or worse than some, I suppose, and even as he was doing wrong thought he was doing right through some convoluted logic. But we all did. Odd how Todd sent the letter to my lawyer thinking attorney-client privilege would keep his secrets safe from the law. They'd thrown his ass right out of the Corps. We like our heroes squeaky clean, unless they find the Lord, which Todd had not. I slip on the watch and check the time. I still had a couple of hours before the funeral.

Accidents of time. Accidents of place and people. Accidents rippling in our guts like a hard punch, fucking us up for life. Like when the Berlin Wall fell. We should have seen it coming. Nothing's an accident. Some things happen beyond what we control, like the ass kicking Job got, but, for the most part, we put ourselves in a position to get fucked over. My Uncle Allen used to love to talk about Job and suffering and how he had to endure what wasn't his fault. But I think if Job hadn't been so good, he wouldn't have caught the Devil's eye.

I thought a lot about those three days back in the 90s. Time has abstracted and twisted them a little, much like family is its own cosmic accident because you don't control that either. Atone for the sins of the father. But now it feels like I'm telling somebody else's story. In a way I am. Jen's story. Todd's story. Marla. The story of a dead kid. The story where I am a minor character, trying to avoid the Devil's eye.

Just fuck.

In his mid-twenties, Hess fills a black suit with a muscular frame. He slugs Jen's boyfriend in the guts. He wears only an Iron Maiden T-shirt and boxer shorts. His breath bursts out like a runner legging the final yards, trying to overtake the leader.

Jen Swallows yells. "Hit him, Hess!" Her Nikon F4 clicks and winds. "Take that you faux white trash poseur."

Hess lets him drop to the concrete. He pushes his mirrored sunglasses up the bridge of his nose.

Jen wears a black mini-skirt, red silk blouse and red high heels. She snaps pictures of the man gasping for breath.

"Here take some of me." Jen hands Hess the camera and she hikes up her skirt, pulls her nylons down, and pisses on the man. "How do you like the abuse now, motherfucker?"

Hess looks around. "Hey, baby, that's enough. Let's scoot before the cops show."

Jen takes her camera from Hess and takes a couple more shots.

"Kick him. Kick him."

Hess shakes his head. "He's had enough."

Hess turns and walks away. Jen kicks her ex then follows. He whimpers, clutching at his guts.

And to think when I was a kid I wanted to be an astronaut, heroic icon of the Cold War, and not a coke dealer, cultural icon of the eighties. Some story. I always imagined donning the bulky suit and taking the long ride up the elevator where a bunch of guys would strap me down into the seat. I heard the countdown in my sleep and felt the rumble of a rocket roaring toward space. Like all kids I never imagined me as a man, but with the face of a boy peering from under the helmet visor. A kid's fantasy. For all the imaginative power I had as a kid, I still couldn't imagine myself as an adult. My old man had been a decorated combat pilot and after his last tour in Vietnam was going to be an astronaut before a gook missile said otherwise. He led raids in fighter jets dropping bombs, firing missiles while going through enemy fire. One of the guys from his squadron said flak clipped his wing and sent him spinning like one of those whirling fireworks that spin and whistle, throwing sparks over square miles of city. A guy from his fighter wing who visited me and Ma said he heard over radio, "Eject! Eject! Eject!" and swore he saw my old man streaming into the night above the darkness the stars scattered above him. I wonder if the night quieted as the other aircraft flew off or if the ground fire remained intense, tracing the dark, knowing men still drifted down far from home.

A silly dream.

I can't help but think of the millions of kids in America, who looked to the heavens after Armstrong's lunar jump. We were legion, but how many actually did? What concerns pulled us down to earth like gravity? Money? Wars?

Who can tell about these things?

I could have loved anyone else, but had attachment issues.

Hess leans back in his seat, one hand on Jen's thigh, the other on the wheel as he races the BMW through traffic. Jen changes the film in her camera, looks through the eyepiece and sets it in her lap.

"Scoot. What the fuck kind of word is that? I don't scoot."

"Sure you do."

"Not in these heels."

"You too good to scoot?"

Her mom inherited old-school war profiteer money and Daddy presided over some high-end East Coast university where the students were either prepped out or pretending to be poverty-stricken by looking like a bunch of fucking sprout eaters. The kind of poseurs I used to short on a gram of coke. She liked to tell me about her experiences slumming from Brown to hang out with guys like me. I didn't even know what a guy like me was. A damaged loser perpetually high and alone?

Jen opens her compact and studies her reflection. She smooths out her glitter. "A girl has only so many good years to wear glitter. Besides, scoot is a crass word."

"You just pissed on your ex-boyfriend."

Back in New York, Jen got the silly idea of moving to Vegas with her boyfriend to be a fashion model. Vegas was going to be the new Paris. After a week in town, he slapped her around like he was some pimp trying to get dollars out of a girl. She packed her bag and slipped out into a studio apartment off Boulder Highway still thinking modeling would lift her up. When I met her she was dancing in Les Folies Bergere at the Tropicana. So much for modeling.

"Seriously, he was sitting around in his boxers before five. He had it coming. And what kind of douche-canoe opens the door in his boxers?"

"You're gorgeous enough. Cut a line on that mirror or put it up."

"All right. Light me a smoke."

Hess pulls out a gold cigarette case and a butane lighter from his inside jacket pocket and sparks a small jet engine flame, lighting the cigarettes. Jen pulls a folded piece of paper from her black and white leather handbag and taps out cocaine on to her compact mirror. She looks out the window.

"Feels like a two-line afternoon. Where we going?"

"Todd's. He owes me money."

"Why do you let him slide when you goon the fuck out of everybody else?"

"Me and Todd go way back that's why. He's good for it and then some."

"Hey, stop. I need a picture of those ribbons."

She points to a light pole that has ragged yellow ribbons and a flier for a lost cat. People post their losses and devotions like playbills or the papers advertising high dollar hookers and strippers, littering the Vegas gutters.

An ambulance siren rips the air. Some cars start to pull over and a couple rev hard, trying to stay ahead.

Hess jolts. His gut swims up his throat into the pool of his mouth. A four-year-old girl stands on the sidewalk. She wears pink shorts and a red tank top. Her blonde hair is streaked with blood and yellow ribbons ripple in a breeze that isn't there. She mouths words. All air and sirens. She lifts a hand, poised between stop and help. Hess squints his eyes,

shakes his head, and when he reopens his eyes, the little girl is gone.

"I need to pull over anyway. Be a good citizen."

As a school kid, I dreamed the fantasy of emerging an astronaut from a spacecraft. A butterfly from its metal cocoon. The drifting weightless, I spun around the earth so far and so close and even working on the hull like some working class auto-shop guy expanded to the infinite. In high school my dad was dead or MIA and math slipped around folds of my brain and into nothingness and the small school I ended up in didn't push too hard, instead focusing on kids with the knack for numbers. Even though I had little interest in cars I ended up in shop as I'd already taken Home Ec and began to wonder if somehow I could tweak wrenches into orbit. Could shop guys go to space? Only shop guys with engineering degrees, carrying a fighter pilot's license in their hip pocket.

The first time I snorted coke, I hoped it'd get me laid, and it did with Jen. I had gone to a party with a friend of hers who I'd met at work. Gail, or some G name, who had blown me in the back of the tire store for forty bucks worth of used tires and invited me to party with some others and, weird, it was at my high school friend Todd's. How could I refuse? Todd's mom decked out the place with new furniture and the dining room table had a small pile of coke and a lazy Susan mirror. Wine glasses and a couple of wine bottles on the table reflected back the light from the crystal chandelier that had one light burned out and cob webs strung between the strands of crystals. His mom may have decorated the joint to make him look like he had class, but couldn't force him to keep up the appearance.

The party full of twenty somethings rocked out to a punk band belting out "Amazing Grace." I had on a Clash T-shirt and blue jeans. Fresh from Los Angeles I still staggered off-kilter from the accident. I'd look and see the dead girl's blue face floating in a bowl of Fruit Loops. See her flicker in the spaces between television shows and commercial breaks or in line at the liquor store. I drifted the world an observer, isolated and apart the way the moon orbits the Earth. I wasn't in the story unfolding. I was in a story past.

I saw Jen come in with a crowd. Jen's rippled blonde hair fell down to the middle of her back, tits in a tight black blouse, and hips sheathed in a black skirt. She kept my attention.

Todd ordered me to loosen up as if a squad leader in charge of R&R. "Private, I order you to get drunk and fuck."

I tore my eyes away from Jen. Smoking hot, but also she had that wild look in the way she walked and the way she carried herself. "I will."

"Cool, man." Todd wandered off with a slight list in his step.

I moved up next to her and we listened to the band. They were banging out all these old church hymns like the ones my grandma got all drippy about when Elvis sang them, except this band raged these songs like salvation was a curse. Jen backed into me, swaying her hips, smiling over her shoulder.

She motioned for me to follow her. We headed for a door leading into

the backyard. She made all the black skirts sewn by kids in sweatshops worth it.

Just off the patio strung with white Christmas lights, she stopped and took out her compact and a small envelope and with a razor chopped a mound of coke in the moonlight. It glowed like plankton in the surf or lightning bugs catching summer breezes. She scooped it with her fingernail and offered it to me. I hesitated and she smiled. "Come on a little stardust to send you zooming."

Her smile and the glint of light in her eyes from the moon and the lights looked what I imagined the magical Elvish world of Tolkien to be like. Some magic fairy world where I could be led to my doom, off into the night where forty years passed and I'd be the same and all my friends dead or ancient relics. I'd always avoided coke or speed. I'd smoked weed like most of the dudes I went to high school with, but this was a big leap, and I didn't know where I'd come down. But she smiled at me again and to me it was like a message saying, snort this shit and I will show you all you've been missing in life and fuck you into perfect oblivion. Slip out of time and slip back in and find this shitty life past and gone. Who said it had to be a tragedy to be Rip van Winkle?

I sniffed as hard as I could and in the dark winced at the sharp pain and the taste of acid down the back of my throat and then the tingle. The air charged. She dipped her nail again and snorted and then wiped her fingertip across the mirror before rubbing it across my teeth. "A freeze," she said as the cold rush frosted my gums.

We moved into the large backyard behind a couple of trees and into a corner. A block wall surrounded the yard. Along the top of the wall broken bottles glittered like the edges of magic swords. Of shattered stars frozen mid explosion. The light. The light, I thought. Does it come from inside the glass? Jen led me to a darkened corner. Jen rolled up her skirt with her back to me. She leaned her forearms against the wall.

"What are you waiting for?"

My head surged wild and my skin tingled. Spark. Spark. Spark. I fell into orbit around her. The crowd-chatter, the band's hymns, and city traffic distorted and faded. It became one hum of blood in my ears. I slipped my fingers into her and felt her pulsing. I felt everything rushing and lights streaked with rainwater in the clear night. I undid my pants. I had never been so hard. We fit together and I started moving back and forth. Her breathing deepened and she mumbled, "Slower. Don't blow it so fast."

I asked if she was on birth control and she chuckled and it sounded deep into the night and far away. "Yes."

The shadows filled with the smells of roses and cigarette smoke, and I looked away from her back and out of the darkness and up into the canopy of light above the city, the dim pale scar of moon, and thought about being a kid, wanting nothing more than to kick lunar dust as I skipped weightless thousands of miles from home until high school ruined me. I remembered being a kid and seeing the moon's thin sliver and thought it like the oceanic tide and the astronauts had to stay in the lighted part or be lost to the depths of space.

I stepped outside my body. Watched the crazy kid with blond hair and a black T-shirt. Two white asses in the shadows. Music like a distant radio station fuzzed. Come in, can you hear me? Helpless in floating lights, trembling from a razor's edge of powder. The slimmest of spaces between a breath.

Gail's laugh broke the night and I tried to focus between her and Jen pushing back against me. Gail's feathered hair bounced as she shook her head. "Figures. I meet a nice guy and he fucks my best friend."

She disappeared into the racket of guitars and drums and the blur and smear of light flooding from the otherworld of Todd's house. I never saw her again, like any one-day stand from the back of a tire store.

Chapter Two

Marla peels her thumb with a razor blade. Her thumb sticking up on her pale hand looks like a hammer smashed cartoon thumb. Her lacquered black and full lips deep red with lipstick gleamed against her white skin. A flowered sundress hangs loosely from her thin body.

Todd talks on the phone, wearing torn and greasy jeans, white T-shirt, and motorcycle boots. Tattoos wind around his biceps and forearms. On his right forearm USMC is surrounded by Celtic knots and on his left a flaming dagger with Death Before Dishonor arcing above and below it. He'd left high school with below average grades and above average ambition to travel the world and fuck people up with high-speed weaponry like a true patriot.

"No, dude, I got him set up, not to worry.... Not to worry, man. We been pals since high school." Marla peeling her thumb catches his attention. "What the fuck, Marla? Knock that off. I don't want to snort your blood."

Marla giggles. "I'm just doing what Satan tells me."

"Tell the devil I'll kick his ass if he doesn't knock it the fuck off." Todd turns his attention back to the phone. "He won't know shit. It's a deal. We all go on like it's yesterday except you and I got more jingle in our pockets." Todd hangs up the phone. "Comeback time."

Marla pouts. She tosses the razor blade onto the lazy Susan.

Todd looks between the lazy Susan and her. "What?"

"You're stealing my high."

"I ain't stealing nothing, but a lickety fuck from you."

"Why didn't you say so?" She gives him a I'm-ready-to-fuck-you look and starts to rise in a slinky way from her chair. "I like where this is headed."

Someone pounding on the door pauses her for a second. "Just ignore it, Todd. It'll be in your best interest." She crosses to Todd and caresses his crotch. The pounding repeats.

Todd smiles at Marla. "I would, but no sonofabitch is going to pound on my door like a cop and not get an ass chewing." He goes to the door and peers through the Judas hole. "It's that skinhead, Freddy. Jesus. I got to see Woo and thump his ass and this fuck shows up."

"Easy on Woo. He's cute."

Todd eyes Marla. "Yeah, okay, but now I have to deal with this."

Marla rolls her eyes and sits back down. "Don't let him in. He's a downer."

"Can't do that. It's rude. Besides," he smiles, "I like to fuck with these cheese dicks. They are as easy to offend as telling an old church lady you want to hump her."

Todd unbolts and opens the door. Freddy's high gloss Doc Marten boots look like clown shoes on his skinny legs in his cuffed jeans. A tattoo of an iron cross below his throat shows above the top of his black T-shirt. The shirt is stretched so tight over his skinny body that it looks like a child's size.

Todd grins at him. "What's up, nigger?"

Freddy eyes widen. "Fuck you."

"Your head is pink. You need to put on sunscreen."

"What the fuck?"

"Why you coming over here, Freddy?"

Freddy pulls a snub-nosed .38 revolver from behind his back. Light shines on its mirrored surface. "To take you down, man. You and your Jew girlfriend."

Todd looks over his shoulder at Marla. She shrugs. "No shit."

"You want to run any business you need to pay."

"Pretty sure she's Lutheran."

"We know." The gun shakes in Freddy hands. "If you want to stay safe you'll have to pay us. We want your bike."

"Whoa, now. I don't think I'm going to live to see a piece of shit like you ride my bike."

Freddy holds the gun up and points it at Todd's forehead. Freddy can't keep his hand steady. He stutters. "Shshshshe's a Jew whwhwhore."

"Ouch." At the table Marla cuts a line of coke. "A whore, Freddy? I thought you liked me."

"You want to kill me, Freddy, that's fine, but you leave her out of it."

"I...I...I'm serious."

Todd takes a step forward. "Go ahead. Shoot me."

"Maa maaa man, I will man."

Todd takes another step closer. "You got a case of the trembles, Freddy."

Marla snorts the line. "I don't like the spinning mirror. Makes me feel like I'm in a circus and not real life."

"Go ahead. Shoot me."

"It doesn't have to go rough on you, Todd."

"I said to shoot me." Todd takes another step.

Freddy takes a deep breath. "I will, man. Jew lover." Freddy takes a step back. His skin flushes and his lips tremble.

Todd yells. "What the fuck does that even fucking mean? Kill me!" His eyes set hard. Todd steps forward until the gun barrel is pressed against his forehead, and he continues forward as Freddy backpedals and smacks the door.

Todd grins. His face lights. "What's your problem big man?"

Todd slaps Freddy on the forehead. "What's a matter?"

Freddy struggles with the doorknob. Marla snorts another line. A parrot screeches from a back room.

Freddy's voice trembles. "You fucker."

Todd slaps him as he struggles with the door. "Piss yourself or shoot me."

Freddy fumbles with the doorknob. The giggling sounds like a kid fiddling with a toilet handle. "I'll fu fu fucking shoot you, man. I sw sw swear."

"Then fucking shoot me."

Freddy finally pulls the door open and stumbles out into the bright sun. Freddy falls. He scrambles to his feet, scuffing his Doc Martens. Blood streams from the torn right knee of his jeans. He stumbles by a pale blue chopper in the driveway. He runs for a dusty black Cadillac with an iron bumper mounted on the front parked on the street.

Todd walks into the driveway with a measured pace as if marching back in the Corps. "Kill me!" His voice echoes in the neighborhood. Some people glance out of windows of houses and the sound of an ice cream truck laces the air with its child-luring tinkle.

Hess's BMW pulls up behind Freddy's Caddy. Todd stops by his chopper for a second. Freddy trips over his feet and scuffs his boots again. He struggles to his feet and runs. Todd bears down on him. Freddy makes it to his Caddy.

Hess and Jen get out of the BMW.

Todd continues down the driveway and kicks a dent in the door of the Caddy. "What's your problem bad ass? Kill me!"

The Caddy jerks and speeds away, tires squealing.

Hess watches the smoke of the burned rubber curl and drift. "What's up, Todd?"

Todd laughs and coughs until he hacks up phlegm and spits. "Not much."

Jen waves away the smoke from her face. "That guy had a cute gun."

Todd laughs again. "He did at that." He pats Hess on the back. "Hey, Hess, You know Johnny Woo?"

"Can't say that I do."

"That slope owes me money."

"Funny, you owe me money, fucker."

"True, but Woo has an ass-kicking coming. Help me lean on him a little."

Jen smiles at Todd. "Such a badass. Is Marla around?"

Todd laughs. "Yeah. She's in there making a sacrifice to the devil."

"Aren't we all?" Jen kisses Hess on the lips. "Take your time and try not to get arrested again." Jen walks to the front door and enters as Hess watches her walk.

"Let's hit it." Todd thumps Hess on the shoulder, knocking him out of his trance.

Chapter Three

Todd and Hess sit in the truck behind a pizza joint. The sun has powdered the faded red paint on the truck. Hess leans back in the passenger seat. No clouds blemished the bleached sky. No breeze stirs papers scattered on the ground. Two bums rummage in a dumpster dropping napkins and empty pizza boxes on the ground. One in a grimy blue shirt pulls out a half eaten pizza slice. The second bum snatches it before the other even can look up and begins to run. The man in the grimy shirt pulls a paring knife and slashes the back of the other and chases after him.

Todd watches them with a smile. "See, I fronted Woo the coke on a promise he was going to get back double the price."

"You mean you fronted him coke that I fronted you."

"Shit, man, let's not get into fractions and shit. You know what I mean."

"The money is in the fractions." Hess pulls at his collar a little. "Man I hate this heat. This beater needs better air flow."

Hess kicks the door open.

"You're the fool in the suit."

My earliest memories involved high heat, the roar of fighter planes and the smell of jet fuel rolling across the desert and all the hope and power it conveyed. Those blended away to smog and traffic honking and then to the heavy dust and blast sirens of a mining town. Somehow, my whole life I'd been trapped between Vegas and L.A. along Interstate 15. The highway rises up out of the Los Angeles basin, over Cajon Pass to stretch its wicked neck across the high desert past Death Valley and back up the mountains and the mines and the myths of mines scattered like a fortune tellers cards by an unpredictable wind, until dropping down into Vegas, that great breaker of dreams.

I had always hated the desert and kept thinking why don't I move. Go somewhere cooler. But then I didn't know how. Sometimes when Jen talked about Manhattan I thought about going there with her. Get out of town and start over. As I grew older I recognized those early sensations divided my life from what was possible to what would be withheld. After my father got shot down I had the inescapable feeling my life had gone into free fall and it was just like my father's, only longer.

"Don't start acting like you're above your raising. You might be some Miami Vice coke dealer to Vegas, but you still a mining town bitch to me."

"Fuck that noise. It's fucking hot."

"This ain't shit, man. Try being loaded down with all your war gear in the back of a one-one-three at Twenty-Nine Palms. When I was in the Corps, water was not a necessity. It was a luxury."

"This ain't the Marines."

"No shit." Todd looks wistful. "If I knew we were going to go after Sad-

dam, I'd have stayed in. I figured after the Wall fell, nothing was worth fighting any more." Todd had always dreamed of being the first kid from the mine with a confirmed kill. "Fuck. I should've known we'd fucking kill over oil."

"Like two bums over a crust of bread."

"I don't care. Honor and glory to the Corps. I'd stayed in to shoot me some... There's Woo." Todd tilts his head toward the back of the pizza place.

Woo shuts the door behind him. He wears a red flowered Hawaiian shirt khaki pants and deck shoes. He walks past the dumpster and stops to put the garbage back in. He continues past a delivery truck. He stops short when he sees Hess and Todd walking across the lot and turns back to the door.

"If you run, I will fucking break your legs when I catch you. You know I hate to run."

Woo stops. Todd slaps him in the head after he walks up to him.

"That's for thinking about running."

Hess musses Woo's hair. "What's up, Woo? You look like you got caught trying to feel up your cousin at a family reunion."

"Fuck, man. I wasn't running. I forgot to punch my timecard."

Todd slaps him again. "Don't worry about the card. If your punk assed manager has a problem give him my name."

Hess grabs Woo by the shoulders and smooths his hair down. "Can't having you look askew."

Woo stares at Hess. "Askew? What are you good cop bad cop?"

Todd slaps him in the back of the head. "No, we're guy in a T-shirt and guy in a suit who are going to kick the ever-living shit out of you."

Woo holds up his hands. "Okay, I know I owe you."

Todd grins at him. "No you owe us, dumb ass. This is the guy who fronted me the coke and because you are dumping on me, he is going to dump on me. Do you see how many times me is getting dumped on?"

"Dude, I..."

"No one forgets three fronted keys of coke."

Hess says with a straight face. "I could say the same."

Woo's voice becomes shrill. "I told that dude that the coke—"

Todd cuts him off. "My coke."

"My coke." Hess cuts in.

Todd says to Hess, "Seriously, man, I am shaking this slope down and you are killing my play."

"I just want to be straight on who owes who."

Todd sighs a rough breath. "Fine his coke. So you're ruining my good name with him and I can't have that."

"Look, man. I don't have it. The dude that was supposed to hook me up took off to L.A."

"Boo-the-fuck-hoo, Woo." Todd shakes Woo. "Me and my boy here don't give a fuck."

Woo hangs onto Todd's forearms. "Man, I ain't cheating you. That dude is."

Todd shakes him again. "You mean to say I got to forget you owe me because you gave the shit to a loser who won't return your calls?"

Hess laughs and thumbs at Todd. "At least he returns my calls."

Woo looks like he just came up with an idea. "You should go after him."

Todd shakes his head. "I got you right here. Why do I need to drive all the way to L.A.?"

Woo says, "I gave him the shit. He was going to trade it for guns to some guerillas from Central America. Man, he's a big player. I was going to triple my take. Get fat on the CIA dole, bro."

Todd says, "You believed that bullshit. He's probably got his ass arrested or killed with that many lowlifes scrounging around. Or he's sucking you."

Woo talks fast. "He's still got it. He owes you."

Todd pushes Woo back. "No, little man, you owe me." Todd cracks his knuckles. "Me and Hess are going to fuck you up. You'll have a week to come up with what you owe me."

Woo puts his hands up. Todd grabs his right wrist and pulls him into his fist. Woo's feet come off the ground and when he touches down he collapses into a heap.

"Kick him," Todd says to Hess.

"I'm not going to kick him."

"Really?"

"Really, Reilly. He needs to be a little more loathsome for me to kick when he's on the ground. I got standards."

"You shitting me?"

"No. This is twice today."

Todd laughs. Woo rolls on the ground like a sack caught in a swirling breeze trying to catch his breath. "When did this happen?"

Hess shrugs. "It's always been that way."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Didn't you kick Cochrane when he was down?"

"He was a scumbag."

Todd nods as he considers what Hess said. "True. Fucking high school pedophile."

Woo pulls a knife out of his pocket, flicks it open and tries to swipe at Todd's leg. Todd jumps back. Hess stomps Woo's hand into the asphalt and kicks him in the ribs. Woo curls into a ball wheezing. Hess picks up the knife, a cheap, loose-bladed folder.

Todd says, "Glad to see he became loathsome enough for you."

"Don't mention it." Hess examines the blade of the knife. "You couldn't cut string with this piece of shit. You get this at a truck stop?"

Todd squats down and turns Woo's face up by his hair. "Listen up Johnny, me and Hess are going to find you next week. But you know we have to break your fucking arm."

Todd drops Woo's head.

"Wait, man. Wait what. Don't break my arm."

"Why not? You going to shit the money you owe me?"

"I'll tell you where he's going to meet those guys. You can get the guns and the coke. Day after tomorrow."

"Why should I go through all that trouble when I can just get my money from you?"

Woo pleads. "Just the guns are worth more than triple what I owe you."

Todd looks to Hess. "Believe this shit? Like he thinks he's on some fucking cop show on TV."

"I'm serious. Just don't break my arm. I can't afford it."

Todd slaps Woo's face. "You can't afford to owe me either, bitch."

Hess looks around. The bums are back at the dumpster picking through pizza boxes as if their earlier fight never happened. "We got to scoot before the cops roll up."

Todd smiles. "Yeah. Where is this meeting supposed to take place?"

"You can't be serious," Hess says.

"In Venice Beach. Not too far from the pier."

Todd looks contemplative. "Uh huh. I tell you what, I'm taking your slope ass with me and we'll all three get it done. If it's a set up, I'll kill you."

Woo nods, "Okay, yeah, I'll go in with you."

Todd wipes his forehead. He stares at Woo. "In the back of the truck, Johnny."

Woo looks at the pickup and back at Todd. "What?"

"You heard me. Get your skinny gook ass in the back of the truck."

Hess pulls out a cigarette and lights it. "Fuck, this is bullshit. I should have your ass in the trunk. Todd, let's get out of here. Leave Johnny."

"No can do. I swear to God, get in the truck, Woo, or I will beat the ever-loving, commie-loving shit out of you or you're going to wish we'd have napalmed your daddy over in Nam."

Todd grabs the back of Woo's shirt and the waistband of his pants. "Let me help you, Johnny. You should be glad you're riding in the bed of a truck and not at the end of a chain."

Woo gets to his feet and cradles his hand. As he climbs over the tailgate, Todd pushes him in. Woo loses his balance and falls into a heap.

"Stay down, Johnny, if I see you up looking around like a dog I'm going beat you."

Hess looks for cops. "This is useless. Let's get out of here."

They climb in the truck and slam the heavy doors closed.

Todd fires the engine and revs it a couple of times.

Hess turns down the radio. "Woo is Chinese."

"Why do I care?"

"You said he was going to wish we napalmed his daddy."

"So?"

"We fought the Vietnamese not the Chinese."

"Don't tell me some of those commie Chinese bastards weren't snooping around. The problem with you, Hess, is you got a narrow scope of vision."

The problem was that I didn't have narrow scope of vision. I'd read every book on that war and wars I could find, trying to understand how a place could swallow so many fathers for nothing. As I grew up the subject of pointless deaths became taboo. No one wanted to admit they had fought in a war that meant nothing and had sacrificed for nothing and friends, fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters died or had limbs blown off. I read and read. My father's old friends told me stories of glory and heroism, but left out the nationalistic reasons and all the moral ambiguity so I became confused. Was the purpose of the war for them to seek honor and glory? Because it seemed so. All that mattered was to fight well. Duty? To show courage? How all their words began to fall like a bunch of tin plates. My father had died and, as far as I could tell, democracy was not better off for it. Narrow scope? Maybe my problem was just the opposite. To see too many possibilities. Left with all the questions of what might have been. Dear Dad: What is dying for duty like when duty means dying and leaving a fatherless son? Did your death make the country freer?

*

Todd says, "You and I got to go to L.A. We score the coke and guns to sweeten the deal."

"I don't want any fucking guns. Too bulky for too little payback. Fucking guns are a hassle."

"Man, you could turn them easy."

Hess chuffs. "What? To people who might use them against me?"

"No, man, to that crazy survivalist uncle of yours and his whacked-out friends."

"Uncle Allen won't want no part of that."

"All survivalists want firepower. That skinny fucker got more illegal guns than—." He brakes at a stoplight. "If not I got some bros from the Corps who are all hooked up in South Africa. I'll still split the money even though you're being a bitch."

"I don't have to go to L.A. You do."

"You'll get your coke back."

"No, you'll get the coke back you still owe me for. I don't move shit twice. That's just a bad policy."

"Man, we been bros since shitting high school."

"Which is why I don't fuck you up."

"Hey, man, I gave you a place to crash when you fell a fucking part in Los Angeles and came dragging your ass here."

Todd gets a cigarette and lights it. He blows smoke. He looks both hurt and angry. "Who was there for you, man? Me. That's fucking who. Now this is my chance to comeback. Woo fucked me and now I'm going to get that and extra back. You got to help me. You owe me."

Hess looks out the truck window. He sighs and shakes his head, exasperated. "Fuck you, man."

"I thought so."

Todd bangs on the steering wheel, acting like he has just come up with a great plan. "What?"

"Dude, you should bring a couple extra keys, so we look like major players and instead of dumping on them, work with them. We could go big. A major guns and drugs racket."

Hess continues to look out the window. "You can. I'm not. I'll help set you up with your own racket. I don't want nothing to do with guns. This one time I'll help and we are square. Fact is I might get out of this shit for good."

Todd looks in the rearview mirror, speeds up and slams on the brake, causing Woo to slide into the front of the truck box with a crash. Todd yells as he looks in the review mirror. "I hope that hurt!" He looks back at the road. "Tell you what. I'll drop you off at the house and I'm going to drive out to Blue Diamond Road to drop him off so he'll have a long walk to think about his sins."

Hess shrugs. They drive a little further. Todd throws his cigarette out the window. "You know why I joined the Marine Corps?"

Hess looks over at him and tilts his head down to look over his sunglasses. "Either to one: get the fuck out of that shitty mining town or two: you were too stupid to do anything else?"

"No, man. Reagan said, 'Some people wonder all their lives if they've made a difference. The Marines don't have that problem.'" Todd looks over to Hess and back to the road. "I wanted to make a difference, man."

Hess shrugs. "Yeah, blowing the shit out some kids' village is definitely making a difference."

Todd slugs Hess in the shoulder. "Fuck you, man. I just wanted to go off like your old man."

"For all I know if he didn't die out there, he's still working a gook chain-gang. Shot down while blowing up some kids' village."

"You're a fucking piece of work. Your old man was a bona-fucking-fide hero and you act like he's a low life criminal."

Hess stares out the window. His voice a monotone. "Just saying making a difference can be spreading bread or spreading napalm. Peace Corps, Marine Corps. Just saying."

In front of his house, Todd pulls the right tires up onto the sidewalk. Hess gets out, slams the heavy door, and walks around to the driver's side. Todd leans out. "Without the Marine Corps, there'd be no Peace Corps. Just saying."

Todd speeds away with a loud rumble before Hess can speak. The truck backfires echoing down the block and Hess flinches. He stands as the desert and concrete heat swirls over him so thick he feels as if it might carry him off in rip curl updrafts.

Chapter Four

Jen opens the door to a cool rush of air conditioning like a splash of water. Marla sits at the table examining her thumb. "What have you done?"

Marla smiles up at her as if she just woke up. "So good to see you, love. When did you get here?"

"Just walked in."

"Silly, sneaking up on me like that."

"The boys are off running errands."

"My thumb kind of stings."

"We should bandage it."

Marla shakes her head. "What brings you over?"

"Hess had business with Todd."

"Todd has business with Hess too. Or is that about Hess?"

Jen takes out her camera and clicks a picture of Marla. Marla smiles and tilts her head.

"Get my good side."

"All your sides are good." Jen winks at her.

Jen takes close-ups, from across the room, different light, and different angles.

"You want me to get up or anything?"

"Nope, just stay as you are and let me do the moving around."

Marla kisses at the camera. "How about take my top off?"

"Nice."

Marla pulls her shoulder straps down. "You want to make out?"

"Not right now."

Marla pouts to the camera. "Pictures can wait. I have a surprise for you." Marla gets up and approaches Jen, runs her hand through her hair.

Jen is caught in a moment of desire and weakness. "Not now. Hess will be back soon."

"Don't worry about him."

Marla kisses Jen softly on the lips as Jen closes her eyes. Marla runs her hands down Jen's body and backs away. Jen sighs and opens her eyes. "Later."

"It'll be worth the wait."

Jen smiles at Marla. "Will you come to New York with me?"

"I'd love to, but I'm working on a deal. Afterwards when it pans out."

"I have plenty of money."

"I know, babe, but I don't want to be a kept bitch. I have to have my own dollars to spend."

Jen takes another picture as Marla keeps her breasts covered.

"Sure you don't want to give these a taste?"

Marla slips the top of her dress down to her waist. Jen's camera clicks and winds as she takes several photographs.

"We can do this tonight."

"Come on. We can now and later. You know you want to."

Jen sets her camera on the table and kisses Marla's breasts and works down and under her dress. Jen pushes her down onto the couch. Marla squirms and her breath deepens until she climaxes.

Jen emerges after Marla's orgasm.

"I knew you wanted to."

Jen gets two cigarettes, lights them and gives one to Marla.

A truck rumbles by outside. It backfires.

"Come to New York"

"I will, Love, I will. Wait a second. I almost forgot. Too much dope."

Marla smiles over her shoulder as she goes down the hall. When she emerges she holds out a gold chain with a charm. "A swallow!"

"Does this mean you'll fly to me?"

Marla unclasps the chain and puts it on Jen. "Hell yes it does."

The door opens. Sunlight streams in as Hess walks in, shutting the door behind him.

Hess fans his face, relieved at the cool air washing around him. "A/C, best invention since fire."

Jen shakes her head at him. "Fire was a discovery."

Hess shrugs. "Whatever. What are you ladies up to?"

Marla giggles. "Just girl talk. Check out my thumb."

Chapter Five

Todd pulls up close to the delivery truck and stays behind the wheel with his truck idling. The two bums from earlier have moved on, leaving garbage around the dumpster behind the pizza joint. Woo sticks his head up. Todd leans his head out of the window. "Get the fuck out." Woo climbs over the tailgate to the bumper and when he is perched between the two, Todd pops the clutch and Woo falls to the asphalt. Woo gets up and walks around to the driver's side.

Woo stops just out of arm's reach. "Fucker. You didn't have to hit me so hard."

"Fuck you. Had to make it look real. What about that fucking knife stunt?"

"Wanted to make it realistic."

"You're just lucky Hess doesn't like to pack a gun. He would have blown your fucking brains out."

"Where's my money?"

"You're even luckier he didn't stomp your teeth and brains out."

"The money?"

"Did you forget you're working on a commission? Hess is all in. Two more days and you'll get yours unless you fuck it up."

"You need to quit acting like I'm yo—"

Todd flips him the middle finger as revs his engine. He shouts as deep combustion roars, "I cunt hear you." Todd waves, pops the clutch, squealing the tires. Smoke from the burning rubber rolls in a thick cloud as the truck lurches forward, fishtailing before catching traction.

Woo coughs and begins to walk.

Freddy's Caddy pulls up with Freddy at the wheel and three other skinheads in black T-shirts with racist slogans. Freddy waves at Woo. "What's up, chink?"

Woo shakes his head.

Freddy motions to the back of the car with his thumb. "Get in."

Woo reaches for the front door handle.

Freddy grins. "Not up here. Back there."

Woo reaches for the back door.

"Will someone help this chink?"

A skinhead the size of a football lineman gets out and pops the trunk.

Freddy hollers as he looks in the side-view mirror, "Get in."

Woo's shoulders slump as he walks over and climbs in. The skinhead slams the trunk lid with a grin.

Chapter Six

The evening spreads out on the horizon like a reflection of the casino's neon lights. Hess's BMW rolls into the parking lot. A punk version of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" blasts as he finds a space.

The music dies as he shuts off the motor and gets out.

He walks through the parking lot ignoring bums, hooker come ons, and trash in the street.

Some light bulbs flicker in the marquee and several are burned out.

An average white guy, middle aged wearing a red polo shirt with collar popped, Bermuda shorts, and sandals hassles a skinny, white hooker. Scars ripple her face. She wears frayed cut off jeans, a dirty white tank top, and flip-flops. The white guy grabs at her tits.

Hess stops within arm's distance. "You should move on."

"What's it to you?"

Hess steps forward slugs the guy in the stomach, crumpling him to the pavement.

The white guy sucks and heaves air.

*

Uncle Allen always said, when a man says, "What's it to you," punch him hard and punch him fast as he's expecting to get lip back from you and not a fist. Before he got saved, Uncle A could clear a bar with a look. He even beat a man with a bowling pin once in a dispute over who's old lady had the nicest tits. He used to drink a lot before he got saved.

*

Hess says, "It ain't a thing to me, but everything to you." Hess flicks open a Bali-song banana knife, rolls the guy on his back, and holds the tip just over his eye. "How about I make you a one-eyed wise man? Now why do you want to make her life harder?" Hess presses the knife onto his lower eyelid.

The hooker laughs a strung-out laugh. Her skin like old sheets fallen from the clothesline. Hess looks at her. "You want to kick him?"

She puts her hands on her hips. "Why don't you?"

"Not my deal."

She laughs again, her eyes dart around. "That's mighty Christlike of you. I'll take what he's got, though."

Hess keeps the knife pressed to the guy's eye.

The hooker takes the guy's money, his watch, gold chain, and his wedding band. She hurls his car keys out into the night and walks away her flip-flops thwacking as she goes.

"You should've stayed home, asshole." Hess stands, flicks the knife closed with a click, and walks to the casino doors.

The guy gets up and rushes in the direction of his car keys.

Hess walks through the casino. Welfare and low-income gamblers crowd nickel machines and the one-dollar blackjack tables—the ruptured and desperate. Two security guards perform CPR on some old man who fell off his chair. A woman wearing slippers and sweats squeezes between the guards to put coins into the slot machine the old man had been playing. These people believed they could parley loose change into a fortune and make an empire born out of *Life Styles of the Rich and Famous*. Just got to find the lucky machine. Each coin holding the dream of walking up to the boss and say, take this job and shove it. Get the hell out of the rat race. Or at least pay the rent as it's behind a couple of months. Stupid bill collectors. Fuck 'em. Cling Clang. At least there are free drinks and a buzz.

Hess walks up to where Jen sits at a table with a couple of drinks.

Jen is looking at her compact mirror. Her camera sits on the table.

A one-man band is setting up his drum machine, keyboard, speakers, electronics, and stringing electrical cords. He has an electric and an acoustic guitar on racks. His silk turquoise shirt shines and his black slacks shimmer in the stage lights.

"This place looks like an old woman who puts on good make-up over bad." Hess looks at Jen spreading around her make up as he sits. "Stop it already. You're a gorgeous woman."

Jen looks at him. "Fuck you, a girl's—"

"I know. Only so many good years to wear glitter or she looks like an aging fairy stripper."

Jen shuts her compact, looks to the man on stage. "Hey, music man."

The music man looks around.

"Here." Jen leans forward to get his attention.

He smiles as he sees her. "What can I do for you?"

Jen smiles back her model smile. "You play, 'Amazing Grace'?"

The music man looks around at the broken down gamblers and faded decor. "What, are we in church?"

She rubs Hess's shoulder. "It's our song."

He shakes his head, still smiling. "Sorry, I don't know that one."

Jen sighs, disappointed. "How about 'Thunder Road'?" She takes a drink and swirls the ice. "If you can't play 'Thunder Road' you should

think about blackjack-dealer school.”

Music Man’s smile widens. “You buy me a drink, and I’ll show you Thunder Road,’ lady.” Jen leans back, crosses her long legs. Music man’s eyes follow the hem of her short skirt.

People gave her respect, which is why she insisted Hess dress in a suit about to foreclose on some sap’s life. Cops look at some biker trash and him, and that other guy will be the one draped over a prowler car’s hood.

Jen reaches into her purse and pulls out a few bills and waves to the bartender. “Whatever he’s having.”

Hess says, “I always loved that leaving this loser-town, screen-door-slamming song.”

“Me too. I couldn’t wait to leave my loser town.”

“You grew up in Manhattan. You don’t know loser towns until you see the mine sell the houses and crack them in half so they can load them onto flatcars. Ever see a train hauling a bunch of sawed-in-half houses?”

Jen looks him up and down. “Don’t give me that hierarchy of poverty crap. If you knew Manhattan like I do, you’d know what I mean. Even as much as I miss it now, then it was a prison of manners.”

Hess waves his hand like he’s waving away flies. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. So hard to be the socialite in the big city.”

Jen flips him off. “Fuck off, asshole. We have our own hierarchy of cruelty you’d never fathom.”

Hess laughs. Jen reaches into his jacket pocket and takes his cigarette case and lighter and lights a couple of cigarettes.

“I’ll fuck off. I got to go to L.A. Todd needs some help.”

Jen sits a little straighter. “I want to go.”

“Hard for me to fuck off if you go with.” Hess grins and drinks.

“I can get some photos of Hollywood Boulevard to go with my Glitter Gulch photos and take some of the highway memorials.”

“Memorials?”

Jen rolls her eyes. “I’ve been fucking telling you about death shrines as a public display of loss and as a way of grieving, acting as a coping mechanism so survivors can go on with their lives—not stuck in that moment of tragedy. I’m exploring in images the roadside displays and what it says about us as a culture. I also want to show how the car was both destroyer and healer by being both the cause of tragedy and the enabler closure.”

Bells ring and coins clatter as someone hits a jackpot in the casino. People hoot and holler.

Hess looks completely lost. “Whatever you say, darling.”

“Come on. It might be my last chance to go for a while.”

“What?”

“I’ve been telling you that I’ve been thinking about going back to New York.”

“Oh, right.”

“Come on. I’ll blow you in the car on the way.”

“Why didn’t you say so? It’s a quick trip though. We leave tomorrow and back the next day. I got court day after tomorrow.”

"That's what I love about you. Impetuous."

Jen grabs his arm and squeezes. Drops her cigarette and picks it up. "Five-second rule."

"I'll remember that when I'm on the floor." Hess gives a wink.

"Hello, Hello?" The music man thumps on his guitar. "What did you think of that?"

Hess and Jen look to the stage. They look at each other perplexed. Hess shrugs and then back to the stage. They had zoned out.

Jen smiles. "You were breathy in the end. Work on it and I'll buy you another drink when I get back."

Hess the astronaut drifts tethered to the spacecraft. Some people will tell you no kid plans on being a drug dealer, but they come from neighborhoods that didn't foster the illusion of possibility. This is your America, fucko. Get over it. Some kids grew up in such shitty places they became thugs and petty criminals the way prep school kids became bankers. Instead of learning math in school they learned to do math by the dime-bag. Me, I was sure I was going to fly in other ways. The stars, man. My old man guaranteed we'd be on Mars twenty years after hitting the moon, but instead we were lining up to spend billions to get bogged down in a sandbox. When did we lose dreaming as a national trait? Maybe we'd grown out of it like teenagers suddenly worried about looking tough instead of curious.

Chapter Seven

Hess walks through the crowd of people playing slots and video poker. This place has higher-end losers, mostly from out of town. Hess walks through to the tables. Only a few gamblers and tourists mill about the casino floor. A long line stretches from the buffet. A woman in a red pantsuit fights with a woman in a gold evening gown over a slot machine ringing and buzzing. Two security guards show up with a floor manager who starts handing out free steak dinner coupons. Hess shrugs thinking about the last casino he was in. The security would have thumped them and dumped them in the street.

I used to hit that place pretty hard, but got asked to leave one night after I got caught balling Jen down by the pool. Some nights you just can't get away with living the dream. Security guard said kids might've come in. No shit? Kids shouldn't be allowed in Vegas. Besides, if some kids are drifting around the pool at two in the morning they got bigger problems than seeing two people fucking. Losers talk about cutting loose and being free and then tell others how to act. Figures. Those who shit-talk the most about freedom are the first to try and take it away. They should've stayed in L.A. or Wichita or Salt Lake or whatever uptight town they came from and died or gone to Reno.

My mom had been dealing cards and spinning roulette for losers since the 70s after Daddy disappeared over Southeast Asia. About the time I

got thrown out of her casino I quit gambling anyway. Uncle A used to say casinos were just like life. A few people controlled all the money and made sure enough got down to the losers to make them think they were getting ahead, while slowly raking it all in. Not only that. The bigwigs cultivated the myth of the winner, giving away free rooms and cheap meals and free drinks and the cool guy image of the gambler to keep them faked out. Living the Dream where it was rigged so a person could never realize the dream. Uncle A would say in a low voice. "See, if we didn't give our money to the banks they'd have no power. Usury's a sin anyways, but greed will drive them all to hell." Of course Uncle A was a cash and carry man.

Hess walks up to a blackjack table. Hess's mom deals cards to a cowboy sporting a straw cowboy hat and a denim suit with a scorpion bolo tie. A sizable stack of gambling chips sits in front of him.

"Ma, when you go on break?"

"Hello, Son. I'm due, Chrissy's late coming back."

Hess looks around, then takes out a cigarette and lights it.

The cowboy doubles down and loses after Mom draws two cards to get twenty. Mom deals again.

Chrissy rushes up, he long hair frizzed and flying. Mom fans the cards on the table and shows her palms and backs of her hands to the cowboy. He tosses her a chip.

Mom takes the chip on the table. "Thank you."

The cowboy nods.

Mom walks away. Hess follows her back through the casino.

Not all the vets who visited us were whacked out. A bunch of guys from his fighter wing at Nellis would roll by with presents for me and her. There was this one black guy who came back with a Vietnamese bargirl wife and Buddhist's ways. Brother Weed and Sister Speed. All those years training and he up and got out and founded a church. More like a spiritual retreat without all the fire, brimstone, and judgmental assholes. After a few years, Mom shacked up with some professional gambler, Cal, and after the visits by the Air Force guys, he'd get all jealous and worked up and we'd get a little slapping around. Must be hard to have a bunch of guys come over and talk about what stud your predecessor was, not even knowing if he was dead or going to show back up with years of pent up Hanoi prison rage. Plus those boys treated me especially good. Kept the dream of flight alive in me for a little while. Must've been double hard on old Cal with me right there, knowing what a douchebag he was. One day he up and disappeared. Not packed up and left, but straight up disappeared as he never came for his clothes and trinkets and his car stayed in a parking space at a cheap dive bar for a week. Just gone. I figured he crossed the wrong bookie and ended up anchored to the bottom of Lake Mead. Some men have the swagger, but not the guts.

"How's wasting your life these days?"

"Come on, Ma."

"You don't think I read the paper, watch the news?"

"It's just a misunderstanding."

"Does it have something to do with that Todd?"

Hess follows his mom into the break room. Several tables and chairs are empty. On the wall hangs a corkboard with notices and fliers and a Workers' Rights poster. Mom gets a cup of coffee from one of the two pots on the Bunn coffee maker and sits at a table. Hess sits next to her. A television runs news footage of Desert Shield and the masses of aircraft, soldiers and vehicles in the sand.

"What does Todd have to do with anything?"

"He's trash. He'll bring you down."

"Ma, I'm not..."

"You shush."

"I can't live up to that. I'm not a hero."

"You could be. You need to give yourself another chance. You just quit, gave up."

"Ma, the girl died."

"People die all the time, but you can save a life, even so."

"I can't live up to that."

"You could. You just quit college and dropped out of the ROTC. Then you quit working on the ambulance. You need to stick with it, work at it like your father did."

"Dad's dead, Ma."

"He could be still alive. Bo Gritz came over..."

"Let me guess he's got photos and needs money to go back to Southeast Asia."

"You shush. He's a good man looking after us."

"He's whacked out, living in the desert, training those Afghan fighters. Dad's dead and everyone has to let that war go and move on."

After a bunch of MIA movies in the '80s, some whacked-out vets would look up my mom and try to get her to chip in money so they could go search for my dad. Bo Gritz made headlines chasing after MIA rumors in Southeast Asia with a bunch of faded photos and a reputation for being a decorated Green Beret. All during the '80s he trained future Taliban in Nevada to fight the Russians in Afghanistan. Last I heard he ended up founding some apocalyptic church compound up in Idaho where he and his followers await for the world to collapse. Funny how much you can sell people with loss. Not all had his prestige and some even asked if I'd be interested in going with them. What the shit do I know about tromping around the jungle? Those fools took movies way too seriously. But that's a problem with a lost war. How does one gain closure when one had to retreat, leave behind the missing and the dead like so many Jeeps and trucks? It is a powerful emptiness that drives a man to obsess over who he thinks he let down. To chase ghosts.

"Just never mind. Did you come over just make me feel bad?"

Hess stands. "I wanted to let you know I'm going to L.A. and if you'd feed Whiskers for me tomorrow evening."

"Yes, of course. All I have in the way of grandkids."

"I'll see you, Ma."

Mom stands and Hess kisses her on the cheek and begins to walk away.

Mom calls after him. "You be careful and don't let those friends of yours get you into more trouble. They are all bad news. And be sure to stop and say hi to your grandmother and Uncle Allen."

Hess walks out of the room. She sits down and lights a cigarette as she watches the television with footage of the build-up for the first Gulf War.

Chapter Eight

Jen drives her white 1988 VW Cabriolet into a parking space in a high-rise garage. She gets out and heads for the elevator.

Jen makes her way through the crowd of gamblers and cocktail waitresses. She stops at the front desk. A well-groomed desk clerk stands looking through a folio file. She places her driver's license on the counter top. "I should have a key waiting for me. Jen Swallows, 206."

"Yes, here we are. Miss Kline left a message to meet her in the Jacuzzi."

"Thanks." Jen slides a five-dollar tip across the counter and then takes the key from him. She heads for the elevators at a quick pace.

Jen walks across the pool area in her black with gold dots bikini and slides into the water next to Marla.

Two kids swim and splash water in the pool, jumping and shouting.

Three middle-aged pudgy men stare at Jen as she gets in.

Jen smiles at Marla. "Miss Kline, I presume?"

"You are correct, Miss Swallows. I have a Cape Cod for you."

Jen slides close to Marla. "Expecting me, I see."

"Those guys have been staring at me for the last thirty minutes."

Jen eyes them. "Oh, really."

Jen slips her arm around Marla's neck and pulls her mouth to hers. When Jen lets go she smiles at them. "That should give them something to think about when they're beating off in the shower."

One of the men works his way off the lounge chair. He wears a Speedo and rubber shower shoes. Hair cream glistens on his hair plugs, sticking out like rows of corn. A mixed drink sweats in his hand.

"Excuse me ladies."

Jen and Marla kiss again and then look at him.

"We'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from making out. We have kids here."

Jen kisses Marla's cheek. "So sorry. I thought this was Vegas and I was at a casino after ten at night."

Marla giggles. "A week night."

"I can call security."

Marla wrinkles her nose. "What a drag. You're killing my high."

Jen looks around his pasty legs, hair worn off his calves. "Why don't we ask the others?"

"That's not necessary."

She rises out of the water. "Hey! You men don't mind if we make out do you?"

Smiles spread across their faces.

Jen smiles at him. "Maybe you should find your wife before the cabana boy does. If she already hasn't found him."

He clenches his jaw and his face reddens. He storms off, his flip-flops scuffing against the concrete.

Marla splashes some water. "Now where were we?"

Jen picks up her drink and sips. "Drinks and a kiss so far."

"Excellent. I feel my high coming back."

They lean into the Jacuzzi jets, sinking a little further into the water. Jen caresses Marla's shoulder.

Jen says, "How long before you can come to New York?"

"You're not leaving that soon are you?"

"Less than a month, maybe."

"I'll have to see how my deal goes."

Jen looks away. "Tell me, what's the deal."

"Just one of my foster brothers got some connections and I act as go between. Might be a month before I see any dollars from it."

"That sounds dangerous."

Marla smiles slyly. "Nah, he was a Green Beret and has been with the CIA down in Nicaragua. I got full protection. Once in high school, I was having problems with a couple of boys and he rolled in with a couple of his army pals and made them hurt."

Jen asks, "And this is going to be a lot of money?"

"More dollars than I've seen. I just want to be my own keeper. Even if it's only for a little while." Marla drinks and sighs, clinking the ice. "You don't know what it's like to be a guest in another's house and spend your whole life trying to be cute and adorable enough not to get thrown out. All the boys thinking it's okay to fuck you because you're not blood and they figure you got no parents, so you must be a slut brought in for their entertainment. Thanks for the slut, Dad! Like some hooker called to a party. Trying to act like the girl you think they want crushes your soul. Pretty soon you're second-guessing yourself and how you should be. Who are you?"

Marla looks at her peeled thumb. "I should go to New York and try acting. Bet I'd kill 'em on Broadway. Get on stage and pretend to be somebody I'm not to get people to love me." Marla empties her drink, fumbles with the cigarette pack, and lights one with a slim lighter. "Man, I'm killing my own high."

Jen caresses Marla's cheek. "Oh sweetheart. I love you for who you are."

"I don't even know who I am."

A clamor of keys and the scuff of shoes and thwack of flip-flops from the casino entrance across the cement.

The pudgy man shuffles up to the Jacuzzi. "Right there. There. Those two women." He points like he's in court.

A young security guard walks behind him pulling his belt up. "These two?"

"Yes. I want them removed."

The security guard looks from the Jacuzzi to the man and shakes his head. "For kissing? The way you talked it was a couple of sea donkeys out here getting it on."

"In front of the kids!"

The security guard scans the pool area. "What kids?"

The man looks at an empty pool. He creeps to the edge and cans the bottom. He rushes about the chaise lounges as the other men smile and drink.

He yells, "Fran! Ollie! Where are you two! Come out now!" He storms back to the security guard and yells. "Don't just stand there gawking at those girls, get some help!"

The security guard smiles, tips his head to Jen and Marla. "Ladies."

Chapter Nine

Todd's truck speeds down the highway through the night. Woo rides shotgun. Vegas behind them pulses and flinches against the horizon like a mechanical sunrise. The heat still holds in the air like a big-block engine after a race.

They pass a sign that gives the mileage to Los Angeles. The faint glow of the old dashboard lights casts a greenish-blue haze. Smoke fills the interior. The tires hum on the asphalt.

Woo has his hand between his legs. "Why doesn't that guy carry?"

"Doesn't want to that's all."

"Fucking going around in his business without a gun is insane."

"He always said if someone was going to pop him they'd do it gangster style and he wouldn't even get a round off and if he did it wouldn't make him live any longer."

"That's insane."

"But he's a major badass. His Uncle A trained him to fight in the Apocalypse. Huge End of Days fanatics. I ran with them a while, but Uncle A tossed me out. Thought I wasn't serious enough." Todd flicks cigarette ash onto the floorboard. "Once I saw a dude pull a gun on Hess and he pulled out his clickity knife and cut the stupid fucker's wrist to the bone before he could blink. Can't pull the trigger if you're bleeding from the wrist like a teenaged girl."

"Insane, man."

"Fucking-A insane. But most people with guns are not going to shoot you anyway. They wave it around try to scare you little so they can get their way." Todd smiles. "Sometimes all you need to do is yell at the

fucker. They piss themselves to get away.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Todd shakes his head. “That Hess, man. One tough motherfucker. A good dude to know.”

Woo looks Todd up and down and then back out into the night. “What the fuck you backstabbing him for if he’s such a great dude to know?”

Todd flicks his cigarette at Woo. It bounces off his head. “Fuck you, man. I’m not double-crossing nobody. Get that straight, slope.”

Todd jerks the wheel and slams on the brakes. Woo bounces off the door. The truck fishtails. The tires screech. They come to a stop in the emergency lane. Dust rolls into the headlights. Todd jumps out and storms around to the passenger side. He jerks Woo from the truck, throws him against the front fender, by his throat with his left hand, and slaps him in the head.

Woo covers his head with his arms. “Fuck, man! Stop you crazy bastard!”

Todd slaps Woo hard on the crown of his head. “You ever say anything like that to me or if I hear of you saying that to anyone else I will ass fuck you with a shotgun.”

“Okay, man. I fucking swear.”

Todd releases Woo’s neck. He is still breathing hard but calms in a few seconds and gains control. “He just doesn’t know the full extent of the deal. Get it? Nobody’s going to get hurt, but I need Hess and I know he wouldn’t do this unless I could bring him in as a favor for an old pal.”

Traffic goes by on highway. A tanker truck flashes by like a quicksilver streaking the night.

“Cool, man I got it. I’m all in, bro.”

“Get in the truck, slope. You ain’t my bro.”

Woo climbs in.

Todd walks around to the front of the truck. He unzips his fly and pisses in the halo of headlights. Dust, steam, and stars.

Chapter Ten

Hess and Jen drive out of Vegas into the desert toward Los Angeles. Jazz plays on the car stereo. The early sun shines slanted rays through the rear window. Hess’s mirrored sunglasses reflect desert and asphalt.

Jen wears a vivid blue, short dress, knee high black boots, and her swallow charm on the gold chain. She looks through her camera viewfinder at the passing landscape.

They pass a sign for Sloan, Nevada in one mile. Jen points at it. “Pull off here.”

“We just got out of town.”

“There’s a shot I need for the show I’m thinking about for a gallery in Soho.”

“Soho, some ho.” Hess chuckles.

Jen rolls her eyes. “Just pull over.”

Hess pulls off the road.

Jen says, "Go left and take a right at the stop sign."

They merge onto the old highway, drive past a few older buildings that haven't caught up to the Vegas boom. Someone has zip-tied a sun-faded and wind-ragged teddy bear to a cross that had been pounded into the ground at the asphalt's edge.

Hess says, "Is that a warning to all the other teddy bears?" He laughs. She does not.

"A kid was killed here. A pickup lost control and flipped him out."

"How in the hell do you know that?"

She rolls her eyes. "Research."

"You don't have to say it like that."

"I've told you before about how I track things down."

"I must've been high. You don't need to act like I missed Christmas."

"Whatever."

Hess stares out at the bear and the cross. "The parents should swap out that bear. You think maybe that particular bear belonged to the kid and no other bear would do?"

She flips her hair back. "You are such a flippant moron."

Jen gets out and walks around and takes pictures, while Hess watches. She gets back in the car. Hess stares out the window. Cars and trucks stream by on the highway.

"Research. Did your research tell you what it's like to watch one of these kids die? You ever even seen one of these accidents? I mean up close and not in some fucking picture."

Hess grips and un-grips the steering wheel. Jazz continues to play on the car stereo.

"I was a paramedic. Once I watched a little girl die after her mom backed over her. When I pushed on the little girl's abdomen she screamed, yelling about how much I hurt her. The mom freaked out, grabbed me. My partner wrestled with her. It took only a minute, maybe less. I can't remember, but when, you know . . . when you get off track how you can't remember exactly where you're at. You get fixed on that one thing. You clear her airway, start mouth-to-mouth because that's the obvious problem, but that's no help because she's bleeding into her guts. When you realize you just felt her last breath in your mouth, it kind of fucks with you. I'd seen adults die, but not a kid. Not like that."

Jen reaches and touches his shoulder. Hess clears his throat and wipes at the corner of his eye.

"I'll never forget how angry I was. That mom, she's yelling and screaming, and I'm thinking she was yelling at me and there's this crowd of fucking suburbanites standing around."

Hess pounds the steering wheel, causing Jen to flinch. "And I'm thinking this is just a spectacle for them, like this little girl is a beached whale." He breathes in deeply. "All I could think was I had just sucked in her last breath."

Hess takes a cigarette from his case, lights it, hands it to her, then lights one for himself. "You know what I did then?"

Hess waits, but Jen doesn't answer.

"I lost my temper, like it seems I do. I hit some dad wearing Dockers who was mouthing some crap. The cops arrested me. The ambulance company fired me. Good luck getting another job with that kind of recommendation, so I went to see an old high school pal in Vegas."

Hess put his hand on her leg.

Jen puts her hand on his. "Todd."

Hess nods.

Jen turns her head away, but Hess keeps looking ahead.

He removes his hand from Jen's leg and shifts the Beemer into drive. Hess wheels the car around, heading for the on-ramp. The BMW gains speed and hits the highway, the light rippling across the waxed paint.

I hadn't planned on telling her the story, but sitting there like a shit-head, it came out. I just didn't tell her I had fucked up and killed the girl. I was going to, but as I formed the words in my head, the other story I had told to myself and others came out like rehearsed testimony in court. I'd gotten to where I believed it myself sometimes. The truth or some version of truth. If I was the only witness who is to say it's not true? Memory is tricky and unreliable anyway. This happened, and fuck you who says different.

As an EMT I had trained until I could work on autopilot, and even though instructors said that no matter how much training they got, some people couldn't hack it under high stress. I heard the legends of my father and how he never panicked. He flew hot, raining steel and fire on the enemy no matter what they threw at him. Uncle A told us stories about men freezing in fear and how they all did until they got used to it and moved in fear instead of seizing up, but there were always a few who never made the switch. They remained paralyzed. I refused to believe I was one of them. Who was to say I panicked and froze? All the commotion, the screaming and people and that little girl whose skin turned blue, and no one could finger me except me, and if I had only kept my temper, I'd still be a paramedic. I came to realize later, Todd's strength was he could control his anger, but could slip it on like a mask, and he had a strange propensity for doing bad and not getting caught. Luck or karma or some force in the universe seemed to keep him off the cellblock.

Chapter Eleven

In the coastal sunshine a white panel van drives along the coast, leaving San Diego. It drives past the I-5 North sign. Frank, a Caucasian man in his mid-thirties with close cropped hair and muscular military bearing, drives. An El Salvadoran, Angel, in his twenties, serious and tough looking, lounges in the passenger seat. Marla leans forward in between the seats from the darkness behind.

Frank and Angel look at her briefly and then back to the road. "There's a great place to get fish tacos close to where we're staying."

Frank says, "I thought you didn't want your boyfriend to know."

"What's he got to do with tacos?"

Angel says, "Dumb ass. If he sees you he's going to wonder why you around." He looks at Frank. "What the fuck, Frank?"

"She's family. Sort of."

Marla says, "Right. But they are really good fish tacos." The two men stare straight ahead. She shakes her head at them. "You can't get as good in Vegas."

Frank laughs. "You can't get as good in prison either. Keep it straight little sister."

Angel stares at her hard. "Or the bottom of the bay."

Marla slumps back into the rear seat. "Fine. You two are stealing my high. We can order in, whatever."

Chapter Twelve

The BMW drops out of the mountains and crosses the edge of a playa into California before climbing into a mountain range. Hess steers onto the off-ramp at the summit where a dilapidated mining town with a run-down bowling alley and a gas station/store.

Just past the bowling alley stretches a semi-abandoned trailer park with rundown trailers, empty spots with cracked trailer pads and dead weeds waving in the wind. It sprawls up the rise to the north of town where the half operational mining buildings and the mountains of tailings blown and hauled out of the earth blot the horizon.

Mom came up here to stay with Uncle A so I'd have a male influence in my life after Cal went missing. Imagine moving from an airbase full of hot-shit fighter pilots to a place scrubbed out of the side of a mountain. Uncle A had been to the Farm three times where the mine sent its employees with drug and alcohol problems. The last time Uncle A came back it was with a Bible, sporting a new pair of combat boots, preaching the end of days was drawing nigh and we good Christians had to bunker-up to be ready to fight the godless Communists who at that very moment were going to nuke and invade what was left. I never did figure why anyone would want to invade a wasteland, but at the time I was swept up like dust into a dustpan. We were to rise out of the ruins of the old order, chase them to Mexico or Canada, and establish a new temple ruled by God's Law. He wasn't one of your Rapture type Born Again Christians who thought all they needed to do was wait around until God plucked their self-righteous asses off the Earth where they would then mock us poor sinners. No, he was an Old Testament, heaven bent warrior against Satan for God on Earth. Most of the family thought he was working through some shit from Vietnam and the holy warrior shit would wear off, but he had been saved.

Hess wheels the Beemer in front of Uncle Allen's old and dingy trailer and parks. A '72 International Scout II is parked out front next to a '69 Ford Fairlane. Tufts of desert grass litter the dirt yard.

Hess gets out and motions for Jen to follow him. They climb the

creaky steps.

Hess knocks on the door and two dogs bark. A terrier mutt and a mottled shepherd.

Uncle Allen yells, "Shut up!"

The door opens. Uncle Allen kicks the dogs back. His work boots are dirty and cracked. He steps onto the rickety wooden steps. Dirt coats his jeans, plaid shirt, and his clean shaven face. Blonde/gray hair hangs to his shoulders, and a tattered cap keeps it corralled.

"Well, look who it is. The prodigal nephew."

Hess smiles and hugs him "I didn't squander a fortune."

"Yeah you did. Just not one you can spend. Good to see you."

"Good to see you too."

"Just got off work, so I's got nothing ready for visiting."

"Not a problem. I can't stay long anyway."

"Figures. I bet you needing a piece."

Hess nods. "Got some business in L.A. and even though I hate it, I'd better have me a little something."

Uncle Allen looks over Hess's head. "Who's the little filly?"

Jen's jaw drops. "I am not a little filly."

Uncle Allen rubs his chin, smiles. "And a spirited one at that."

"When you're done here you can come find me. I'm sure you won't have too much trouble." Jen storms to the car, takes out her camera bag and walks off. Her heels click on the gravelly asphalt.

Hess calls after her. "All right."

Jen yells without turning around. "Look at this place. A memorial for American industry."

A 1976 white GMC pickup without a bed on it honks and the young men hoot as they rattle by Jen. She flips them off.

Uncle Allen smiles as he watches Jen walk away. "Why haven't you brought her by before?"

"I knew you'd just piss her off."

Uncle Allen shrugs. "Well, come on in."

Hess follows Uncle Allen into the living room. It is clean and neat, but the furniture shows wear and age. An old recliner in front of a television has been patched with duct tape. Family pictures adorn the walls. A Bible sits on the light stand next to the recliner.

The dogs sniff and wag their tails at Hess. Hess pets them and they go into the kitchen claws scratching against the linoleum.

"How's your mom?"

"Good. Still dealing cards to losers."

"You going to visit your grandma?"

Hess looks at the family photos on the wall.

I didn't like visiting as her as a kid. Grandma sitting in that hot trailer with foil covering all the windows, the swamp cooler ticking, dark with only one shrouded bulb on an end table filtering the hanging smoke from Pall Mall after Pall Mall. I'd come in and she'd grind that electric easy chair forward, shoot out her arms, hissing almost, "Come to grandmother

my miracle baby, my miracle baby.” When I got close enough, nudged forward by mother, the old woman would grab me by the shoulders and suck me into that dank cotton dress reeking of sweat, bitter smoke, beauty powder, and jalapeños. The wind always rattled the sun faded siding. I tried to hold my breath, but she squeezed me so hard and long her sweat soaked my shirt. It was like I was a fly being sucked into the Venus flytrap she kept on her table next to the lamp. Once she started coughing and hacking as she kept a tight grip on me. I swear I heard shit breaking loose in her chest, but trembled to say anything, and trembled when she released me with a dry kiss on the cheek. I stood there as she pushed a button on a panel at the end of a heavy cord. The chair would grind back to a normal, non-ejection looking seat.

She called me “miracle baby” because Grandpa had cancer and when I was born he got better. I heard all the time from that smoking crone how I gave them all the will to carry on, “To live, my boy, to live, you saved us,” and she told me that if I ever quit loving them they’d die. Got to be I believed it. It’s a heady thing to be hero-worshipped as a boy. What kid wouldn’t buy into it when all the adults told you so? I could even will my father safely back to the States if I wanted. The old woman creaking out words like breaking the spine of a book. “You wouldn’t want grandmother and grandfather to die? Would you?” Fuck me. I was ten when my miraculous powers ran out.

Uncle Allen says, “She’s your grandma and it’s right you go see her. She talks about you all the time. You have to respect that.”

Hess suppresses a chuckle. “Like all the respect they gave me.”

“You still messing with the drugs?”

Hess snaps out of his trance of memory. “Just a business like banking or the stock market. Supply and demand and investing.”

Uncle Allen chuffs. “Those two worse than slinging dope. Legal thieves. People forget the Bible.”

Uncle Allen starts down a narrow, paneled hallway and enters a room. Hess follows. Along the walls squat four gun-safes. Uncle Allen goes to one and twists the dial.

“Just one?”

“Yeah.”

Uncle Allen opens the safe. He takes out a semi-auto handgun in a holster, hands it to Hess, and then two empty magazines, and a box of bullets.

“You going to say hi to your grandma?”

Hess clips the holster onto his belt. “On the way back if I have time.” Hess begins loading the magazines.

“You should make time now.”

“This is a shitload of bullets.”

“Yeah, you can pack a lot of killing into a small space.”

“I’ll come back to visit.”

“That so?”

Some glitch in my love system let Grandpa die, and it all got laid at my feet. My dad had already been gone a year. It's a bitch to have your whole world looking at you to save them. The whole clan raising you up like a faith healer, except you're so powerful and full of goodness you don't even have to lay hands on folks. No. All you need to do is direct your love at them and they live for as long as you can love them and you're only a little boy. A wonder-kid. What great things will you do when you get all grown up they mused with faraway eyes.

"Granny talks about you all the time."

"Yeah, she can keep talking. I'll be back." Hess finishes loading the magazines and puts them in his pockets.

Hess follows Uncle Allen as he walks into the kitchen and opens the fridge door.

"Want a soda or some tea?"

Hess shakes his head. "I need to get going."

Uncle Allen pulls a gallon jar out of the fridge and pours himself a glass of tea.

"You think you can pull the trigger now?"

Hess shrugs and looks at the family photos on the wall. One with Uncle A in Vietnam with a cigarette dangling out of his mouth, helmet shifted back on his head as he straddles a water buffalo with a Vietnamese kid in front of him like they're at a carnival pony ride. Hess smiles out of several as a teen in camouflage and armed with guns and shooting at human silhouette targets with Uncle Allen and others in camouflage and military gear.

We got all wrapped up in the militia movement and I thought it was cool. I started to learn martial arts from some guy who worked with Uncle A and we trained like an infantry platoon. I recovered some sense of my power after losing my hero status. I also became arrogant believing I knew something others didn't and they would have to depend on me to survive. We'd have guns and food and carve out a city-state. The guys spent a lot of time sitting around talking about how they were going to rise up from the ashes to make a new community and all the others would be dead or starving because they were unprepared. They said no room for compassion in the Apocalypse. Even at first I felt myself slowly withdrawing from them as they ranted, but when Brother Weed swung in for visits with Sister Speed. He wore some African robe and she an ao dai of beautiful blue. She shimmered in the light like a jewel cut from the fabric of the universe fallen to earth. I was wearing a Kill Commies T-shirt and camo pants. He just shook his head at me. "You all primed up to be a killer."

"A survivor."

"You don't look like you ready to survive shit. Where's your hammer and a saw?"

I didn't know what to say.

He continued. "Surviving means being a builder, not a destroyer and

you all primed to be a destroyer. Let me guess, you and all your pals training like you in the infantry, but not like carpenters?"

"We train to defend and fend off marauders." My voice cracked.

"Sure you do, son. Sure you do. Why don't you train to save people instead? Help and build. If an apocalypse does happen, which I doubt, any silly ass can shoot a gun, but who will rebuild and who will minister the sick?" His big smile spread across his face like a light. "Hell, I killed motherfuckers by the truckload, but Sister Speed saved hundreds."

At the next meeting I looked around me. Brother Weed's words ringing in my head. These men and boys looked desperate in a way I hadn't noticed before. Many of them were misfits and outcasts even in a place of misfits and outcasts. They wanted to be relevant and they wanted people to depend on them and this was the only way they knew how. I began to feel ridiculous dressed in my cammies, cradling a rifle like a puppy.

Plus, something key happened when Sister Speed hugged me goodbye. At first I wasn't aware she had said anything, her whisper like the breath of a baby sleeping. Now the guys who hung out with Uncle A would say she was full of shit, and in their false bravado insult her world vision, but she grew up in the war and she'd seen darkness and fire fall from the sky. "Restraint of power is the greatest power." Once you kill someone you can't take it back." Such an obvious statement. No shit, I thought. That's the point, shoot to kill so he can't come back to get you. In my youthful belief that my kin and their friends were always right, I kept shooting up the targets, but I started to swing the other way. I'd been reading a lot and discovered every age has its lunatics who holed-up believing the end was near and adopted a bunker mentality. I looked at the broken and ruptured men: the skinny welder who only shot .22 caliber, the obese truck driver who couldn't walk a hundred yards much less hump his ass all over the mountains, a guy with long blond hair and boots that reached above his knees, a short stocky man with dragon tattoos on his forearms like Cain in the television show Kung-Fu. They loved their guns more than women and some of their women had drifted off to other men. Fuck that.

But Sister Speed also planted an image in my head. We'd imagined killing enemy soldiers, thugs, and gangbangers and not running Vietnamese girls dripping with napalm and tears.

Uncle A sits down in his recliner. "I suppose you'll figure it out."

"I suppose so. I don't know. I don't know exactly what Todd's got going on."

"Todd's a douchebag. You need to cut him loose."

"After this I am. We'll be even."

Uncle Allen shakes his head and takes a drink of tea.

Hess keeps talking. "Anyway. I just want a little fool-insurance. If it goes south, I can draw it to back people up."

Uncle Allen laughs. "What backs people up is shooting them. Keep that in mind."

I could shoot with the best, but Uncle Allen always said, "If you pull a gun you got to be ready to drop the hammer on a guy." Before Sister Speed, I had made myself believe it was as simple as squeezing a trigger, but after her whisper, her words wove a net of doubt and I realized I was never sure I could kill someone. That was my real reason for not carrying a pistol. I made up the other stuff because if people thought I was scared to kill, they'd come after me.

Chapter Thirteen

The pick-up truck without the bed speeds up after passing Jen, scattering dust and pea-gravel. She lets up on her quick walk as she distances herself from Uncle A's place.

She takes photographs as she continues: Some dead grass, a new Ford pickup truck with a roll bar and off road lights in front of ancient trailer with water stains down its sides, a small mutt chained to an engine block, a lightning struck tree by a trailer with a plywood room built on to it.

A four-year-old little girl plays in a yard patched with brown grass. A swing set sags in back, a bicycle lays on its side, and a small wooden fort built of scrap wood leans by the road.

Jen calls out. "Hey, little girl."

The little girl pauses and looks at her. Dirt smudges her face and snot crusts her nostrils. Her dark hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail with a scrunchie that has plastic flowers dangling from it.

"Don't be afraid sweetheart. Can I take your picture?" Jen holds her camera out to show her.

The little girl looks to the trailer and back to Jen and shakes her head.

"Come on, now. It'll be a nice picture. Why you're so cute."

The little girl shakes her head again. Jen puts the camera to her eye and starts clicking. "See it's not bad."

The little girl smiles. Jen steps into the yard. "You're a cutie."

The trailer door bursts open like a rattle of beer cans. A fat young woman wearing an oversized T-shirt with a picture of Garth Brooks on it and shorts, hair dirty and baby on her hip, rushes onto the steps of the trailer. The sound of daytime television applause comes from behind her.

She yells, "What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

Startled Jen pauses, but swings her camera and snaps a quick shot. "Just taking some photos. You have a cute little girl."

The woman looks down to the little girl. "Lucinda, get your ass in here now. What have I told you about strangers?" She fixes her stare on Jen. "Especially ones looking like whores."

The little girl runs into the house.

"You get on back to where you come from." The woman slams the trailer door behind her.

"At least I'm not trash," Jen yells back. Jen takes a picture and walks away.

Jen walks to the gas station phone booth. Cars on the freeway rush

by like flights of birds in a jet stream. She picks up the receiver missing the earpiece. "Figures," she says. She walks into the station. At the desk a high school boy sits, reading a dirt bike magazine.

Jen clears her throat. "Got a phone I can use?"

The boy looks her up and down smiling. "Ahhh, yeah, but nothing's local from here."

Jen puts her hand on her hip, looking down at the kid.

"Even to get your mom on the line?"

"Yeah, she dumped Dad for some well driller passing through."

"Sorry to hear about your loss. The phone?"

"Oh sure this one here or you can use the one in the garage."

Jen walks past him into the garage area.

She squeezes past an old Rambler on jack-stands, a tire mounting machine, and an empty bay with the lift to a workbench with greasy phone.

She takes a phone card out of her purse and picks up the handset. She dials. The phone rings and Marla's answering machine picks up. "Hey, this is Marla. I am out tripping or just tripping, so leave some wisdom." After the tone, Jen cups the receiver as if somebody might be listening. "Hey, babe, just checking on you. Thought you'd be home. I'll call you before I come back from L.A."

Jen hangs up and leaves and walks back toward the mining camp, past the bowling alley where the pick-up truck from earlier is parked next to an orange muscle car. Rock and roll blasts from the car.

Hess's BMW pulls onto the road and heads toward her. She stops, and he pulls up next to her.

"We're done here."

Jen sighs. "Thank God."

"You want to see a local highway memorial?"

Jen perks up. "Yeah."

She gets in and they drive to the highway on-ramp and the BMW pulls over and Hess gets out.

She gets out with her camera and stands on the asphalt as he rummages around in the brush.

Hess stands and surveys the area. "It's got to still be here. Maybe a little further."

He walks parallel to the on-ramp. Jen walks, her heels clicking.

Hess stops. "Here it is." He picks up a small wired together cross. The weathered wood has a rusting dog collar hanging from it.

Jen snaps a few photos. "Let me guess, your best friend."

"Brandy got off the chain and dashed down here and got squashed by a Celica."

Jen takes his picture as he poses, holding the cross. "I bet you cried."

"You know I did. Like a kid who had let his dad's best friend get killed."

Jen lowers the camera a moment and raises it to take another picture. "Shoot me some tears now to make the photo more dramatic."

"Nah, I gave up on crying. It don't make a shit of difference to the

dead.”

He tosses the cross off into the brush, and they get back in the BMW and pull onto the highway.

Funny how we take trips expecting one thing and discover something unexpected. How a moment of action or inaction doesn't change the course of our lives, but redefines who we were, even when those people from our past always see us as we used to be. Almost like no one expects any change.

Chapter Fourteen

Yellow hash marks slip by. The air-conditioning blows cold, and the radio plays more jazz. Jen leans back into her seat, hand up in front of the a/c vent as she looks out the window.

“Thank God for tinted windows and sunglasses. Second and third best inventions ever.”

Jen leans forward. “Pull over there.”

Hess clicks on the blinker. “The mile markers look like little grave markers. Every quarter-mile a sign for the dead.”

Hess pulls over. Jen gets out and walks to where someone had stuck a cross in the ground and planted plastic flowers, a cardboard four-leaf clover painted metallic green. Along the highway trucks and cars whip by, rumbling the air. One big rig honks its air horn.

Jen squats down and points the camera as level as she can. Her skirt climbs up to her hips. She moves around and takes shots from different angles. The wind blows her hair across her face and a strand gets caught in her mouth. She draws it away with a finger and Hess loves the small moment as she looks out of another world. A kid on a summer day with a camera and all the wonder a blue-sky day could hold.

Jen gets back in the car. She changes the film in her camera. She marks the used roll and records the number in a small Steno pad.

Hess shifts the BMW into drive. “I wonder if there's highway marker for everyone killed on the highway.” He accelerates onto the highway. “Then there'd be a constant memorial.”

“That last one had a picture. Those are my favorite.”

“A picture within a picture. What's that for?”

Jen sighs long and loud. “I told you. That gallery in Soho. I'm thinking about making a collage from the photos from accident sites. I think it'd be cool to combine these photos with some from burial sites along the old emigrant wagon trails. The marking of the grief inflicted by those journeys mirror each other in an American way.”

“Whatever. Once they're gone, they're gone, and all the plastic flowers out of China don't make a shit of difference to them, mirrored or not.”

“You're so pale. I should put some plastic flowers on you.”

“I wonder how come I never see any of those Jewish stars.”

“Don't be a moron.”

They drive off. Jen looks through her camera.

Hess sticks his tongue out at her when she points the camera at him. "What do you want to do when we get back? We could get some food at the Chinese place in Commercial Square."

"It's Japanese." Jen turns back to the front. "I think I just want to go home."

"My place? I guess we could order out."

Jen shakes her head. "No, New York." She stares out her window, camera up to her eye.

I'll get tickets. Be nice to get out of Vegas.

The BMW speeds down an off-ramp and onto a two-lane road leading out into the desert. Heat waves flow over the road, blurring a building with cottonwood trees trembling in the distance. The apparitions of Joshua trees flicker as they punch through the heat. The road opens up and Hess wheels up in front of a wooden church freshly painted so white it glows and shimmers in the sunlight. The roof and steeple pulse blood red.

Jen leans forward and looks out the windshield. "Are you kidding me? Church?"

"Chill the fuck out." He smiles at her. "You can stay in the car if you don't want your skanky soul saved."

"Ha ha ha." She stressed each ha.

Hess gets out and Jen follows him.

Hess strides up the steps and pauses at the door. A plaque to the right of the door reads: Church of Celestial Light. Cleansing Doors of Perception Since 1973.

Hess put his hand on the door. "Brace yourself."

Jen looks at him with her "what the fuck" look.

Hess opens the door and walks in followed by Jen.

Green, yellow and red light streams through a giant stain-glass peace sign. Instead of pews, cushions and pillows lie strewn on the wood floor. Incense burns in potted palms in the corners.

A lean woman in her late fifties, wearing dancer tights, ballet dances on the stage with a pulpit to slow tempo Arabic music.

Hess whispers. "That's Abby. Her husband disappeared with my dad." Jen nods.

From a side doorway covered in a curtain of beads and pooka shells that rattle and clink, Brother Weed, a tall black man in his fifties, enters the main room. Sister Speed, a petite Asian woman, follows him. He wears a yellow and brown dashiki and jeans and she wears a turquoise ao dai.

Brother Weed sees Hess and smiles and walks quickly to him. Sister Speed's face lights up as she moves.

They embrace.

"This is my girlfriend, Jen Swallows. Jen this is Brother Weed and Sister Speed. He was in my dad's squadron in Nam."

Jen sticks her hand out, but Brother Weed hugs her as does Sister Speed.

Sister Speed smiles. "Have you eaten?"

Hess says, "No, but we don't have a lot of time."

Sister Speed touches Hess's forearm. "Nonsense. Come on. You eat or I shoot out your tires."

They follow her through the curtain.

A wok simmers on the stove. The air hangs with the smells of turmeric, curry, and garlic.

Sister Speed stirs the vegetables. "We were just cooking when we heard the door open." The big metal spoon rasps against the wok.

Jen smiles at her. "This smells delicious."

"And good for your blood," Sister Speed says.

Hess puts his hand on Brother Weed's shoulder. "I need some help tomorrow. Can you get loose?"

"You bet. Fill me in."

Chapter Fifteen

The evening light smudges the smog and the sunset burns the sky. Traffic slips along, streetlights light up. Hess fidgets behind the wheel. Jen shoots some photos. She sets her camera in her lap. "Let's go tear it up."

"Let's get a room first."

Funny thing about being coked up, the trip compresses and flexes. You're in Vegas, you're in L.A. I didn't even remember passing the Gateway to Death Valley. But crazy enough, time blew itself out and my brain and body started this slow motion crash like running a car off an embankment and hanging in the air forever, so long I thought I might actually be flying, marveling at all the shades of smog and sky.

We rode the carousel at the Santa Monica Pier with hand-carved horses making frozen leaps and the Ferris wheel on Balboa Island and we sat in a bar off Melrose with funky blue lights, making everyone's skin look dead as if they were dragging their sorry asses through a zombie movie.

Drinkers lean against the horseshoe shaped bar. The bartender, a hipster with eyeliner, dyed black hair like a Goth and face piercings glint blue light on his face ignores people until they ask for a drink. Twangy country music plays low on the jukebox. A woman with ragged white hair in a blue paisley housedress walks up to Jen. "Lady you can really fly."

An old man who drank next to the ragged hair woman wears a Tirol and bright red suspenders holding up red and gold surf shorts. He wanders over to Hess. "Are you German? I'm German. Fought the Russians. Those bastards deserved to lose everything."

"No, man. I'm not."

He says, "Ah, Norwegian then." He stumbles away to sit next to the woman with ragged hair, and they sing a German song together.

"Let's go to the Improv and then go for a walk on the beach."

Hess shrugs. "Sure."

Jen takes her camera out. "Can I photograph you two?"

The crazy couple whoops and starts dramatically posing for Jen as

Hess flags down the bartender to pay the tab.

Driving down Hollywood Boulevard, jazz plays on the radio. Jen scans the side streets as if looking for a lost dog. "Pull over, quick. Toward the back."

Hess pulls into a mini-mart. She jumps out and walks around back. Between a dumpster and the building, she hikes her skirt around her waist, pulls nylons and panties around her knees and squats. She pisses with a vengeance.

The night air thickens with the low clouds, and the streetlights' rays break through her hair, giving her head a blonde halo. Traffic moves in spurts. The BMW's radio plays some jazz. Her piss hits the ground, spreading away from her boots like surf receding out to sea. The lights buzz and pop and horns honk as people drive in and out of the mini-mart, pulling away from the fuel pumps. No one notices her. He snatches her camera and click it a few snapshots of her. Let's see her put those in a gallery. She could call it an exploration into the failed manners of an upper class woman. Salt air, smog and sweat coat Hess's skin. Jen wipes herself with a tissue and pulls down her skirt. She smiles, skipping into the parking lot—and with all of her modeling school grace, climbs into the Beemer. She smiles, says, "I just peed on L.A."

"Sure."

I knew it was Hollywood.

I had seen Los Angeles from high in the San Gabriel Mountains in the blackness surrounding lights spreading out so far they became a haze. Some high school pals and me used to hike up there to watch the city and lay back and stare at the stars. All was a stew of lights. A cemetery sprawled over acres of darkened ridge, and highways dotted with vehicles speeding in a one a.m. rush hour to beat closing last call traffic. Beyond the light-mottled skyscrapers—the Hollywood Hills and the sign, the Griffith Park Observatory and the constant hum of industry. I liked to watch aircraft dropping for LAX or launching into the dark, and listen to the noise under a dome of lights that blotted out the night sky. The electric city thrummed and popped. I believed I was untouchable, suspended above it all in the dark.

Hess noses out of the parking lot in between a pickup truck and a piece-of-shit Toyota when an ambulance shrieks, trying to work its way through the clogged street. Horns honk. On the sidewalk across from Hess a homeless couple play a guitar and a tambourine next to a suitcase with a giant yellow cat sitting on it. The blonde girl with bloody ribbons streaming from her hair pets the cat. Hess stares at the blood vivid against her blue skin. A shimmer, a faint glint in the eyes like a distant wink of a star through high thin clouds. The bums strum and shake as people drop coins in a cup, but jazz fills Hess's head. A piano, a trumpet, drum kit. Can he hear the cat purring? He wonders at the sound, rising from the back of his head. Something both content and nervous. Hess waits for the girl to look at him. To raise her hand. To beckon him for

help. To beseech him to stop. But she pets the cat as the homeless play on.

Jen slaps Hess on the shoulder. "Quit zoning-out and let's go." Cars honk.

"All right, don't get your panties all twisted and shouted up."

Hess pulls the BMW out, merging with traffic, leaving the blonde girl behind him.

*

We went to a club, and I faded in and out of consciousness. I laughed out of reflex, not knowing what the comedian said. I ordered a drink and all I could make out about the waitress was the flat black of velvet, the gold trim on the hem and chest of her strapless dress. The vague image of Jen dancing at a different club, spinning and spinning, her hair like a blonde cape, yells over loud music. "I love dancing." We danced and sometimes I just stood back as the crowd churned around us. It dizzied me. The dark and flash of strobe lights—there and gone in fractions of moments and ghost images in my darkened brain of her between the light pulses. The crowd cheered as some new disco song flooded the place.

I hated Disco more than Jazz. I blamed the Cold War for Disco. People had just given up on the future with the threat of nuclear annihilation; just dance and snort coke and fuck random strangers. But without the Cold War we wouldn't have Punk Rock, so you have to take the good with the bad.

*

They swirl and dance and head for the bar and get drinks. The night whirled in and out as time clocked on. Jen leans close to Hess's ear. "You want to head back to the room? You got a busy day tomorrow. Business in the morning and the drive to Vegas."

Hess stares at her, then looks at his watch. "After another drink. It's only ten."

Jen tugs at Hess's arm. "You know I been thinking. Why do Central American guerillas want to trade guns for cocaine? I would think it would be the other way around."

"You'd think. But Todd's got it figured."

Hess looks across the dance floor at all the people dancing and grinding as his vision fades to black.

I didn't really think about her slurred words. I became cut loose and blacked out. It amused me to think of my unconscious body functioning loose in the city. I might as well have been dead. I could have been on the dark side of the moon. I imagined myself as Hess the astronaut, drifting outside the ship with my shop-guy wrench, working on something. But because I am a fuck up without an engineering degree I lose my grip on the tool and it floats away. I grab after it. Because I am incapable of

planning ahead or considering the real weight of consequences, I jump free of the spacecraft. I grasp after the wrench, floating above the earth. I wondered if I'd have enough air to last until gravity skipped me off the atmosphere like a sorry meteor.

Chapter Sixteen

Hess wakes, twisted in the hotel sheets. CNN blasts with footage of Desert Shield. He looks around puzzled at first. Through the open curtains the city lights still wait for dawn.

Jen had taken a shower, and Hess watches as she starts to dry her hair in the nude. "You're better than CNN."

The acne on her cheeks stands out. The light makes the water on her fake-baked skin shimmer, and Hess gets up and runs his tongue along her shoulder. His cottony mouth sucks up the water, but the chemical taste leaves him thirstier.

She flips her hair as she bends over. The blow dryer whirs, drowning out the news. Jen backs against Hess and starts grinding.

"You'd better hurry."

Hess's brain hurts, but he gets an erection anyway. As they have sex, he stops to call room service for a couple of Bloody Marys.

Hess starts the BMW. Jen fiddles with her camera. She wears a black mini-skirt and a sheer black blouse over a gold lame bra. "Hold on." She produces her compact, flips it open. She grins. "A little toot before breakfast."

"Sounds good to me. Keep you from slumping over in your eggs. That wouldn't be a pretty sight."

"Everything I do is pretty."

"Even pissing in the street."

Hess takes a baggie of coke out of his jacket pocket and dishes out a little onto the compact mirror. Jen chops it with a razor into two fine rows.

She hands him the compact and he holds it in his lap. She takes a cut down drinking straw and leans into his lap and snorts one line. She massages his crotch before sitting up.

She takes the compact from him and holds it in her lap.

"My turn." Hess leans into her lap and as he inhales, works his fingers into her.

Jen moans. She cocks her hips and opens her eyes. "Hey. We aren't alone."

She points with her chin and Hess looks.

A homeless guy in a filthy jean jacket and surf shorts stands next to a garbage can eating an apple core, staring at them through the windshield. Hess rolls down the window.

Hess yells, "Move along if you don't want an ass beating."

He grins a wretched grin of nasty teeth and wanders off. Jen squints and rubs her red-rimed nose. "You looking to get arrested? Cool out."

"That bum ain't going to do shit."

"Yeah, but he might." She points at a well-dressed businessman a couple cars down loads a large suitcase into the trunk of a Mercedes.

"Whatever. He won't do shit over a bum. Get his shoes dirty or have to pony up a fiver."

Hess rolls the baggy with a couple of grams left and puts it in his jacket pocket.

"You're such a moron."

He smiles. "Yes, but I'm your moron. You ready? I want to be earliest birdiest."

"How ready does one need to be to sit and be beautiful in a diner? You're the one who'd better be careful."

Hess slips the BMW into gear. "Don't get all 'I can't fuck this up' on me. If I'm not back by nine, shit's gone wrong. Cover your ass, get a cab, and light out for the John Wayne. I'll page you in the American terminal."

Jen rolls her eyes. "Don't worry. I'm smarter than you look."

Hess laughs.

"You know, you really shouldn't go. We should just hit the highway back to Vegas. Still weird they'd come up here for dope."

"Can't do it. I owe Todd."

"The whole thing is flaky. If you go you should tell him to back off. Just let it go."

"Look, things are in motion. I got to follow through."

"Even if it's stupid and will get you killed or arrested? What the fuck did he do to make you even risk being late for court tomorrow?"

Hess backs the BMW out. "You let me worry about that."

Jen turns up the jazz.

Chapter Seventeen

Jen sits at the coffee shop counter. Her camera sits next to a cup of coffee and a half eaten pastry. A waitress wipes down the counter in front of Jen with a dishtowel.

An old timer wearing a fedora and almost black purple velvet suit sips coffee a couple of stools down. A walking stick with a pearl top leans against the counter. Others eat breakfast in booths.

Jen toys with her swallow charm gazing off.

The waitress stops in front of Jen. "Now that's pretty."

Jen blinks and for a second doesn't realize the waitress is talking to her, but then smiles. "I'm kind of bummed that I never made it down to San Juan Capistrano."

"To see the swallows?"

"Yeah. For centuries they've come back to nest where they hatched."

"That's something all right."

The old timer shifts in his seat to angle himself toward Jen. "When I first came here during W W-Two there were a lot more swallows."

Jen smiled at him. "That a fact."

"Sure enough," he said. The chair squeaks when he turns back to his

coffee.

Jen spins the saucer with the pastry, and picks a flake of frosting off and puts it on her tongue and savors it. "My last name is Swallows. I've always had an affinity for them. You know they fly continents to make it back home."

The old-timer coughs.

Jen continues. "But they don't do it alone. As a flock, a family. The males build their nests from mud in the spring. They always come back." Jen realizes it's the right time to go back Manhattan, those soaring cliffs of skyscrapers that stifled her as a girl.

Jen stirs her coffee and the spoon clacks. She blows across the liquid surface before sipping from her coffee cup. The old-timer and waitress watch her.

Jen sets the cup on the counter. "True hope is swift, and flies with swallow's wings. What good's a life without hope?"

The old-timer taps his cane. "Indeed. What good?"

The bell on the door rings. Hess walks in. Blood streams down the side of his face. All conversations and eating stops. Only the sound of canned music, traffic, and a helicopter fill the emptiness.

Jen gasps. "What's wrong?"

Hess surveys the coffee shop in a second. "We got to bail."

"All right. Let me pay up."

Hess throws a few bills on the counter. "Now."

Before Jen can gather her things Hess pushes out the door, the bell ringing behind him.

Chapter Eighteen

On the street in front of the diner, Jen gets out and pauses. "You sure?"

"Yeah." Jen shuts the car door and steps away. Hess ejects the jazz CD and tosses it in the backseat. He pulls out a CD case from the band that played the night he and Jen met. *Songs to Save the Soulless*, with the band's name, Napalm Cocktail, written in fire framing Death with a martini shaker serving burning people at a bar.

He slips the CD out and slides it into the player. The speakers blare the punk band's version of "Onward Christian Soldiers." Hess head-bangs to it as he drives and air plays instruments.

He passes the parking lot not seeing Todd's pick up. He drives several blocks away and parks and walks to the parking lot and notices the van with Frank and Angel. He checks his watch. Two hours before show time. Hess stops and lights a cigarette and gets an L.A. Weekly out of newspaper rack. Hess walks past the parking lot, across the bike path and over to the beach. He sits on a bench. He pretends to read. Joggers and bicyclists go by. Seagull cries punctuate the rolling surf.

The two in the van look half asleep. They chat and lean back in their seats, drink coffee, and eat some pastries. Hess gets up and moves to another bench just out of sight of the van. If it left he'd see, but now they

couldn't see him. He smokes and waits.

An hour and forty-five minutes later, Todd pulls his pick-up into the lot and parks, backing into a space.

Hess folds his paper and waits a few minutes before getting up. The surf crashes against the beach as a helicopter flies just off the coast. Hess watches to see if it's a cop chopper.

Todd and Woo talk, oblivious as stones.

I first moved to L.A. out of high school. I didn't have the typical Hollywood reason for coming here. I drove from that shitty mining town because some guys who'd graduated the year before me had a big house and needed a tenant. I followed my impulse into emergency medicine, and found it cool to work. I'd go out to see Brother Weed and Sister Speed every month or so and hang out. I drifted away from the gun culture of my family and the guys at the house. They had guns, but shit, it was like mounting a major expedition to go shooting from the city. Not like at home where in five minutes you could be blasting the shit out of the desert. I wondered if the urge to arm myself would come back. The strange eroticism of forged steel in recoil, smoke filled sinuses as sharp as sex, and the sublime joy of a bullet splintering steel, glass, wood, or bone. For the time I walked in Sister Speed's philosophy, but the other thing was deep inside me, instilled by family, society, and life to rise up like some dark sea monster. Would Uncle A win out over Sister Speed?

Hess crosses the bike path and begins to walk toward the Todd's pickup.

Hess reaches the pick-up and leans on the driver side door. The window is down. Todd smiles. "Hey, man, good to see you."

"Yeah. How's the hand, Woo?"

Woo flexes his hand. "Fucking hurts."

"Good. You deserved it."

Todd slugs Hess on the shoulder. "You ready, man? Where's the shit?"

Hess looks at his watch. "Another fifteen minutes?"

Todd "Yeah. Woo says they're going to meet that other guy right over there."

Todd points to bench where a homeless guy plays a guitar with only three strings on it.

"You guys walk around at all?" Hess watches the homeless guy to see if he wasn't a cop.

"Nah, got here and parked."

Woo added, "To see if they got here early."

"So, you two vacationers didn't see the van parked behind that motel over there?" Hess points across the street. Todd twists around to see. Woo leans forward.

Todd leaned back into his seat. "Just a van, man."

Hess shakes his head. "A van with a mean looking white guy sporting a crew cut and a guy that might pass for a Central American guerilla."

Todd looks back at the van again. "Nah way, man."

"Yah way, man. They been sitting like that for the last two hours."

"Two hours?" Woo says, "They must be the contact."

"Hey, Woo," Hess says, "that the guy you fronted the coke to?"

He licks his lips and he looks down. "No."

Hess leans back from the truck and looks around. "Really? Where the fuck is that guy?"

Woo avoids Hess's stare. "I don't know man."

"What the fuck, Woo." Hess points at Todd. "So we got the gun guys over there, but not Woo's fuck-up. This stinks of a set up. I'm out."

Todd sits up straight. "No way. Woo's guy is solid."

Hess steps away. "No, Woo's guy's not solid. And why would a Central American guerilla group want to trade guns for coke?"

"How do I know, man? They want to make a deal, I want to make some money... Are you backing out on me? You owe me—"

"I don't owe you arrested or killed. Your stupid ass is being set up, and I'm out. The only reason I came was to get you gone before you do something they can actually arrest you for. Consider this a favor. Drive off. Now."

The van creeps out a little bit.

Todd pounds the steering wheel. "It might be them. Where's the shit, Hess?"

"Close. I'm not carrying that much coke around until I know they're not cops or thieves."

"That's bullshit, man. This could backfire. You fucker."

Hess nods toward the van. "Here they come. Early I might add. I'll post up behind the truck to keep an eye out. You two assholes try not to fuck it up."

Hess walks around behind the truck.

The van crosses the street and into the parking lot and stops perpendicular in front of Todd's truck.

The driver's side cargo door slides open. Angel points an AK-47 at Todd and Woo. Frank hangs his arm out the window and taps a Beretta 9mm semi-auto against the door.

Frank smiles big. "Good morning, bitches. Hand over the dope."

On the street parked about half a block away as the van pulls up to Todd's truck, Freddy sits in the passenger seat of his Caddy scanning the parking lot with a set of binoculars. The NFL lineman-sized skinhead sits behind the wheel. The other two are in the back.

Freddy yells, "Go! Go! Go!"

Freddy grabs a Molotov cocktail from the floorboard.

The Caddy lurches forward. The engine roars and the tires smoke and squeal. They cut off traffic. Horns blare.

Freddy yells over the engine. "Clip the corner of the van with the bumper."

They jump the curb into the parking lot, careening in a semi-circle before accelerating toward the van.

Hess draws his pistol. The revving Caddy causes the others to look.

Hess levels his pistol as the Caddy crunches the van's rear right corner, launching it into a spin. The AK-47 blasts. Hess drops to the asphalt.

The Caddy screeches to a stop. Freddy jumps out and lights the Molotov cocktail.

Frank face plants the steering wheel and slumps in the seat.

Freddy holds the flaming bottle like a side-armed pitcher. "I warned you, Todd."

Hess gets back to his feet.

Todd kicks the door of his truck open and leaps out. "Fuck you, nigger." Todd jerks his revolver from his waistband and fires. The bullet hits the Molotov cocktail, tearing away part of Freddy's hand.

The gas and flame splash up Freddy's arm. He screams. "Fuck! Oh, fuck! Oh, fuck!"

The other skinheads stop. Angel jumps from the van. The AK-47 rips as he sprays them with bullets.

Hess levels his pistol at him, but hesitates. He stares down the slide. The guy turns toward Todd.

Todd stops. "Let's get the fuck out of here!"

Woo gets out of the truck, reaching behind his back. The AK-47 pops, stitching Woo's chest with bullets. As he falls a small semiautomatic pistol clatters on the asphalt. Hess drop-steps and kneels at Woo's side. He thinks, too many holes in too many important places. Woo's mouth works, the air rasping and gurgling. Blood and more blood.

Todd squeezes the trigger twice, hitting Angel twice in the chest. "Fuck you."

Woo's mouth quits moving and he stares into the sky. Hess takes off running. At the street Brother Weed picks him up in an old blue Subaru wagon. They drive away and merge into traffic.

Todd gets in his truck and speeds off.

Hess turns to see if anyone noticed him getting into the Subaru. In the parking lot Freddy runs as if he's holding the Olympic torch and smoke hangs around the cars like a marine fog.

Brother Weed glances glassy eyed at Hess's ear. "Your ear is bleeding."

Hess touches his ear and looks at his bloody fingers. "Now ain't that the shit."

Brother Weed rolls to a stop at a light. "By the slimmest of spaces we live."

Later I'd think of a bump. Of Woo full of chest wounds. Of me dropping, of kneeling, of living. For every action there is a reaction. Woo reaches for a gun and gets killed. My gun was already out, but the guy didn't notice me. I could've popped him clean. A body at rest I suppose. But the reaction. Not to shoot, but to kneel and see if I might save a life. Many times I dreamed floating away from a spacecraft to chase a tool I'd let fly. Adrift above the Earth. In space only the fabric of the suit lets you live. The seam in the suit with a slow leak and below me, all the air in the world if I can only get back. Time to get back.

Chapter Nineteen

Marla sits in one of the beds in a cheap motel, smoking. The television blares a morning game show cheers and whoops of the audience and contestants.

The door flies open, slamming against the doorstep, startling Marla. Frank stumbles in. He kicks the door closed behind him.

Marla pulls the sheet up around her neck.

Blood streams from a knot on Frank's forehead. "We got to get the fuck out. We have to hide. Fucking set up. Your friend killed Angel." He grabs a daypack and stuffs his clothes and shaving kit into it. "Get your skinny ass up. Fucking van's wrecked. We wait here and we're fucking dead."

Marla shakes her head. "Todd was in on it. He wouldn't have shot." Frank keeps moving.

Marla watches him. "No fucking way. Okay, no worries. No one knows where we are. We can ride this out. Besides we didn't kill him. We can—"

Frank stomps toward Marla and jerks her up by the shoulders. Her red panties are like warning light against her pale skin. "Angel has some very bad friends and family who don't know the meaning of 'we didn't kill him.' They just need somebody's blood to make it even."

Frank drops her on the bed. "You've always been a stupid slut. I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

Chapter Twenty

Hess drives on surface streets headed for the highway. His hands on the wheel at ten and two. Jen stares out the passenger window. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"Fucking believe it. Todd fucked the dog on this."

"We just got to get back." She gets the cigarette case from Hess's jacket pocket.

"I am going to visit some Old Testament retribution on Todd. Hell and fire and damnation."

She lights the cigarettes, hands one to Hess. Puffs and blows smoke, fidgets.

"No way. I don't believe Marla's involved. Just don't."

Hess looks her up and down. "What the fuck does that mean? That little fairy girl say something I should know about?"

Jen blows smoke, her lips tight for a moment. "No, not like that. Okay, whatever. I'll see when we get back." She throws the cigarette out the window. "Let me clean up your ear."

I still dream of being an astronaut, skipping across the surface of the moon. It wasn't until I was wearing county orange watching the news in the common room when I found out that little fairy girl had tried to double cross Todd. Whoever she threw in with ran her up on angel dust

and dumped her into Mission Bay. I saw them in my sleep. Marla drifting through space, dead, in a sundress, her face blue and her lips black, past. Her eyes stare, wide and blue like burning gas lit by the flaming sun. Jen cries, sweeping a table clear of magazines and a vase. She shatters dishes against the wall, collapses on the couch, as she clasps the swallow pendant Marla gave her. In the dream I swim in space, trying to get to Jen, but we are too far apart. No matter how hard I flail in a vacuum, I was going nowhere. Only the gravity of the earth to pull me back home.

The BMW speeds east down the highway, through Baker, CA. Jen looks through her camera viewfinder and snaps pictures of the sign Gateway to Death Valley.

"They bused me from that mine down here to go to school here."

Jen looks around at the smattering of restaurants and gas stations and motels surround by desert. "That must've sucked."

"It did. That was after we went to live with Uncle A. Felt like I was being exiled."

"You were. Exiled by a grateful nation."

"It's how I met Todd. Total fucking accident. He was a pretty good second baseman."

I'd never see Todd again. The marines got hard up enough to take him back and away he went. During his first tour he sent a letter to my attorney, figuring the attorney-client privilege would protect him. For some reason he confessed about his plan and how he and Woo staged the whole thing to get into business. None of that deal ever got tied back to me. To the cops it was open and shut. Skinheads fucked a deal up with guerillas and everybody died. While I drove toward Vegas, the cops were busy shaking down Nazis. If you're going to have a scapegoat and someone take a fall for you, I couldn't think of a better bunch of assholes to do it.

Chapter Twenty-One

The door from my apartment slams closed. In this rundown neighborhood I lock it up. Criminals are everywhere. I walk to my '88 Trooper II and get in. The heat swelters inside and I think about Woo and when Todd and I thumped on him. It's not just because of today, but I am always reminded it was then that my life broke from one way to another. I drive through Vegas and the heat has most people hunkered down inside. A few people stroll about, but damn few. I don't go past any of the casinos or the touristy part of town. I could be in any town America among the houses and apartment complexes I motor by.

I never made it to see Grandma. Prison made sure she died before I could visit. No miracle to keep her hanging on. Reconcile the past with the present: I guess that's one reason I decided to go to the funeral. And to make sure the bastard was dead.

The funeral home hung with yellow ribbons and American flags. Bikers lounge around on Harley-Davidsons. A few have the MIA/POW flag flying on whip antennae. A little bit away there are some war protestors and the Westboro Baptist Church with God Hates Fags signs and other inflammatory slogans. All manner of self-righteous douchebags.

I shake my head and walk into the funeral home.

In a way Todd's story became what he dreamed about when he thought about my father. Making a difference in people's lives. I heard the story and imagined an older Todd wearing full battle-rattle with other Marines riding in a Humvee. They drive down a street in Fallujah with another Humvee ahead of them. They turn a corner and a crowd has gathered along the sidewalk. A man throws a little girl into the street in front of the speeding Humvee, but the driver cannot brake fast enough and hits her.

Marines pile out and the insurgents spring the ambush. Bullets pop and whizz. Todd scoops up the little girl.

Todd yells over the noise of gunfire. "She's alive. Let's get her to an aid station."

The other Marines continue firing. The turret gun pounds out bullets.

"Fucking now!" The marines pile into the Humvee and speed off to an aid station. Todd runs in.

Todd has the girl in his arms, his M-4 is slung on his side. There are Marines being operated on. A lance corporal approaches Todd with hands up as if to slow Todd. "Whoa now, Marine. Where do you think you're going?"

"This girl needs help."

"Okay, we can't help civilians here. You have—"

Todd switches the girl to one arm and brings his rifle to bear on the corporal. The corporal stops. "Who do I start killing to get her help? You first?"

The corporal backpedals.

A major in doctor's scrubs cuts in. "We can do this. Take it easy, Marine. Stand down."

A woman takes the little girl from Todd. "Don't worry. We'll take care of her."

Todd lowers rifle. "Okay."

Todd emerges from the aid station. A single gunshot rings out. A sniper on a rooftop scrambles to get away. Marines return fire. Todd drops dead, not even a little alive.

Like when my father disappeared in the early seventies, no one outside the family and his unit cared. It was the end of a war when the shininess of it had worn off and the only people who cared were merchants selling patriotic wares. We had made it an honor to fight in pointless wars and somehow connect it to that basic American impulse of freedom. My dad disappeared and America shrugged its huge shoulders—so fucking what. What's on TV?

In the funeral home, I make my way to the casket. Mourners whisper. Three Marines sit in the front row in dress blues.

Older Todd lies in a coffin, his uniform is immaculate with ribbons and medals and an NCO sword reflects light.

Some people mill about. An old woman in a black polyester dress walks up. "A true American hero."

I smile at her. "Yeah, he was a true American all right."

The old woman sniffs. "A shame."

She has the look of someone I may know, but I can't place her. I knew a lot of people in Todd's family and she didn't strike me. I saw his mom and stepdad #10 in the front row and assorted others. "How are you related to Todd?" I ask the old woman.

"I'm not. I just go to funerals for our heroes to show my respects."

Her face had real grief etched into it, and I wondered what ghosts drove her to funerals. Does she fear losing the country and her home? Does she wake in the darkness at night when she lies in bed? Does she go from some past loss, a father, husband, brother, sister, mother, or is it a calling for her to be there for the country? One stranger without an agenda just to mourn the dead? She daubs her eyes again. Does she go because so many don't?

I tied on the black tie for more than the mourner of the dead. It is a combination of all the colors, but an absence of light. It is everything and nothing at the same time. This is what the soul is. Uncle Allen suggested they write in Todd's obit in the Baker paper: local douchebag dies a valiant, but pointless death. The editor wanted nothing to do with it.

I look over the body. "You still owe me money." I put the letter in the coffin. His confession will go into the ground when he does. If the ancients are right and what we have in our caskets makes it into the afterlife with us then he can reread it and show it around. He'll be a funny figure with his uniform and sword and evidence he was a back stabbing asshole. Who am I kidding? This life is the only shot you got. He died and now he is nothing. Maybe we'd be less inclined to blow each other up if we knew the wages were a black void. I fucking doubt it, but a boy can wonder.

The minister moves in front of the coffin. "Let everyone please take their seats."

I continue down the aisle. The old woman follows me and pauses before taking a seat in the last row. Her dress rumples like crumpling papers. "Aren't you staying?"

I soften. "No ma'am. I'm afraid I just don't see the point." I tip my head. As I start to leave an old man in a kilt and the full outfit blows "Amazing Grace" through a set of bagpipes. His bluish skin sucked up the candlelight as his cheeks puffed and blew air and his short inhalations were the gasps of a man already dead.

I am dizzy.

I am in the desert.

Chapter Twenty-Two

My fucking ear stings. I slouch in the seat as the desert swipes by in panoramic brown. Jazz plays weaving notes with the air-conditioning. Jen takes some pictures at a passing memorial.

"Sorry we don't have enough time to stop."

Jen rolls down the window, leans out and takes another photograph. Her skirt climbs high and I caress the backs of her thighs and run a hand up to her crotch. "I think I found the Promised Land."

She eases back into her seat. She reaches into my jacket pocket and gets the cigarette case. She lights two between moans. She leans back and cocks her hips toward my hand. "We fly by with no time to memorialize."

Jen and I came up over a rise before Cima Road as the highway started climbing into some mountains. A VW Beetle was upside down about fifty feet off the black top. A guy staggered by the car. We pulled into the emergency lane. I clicked the hazards, and we got out. I had a déjà vu moment of exiting the ambulance.

A man was by the car, fuzzy and out of focus like a ghost floating in the heat waves. He reached us and was yammering Spanish. A Mexican. Blood dripped down his forehead.

"He says his wife is dead, but his daughter is hurt, knocked out," Jen said.

I stopped and stared at her, said, "You speak Spanish?"

"Spanish, yeah, and Russian, Japanese and French."

"No shit, I never knew that."

"You public school kids think you're so fucking smart."

The Mexican guy was frantic, pulling at my sleeve, so I had to brush him off as I walked. Steam rose off the back of the car, and one of the tires still spun. It smelled like antifreeze, oil, and dirt.

A woman's legs stuck out from under the car, and I thought about the Wizard of Oz—couldn't help it—red shoes. I stopped and thought, What the fuck am I doing? I have to get out of here. I shiver. Instead of turning back I walk on. The teenaged daughter lay knocked out on her back, breathing raspy breaths. Pink blood stained her white blouse in the middle of her rib cage. A fucking sucking chest wound. I couldn't believe it. I could fix this with some plastic and tape and she would live a motherless daughter, but live.

"Ask Paco if he's got any tape." I knelt next to the girl. Her cheeks were smooth, and her forehead had a couple of pimples, but her skin was brown and alive. I heard the Mexican guy ratchet up his voice. He stood behind me by the car. I yelled, "Jen, does he have any tape?" I reached to unbutton her blouse.

The Mexican guy yelled and Jen said, "He says keep your hands off his daughter."

"What?" I couldn't believe it. What did this fuck know about saving

lives? I reached into my jacket pocket pulled out the baggy. It'd fit right over the hole and seal it. A little tape to hold the plastic to her skin—she'd breathe. "Tell him I'm saving her life."

The pearl button was awkward, like the hole was too small. My fingers fumbled with it as it slipped in my grip.

I dumped the coke on the ground, wanting the plastic to be flat and get a perfect seal. With my other hand I tore her blouse open, tired of messing it. Buttons popped away, glinting like shooting stars.

Sweat dripped into my eyes and I wiped my forehead. Jen quit talking to Paco, her feet apart, and handbag dangling from her hand, gorgeous in the sun. "What the fuck do you think you're fucking doing?" Jen asked.

Paco really started going off behind me.

I smoothed blood the color of cotton candy away from the puncture. "Tell Paco get some tape and quit shouting that gibberish at me."

"You moron. I can't fucking believe you. The cops will be coming," she said.

"Jesus," I said as I took a shot to the back of the head. It was weak—my Ray Bans never even came loose. The guy had never hit another man in his life. I stood up and clocked him. The Mexican sprawled out into a bush like he was trying to get out of a net. A screeching black bird pecked at the woman's legs. I jumped at it, flapped my arms and hollered, "Get out, you fucker." It hopped away a couple of feet. I scooped up a rock as I ran, hurled it. The bird flapped into the air.

An eighteen-wheeler came over the rise of highway and its brakes came on, squealing and smoking. Huge rolls of steel lined its trailer like mirrors exploding silver rays. I walked back to where the girl lay. I couldn't make out a thing Jen said.

My shadow fell over the girl, and I couldn't hear her breathe. Her bra shone in the sun. I knelt down. She had a gold chain with a gold Virgin Mary that I moved out of the way to check her pulse. My fingers found her carotid artery. I kept my fingers there and nothing. I held my fingers there longer waiting for the soft beating. It was faint, fuck, so faint.

Jen started yelling that we needed to get in the car before it was too late. "Cops, drugs and you have court." It was all a buzz and clatter around me. I tried to focus.

The pink froth of bubbles oozed out of her chest. With my hand, I smoothed the blood away, again, and fitted the bag over it. Her flesh was warm and soft. Her broken ribs flexed and crinkled under the pressure of my palm. I winced. Jen talked Spanish again, and as I looked I saw Paco coming back at me.

"He says get your drugs and filthy hands away from his daughter," Jen said. She pointed to the baggy in my hand.

I stood and knocked him back down with a palm to his chest. That's when I saw an explosion of lights as the truck driver hit me from behind. He had hit someone before. I'd been so focused on the girl, I'd forgotten about him. I tumbled forward. I came up, feeling blood and heat and the tingling of crushed nerves. Son of a bitch broke my sunglasses.

He yelled, "What do you think you're doing to that little girl?"

I scrambled to my feet and pointed at the truck driver and said, "You fucker, I'm trying to save this girl's fucking life, that's what."

His white T-shirt was dingy in the sun. He backed away and his eyes widened like he'd been given a bad fortune. Jen moved behind him. My eyes hurt a lot and I squinted.

Paco jumped on my back and I flipped him off. Fucker. I turned and kicked Paco in the ribs to keep him sucking air awhile.

"Jesus if these people would leave me alone I could get this done."

"What do you expect? You look like a zombie in a suit molesting a little girl. Let's go."

A couple of birds were back pecking on the woman. "Not till I patch this girl up," I said. "I can save her." The highway patrol blazed up over the rise, screeching to a halt, roller lights flashing. I looked at Jen. "Just get me some tape. I can do this. The cops will know what I'm doing. They'll see and if they don't I'll show them my old card from my ambulance days. We're a lock."

I limped after the plastic bag where it had blown into a bush. I retrieved it, went and knelt next to the girl. My foot hurt. I brushed the dirt off the plastic bag, shook it, and placed it over the girl's puncture wound. I felt the plastic suck against her body and held it as steady as I could, though my hands were shaking and my knees ached. My whole body started to feel like one giant broken tooth. It began in my stomach, and rippled out. I looked up at Jen. The cops were getting out of their car behind her.

She stared at me. Her hip cocked, with her hand on it, she stood in her heels. The wind blew her hair around and it looked like rays of light were shooting out of her head. She wasn't even sweating. I said, "After you get the tape, you could get your camera. These could be some cool pictures for your collage. The pre cross and flower scene."

"You're a fucking moron," she said.

The cops came up and after a quick glance around, drew their pistols what with the trucker shouting and Paco pointing and shouting, "Dro-gas." Even I could interpret that. Fuckers. I tried to tell the cops what I was doing, but it was all shouting and gun pointing.

The cops yelled at me to get away from the girl. I kept my hand on her wound. "No, I need tape."

"Get the fuck back. I will shoot you." He stressed *will* as if to say he's put holes in something besides paper targets.

"Kill me and kill her, assholes."

The cops looked back and forth at each other.

"She's got a sucking chest wound," I said.

One holstered his gun and knelt opposite of me. "I'll hold it and you back away."

He slid his hand next to mine, and I thought about how soft his fingers were. I put my hands in the air, my job done.

"Tape her," I said.

The other cop pushed me face down, cuffed and frisked me. "You have the right to remain silent, use it."

Sand stuck to my face. My suit was trashed—stickers, dirt, pea gravel, and blood. I was glad I wasn't wearing a tie. Cactus stickers pricked my chest, and my Bruno Magli shoes were scuffed to shit. A county cop showed up and was looking at the girl. Jen took pictures of me. I told them check my wallet for my EMT license. One of them got it and said, "You can't be fucking serious. This thing's been expired for years." They rolled me over. The sky was a stark blue. A rock poked into the small of my back.

The cops sat me up and walked over to talk to the county cop. One walked back over to inform me that there was a warrant out for my arrest from Nevada for assault on Jen's ex to put on top of violating the conditions of my bail. The trucker walked back to his rig. Paco stood by the car, dazed, while Jen ghosted her way through the bushes around the accident, taking photo after photo. Kneeling, standing, from different angles and directions—the car, birds, the mother's legs, Paco, the cops, me. And the girl. Jen lingered over her. No one seemed to care. After picking her way through the desert, she knelt next to me. She reached into my jacket and pulled out my cigarette case, and got two out. She lit them and wedged one between my lips. She coughed, smoked and smiled. "Listen," she said, "I'm leaving." Her voice sounded rough.

I blinked through the smoke.

"I'll get your bail, but afterwards I'm headed to New York."

"I won't be able to go until all the court stuff is settled."

"I don't want you to go."

I shrugged as best I could.

"I been talking about it awhile now, but you don't pay attention. I want more."

"We have a good thing here."

"Vegas is killing me. The drugs, drinking. The night and day living. There's more things I need to do." She smiled. The glitter on her face sparkled, but her eyes were shaded and flat. "You were fun, but I've got to go."

"What are you going to do?"

She gave me the look like I was stupid for asking.

"Give modeling another shot?"

She shook her head. "I'm not a model."

I nodded. "That jazz, you know? I still don't like it."

She smiled. She stood, her long legs arcing above me, and tugged her skirt down. I wished I could reach my hand up it.

What else could I have said? A party always broke up. But as she walked away I called her back. She turned. "Sure we can't go to New York together? The change might do us good. Like 'Thunder Road,' blow this town full of losers."

She shook her head. "'Thunder Road's' about high school kids. Besides, you and I can't exist without Vegas."

She left. My high was wearing off. I wanted to sleep. I thought about calling her back and telling her about the girl I killed in L.A., but that would have been a poseur thing to do, some pathetic effort to keep her.

When I was in the joint I read this poet and he said, "There are more mysterious things than the human heart, but I don't know what they are." The past was one big wreck anyway and useless to worry about.

I didn't blame her for the assault rap I had to beat. I didn't have to go over and punch that guy, but I did.

All I needed to worry about was staying out of jail and figure out what next after that. Jen'd go on to that art dealer.

I saw a profile in an art mag I started to subscribe to and imagined being there. In a black evening gown, Jen moves amongst people, drinking wine, talking with others. Along the walls hang Jen's Memorial Photographs. Some of the accident photographs hang interspersed. It made me laugh that she used the one of her pissing behind the mini-mart and hung it over the reception book. My name was inscribed on a gold plate next to it. It'd take her sixteen years, but Jen made it to Capistrano and shot photos of the swallows at the old mission. She had quit wearing glitter and used very light make-up. Her skin cleared up when she got off coke and away from me. Around her neck always hung the swallow charm Marla gave her. When I found out about her and Marla it was like one of those ah-ha moments, of course they were lovers. No matter. She found her way home.

I spit the cigarette out. My mouth felt like I'd sucked a battery dry. I wanted a drink and a little coke. Dead looking mountains stuck out of the eastern horizon. In front of me Jen chatted to the cops, the light glinting off all their metal surfaces. Paco kept shooing the screeching black birds away from his wife and those fucking glittering red shoes. I smelled sweat, blood, and dust. The Mexican girl I saved looked like she was sleeping. Her skin, smooth and brown, the texture of an ironed silk shirt. Pretty. Everything was going to be o-fucking-kay. Closing my eyes against the sun, I nodded off under the paling sky, there in the desert and dreamed of flight.

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-The Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary



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