Almost Touching, Almost Free

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ALMOST TOUCHING, ALMOST FREE

by

Dustin M. Hoffman

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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This collection of stories delves into themes of the working class. These stories of working-class characters range from realism to fabulism to experimental, because the story of working-class people is complex and always shifting. Some of the stories travel backward in time to shepherds and traveling crusaders, while others take on much more contemporary voices, speaking from the point of view of sex workers, carpenters, office workers, ice cream van drivers, and salesmen. If these stories have one thing in common, it is that the characters are searching for identity, for a concrete sense of self that seems to have become nearly impossible to grasp in their working-class societies.
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The first time Grandpa died we were at the circus. Trapeze artists swung from pencil-thin bars, and I waited for one to fall. At nine years old, I questioned the strength of safety netting, imagined one frayed thread. A puddle of blood would bloom from sequined leotard and glitter hairspray.

Grandpa whistled to himself each time one of them somersaulted through the air. He lowered his mouth so close to my ear I could feel the saliva on his fat lips. He whispered, “One in five circus acrobats end their careers with a mashed noggin,” then he leaned back in his seat, draped an arm over my shoulder. “If anyone dies, I hope it’s not the one with the impressive hooters,” he said.

I wanted to shush him, but we were in the back row. It was the last day before the tent folded up and left town, and only a dozen or so bodies spotted the hundreds of empty seats. I focused on the impressive hooters, asked God to watch over them. I squeezed my snowcone until blue syrup oozed cold and sticky onto my knuckles. Grandpa asked if I wanted another snowcone, and I said nothing as the artists swung higher, closer and closer to the tent’s peak. Grandpa offered to buy me cotton candy, a pennant, a pink balloon shaped like an elephant. The men clutched the women’s ankles, released them, catapulting their shiny torsos into triple spins.

Grandpa slid his arm over my shoulder and pointed up. I followed his hairy arm, that thick index finger slashed by the white scar he told me he got when a hungry table saw tried to eat him for lunch. “The real magic is right there in the rigging,” Grandpa said. “Ten tons of canvas, pulleys and straps, frame poles bigger than elephant bones. The
invisible hero of the circus is the tent man, who whips a palace together in a few hours. That’s the real trick here.”

I tried to think of men propping up striped canvas, but my eyes strayed from Grandpa’s finger. The leotard princess stood on a tiny pedestal, bent at the waist, fingers twitching in the spotlight as the bar floated into her palms.

Grandpa gasped, squeezed my shoulder so hard I thought it would pop. Then his grip went loose. He let me go and slumped into the bleachers behind us.

I prodded his belly, pinched his shoulder. He didn't move. I dropped my snowcone, and it splashed on my sneakers. I slipped my finger under his nose. No breath. I straddled his limp body, shook his shoulders, missed the impressive hooters swinging back up to the platform unscathed.

No one in the scattered audience glanced my way when Grandpa died, when the tears ran down my cheeks. Because of those sparkling trapeze artists, no one cared. We were invisible as those tent men. So I screamed. I like to imagine the glimmering leotards all paused, their sequins gleaming a hundred tiny spotlights my way, contorted bodies frozen in midair. But I didn't get to see it. I was facing my dead Grandpa, whose right arm woke from death and clapped over my mouth.

“You have to watch out for me,” he whispered. “Someone dies of a heart attack every thirty-three seconds. It’ll happen when you least expect, so never forget to keep one eye on the world and the other on Grandpa.”

I missed the trapeze artists’ four-person swinging chain, their famous denouement. I was busy counting seconds. Every time I hit thirty-three-Mississippi, I squinted at Grandpa, who could die at any moment.
Really the first time Grandpa died was before I could remember anything, at the moment of my birth. In the delivery room, Grandpa manned the camcorder. I came into this world purple and silent, umbilical cord noosed around my neck. But none of this is on film. Grandpa dropped the camcorder just as the crown of my scalp bubbled between my mother’s legs. After that, the video plummets. Blue-bootied feet fill the screen, layers of yelling. My mother’s groans drown in my father’s shriek, the nurses’ shouts. Someone kicks the camcorder and it spins to Grandpa’s face, a close-up of his lolling tongue, the milky scar like a comet above his right eye pressed to the white-tiled floor. He got that scar, he once told me, serving his country, building Ike Eisenhower’s interstates, a run-in with a rogue jackhammer. Saved the foreman’s life and still finished his stretch of concrete before going to the emergency room.

Did he receive the Purple Heart he deserved? No. And my parents didn’t name me after him, despite how he pestered them when the hospital admitted him and gave him the bed next to my mother. My mother told me she refused him one hundred times, browsed baby books, but couldn’t think through Grandpa’s constant chatter. When my mother was ready to leave, they told my parents they had to choose. Instead of Grandpa’s name, my birth certificate has Placeholder typed above the inky stamps of my tiny feet. They always told me they’d change it, but never did, and then when the responsibility became mine, something always seemed more important.

The only copy of the video of my birth hides on a shelf next to the other home movies. It has no label, because how do I explain it in a few words? No one has ever watched it but me. And when I do, I press pause just before the camera cuts out. A slit of
Grandpa’s pale blue iris shows through a clinched eyelid. A tenth of a second wink to a life unseen.

Grandpa died on a Tuesday once. He was demoing my parents’ roof, had been at it all day, chucking broken shingles all over the yard until it looked like the earth had opened up in black holes. My dad kicked shingles on his way to the mattress leaning against the big oak tree in our front yard, where he’d teach me to throw the knuckleball. He dug his fingernails into the red stitches, pinky hanging loose, his hand like a crippled claw. It would give me the edge, I was sure, make a mediocre high school pitcher throw no-nos, get scouted, drafted, become a superstar and make millions. The whole world would watch a man who’d mastered the dying art of the knuckleball. Right as he tucked up a knee to wheel into his delivery, Grandpa shouted from the roof, “Either this roof goes or I do.”

My dad shook his head and refocused on the mattress— that tiny mess of springs and stuffing I grew out of years ago. He honed in on the faded piss stains from when I was four and still wet the bed. Mom would always scrub the mattress while I was at school, never said anything about it to me or Dad or Grandpa, like it never happened.

Dad wound up, kicked his leg. A shingle spun off the roof and flew past him like a runner sprinting off his lead. Dad’s neck jerked. He released. His knuckler dropped hard to the left, bounced into the street. I ran after it, left him smacking his glove, his back turned to Grandpa and the roof.

Dad worked as an accountant, had wanted to hire the roof out, because we didn’t need to risk dancing across the steep pitch. But Grandpa said that was the problem with
number men, pencil-pushers, desk jockeys. Would pay a small fortune to hide their fear of scaling ladder rungs. Grandpa built his own house, worked construction for thirty years. He said he was a journeymen electrician, the finest carpenter in Cheboygan County, fastest shingler in northern Michigan. He’d consulted on plans for the Mackinac Bridge, been personally requested by the governor to oversee underwater welding after Frank Pepper ascended too quickly and died of the bends. If any of Grandpa’s story was true, it didn’t make him famous, didn’t even earn him a footnote in Michigan history books. I checked, spent all of fifth grade scouring the library. The way my dad put it, Grandpa was just an old handy man. Thirty years of labor got him nothing but a bad back, a half-dozen scars, a twisted thumb, and a right knee that popped like crazy when the sky went gray.

Out in the street, I could see Grandpa over the eave, leaning to slap his husky named Sal on the ribs. He’d carried Sal up the ladder with one arm early that morning. Sal panted now, looked like he was laughing, his hind legs straddling the peak. Sal’s muzzle followed Grandpa as he scraped his rusty pitchfork against the last of the shingles. He worked quickly, his short, thick arms grinding prongs against plywood. Somehow he seemed to sense the edge of the roof without needing to look, his boots inches from slipping into the gutter.

“You wanna kill yourself?” Dad yelled. Grandpa straightened his back, puffed out his chest, smiled. Then his smile flattened when he looked down and saw that Dad was talking to me. He aimed his pitchfork my way, slowly, the sun casting his eyes into darkness. Grandpa looked like a Greek god escaped from the underworld, now reigning over our torn-up roof.
“Get out of the damn road,” Dad said.

Grandpa dropped the pitchfork on the roof and kicked at the last shingles, scuffled closer to the roof edge. I couldn’t stop watching, forgot all about the orphaned knuckler and being drafted and standing in the road. The dead thump of Dad’s leather slapped against the sod. He jogged out to me. His lips curled in so his grinding teeth gleamed in the sun. He hopped the curb and swatted me on the back of the head.

Behind my dad’s back, worse than the sound of his tossed glove, the pine shrubs shuddered, followed by a thud. Dad left me at the curb and bolted toward the house. I couldn’t keep up with him, with a middle-aged accountant, and that’s when I knew I’d never be drafted, never tip my hat to the roar of thirty thousand fans.

He made it to the shrubs before I even got in sight of them. He yelled to me, “Everything will be all right. Don’t touch your grandfather.” Dad’s face blurred past, but I saw enough, saw the vein popping like a fat worm on his forehead, all that white in his eyes. The front storm door gasped open, slammed shut, and then I was alone.

I crept to the house, stepping on broken shingles that crunched like snapping bones. Sal barked from the roof, lunged forward only to balk at the edge.

Grandpa’s body was twisted in the shrubs, his arms splayed like a broken G.I. Joe. His eyes were closed. Dad said I shouldn’t touch him, but I had to know how cold he was, find out where the bleeding came from so I could rig a tourniquet out of my T-shirt and twigs like Grandpa had taught me. I touched his forehead first, like my mom always did when I was faking sick. His forehead was warm, maybe hot, but I didn't know. I’d never touched a dead man, and I knew then I never wanted to. When I drew my hand back, Grandpa’s blue eyes stared up at me. He smiled and lifted a tar-grimed finger to his
I stayed quiet until the ambulance arrived, let tears stream down my dad’s cheeks. I wanted to tell him, but Dad would be mad instead of leaning over Grandpa and telling him how much he loved him. To hear those words, that was a secret art better than a knuckleball.

The paramedics tried to lift Grandpa onto a gurney, but he pushed them away, was up and walking with the paramedics’ blood pressure band still strapped around his bicep. They urged him to at least take a ride to the hospital to check for internal bleeding. He didn’t need to go, he said, felt better than ever. They shook their heads, chuckled when Grandpa whipped out the tire pressure gauge he always kept in his pocket and told them the ambulance’s right rear tire was a bit low.

“Ever see a man so old walk away from a fall like that?” Grandpa asked the paramedics. He handed them beers from his Styrofoam cooler, which they reached for, but then waved away.

They assured him they hadn’t, that this was the damndest call they’d had all year.

“Must be some sort of record of age and distance fallen.” Grandpa slapped my dad’s back, said, “You should make an equation for that.”

The next day, he finished shingling the roof with Sal, said the two of them had made record time, wondered if someone shouldn’t call the *Cheboygan Daily*: RETIRED ROOFER KEEPS ON TICKING. Dad forgot about teaching me the knuckleball and spent the day pacing the house, peering up at Grandpa, but wouldn’t step on the first ladder rung.
Grandpa died in his bathroom when I was eleven, slipped on the tiles when I ran
into his house to get him up for Christmas morning. Grandpa died when we were making
a giant diorama of the solar system for my eighth grade science fair and he fell on the
table saw. Grandpa burned in camp fires, had aneurisms at football games when I waved
to the bleachers, choked on turkey bones and once a pecan pie at Thanksgiving. Instead
of studying for tests, I learned the Heimlich, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, drew
schematics for heart paddles salvaged from toaster ovens.

Grandpa didn’t die on the Sunday in February when I was eighteen, when we
buried Sal. Sal spent the previous night at the emergency vet hospital. I’d driven them
there, picked him up an hour before midnight. I had to pull myself away from Wendy
Seitzer’s big, soft lips when Grandpa called. She’d slipped off that threadbare Relay for
Life T-shirt in the front seat of my Cutlass, and her white bra glowed brighter than
anything I’d ever seen at night. I scraped that T-shirt off my floormats and took her home,
my skin hot, fingers twitching. That whole drive I wanted to pull over into every empty
parking lot and forget about Grandpa.

But Sal wouldn’t get up, Grandpa said, wouldn’t even raise his head when
Grandpa waved a raw steak in front of his nose. He wouldn’t get up all night at the
hospital, his rib cage shuddering full and then falling flat. The doctor said he was old, that
it was his time. Grandpa turned down the needle and the soft sleep. He cupped Sal’s
muzzle, said Sal was a tough dog, no fucking quitter.

Sal died anyway, at home on Grandpa’s lap, three steaks piled in front of his nose.
We buried him the next day, or at least we tried. The ground was frozen solid. Dad and I
were in charge of digging. We snapped two shovel spades off their wooden poles and only made a six-inch divot in the earth. Grandpa came out carrying Sal wrapped in an American flag. When he saw our hole, he was disgusted, said that shallow depth was an insult to a true patriot. Grandpa had told me about how Sal once saved the governor by biting a man at the Memorial Day parade. Sal chased that man for two miles, a train of police cruisers tailing his pursuit. Everyone thought Sal was rabid until the assassin collapsed from exhaustion and rifle casings jingled out of his breast pocket, at which point Sal lifted his leg over the crumpled body and pissed upon his face.

Grandpa told me that story when I was a child. I told all of my friends at school, and once a teacher wrote a note to my parents for telling lies. But there was Sal’s paw jutting out of his American flag shroud.

Grandpa spent the rest of daylight digging. He repaired and broke the shovels a dozen times before he took up a splitting wedge and a sledge to chisel out another two feet of frozen dirt. It was night before Grandpa placed Sal into a respectable hole. I watched from the kitchen window that looked upon the back yard, and I wondered if I should join them, tell a true story of something I remembered about Sal. I thought about Wendy Seitzer instead, imagined my floormats filled with her crumpled clothes, imagined a world where Grandpa died years ago and I spent all night pressing my lips against Wendy’s body.

He eventually slunk in through the back door. We weren’t invited to hear Sal’s eulogy. Grandpa stood silently at the window, staring into the darkness all night, a stocky statue.
My mom’s mom, Clarice, died when I was twenty. She appointed me as a pallbearer. I was afraid to do it. I didn't know how heavy a casket could be, and Clarice’s looked colossal, marble and ivory finish, brass handles.

I kept going up to the casket, and Mom teared up each time I stood over Clarice’s body. “My sensitive baby,” Mom said, wrapping her clammy hand around my fingers. After she released me, I gripped the casket’s brass handles. I lifted as much as I dared without Mom noticing my flexing shoulders, mistaking muscle strain for mourning. But I couldn't budge it. Not even enough to rustle the lace surrounding Clarice’s freshly permed and dyed red hair.

Grandpa showed up to the viewing for the last half-hour. My mom grunted as he staggered down the aisle. “What the hell is he doing here?” She stood from her seat in the front row, but I put my hand on her shoulder, rose to meet Grandpa at the casket. His breath smelled like whiskey when he pulled my forehead against his and said, “Do you think someone can die over a broken heart?”

He gripped the handles and cried. The casket shook with his sobs, rattling on its stand so loud that everyone looked. The weight was nothing for him, a man three times my age, who’d lifted sledges and stacks of shingles his whole life. I hadn’t lifted more than a text book since I’d started college. They were heavy text books, though. I was majoring in mechanical engineering. No time for knuckleballs or Wendy Seitzers. I planned to become a famous inventor. Perhaps I’d create hydraulic shirt sleeves to exponentially increase arm strength, or maybe hover-caskets fueled by formaldehyde. Of course I’d never actually do these things or invent anything noticeable. I design rebar for a construction materials company. There’ve been millions more caskets in the world that
function just like any other casket, with no help from me.

Grandpa shuffled toward the coffee parlor in the back of the funeral home, dabbing his eyes with a paisley handkerchief he pulled from the chest pocket of his black T-shirt tucked into black stone-washed jeans. Everyone in the lobby turned to watch his blubbery exit, patted him on the shoulders as he passed. Only Mom and Dad and I knew he’d only met Clarice five times over the years at Christmas dinners. We stopped inviting him after he called Clarice a goddamn liar when she said she’d served President Ford a cup of coffee with two creams at the diner she worked at when she was sixteen. Grandpa smacked the serving spoon into the mashed potatoes, shouted that Ford only took his coffee black.

Mom clutched Dad’s lapels and told him if he didn’t deal with his child-of-a-father she’d get some real use out of her heels. Dad looked at me, lifted his eyebrows toward the coffee parlor. As if I knew what to do about Grandpa.

I made my way to the back, dodging dozens of hands reaching to pat my blazer. The parlor was empty. A full pot of coffee simmered on the hot plate. A box of pink and yellow-frosted pastries sat heavy on a silver dish. My stomach growled, but eating a bright pastry seemed like it would be disrespectful to Clarice. I heard whimpering from behind a plum curtain. I lifted the curtain and stepped into a room filled with caskets. A dim sconce lit a big wooden cross on the wall, but otherwise the room was dark. Shadows everywhere. Grandpa’s whimper but no sign of his body. Some of the caskets were open and empty, some sealed tight.

Hidden in the darkness, Grandpa blew his nose wetly. There were no other doorways, no escape from the room. I dragged my finger across a shiny ebony casket,
lifted the lid slowly, half-expecting to find another permed mop like Clarice’s or a bald scalp combed-over with thin gray strands. But inside was only lavender satin and a hole of shadows. Grandpa whimpered again, like Sal used to do under the sofa during thunderstorms. I moved to a pink casket, and as soon as I’d cracked the lid I realized it was child-sized. Grandpa could never mash his stocky frame into the space made for a little girl. And I thought about little girls, wondered if they really died, somehow couldn’t believe it. Death was a thing for Grandpa, who never really died.

Grandpa’s whimper turned into a stifled chuckle, and I knew he was there, inside the lacquered oak casket engraved with a scene of an old trout fisherman, knee-deep in a stream, a young boy at his side smiling up at him. I ran my fingers over the smooth ridges of the immaculate woodwork. After this casket left the showroom and got dumped into the ground, there’d just be worms and dirt pressing into the grooves of this perfectly-crafted scene between grandfather and grandson.

Grandpa was in that one, but I wouldn’t open it. Clarice’s arms were crossed and dead in her casket, but I knew he was jamming his hands over his mouth, choking back the giggles of about-to-be-found. I knew the feeling from playing hide and seek with him as a kid. I’d hide between the overalls in his closet, inhaling the scents of sawdust and turpentine, biting the pencils he left in his pockets. He always knew where to find me, and that’s why I chose the spot. I was afraid to hide anywhere else, because what if he didn't find me? I couldn’t waste my life waiting for someone to notice I was gone.
Darrell has two choices, one good choice and one bad choice. We cannot be sure which is which, however, perhaps because we are only as human as Darrell, which is to say, seven-eighths human and one-eighth alien. We know the human chunk—ours and Darrell’s—creates the indecision, but identifying indecision does not improve our confidence. Indecision is complicated, and we try to understand, thirst for explanations. But we avoid obsession, which is difficult when our nonhuman eighth, different from Darrell’s, spins spider webs of our thoughts and also makes our veins glow purple, especially the veins behind our eyes, which are always bloodshot, streaked, criss-crossing behind our eyelids into cranial darkness, where we cannot see but wish we could.

Darrell’s choices are as follows: go to the punk rock show tonight, or watch his friend take too many pills and die.

Darrell’s alien eighth stems from a heritage only we know, a race of tree sloths with intelligent thought, who moseyed to this planet in their spaceship that looked like a tree and moved much slower than the speed of light, but faster, too, because of wormholes. Without wormholes, they never would have made it to Earth in their lifetime, as they are just as lethargic as Earth's tree sloths, though much smarter—they read Descartes while hanging upside down. Without wormholes, they would have chosen their dog-eared Descartes hardcovers over impregnating Darrell’s grandma, Peggy Sue, with invisible photon bullets coated in sloth sperm at the same time as she was making love with Darrell’s grandpa, Willis. And Willis wouldn’t have married Peggy Sue if he didn't think he was the father of Darrell’s mom, but instead would’ve followed his dream of
piloting biplanes from Quito to the Galapagos. Willis would've eventually flown too close
to a waved albatross that would crash through his windshield. Its giant wings would wrap
his face, blind his trajectory, and neither specimen would ever fly again. But there are
wormholes, so there is Darrell with his rich and unique heritage that he'll never fully
appreciate.

In front of the mirror, Darrell snaps spiked bracelets on his wrists. He teases his
curly brown hair into spikes, hands sticky with styling gel. Earlier today, he tried to dye
his hair blue, but it came out greenish, and he is displeased. Really, he's never looked
closer to his sloth ancestors, as their fur is tinted greenish from the symbiotic algae
clinging to the long, lazy strands. One alga that lived on Darrell's ancestors was named
Unk, and he was the bluest alga in his neighborhood, which meant he was smart and
virile and full of potential. In his middle age, Unk invented the heartworm pill. But he
was too small, his handwriting too tiny, for the patent office to notice his request. When
the patent office received his paperwork, they mistook it for a fleck of torn napkin fallen
from their mustaches after lunch and brushed it into the trash with an embarrassed flick.
Thusly, Unk does not own the patent on heartworm pills, though we know it should
rightfully be his. So many great minds are cursed with tiny handwriting and microscopic
voices.

Darrell’s handwriting is large and sloppy. He writes a short letter to his friend, an
act of avoiding Woody's brown eyes, eyes that love Darrell in a way he fears. This is what
the letter says: *Sorry, dude. Can't take pills tonight. I'm in love with Edie, and nothing
can stop me.* When he folds the letter, one crease down the middle, it clings to his sticky
fingers. This could be just physics, just certain molecules bonding to other certain
molecules. But we're not sure. It could also be a tiny race of bacteria in the hair gel that really don't want Darrell to deliver this letter, that cling hopelessly, because they either don't like Edie or don't want Woody to die alone. We can't say for sure. Some things we can't see. Some life is beyond our understanding.

On his way to the show, Darrell drops by Woody's apartment. He squats at Woody's door, observes yellow light slicing through the cracks, and then slides his note under the door. Darrell has made his choice. But we need to see more, so we peer through the north wall of Woody's apartment. Pink strips of fiberglass have slumped into a pile between the joists, because only seven staples secured each strip of insulation, and they have broken free. Past the insulation, Woody pops another pill while he watches Darrell's note slip through his door. He knows all about Edie and what Darrell fears, why he will not choose to watch Woody die tonight. This surprises us, how much he knows. We thought Woody was just here to take pills and die alone. We were wrong. We deserve forgiveness, as oversights are part of being seven-eighths human. We pat each other on the back, sympathize with our inability to know everything, which is the job for a being with a lesser portion of human, perhaps three-eighths.

Woody doesn't read the note. He refuses the existence of Darrell's choice. He kicks open the door, hoping it will crash into Darrell, who is already back in his car, turning the key. Woody spots the red Ford Fiesta from the balcony. He bolts inside his apartment, skids the toilet from its base, which he disconnected yesterday, instead of calling the landlord to fix a leak that wouldn’t bother him much longer anyway. He drags the toilet to the balcony and heaves it over. The toilet smashes into 427 porcelain shards in the space Darrell’s bumper occupied a moment before. Darrell is already pulling away.
He doesn't see and doesn't hear, because a cassette of Edie's favorite band, The Imperial Coronaries, blares through his speakers. Darrell hopes the excessive decibels will inject this music into his brain, transform him into whatever Edie loves so much. The cassette blares so loud that four of the tiny hair cells inside Darrell's ears lay flat, never to rise again. He drives into the night. After a few miles, he shuts off the cassette to listen to the wind through his window, but only hears ringing. Darrell will no longer be able to hear these high-pitched notes again after the ringing stops. These notes will be gone forever.

And that's too bad, because Unk’s language operated in these lost notes. If Unk had a longer lifespan and Darrell had a full range of hearing, he would’ve been able to hear his algae cries, publish Unk’s patents, make him jealous, or proud, depending on the depth of his symbiotic relationship with his sloth partner. We ponder the ownership of sperm, whose tails wiggle with life. We squint to determine if these flailing rudders have motivation or just an involuntary obsession to move forward. There is potential for self comparison, but we must trust our instincts, our glowing sight, and push on.

Hundreds of years in the future, anthropologists will excavate 423 shards of Woody's smashed toilet. This discovery will incite a renewed interest in the culture of man in the twenty-first century. The scientists will piece the toilet back together and debate the purpose of a seat with a hole in it. They will eventually choose to define this seat with a hole as a device once used to extract human souls, since it is so foreign to their current bathroom technology, which consists of a plastic bag inserted into the intestine to capture feces. Feces are valued as a potent fuel in the future and are termed “gold” because no one has ever seen gold, but from historical accounts they understand gold to be a valuable material which feces now is. In their eyes, the owner of the soul
extractor, Woody, must have been a king, a president, at least a duke, in order to own something so amazing and have the luxury of being able to smash it.

But Woody is just Woody, a lonely guy with a lot of pills and only one friend, Darrell. They grew up together in a cul-de-sac called Bison Run. Neither of them ever saw any bison and no one ever ran, except Darrell and Woody on some nights. They ran to the city and rode the el, but were always too afraid to get off and just rode in circles all night, until Darrell's head slumped onto Woody's shoulder.

Darrell's ears ring as he pulls into the parking lot of the bar where the punk rock band will play. Inside, the band roars, already halfway through their set. The volume of their music instantly crushes another one of Darrell's inner ear hairs, and ten more notes will be forever gone from Darrell's range by the end of the night. Darrell pushes through the music, through the crowd pulsing to the Imperial Coronaries' song, “My Robot Got Cancer.” His progress stops when he runs into a punk that looks like Woody: shoulder-length brown hair, soft brown eyes, a thin frame. Darrell shoves past him after a brief pause. He tells himself this fellow does not in fact look like Woody, but looks like a hippie, looks out of place, and is a poser in the crowd. The Woody-looking fellow forgives Darrell's abrasive shoulder after it slams him out of the way. Many people push in the crowd, and surely he didn't mean malice. No reason to get upset about it. Each choice is precious, and the Woody-fellow wouldn't waste his time transforming one harsh shoulder into sour grapes.

Edie clings to a metal rail in front of the stage. Bodies bash into her back in waves. She is short and beautiful, and her ass has been groped eleven times already tonight, but she refuses to give up her spot at the rail. When the next person presses into
her back, their hot crotch mashing against the small of her back, she thrusts an elbow. The pit is no place for romance to Edie, and even if it was, shoving crotches and groping hands are poor equivalents to boxes of chocolates and roses, which she would find too predictable anyway.

Darrell grips his belly, winces, but also still tries to keep his head bobbing so no one knows he has been rejected by Edie. He doesn't know Edie didn't know she elbowed him. Only we know that. And only we know Darrell possesses what drives most human women wild: pheromones released by especially virile algae, like Darrell's symbiotic ancestor Unk, who snuck onto the sloth's photon sperm bullets so he might escape the slothful sloth planet, where inventors receive no patents. On the sloth planet, no one cares about ownership. When he tried to establish his right to heartworm treatment, the sloths were like, “Relax, man. Let's all just share the heartworm pills. It's a far-out idea, and why would you want to limit its use? Let’s chill with some Descartes.” But patenting didn't go so smoothly for Unk on this planet either. Algae dreams are denigrated on almost every planet. Poor Unk. A long life with no acknowledgement.

Edie wishes she wouldn't have worn a skirt to the show. Another hand flutters the hem, creeps up her thigh. She readies another elbow thrust, looks behind her, but a vacuum has opened up. For the first time tonight, there is space behind her, and she can concentrate on the guitar player in the band, Too Bad Ventricle. Too Bad is short and beautiful like Edie. Edie hopes she likes girls in skirts, hopes she likes girls, because Edie loves Too Bad, even without any algae pheromones, which is true love. Maybe. We can't make claims to define love, when Unk abandoned his family to make their lives better, only to fail. We do know Edie likes the way Too Bad's dreadlocks swish to the beat, how
sweat glistens off her cleavage.

Poor Darrell. He doesn't know he has the wrong genitals, doesn't know Edie would never fall in love with him even with all the algae pheromones in the universe. Not just because Edie loves Too Bad, but because Darrell makes poor choices. At the exact moment the vacuum behind Edie opened up like a sigh, Darrell was involved in another poor choice. He caught the twelfth man to try and grope Edie's ass and now drags him by the neck of his T-shirt to the lobby. Darrell is not a fighter, hasn't thrown a punch since fourth grade when Billy Morrow yanked the tail off the class' pet iguana. He throws a punch, but it rolls slowly off the twelfth groper’s shoulder. The attempted groper, Trevor, also owns the wrong genitals to win Edie's favor and is much smaller than Darrell, but his last fight was Wednesday, when he head-butted another much larger man outside a convenience store, who told him his red mohawk made him look like a fag. This comment led Trevor to groping. He had something to prove, even if no one was watching, except us, who he is unaware of, and of course Darrell. And now Trevor easily ducks Darrell’s slow punch and kicks Darrell in the crotch, followed by a knee to his jaw. He calls Darrell a fag and sinks back into the pit.

Darrell writhes on the lobby floor, feeling like a bowling ball slipped into his lower intestine and sniffing twenty years of spilled beer crusted into the carpet. He thinks about this word, fag. It makes his face flush, makes the faces of those around him seem to stare. The word fills him more than the kick to the groin. We are surprised these three letters mean so much, pass from one person to another, grow into dangerous parasites. These three letters make Darrell mad at Woody.

One week ago, Woody said, “I love you, Darrell,” then swallowed a pill, hiding
his eyes behind a black mug.

“Okay, man.” Darrell rolled his pill between his fingers. “I guess I love you, too.”

“No you don't. Not like I mean it.”

Darrell put the pill in his mouth, bitter between his molars, and then spit it back into his hand.

“You don't have to say anything,” Woody said, and Darrell was relieved.

But now he is mad. He doesn't want to own the word coughed onto him, the word he now thinks he should have coughed onto Woody.

We find this tragic. Darrell owns the right genitals for Woody and the wrong ones for Edie. But Edie isn't thinking about genitals, more interested in dreadlocks and guitars and a fantasy where Too Bad stage dives into her arms. And, really, genitals are not the first things on Darrell or Woody's minds. We seem to have revealed a personal focus on genitals, and we are embarrassed. Sometimes we need to simplify our interpretations for the sake of conciseness. But simplicity fails, and conciseness is impossible when there is Unk and a sloth planet and soul extractors and waved albatrosses—and Woody, who will die anyway.

Darrell limps to the exit. He looks back to the stage, the crowd, one last time. Edie spots him over the scattered dance floor. Too Bad and The Imperial Coronaries have left the stage. Edie bites her lip, trying to share some of the blood dripping from Darrell's nose. But Darrell misses this mercy, because his vision blurs. He just sees faces, still imagines them staring. Only two faces matter, Darrell's and Edie's, and the line between them ruffles carbon monoxide molecules enough to open a wormhole. The room could fill with sloths in a nano-second. They'd hang from the rafters, the drum set, the
merchandise tables, but they won't appear. Darrell doesn't see Edie, and the sloths are too involved in contemplating Descartes’ Latin, *cogito ergo sum*.

Edie knows why Darrell is here. She knows he's loved her since fourth grade, when she tried to rubber cement the iguana's tail back in place. He has been sweet to Edie, buying her Twinkies when Sabrina called her fat in high school. He drove her to night nursing classes when her car broke down, waiting outside until class let out. They watched a meteor shower on Wednesday, the same time Trevor was fighting a word, and Darrell cried when the last rock burned yellow across the sky. For all of his sweetness, Edie will never love Darrell the way he wants her to.

Darrell is defeated. His ears ring and knots fill his belly. He punches the steering wheel on his way to Woody's apartment. He slides over a curb at one point, because he is angry and his vision is blurred. The curb cracks, crushing dirt underneath, which bends a buried tin can full of 1878 twenty-cent pieces featuring a seated Lady Liberty, worth enough to send Woody to the Galapagos where he'd forget about pills while watching the waved albatross clap sky with its giant wings. This is the closest anyone will get to this treasure until the anthropologists excavate Woody's toilet shards and also find this tin can. They are less impressed with the coins, which don't tell them anything they don't already know. They still have money in the future. There is still fuel and money and science, an absence of toilets, and a severe longing to understand the soul.

His Fiesta in park, radio silent, ears ringing, Darrell watches the stairs to Woody's apartment. No more watching. He stumps four pieces of parking lot porcelain shards into dust. He climbs the stairs. He has come to confront Woody, to let him confess his love for Darrell, so that Darrell has reason to transfer the word he carries. Perhaps he will stomp
Darrell like porcelain shards. This is one choice. He also considers letting Woody feed him pills until his eyes blur completely, until he can't feel bowling balls in his stomach or his throbbing forehead or his incorrect genitals. If he took enough pills, he could let Woody love him. Stubbly mouths pressing, chest to chest, two sets of genitals that don't fit together, two humans not minding they don't fit. Then what could a word do to him? It wouldn't be right or wrong, it would just be a choice.

But these thoughts of Darrell's are why Woody is dead. Woody does not want Darrell to love numbly. So Woody chewed up every last pill, even a broken one he found under the fridge he couldn't identify, which was actually a heartworm pill for a dog that lived in his apartment three years ago. Woody's heart is protected from worms who would love to tunnel through his most precious tissue, but his most precious tissue has stopped working. Woody is dead. This is no surprise. We've prepared ourselves, and we've come to terms with Darrell and his choices. He is human, at least seven-eighths so, and he has a right to all his choices, Woody too.

What we had not prepared ourselves for was the dog dying, the Labrador retriever and Akita mix, a labrakita, whose pill Woody ate just before he died, when his eyes could hardly stay open and his skin felt like a million needles, not pressing into him, but skin as needles. The dog didn't die of heartworm. It died from the fender of a Dodge truck, and had been starving before because its owners set it free when they were tired of him, set him free in a park that was not freedom but fear, loneliness.

We didn't know Woody's death would reveal labrakita death, and we are afraid. The labrakita's rib cage forks from a drainage ditch, flesh pecked by crows, bones brown with bacteria and algae lacking inventive ambition. There is stillness. Bones and silence.
We turn to our mirrors and see our eyes, as purple and variegated and glowing as ever, trailing nowhere—into our eyelids. We ignore the bags under our eyes and retrace Galapagos flight patterns, examine waved albatross feathers, scour Descartes.

Somewhere between Unk's patent and Woody's involuntarily emptied bowels, we find reason to reconsider the sloth. Maybe lethargy is not the best description. Highly evolved is better. They conserve energy by limiting movement, choices, decisions to return to the earth, where there is so much danger. With backs dangling from the treetops, there is much less chance of becoming roadkill, or surprising us.

We hope Darrell will grow into his ancestry, contemplate choices more slowly. We try to explain this to him. We tap Morse code through the pine door Darrell presses his ear against, but Woody's slumped body also presses and muffles our tapping. Darrell hears nothing.
I discovered my self-destruct button centered in the middle of my back. I had been reaching for this monstrous zit, stretching and straining, but I couldn’t get a grip on it. I could feel it, though, pulsing under my skin, and since my brother and I were headed out to go swimming at the gravel pits with Kim and Suzie, I needed to at least pop the head. Then, maybe I’d be able to lie, say I scraped my back doing something manly, like working on my Mustang, which I didn’t have and wouldn’t be able to drive anyway without a license.

I pulled my mom’s hand mirror from the drawer, angled it so I could get a clear view of the damage on my back. Right next to the zit, just below my shoulder blades, a small red button protruded from my skin with an undecipherable message written under it. I tried to touch it, to finger the mysterious text and red button, but it was set perfectly in a place I couldn’t reach.

I got my father’s Polaroid camera and snapped a picture. I flapped the image so hard it slipped out of my hand and fell in the toilet. Floating in the water, the picture breathed through the fog of the blank Polaroid, my pale and acne-dappled back developing with one perfectly circular red button. I knelt next to the bowl and could finally read the message. There was no mysterious language. It was plain, clear, obvious, said: SELF-DESTROY.

There in the bathroom, staring into the toilet bowl at the Polaroid, I felt my heart thump, sweat pooling in my armpits. If the button had been there for long, it could’ve accidentally been pushed. Like last week when six-foot-tall Dale Dinty slammed me
against a locker. I could’ve gone up in a flash-bang.

Somehow I’d survived to live and play video games on Saturday night and walk through the halls of my high school for another week with my head down. Now that I knew the button was there, I could check out at any moment. It was simple. Hold my breath, close my eyes, push the button, and kaboom.

The bathroom doorknob jiggled, and then the door thumped. It was Gavin. Only he would try to barge in without knocking. My parents avoided any invasion of my privacy, terrified ever since they walked in on me jacking off to one of the latex-clad heroines on my comic books. I was their embarrassment. Gavin was their star. He was three years older, had thick blond hair that swept in front of his eyes and chiseled features, even a cleft on his chin they would playfully thumb when he came in way past curfew. He was on the honor roll every year, captain of the soccer team and the audio/visual club. From the jocks to the nerds, everyone looked up to him, everyone loved him, and I was an invisible boy, who somehow now had a self-destruct button.

The door thumped again, the hinges pregnant under the weight of Gavin’s shoulder. I threw on my T-shirt and flushed the toilet, hoping the Polaroid of my self-destruct button would disappear. The bowl refilled, swirling the picture like a life raft back to the top.

“You’re pretty enough, Chaz.” Gavin’s fingers slipped under the door, flicking like spider legs. “The ladies are waiting.”

“Give me a second.” I flushed again, but the toilet still refused to swallow.

“Double flusher. Didn’t know you had it in you, bro.”

“Give me one fucking second.”
The Polaroid wasn’t going down, so I fished it out, tossed it in the trash bin, and covered it with wadded up toilet paper. But I changed my mind, dug out the picture and set it on top of the trash, face up. I hoped my parents would see it. Their previous fears would be dwarfed. Soon they’d be wondering if their son was a pile of dust, instead of worrying about what comic book he was jerking off to.

When I opened the door, Gavin stood there, tall and shirtless, rippling abs, veins popping from his forearms. I tried to slip past him, but he wouldn’t budge. He raised his chin, flared his nostrils, sniffing.

“Doesn’t smell like a double-flusher. Making sexy time in here?”

“Alright, I’m ready. Let’s just go.”

“Calm down, little man. Hope you saved some fire for Kim’s little sister.”

Kim Mahoney couldn’t go on dates alone, but if the younger siblings tagged along, her mom thought everything would be safe. It was a ridiculous and counterintuitive rule. Kim’s mom only risked a double threat this way. Sure, I’d never kissed a girl, which would’ve been a good gamble on her part, if not for the trump of my complete desperation to feel a girl’s lips press against my own, to know I had some bit of what everyone loved about Gavin. And then there was the chance I might just explode all over Mrs. Mahoney’s daughters.

Gavin drove his Camaro and passed me a beer as soon as our parents’ Smurf-blue two-story disappeared in the rearview. He slurped from a flask and cranked up the volume on his CD-player, Oingo Boingo’s out-of-breath singer gasping as Gavin peeled out of our suburb.
“Don’t think this is all just for me,” he said.

My beer tasted awful. I held my breath as I choked it down.

“I want my brother to have an education.” He punched ahead a few tracks, landed on a song he liked, leaned back in his seat. “I’m gone next year, and it’s time I did some apprenticing.”

But I could be gone right then. No chance for Gavin’s pity apprenticing. I wondered, if I did activate the button, how large my blast radius would be. Would Gavin’s whole shiny, Armor All-reeking Camaro blow up? I figured it had to be at least large enough to scorch the upholstery, maybe singe Gavin’s perfect bangs. This power I held over Gavin for the first time in my life allowed me a confidence I’d never felt. I grabbed another beer from the cooler, stomped my feet into the shiny olive-green dash.

Gavin pinched his long fingers into my shoulder until I lowered my feet. His blue eyes stayed on the road, and his smile disappeared, telling me I better not try out any more of my new confidence.

“So, you like Suzie?” The smile crept back onto his thick lips.

“I’ve never even talked to her.” But I knew her. She wore heavy eyeliner and black clothes and penned fake tattoos on her arms. She had self-destruct-button confidence, a long, slim nose and wide, green eyes never cast to the floor. She sliced up her black T-shirts, dangerous torn lines of cleavage that made the teachers stare, and she’d stare right back. Once, the assistant principal made her seam up the front of her shirt with duct tape. It was a small blessing in my life to have passed her in the hall before classes started, before the duct tape, to glimpse the pale sides of her small breasts, the purple center of her bra, a crow perched atop a lone fencepost drawn onto her
cleavage. “She’s okay, I guess.”

“Think she’s sexy?” Gavin nudged me with his elbow. “You dream about doing dirty things to her?”

“I might kiss her.”

“Kiss her!” Gavin stared at me, shook his head. “With all your smutty comics, that’s the best you can imagine? I’m disappointed, bro. You’ll get no BJs with that attitude.”

“Why does it have to be BJs?”

“Chaz, what’s the point of living if you’re not getting any?”

What Gavin said worried me. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I wanted a first kiss, but Gavin put all this new pressure on me to sprint through the bases when I hadn’t even ever been on deck before. I considered pushing the button right then, just giving up on it all, except I couldn’t reach it. I tossed my empty beer can against the windshield and threw my back into the seat. Nothing. No escape from Gavin’s Camaro.

Gavin cranked up the music, swinging his head from side to side with Oingo’s crazy trumpets, finishing with a finger drum-roll on the steering wheel. I tried to relax, not over-think things, be more like Gavin, if I couldn’t escape him. The sky was clear and blue. The smell of cornfields and manure poured through the open windows mixing with the Armor All. At least I could enjoy this moment. And even though I was completely unprepared for Suzie, I didn’t really have anything to lose. If I made a fool of myself, I’d find a way to hit the button.

Gavin must have sensed the energy shooting through his car, the freedom creeping into my veins, because he slapped my shoulder, kept slapping, punctuating the
beat from his stereo, pounding toward the center of my back. I slid away from him. I couldn’t press my button alone, but there was something wrong about my brother helping me do it.

The girls lived in a trailer park. Three of the lots had fenced-in rottweilers frothing and barking through chainlink as we rolled past. The white paint jobs of most of the trailers had faded to a dirty gray, but not Suzie and Kim’s house. Their trailer was bright orange, blue trim. It looked terrible.

Mr. and Mrs. Mahoney worked at the oil refinery in our town. Gavin told me their dad had just returned from four weeks on an oilrig with a broken leg and a fat wallet. I’d always thought there was a ton of money in oil, certainly more than my dad made selling dirt. He imported sand from tiny islands in the ocean, white sand that sparkled in sunlight. I guess it was pretty, but, still, it was dirt. We had a nice new house in the suburbs. I figured the Mahoneys must have had piles of money buried somewhere, maybe under special deliveries of my dad’s finest sand. I imagined them shoveling it out every now and then to roll around in pools of cash.

Gavin told me to be ready to open the doors when he brought the girls out, smile at their parents through the window. It was too dark inside their place to see anyone, but I smiled anyway, smiled until my face hurt. And when the girls came out, Kim in a white strapless dress and Suzie in a non-shredded black T-shirt and black shorts, I popped open the back door. Kim smiled at me as she walked past, called me a gentleman, and slipped into the backseat. Suzie frowned, stared through her aviator sunglasses and then followed her sister.
I kept smiling as Gavin approached and had enough gentlemen left in me to open his door for him. Before he got in, he swatted my head, hissed, “You were supposed to open the front door for Kim, ass-wad. You think I want to put my arm around you?"

“Hop in the backseat, then, Gav,” I said, loud enough for the girls to hear. “I’ll drive.”

Gavin shoved me against his car, metal slamming against my back, somehow missing my button. He walked to his side. I gave a final wave to the dark window of the bright trailer and ducked into the car.

My forehead felt like a kite from the beers, and I was smiling again, thinking about the opportunity sitting behind me, frowning, Suzie’s face appearing larger than it actually was in the side-view. I wondered if she had a black swimsuit on under the black T-shirt, or maybe not, and then Gavin would coax her into the water in the same purple bra I saw at school that lucky morning.

Suzie’s eyes bored into the back of my seat, while Kim and Gavin’s eyes seemed to be blinking out some kind of secret sexual Morse code through the rearview. The way Suzie stared, I wondered if she could see through things, x-ray vision. Maybe she was staring at my button. Her arms and legs were crossed now, but I imagined her zeroing in on the red button like a bull’s eye, then kicking into the seat and sending me to hell. No kissing, no purple bras, straight to the big finale. I never wanted to stay alive for another mile like I did then, riding shotgun with two pretty girls in my brother’s car, nothing to lose, except the next second and the next one.

The gravel pits were closed off to the public. My mom told stories about one of
the kids from her high school drowning out there, how the mining had left an uneven
gravel bed under the water, great drop-offs that made the water so cold in some spots and
so warm in others that a body could cramp instantly and sink to the bottom. Her mother
never let her go to the pits, but Mom never said no to Gavin.

“Hold on tight, ladies. I’m gonna gun it.”

Gavin revved the engine. Since the gates that led to the two-track entrance were
locked, he had to drive through sand and brush for a hundred yards or so to make it to the
beach.

“What am I supposed to hold on to?” Suzie asked.

I took a chance and reached my hand into the back seat. “You can hold on to me.”

“That’s so fucking sweet,” Kim said.

Every second my hand reached out to Suzie, shaking from the car’s engine, it felt
like acid pouring over my skin, and she just kept staring behind her aviators, sucking her
lips in, probably holding back a laugh, until Gavin let off the brake and we thumped
forward over the sand. Suzie was fine. But I bounced all over, my extended hand
smacking between the seat and door. And this was the first time I saw Suzie smile, as if
pleased to see me in pain. I didn’t care. I caused that smile, and I would own it with my
jammed fingers and twisted arm.

Through the sand and brush, the beach appeared, shimmering still water, the
beach empty. Gavin parked under an elm tree and lugged the cooler out to the sand. He
peeled his shirt over his shoulders and tossed it to the ground, his muscular torso shining
in the sunlight. With one quick tug, Kim pulled a string behind her back, and her white
dress floated to her feet. Her body was tan and lean, her bikini red and tight to the curves
of her body. Gavin flipped her over his shoulder and rushed into the water. They both laughed, their perfect bodies splashing.

It all seemed so natural, what they were doing, that I wanted to puke. I turned to Suzie, hoping we could share a stomach turn, or, maybe give it a try ourselves. Suzie sat in the shade next to the Camaro, drawing on her arms. She didn’t remove a single item of clothing, didn’t seem to have any interest in being swept into my arms. I stood in the hot sand alone.

Kim and Gavin swam across the gravel pits, and I was glad to see Kim was a far better swimmer than Gavin. He looked pathetic next to her, kicking and punching up a froth, while Kim’s strokes sliced through the water hardly leaving a ripple. He wasn’t perfect at everything, and now was being shown up by Kim. I hoped it was eating him up, stressing him into early balding.

“You swim as good as your sister?” I said.

“Are you as big of a douche as your brother?” She didn’t look up, penning the wide, black eye cavities of a skull onto her wrist. Her pale skin dimpled under the pressure of her pen.

“You know, you’re going to die soon.” she said.

“How do you know?” I said in a whisper.

“No need to get so serious, Chaz.” She drew a line sprouting from a crack in the skull’s crown. “We’re all going to die someday. But it’s not so bad. Death is beautiful.” She detailed the top of the spiral with petals. It was a flower, a rose, wilting, growing dead out of the skull.

My chances were looking better than ever. She didn’t like Gavin, but she did seem
to like inevitable death, and I had that going for me. I turned my back to her, stretched my arms over my head, allowing her a chance to see my button. Maybe she’d think it was beautiful, a subject worthy of drawing in black ink on her own skin. Or maybe it would just scare her away. I lowered my arms, grabbed her a beer from the cooler. She took it, her fingers briefly swiping mine. I squatted in the sand next to her, let my thigh press into hers. She didn’t flinch, just added thorns to the rose. I leaned over to watch her work, closer, so I could smell the beer on her breath. She stopped drawing, and I thought, This is it. This is how a first kiss blooms: a shared interest in death, in Suzie’s skin. I put my hand on her leg. She dumped her beer in my crotch.

“I would prefer if you didn’t try whatever you’re doing,” she said. “No moves please.”

The beer was ice cold, and I felt myself shrinking. “I don’t have any moves.”

“Oh-huh,” Suzie said. “Just like your brother.”

She stood, pocketed her pen, and stepped into the sunny sand. She chucked her aviators and dove into the water, without removing another piece of clothing. She swam like her sister, graceful. Now I was sure her parents had more money than they let on. They must have had another house somewhere with a big swimming pool. Maybe she and Kim even visited Mr. Mahoney before he got hurt, swimming back and forth between the greasy oilrig and the bright sandy shores of one of the islands where my dad imported sand. I imagined Kim and Suzie racing in sleek silver one-pieces. They glistened under the water like sharks, beautiful carnivores that could tear a man in half. In my dream, Suzie won every time, overcame her older, more beautiful sister.

Gavin and Kim were across the beach, lying in the sand, Gavin likely exploring
her molars with his tongue. Suzie glided out to the middle, took a breath, and then dove down, out of sight. I was impressed as I counted the seconds, worried after too many numbers clicked through my head. She seemed like too good a swimmer to drown, but then there was Mom’s story, the infamous gravel pit cramps. Suzie’s body might have struck a vein of frigid water, her inked arms twitching, then locking up. Paralyzed, sinking to the bottom.

I hollered across the water, but Kim was propped on top of Gavin now. They didn’t seem to hear or didn’t care. It was up to me. I ran to the edge, toed the cold water, then jumped in, thrashing my best doggy paddle until I was deep enough to dive down. I opened my eyes to a blur of green. My ears pulsed with the kicks of my legs. I felt my muscles straining, and I wished I’d taken swimming lessons when I was younger instead of opting for comic book camp. I would become the next urban legend death at the gravel pits. Maybe Kim and Gavin’s kids could share this cautionary tale with their own perfect offspring someday.

But I wouldn’t let Suzie go out like that. I had my self-destruct button, and I hoped the blast would be enough to displace some water, erupt a tsunami that would surf Suzie to shore, extinguish Gavin’s effortless charm. I still hadn’t reached bottom and had no idea how much longer I could hold out. I stretched for my back, clawed at my skin, but still couldn’t reach it. I felt a hand around my ankle, a pull upward. I let it take me.

When I surfaced, there was Suzie, her wet, black hair pasted across her face. “Were you trying to save me?” “I thought you were cramping.” “Cramping?” She pulled her hair away from her green eyes, her lips. “You didn’t
I rubbed the water out of my eyes and looked. We were only a few feet from the shore. I hadn’t made it anywhere near the middle. I must have looked like an idiot flailing in the shallows.

“No need to worry. It isn’t even deep in the middle. Maybe twenty feet.”

They must have filled it in after that girl died. My mom would be relieved to know. I imagined a skeleton under ten tons of my dad’s dirt, arms permanently outstretched for help, algae twisting ghostly green through the nasal cavities. The vision seemed like something Suzie would draw on her ankle, maybe behind her kneecap.

“I wasn’t worried,” I said. “I’m going to die someday anyway, right?”

“All of us.”

“Maybe sooner than we think.”

Suzie squinted at me, lips curling into a smile. She turned toward where Gavin and Kim were. They had disappeared, and the only thing left behind were Gavin’s shorts. He was either naked somewhere with Kim, or maybe we shared a genetic self-destruct button, which Kim had accidentally activated, blowing them into oblivion. But I preferred to think I was the only one with the button, this one special thing about me Gavin would never have. I chose to imagine Gavin naked with Kim, their tan skin slatted by tall grass and reeds, maybe atop a poison ivy bed.

“Want to swim to the other side, see what they’re doing?” I said.

“I could care less.” She pulled at the neck of her shirt, gritting her teeth. “I can’t swim in all this shit, though.”

“Yeah, swimming is so much better in the nude, don’t you think?” I was having
trouble treading water alongside Suzie, but she didn’t need to know I’d had enough swimming.

“I’m talking about bathing suits, Chaz. You thought I wanted to skinny dip with you?”

“No, that’s what I meant, too. I was kidding.” My chin floundered below surface, pit water filling my mouth.

We swam back to shore. Suzie stepped onto sand while I gasped for breath, still slapping the water. When I crawled to shore, finally, Suzie peeled her soaking shirt over her shoulders and slipped out of her shorts. Beside her sat the crumpled pile of wet black clothes, like a flat tire, which made her skin seem even paler. She wore a yellow one-piece that looked too big for her, probably a hand-me-down from Kim, and the yellow made her pale skin look sickly. It wasn’t the image I’d expected, didn’t match the wonder of purple bra through torn black T-shirt. This was better, less like one of the heroines in my comic books. Here was Suzie, faded ink sketches running up and down her legs, her chest. Only her back was untouched, where she couldn’t reach. I couldn’t tell what any of the drawings were, no hint at what they had been. Just sooty smudges. Even the skull she’d drawn earlier had lost its definition, now a blob of gray.

She looked dirty with her faded ink, awkward in her baggy suit. But that was perfect, because I wasn’t perfect, because I was sick of Gavin and Kim and perfect romance. I still wanted it, all of it, but in a different way. I liked Suzie, not the idea of BJs or bouquets of roses. I just wanted to kiss her, for us to share whatever came next. Gavin would have punched me and twisted my nipples if he heard me say these things, but I didn’t care. I could think it.
“You going to take off your shirt?” Suzie asked.

“I will. I’m working up to it.”

There was so much to be embarrassed about: my flat chest, my pudgy belly, mountainous zits, but then there was the self-destruct button. I wanted Suzie to see it, what made me dangerous and different from Gavin and everyone else. I just had to get past the rest of myself.

“Good luck with that.” Suzie turned her untouched back to me, and waded into the water. She dove in and swam a straight line across the pits.

I stood alone on the shore, my soaking T-shirt plastered to my body. I took it off, tossed it next to the black mass of Suzie’s wet things, and the sun felt warm against my back, my button.

She swam ahead, trailing a rippling V like an arrow, a path beckoning me. I trudged back into the water. I thought she was headed straight across to where Kim and Gavin had disappeared, but Suzie changed direction in the middle, maybe over the dead girl’s skeleton, and aimed for a different beach, one wrought with reeds and algae instead of soft sand where a couple could sink into beach romance.

On shore, Suzie plucked cattails, gutting their feathery innards. I watched her while I still swam, between gulps for air, her skinny, smudgy body only strokes ahead. If I reached land this time, there was no way I could make it back. Gavin would have to bog around the pits through the brush to pick up my beached body, or they could just leave me here. I was done swimming.

I planned to show Suzie my button, but when I reached her and the overgrown shore, I flopped belly-first into the mud at Suzie’s feet. My heart rioted, exhausted.
Cattail guts wisped against my back. Suzie’s shadow dragged cool across my skin. If I had any energy left, now would be the time to stand and take Suzie in my arms. That had to have been why we’d crossed the pits, like Gavin and Kim. But we were on a different side. It wasn’t the same as molars and tongues and shed bathing suits.

“What’s that on your back?” she said. “Did you draw that?”

“No.” I gasped to catch my breath. “I found it.”

I’d wanted her to see it. Self-destruction, this lonely endeavor, could become something to share. But I didn’t know what to do next, didn’t want it all to end where it started. I was afraid.

Suzie knelt in front of me and offered her hand. I stood, my legs shaking, and she circled behind me.

“What happens if you press it?”

“I don’t know. I can’t reach it.” Across the water, Gavin emerged from the tall grass, his body bent to hide himself, his waist pale next to his tan torso. He reached for his shorts, squirming into them, then peered at us. “But I think it’s pretty clear what will happen.”

“What good is a self-destruct button if you can’t reach it?”

I reached back to show her how my fingers could only get as close as the big zit.

“Let me help.” Suzie grasped my hand, stretching it past where I could go myself. Her hands were warm, smooth.

Gavin waved on the other shore, his perfect teeth flashing. He gave me two thumbs up, started hopping around. Kim appeared out of the reeds, walked past Gavin, slapping him in his chiseled jaw. He raised his hands to her and shrugged, as if hoping
she’d climb into his arms again. But she ignored him, lifted a hand over her eyes to gaze across at us from her spot in the pure white sand. But what about the other side, muck and dirt and sludge and oilrig runoff oozing rainbows swirls on the water’s surface?

Gavin shook his head at Kim, started walking around the shoreline toward his Camaro. Something had went wrong, but I knew he was still rooting for me, expecting me to succeed where he must have failed. I’m sure he thought he knew what he was going to see, me kissing a girl for the first time, but he’d be surprised when I lit up and left nothing but smoking cattails, their cotton wafting in embers over the water. What Suzie and I were doing was something Gavin would never understand, something I didn’t understand yet, but I was ready.

Suzie guided the tip of one finger to the button, and I felt the arc of it, its perfectly round edge brushing my skin. She didn’t press my finger farther, just held it there, let me explore the shape of my own button. And I didn’t press either. It was there, between our fingers. We stayed in the cattails, muck sucking at our ankles, pit water lapping quietly. Suzie’s thigh brushed against the back of my leg, and then she let my arm go.
Tuesday, I scrape wasp nests from the Raku-table out in the garden, outrun buzzing from dropped combs while dancing around the plants. I kiss tiny accession numbers on the back of a dozen yellowed etchings, three hundred years old, yellowed, paper as thin as moth wings. I don’t even look at the front, can’t stand to see the images I will tear in half, the Italian villas and stone-turreted castles.

My boss, Margaret, invites me to lunch with our newest gallery donors. I try to turn down the offer, thanks but no thanks. She insists, so I go. It’s an Indian place with a glass chandelier dangling its brittle shimmer. It clinks every time someone sucks through the front doors.

The donors are the son of a rich estate and his wife. They are thin, wear turtlenecks and black-framed glasses. He has a mustache carved tight to his upper lip. His father died last month, and even though he seems sturdy enough, his wife’s eyes are shiny and red like stained glass. I shred my napkin under the table and say nothing. I hope, when I am eventually asked a question, I do not say the wrong thing and cause her to shatter in sobs.

Gray streaks shoot through Margaret’s curly hair, and if she didn’t pin it down it would poof huge, make her head twice as large, so large she’d knock over the exhibits. She orders chutney dip and papads for all of us to share. When I dip one of the papad wafers, it catches in the dip and snaps. I try to fish it out with another wafer, and this one snaps, too. I end up using my fingers. The donors and Margaret all stare as my thumb grazes the chutney. The wife of the donor is the only one who dips another papad, and I
could hug her if I didn’t think her spine would crack in my arms. Otherwise, no one else dips, and I stare into the full bowl until our orders arrive.

My girlfriend Bailey goes to grad school, American culture studies, four hours down the interstate. We lived together for two years, but I landed the gallery job, and she landed a stipend. If we can hold out, in another year, she’ll be back. She used to elbow my nose, my jaw, my ribs when she dreamed, a restless sleeper. Now I sleep soundly, never wake to streetlight halos at four in the morning, Bailey’s eyelids secretly fluttering next to me.

She has gained weight, sturdy in all the places I’ve gone soft. Her arms more muscular than mine, her thighs wider. She has been eating well, swimming, running, lifting weights at the campus gym. She has always had a wide nose, and I love how her body has caught up.

Over the phone, she asks if I’ve been eating, and her voice crackles. I think of all the miles her voice must travel. Tendrils slung over telephone poles, swinging in the wind, hundreds of crows and sparrows perched atop our voices from here to her, bowing the lines. It’s bound to snap. I always say I love you first, just in case we lose our connection.

Outside my duplex, a pair of shoes dangles over the line by knotted laces. I wonder if anyone will ever remove them, or even how they would. Cherry-pickers, extension poles, catapults or throwing stars? The shoes are high-tops, black turned crackled gray by sun-bleach and rain and snow. Maybe they will fall on their own eventually.
On Wednesday, the new donation arrives. Pine boxes like tiny coffins ship into the gallery. UPS men in their solid brown uniforms plunk and stack the boxes at the gallery entrance. I meet the men late, a large stack already teetering at our door. They handle our boxes roughly, so confident in packaging, oblivious to red-stencil stamps of FRAGILE. I swipe a box from one of the men’s hands, before he adds a tenth box to the pyramids of pine growing outside the gallery. I rush the box inside. Run back out for another. My wrists fill with slivers and rash from the untreated pine. For every box I grab, two more appear. I am outnumbered by the UPS men. Two makes a crew, but I am one.

I used to trust my hands, my arms. But my muscles have sunken in the year I’ve had this job. They burn with the tenth box, and there are many more to go.

I used to work construction with my friend Rory. He is a stone mason. I was a house painter. Now I work at the gallery, never have to heft five-gallon buckets or steady thirty-foot extension ladders or hug cutting pots to my chest like babies for eight-hour shifts. Rory says the paint lines where the blue walls meet the white ceilings now wave and dip and crest. Lines are never as clear as they were with me.

Rory doesn’t really care about straight lines. He smashes stones, fits shards like a puzzle into exterior facades. His technique of hurling stone against concrete always yields the perfect piece.

Tonight, I drive to his house. I park in his driveway, notice his vinyl siding, not a bit of stone work out front. Every place I’ve rented has had beige walls. I smile because
we are the same on this—neither of us has the energy to apply our trade at home.

I walk out back to his truck parked beside a slab of flat concrete that would’ve been his pole barn. But his wife left him. He never framed the pole barn, only lay an open concrete bed. The barn was going to be for storage, once the baby came. Now there will be plenty of room in his house.

We drink wheat beers from a case balancing on his tailgate, and it’s my biggest meal of the day.

“Got something good for you,” Rory says, snapping his fingers.

From the toolbox bolted into his truck’s flatbed, he pulls a dozen bulbs and three florescent tubes. He hugs them in his large, hairy arms. “I’ve been collecting them.”

Rory is a good friend. I’ve told him of my breaking fears, how each item at the gallery is just waiting for me to slip and drop and smash it. He proposes a solution. He shatters one of the tubes against the concrete, and it makes a beautiful pop and tinkle. We hurl the bulbs, let them snap and wait for echo off his siding. My shoulders melt with the release of each bulb. We smash everything: the bulbs, the tubes, our beer bottles, and I consider hurling my glasses. When it’s all over, a thousand fragments glint moonlight. It looks like constellations crashed, fell from their delicate patterns, and landed on Rory's empty concrete bed in a sparkling mess. He drives through the grass back up to his house without stone. I teeter on the edge of his tailgate, smiling, waving goodbye with my last bottleneck to the glass fading into tiny diamonds.

Rory is proud of me for getting out of construction, for finally making use of the arts management degree it took seven years to earn. I no longer sweat summers, freeze in
winters. I work in climate-controlled gallery storage or the air-conditioning of the exhibit floor. I don’t abuse my back. I don’t eat fast food from my lap in the cab of a truck. In fact, I can make it through an entire shift without needing to eat at all. I leave work with the need to do more, so I call Bailey, plan weekends when I visit, when we will make love like strangers and then remember we’re not, slip into routine, watching game shows and then talk shows until we fall asleep, our changed bodies tangled together.

I love Bailey and I love Rory. But neither of them are here. So I choose to hate Rory. I hate him for his encouraged breaking, for his large arms and threadbare T-shirts with cutoff sleeves. He sees sky all day. Grime drills into his fingernails, and it doesn’t matter. I miss dirt and sweat and muscle strain. I miss solid walls of color I’ve painted, when I held the brush, when I was just a canvas away from becoming an artist. Rory fills walls all day with stone. Rory’s wife is a true stranger now, not just on the phone, in theory, and all his longing stores up like a giant bucket of dry mortar mix. Rory has all the want in the world and no water for the mix.

Thursday, I call and order soft cheeses, wines, and violinists for the exhibit opening. I coax nails from pine coffins. As gently as I pull, they screech and echo off the canvases in gallery storage. The donors have been generous, a collection of Japanese jade and ivory and porcelain and silk worth more than I’ll make in my lifetime. If I still painted, they’d be worth more than I’d make in two lifetimes.

With cotton gloves, I handle dolls with hand-painted porcelain faces wearing tiny rings of ruby and sapphire. From a nest of packing shreds, I extract one tiny horse at a time, then a carriage, then the driver, all carved from ivory. The driver’s hand is missing.
I scrounge through the packing.

“Don’t worry. It’s been broken for years,” the wife of the donor says to me. I wonder how long she’s been watching me. No one is allowed in storage besides Margaret and me, but I left the door open. I always do when I’m back here alone.

“That one used to sit on Chuck’s mantle. It was one of his favorites, before he died,” she says, squeezing her pale wrists. “He told me that when he was a child, he used to push it down the sidewalk, and one day he lost the hand. Down the gutter. Buried in dirt somewhere. Who the fuck knows. He liked it better this way.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. And I want these words to mean something, to stop her from pinching her forehead. Really, I’m glad someone is here to tell me what I haven’t broken, which pieces were fifteen-thousand dollar toys for a child who is now a dead benefactor.

She moves closer, kneels down with me next to another box I’ve opened. She reaches inside, pulls out a small red stone box, an ivory lotus inset on the top.

“This was my favorite. I would’ve kept it. All of these. But my husband says it would be selfish.”

“It’s not selfish,” I say. If they kept this collection, I wouldn’t be able to break any of it. “These pieces will spend most of their time in storage, where no one will see them but me.”

“Thank you, for saying that.”

“Take it back. I’ll let Margaret know. She won’t miss it.”

She hands the red box to me, but won’t let go. I want to release it to her, but she might let it go at the same moment. I imagine it smacking the floor, the hinges snapping, ivory lotus leaves erupting. She leans her head against my shoulder, a cold cheek against
mine, cold like the porcelain dolls. Her face slides, and it feels like she's slipping, like she and the box could both fall to the floor. I catch her, press my lips against hers, her tears running salty into my mouth. The donor's wife’s lips are soft, her skin cold, her body thin. So much that seems fragile and I am the sturdy one. It's the opposite of kissing Bailey. The donor's wife pulls her head back, bites her lip. She presses her other hand, the one not holding the box, against my crotch. She rubs, and I grow harder, and I want to lift up her skirt, tear off that turtle neck, but I push her away. I let go of the box. And she doesn’t drop it, nestles it back in the packing shreds. It feels like the driver’s tiny missing hand is inside my belly, scraping the lining, clawing up my throat.

Bailey and I can’t meet this weekend. I have to attend the gallery opening, and she has hundreds of pages to read, an essay to write. I can’t tell her about the donor’s wife over the phone. We chat, like nothing is new.

I bought a cordless with an extended range of seven thousand feet. I no longer stretch the curled cord tight, pacing through my duplex. It was a purchase to loosen the slack, but there is a delay, and my own voice talks over myself. I hear the tinny inflections of my last questions behind Bailey’s solid voice.

She tells me she could come, could blow off writing her essay about lips in modern advertising.

I tell her no. I don’t want to interrupt modern lips. The cordless gripped against my shoulder, I tape three broom poles together.

She tells me I could come. We could play a game of ignoring each other, a game of tempting, like hide and seek, and when she finishes her essay she’ll find me tiny and
compacted into a pretzel under the sink.

I slip out the front door of my duplex with my new cordless. I walk to the telephone line with the pair of high-tops, and tonight another pair dangles. These ones are pink and white and bright. They bow the line more.

Bailey says drug dealers. Aren’t shoes on lines a signal for that? Maybe I should move.

But she doesn’t understand I have nightmares about thin glass, gossamer strands, arteries, and not drug dealers. Nor does she know I’m outside a possible drug dealer’s home staring at the shoes right now, batting stupidly with my taped broom poles, tiptoeing, but not even close.

When she asks what I’m wearing, I’m too ashamed to say, had not considered wearing anything special to talk on the phone. I would tell her my old painter jeans with tears in the knees, a stained plaid bathrobe flapping open to expose my flat chest each time I jump and swing the broom poles. She laughs when I hesitate, the question a joke. Phone sex not a replacement for present bodies. We will see each other soon enough.

Sometimes I think about my body, the inside, the wet parts. My heart, too small, like everyone’s. This strand and that thread and so many gallons to pump. This never happened when I was painting, exhaustion proof that everything worked. I always trusted my lungs, strong enough to filter fumes and particles. I’d hack up blue paint in the shower after work. Sometimes green or beige, mostly bright white. Now my clean lungs don’t cough up anything, and I wonder if sawdust burrs held me together, if paint glued my organs tight.
Friday, I haul pedestals, shine showcase glass, then aim the track lights, which sizzle against my skin. Margaret arranges the Japanese exhibit with the donor’s wife, balancing framed wood-block prints against the gallery walls, placing jade and porcelain figures where they want pedestals to go. Margaret hollers up to ask my opinion about a silk tapestry. I pretend I can’t hear.

I feel like I’m home again atop the fourteen-foot step ladder, diddling one of the lights. But below me porcelain dolls and glass frames dot the hardwoods like land mines, and I wonder how the hell I’ll get to the next light. I’m out of practice with moving ladders. I imagine wrestling the ladder over a few feet, its wobbling feet decapitating this porcelain princess with dangling ruby earrings or piercing through that woodblock print. Then the donor’s wife sobbing, a memory shattered, me to blame, me the gallery grunt who tried to fuck her in gallery storage. Margaret unpinning her hair to fire me in a poof of rage.

I drive to Rory’s with a case. He has a bottle of whiskey. He also has an oak coat rack, an acoustic guitar, a chaise lounge with burgundy upholstery, a dozen knickknacks, a rocking chair. She didn’t pick up these things this afternoon when she picked up everything else. He no longer has a dog or a TV, and they’ve returned the crib and changing table. He has these things, though, so we will break them.

I have my eyes on this Precious Moments piece, a child with sad, dopey eyes holding an umbrella. We drink. We smash. Rory wields an axe, comes down hard on the chaise. It splits in the middle, collapsing in on itself. We drink more without talking, only
breaking. I’m tired before he is and rest on the tailgate, swigging the whiskey, thinking of the donor’s wife, missing Bailey. Rory is all teeth tonight, his mouth a flash of gnarled pearls, which are yellow in daylight, but like lightening in the dark as he dices the coat rack.

He laughs now and then, smiles up at me, his face sweaty and luminescent. He breaks everything left without anger. Perhaps it’s the nature of his job, thousands of hours breaking for paychecks. I am not programmed this way, trained to fear one drop of paint on carpet, and now at the gallery it’s much worse.

Rory breaks while my head becomes a boulder. I haven’t been paying attention to what goes into me: the beers, a splinter of rocking chair in my forearm, the rest of the whiskey, long breaths of wildflower and moon. My chin digs into my chest, and I can’t lift it. I puke on my shoes.

The axe-head clangs on Rory’s concrete bed. He sits next to me, wraps his arm over my shoulder, apologizes for something.

“No driving home for you tonight,” Rory says.

“What do you know about phone lines?”

“Ask a phone guy. I do stone and mortar.”

“Can I touch them? Will I get electrocuted? What if they break?” Below me, moon refractions spark off the shards of our breaking. So many lights it's dizzying.

“Why don’t we worry about that tomorrow.”

“What about tonight?” I say, and puke again. My insides glare on Rory’s boots. “I fucked up with Bailey.”

“You’re doing good, buddy. Get it out.” He flicks my insides off his boot.
“How pissed is she?” he asks, lifting my head so he can look in my eyes. He’s sizing up my fragments, arranging them in his head.

“How did you fuck things up with your wife?”

“One time, I was up on scaffolding, sandstone brick for this movie theater.” Rory lowers my boulder of a head to his shoulder, and I stare at everything broken. “I had to brick around a bundle of power lines coming out of the building. I kept telling myself not to touch the lines, to be careful. But after an hour, I forgot. It became just like any other hour of work. My elbow grazed the lines a half-dozen times. Nothing happened. I was still alive. Phone lines can’t hurt you, man.”

I only know Rory at work. He was never one of those guys that talked about home. But on the ground, thousands of shattered pieces tell me something. There is the mouth of the Precious Moments figure. There is the spindle of a coat rack, a guitar string coiled like a question mark, leg of rocking chair, a pink night light shaped like a teddy bear still intact.

“You can crash here tonight. I’ll carry you inside like a baby.”

My body wants to fall off the tailgate, but Rory’s arms balance me. He clings tighter. My head falls into his shoulder, and he kisses my forehead. I haven’t felt man’s lips on my forehead since I was a child. I will never forget the way his stubble scratches into my forehead. He tells me we’ll get through this, but I don’t know what it is. There is only me and Rory, breaking and drinking too much.

I wake to the inside of Rory’s home. I am thirsty, but only one mug sits in the cupboard. I drink from the faucet. The ghosts of furniture stamp impressions into his
carpet, but the room is bare save for the old green couch I slept on, now blotched in my vomit. No pictures on the walls. Drawers pulled open and empty. It’s as if there’s been a burglary.

I run water over my scalp, mat down my hair. I dab at my vomit on the couch with toilet paper, but it just makes things worse. I am late for the gallery opening. My clothes are a mess, so I rummage through a pile of Rory’s dirty laundry until I find a pair of jeans without mortar crusted onto the pant legs, a navy blue button-up that still has sleeves at the shoulder.

Rory sleeps soundly upstairs. I hope he sleeps all day, dreams about broken things, a living room full of them to cover the ghosts of his wife’s furniture.

I saw Rory’s wife once.

I was outside with my crew on a smoke break. One of the construction managers for the subdivision joined us. In his sunken jaws sat huge crooked teeth. Most of the managers were young guys fresh out of college, know-it-all assholes. We liked Doyle. He was tall, had thirty years experience, ten years of AA, and a nude Polaroid of his ex-wife sprawled over his Harley in his wallet.

We watched a white Corolla circle the cul-de-sac of unfinished houses. A woman driver, a rare sight at the subdivision until the housewives moved in. But there, then, no women.

Doyle smirked with his huge teeth, said something about her patrolling for cock. The crew laughed. He trotted out to the car, leaned inside the open window, jerked his wrist behind his back for us to see, gesturing a handjob. Rory barreled out from the side
of another house. We didn’t know he was there. He surprised Doyle, grabbed that jerking wrist and twisted it behind his back, farther than I thought it could go, and Doyle was frozen with his head inside that car. I could see Rory smiling, inches away from Doyle’s face. Just smiling so hard I was sure his or Doyle’s teeth would shatter.

He let Doyle go, got in the car, and rode home with his wife.

Blazers and dresses swarm the gallery. It’s a good turnout. Rory’s clothes fit baggy on me. I weave through the pedestals and guests, try not to touch anything. I bump into a blazer, and he turns, looks at me, and turns away. I might as well be another pedestal. I look like a janitor. They don’t care why I’m here, but know they don’t need to talk to me. Dressed as Rory, I am invisible. Even Margaret glances my way and doesn’t seem to notice. I feel wonderful. I raid the picked-over cheese tray. I avoid the wine, but chug two glass bottles of water, which I know are expensive because I ordered them.

The donor’s wife wears another turtleneck, black, her eyes still bloodshot, and I wonder how someone else’s parents can ever mean that much, how terrible it must be to love so recklessly. A man with a ponytail wearing a leather jacket and tie rambles while she nods her head, pulls at a loose thread in her sweater. I walk over, ask to speak with her. The man leaves us, his ponytail swishing past a print of a thin rope bridge over a gorge.

“Thanks for saving me,” she says. “I couldn’t take another minute listening to that dipshit.”

I lead her to gallery storage, where I will fuck her. This time I won’t cower at her touch, worry about this or that breaking. This time, I will be as strong as Rory. Inside,
next to empty pine boxes and the cabinets that will eventually fill with her donations, she
tells me they're worthless. Margaret brought in an assessor who discovered all the
donations were facsimiles. Fine facsimiles, but all replaceable. One hundred years old
rather than seven hundred. Made in factories by peasant workers. The reproduction work
is nearly perfect, but peasants can’t fool an expert.

She wonders why she just can't take them all home, then, go out to the gallery and
load up her arms. I tell her to do it. I tell her why the hell not.

But now they're ours, and if I break one, insurance will pay more than they're
worth. Each piece will sit in storage, and Margaret will not care when they break. I hug
the donor’s wife, and she hugs back, tighter than I think she can. Her tears soak warm
through Rory’s shirt. And this is really what Rory would do. Rory would squeeze until
she shattered, piece the vertebrae back together more beautifully than they’d ever been.

Bailey doesn’t answer. She’s lost in lips, writing her essay. She answers the fourth
time I call. I charge into telling her about kissing the donor’s wife, about almost fucking.
I wait for her to reply and grind my teeth.

She laughs. “That’s the only reason you called?”

“I’m sorry, Bailey.” I walk outside, up to the shoes on the phone lines.

I remember Bailey when we met four years ago: short bleached hair, ears full of
piercings, a punk rocker. Her hair is brown now, her piercings healed shut. She is a back
to an original Bailey I never knew.

“I’m so fucking tired of lips.”

She hangs up, goes back to work three hundred miles down the phone line.
I toss the cordless at the shoes. I make contact a few times, and the gray shoes swing, showering sun-baked flakes. With my best throw, I set a pink shoe spinning, twisting tighter. The phone line sways but doesn't break. The cordless is ruined, green circuit boards and wires spewing from the black casing.

Sundown, Rory’s lights are on. I didn’t bring beer, only his clothes. He isn’t inside, but the place looks different, cleaned up: drawers closed, furniture footprints swept away, green couch smelling like cleaner, a new TV.

Outside, at the open concrete, Rory works next to a lamp. He smiles when he sees me, asks how the big opening went.

“Have a seat,” he says. He waves me to the chaise lounge, which he plops onto, and tilts his head up to the stars, his Adam’s apple pointing like a knobby knuckle.

From where I stand, from a distance, the chaise he hacked into a thousand pieces looks fully repaired. It must have taken him all day to clean his house and repair this piece of useless furniture. But this is what he does. I imagine him pasting the pieces together, and I wonder if it’s strong enough to hold us both. I wonder if he considered putting it back together in a different way, making something new and better. But maybe this is right. Maybe the pieces could only be this one thing.

I make sure I don’t look too close at the details, because I don’t want to see the glue squeezing between fragments of wood, the upholstery stapled together. Tonight it’s a chaise again, a sturdy enough place for me to sit.
We tore up the earth in the yard of a three-story four-thousand-square-footer in Swinging Willow subdivision. We backhoed a gash through the silky sod, brown like a week-old scab, red at the center. We were making a fountain, the Hendersons willing to shell out fifteen grand to piddle a Zen waterfall down their front lawn’s downgrade, to sparkle diamonds in their eyes from the big bay window large as the sky itself. They could have just looked outside from seven to five and seen a half-dozen torsos, bare chests gleaming sweat, pocked with clay and topsoil.

Because we dig earth, because we heave shovels, because we haul it away in the back of Rex’s not-so-shiny ’92 Dodge Ram and haul back slate steppers and granite outcroppings, our skin never stops sparkling. We can’t tear away enough layers to cool down. No one works harder than the hardscaping boys. Won’t catch us snipping copper and tugging carpet and swinging brushes in an air-conditioned house.

The gash in the Hendersons’ front lawn was a big dig, a gig where work changed, where a gash in the earth split us into pieces. That’s the only gigs worth talking about.

We chunked twelve tons out of the ground, dropped ten tons of stone back in. Tommy was helping Al line up the schedule 40 lines, when Tommy said, “I’d rather be laying ass than laying brass.” We boys laughed, because it was a good rhyme, even though every line was PVC and Tommy didn’t know shit about plumbing. That’s why we’d hired Al three weeks ago, a career pipe-bender, who ran out of houses after they stopped digging foundations in the subdivisions and started planting foreclosure signs. Now he was ours. And we needed him. And we liked him and his tool boxes full of
purple primers and chamfer cones and the way he could pour hot sand in a pipe and make it bend like magic. And we liked the way he would bow his head and point both fingers in the air to silently confirm that, yes, he knew how to do that too.

“I’m gonna fuck Silvy from behind until Saturday morning,” Tommy said. And that was something we knew, because Tommy’s Silvy liked it from behind just fine, and she liked a night of fucking. You learn these things about men you haul dirt and rock with ten hours a day.

“Who you fucking tonight, Stas?”

“I’m fucking serious,” boss Stas said, and then pivoted a two-man rose stone toward the sun. “Serious about this fountain, so pick your asses up and start earning what I pay you.”

“Who you fucking, Al? One of them tight and crazy betties from the bar? Take her home and slip that pretty piece of yours between her thighs.”

“I don’t fuck Betties. I fuck Bobs,” Al said and climbed up the slate steppers.

“So you’re a butt fucker, eh?” Tommy said. “A genuine cock sucker. Ain’t a piece of pipe you don’t know how to couple.”

We all looked at Tommy’s mouth, the words spilling out around his tongue, past that one veneered tooth that flickered like new PVC. We didn’t look at Al, afraid to imagine fucking and sucking, afraid that imagining was too close to standing alone in the dry fountain like Al.

“Did you know you hired a fag, boss?”

“I did not, Tommy,” Stas flipped open his phone, clicked it shut. “But now I know at least one of you assholes can oversee design with me.”
“Man sauce makes a body strong,” Tommy said, “gives you an eye for ascetics.” He kicked some Mexican River Rock pebbles down at Al, who had his head down, shoulder hunched, focused on his chemical weld. “And look here. The man knows how to make two pipes fit together.”

Al flung one of the pebbles back at Tommy’s gut and then went back to work, twisted the pipes together and lifted them with a smile. We knew they were tight, trusted Al’s joints not to leak, his plumbing as true as his pebble aim.

“Don’t try to pretend I don’t have shit to dole out. You’ve been keeping sexy secrets from Tommy. I have months to make up for.”

Tommy kept up until lunch time. He climbed into the fountain trench with Al, and we followed, heaving chunks of granite into an outcropping, around the hole, a wall to hold us in. Not because Al needed us or a wall, but because we had work. Money to make, wives and girlfriends and child support and parole officers to pay. We dug and hauled wheelbarrows of River Rock to smooth out the remaining backhoe teeth marks. After Tommy’s cum-guzzling jokes hit a dozen, they sounded the same as any other. Sounded the same as when Tommy talked about Stas’ twenty-two-year-old honey’s tight, wet lips, or when Tommy recalled his dream about getting a BJ while he took a shit, or how Rex’s favorite hooker told him his foreskin smelled like blue cheese. It was work, like any other day. Al laid the pipe and rigged the pump, and we heaved the boulders from the bed of Stas’ truck.

But Rex stayed silent that day, didn’t laugh, didn’t look any of us in the eyes, didn’t act out Tommy’s words with his wire strippers waving in front of his crotch like he usually did. Some current crossed inside him, shorted his nerves until his tongue morphed.
into a mangled lump in his mouth, his tools just limp pieces of metal dangling from his belt. Rex used to be a union electrician, until his union folded. These things happened. Now the closest he came to his old trade was wiring up the fountain pump. Boring to a wire-snipper who used to diddle the guts of x-ray machines, wattage that could broil intestines.

And there was a glitch in the pump that kept the fountain as silent as Rex’s mangled tongue when we switched it on and waited for the groan of sucking water. Rex kept his head down, digging through the dirt to find the lost connection. Al tried to help, dug alongside him with a scrap piece of pipe. He was standing behind Rex’s bent waist, plowing with his schedule 40, when Tommy said, “Looks like Rex is curious. Give him a few thrusts.”

Rex jumped up, knocked Al’s pipe clinking to the pebble bed. Their shirtless bellies collided in Rex’s attempt to scuttle out of the hole, and that got Tommy going all over again. We tried not to laugh, but we couldn’t help it when Rex tripped over the outcropping, ran to his shirt, crumpled and baking in the sun, yanked it over his hairy back. His fat lips twisted, snapped over his clamped teeth.

Rex slunk back to his truck, sat in the cab for two hours holding his cell phone to his ear without moving his lips. He eventually headed back to the yard and stabbed his spade into the pebble bed, into the dirt beneath, like he was hunting magma. He dug hard and deep, flailing his arms so that nobody dared go near him. We moved up the fountain, dodging flung pebbles and dirt. His gray shirt turned black, sweat dripping down his arms.
We hauled in the last of the two-man granites. Each cost more than we would earn that day. Rocks too smooth for proper grip. Rocks variegated with bolts of quartz and sparkles of blue and green. Rocks that sucked sweat from our hands and darkened in the shape of palm-prints. We hauled in twos up the downgrade, shoulders leaning toward our partners, foreheads pulled together under the weight. An assembly line of shirtless hardscrapers. Stas jerked and budged each boulder a quarter-inch at a time, didn’t ask Al for his aesthetic opinion, didn’t ask any of us, same as any other gig. And Tommy ran out of jokes like he always did, his jaw tired as our arms. But Rex kept digging away, deeper into the gash in the earth filled with slate steppers and pebbles and boulders and shirtless men and one fag.

After dinner break, before we finished sprinkling the rest of the Mexican River Rocks, before the sun turned purple and then smashed into dusk, Rex gave up on digging. He paced the fountain, made his way to the top and leaned against one of Stas’ perfectly adjusted rose rock boulders. The dying sun lit up the pinks, cast Rex’s crinkled forehead in purples. We smoked cigarettes on the sod while Al recoupled the flex lines at the bottom of the fountain bed. It was the last bit of the gig, something only Al knew how to do, so we waited. Waited until Rex winked at Tommy, aimed the point of his spade down at Al. Rex said to Tommy, “Here’s a way to make a fag rock hard.” Then Rex pushed against the rose rock, a two-man boulder we didn’t imagine could be disturbed by one man. Tommy ran toward Rex—perhaps another one of Tommy’s jokes, a tackle followed by a twisted nipple. But this time it was Rex’s joke.

We heard the smacks, the sickening sound of a two hundred-dollar rock budged, clunking through the steppers, snapping slate shards, busting itself into dozens of useless
fragments. Al held his glued flex until the last minute, jumped away too late. Rose rock careening, a deadened landing on shin. Snap of bone or rock. And then Tommy gripping Rex’s collar, the shriek of tearing cotton. Rex laughed alone at Al’s grimace, scanned our faces, waited for us to join him. He kept laughing as Tommy shoved him to the ground, kicked him in the kidney. And Tommy’s boot couldn’t stop the laughs, only sent Rex sprinting down the downgrade, faster than us, after-dinner smokes clamped in our teeth.

We bit through our filters, dropped our cherries onto the pristine sod.

Al crawled out of the pebble bed. He flopped onto the sod, and it was then that we saw the dark around his left shin. Blood. Stone blood. Bleeding from the rock Rex shoved into the trench when Al wasn’t looking but we were. The stone that tore down the downgrade and then smashed up into worthless shards.

We wanted to ask if he was all right, but that seemed stupid. One side of Al’s lip curled. He clicked his tongue and squinted up at us through the burned-out dusk. We couldn’t figure out if we should move him or not, if we should give him to some EMT kid who could deal with that rock-bleeding leg. Stas fumbled for his cell phone, dropped it into the earth’s gash full of rocks. The phone clacked, battery popping out and disappearing into crag shadows. We dug through our pockets, through the damp of sweat-soaked denim for our own explodable phones. All but Tommy. He reached his hand out to Al, who interlaced his fingers and pulled. Tommy heaved Al’s arm over his bare shoulders and lugged him to his Honda Civic, the smallest car for the biggest guy on our crew. Panels scratched, front door dented from that night when Tommy drank too much and had to slam an even bigger man’s head into the door. That car was a piece of shit that whined and gurgled every morning before the sun eked up over the sod and vinyl siding.
of the suburbs, but on this night, as Tommy’s Honda serpentined out of the cul-de-sac, it
glimmered, sucking in every last fleck of paling sunset.

We slept restlessly, next to our snoring wives and silent girlfriends and all alone.
We rolled into the divot of worn-out springs, dreamed of suffocation as skin and bed
sheets mashed against our sweating faces. Where was Rex tonight? Still driving his rusty
Dodge up and down subdivisions, afraid to pull into his driveway, squeezed between the
lawn that he and we had no hand in sodding or seeding.

On one of our dozen trips out of bed, hands fumbling against leaden shadows
where we knew there was once a light switch, we gave up, slid down the wall to a squat.
We couldn’t bring on quiet dreams by jerking off or drinking milk or chewing two
o’clock salami sandwiches. We carried our cell phones in the pocket of our pajamas, in
the waistband of our underwear, waiting for a call. Stas bought a new phone on his way
home from work, at the store next to the hospital where Tommy and Al sat in the waiting
room. No insurance so no rush. Rock blood hardly life-threatening. Stitches and tetanus
needles, some bandages cleaner than Tommy’s sweat-hardened T-shirt wrapped tight
around Al’s shin. An x-ray and some valium in waiting. Waiting for results, for the bright
white bone sparking across black film. Waiting with Tommy, who keeps patting Al’s
back, asking if there’s someone he should call. Parents? Sisters or brothers? Tommy’s
hand moves in slow circles between Al’s shoulder blades, across muscles so much like
his own. He pulls his hand away when the old man across the room turns his one good
eye toward him, the other hidden behind a handful of bunched-up white panties, stained
with brown-dried blood.
No, no one, Al says through his teeth. Your boyfriend, Tommy whispers, and thinks of hard cocks pressing together through denim, can’t find the joke that should be there. He glances at the empty seat next to him. No boyfriend. Don’t bother him with this shit, Al says. And Tommy thinks of the time he smashed that bigger man’s head into his door panel when Tommy called him a fag at the bar one night. He meant it as a joke, like the ones he said at work, but this man didn’t get it, wouldn’t stop shoving and swinging in the parking lot until Tommy clunked skull against metal. He wonders why that man didn’t call the cops, whether he told his wife that night. Tommy learned to keep those jokes at work, among the men who knew him, men who wouldn’t translate words into knuckles. Tommy didn’t tell his old lady he dented his car with a skull the night it happened, and they didn’t fuck from behind like she liked. He said he was too tired, and she didn’t even care, just flicked off the lamp, but he felt her staring all night.

Tommy pours coffee for Al into a chipped Styrofoam cup. Al takes a sip, passes it back. And it’s probably burned, cooked on the hot plate for the last six hours, but it smells good, like earth and warm when his body shakes in his tank top, emergency room air-conditioning blowing hard. Not like the comfort of sweat, the day, the lawns and rocks, when Tommy’s hauling rocks and spreading sod with the boys, with us, who want to be us, but we can’t find the light switch and can’t get to sleep because we’re wondering about Tommy and Al and Rex. And we hate that old man and his bleeding eye and his bunched-up panties who won’t stop staring at Tommy even though his good eye probably isn’t worth a shit, pale and milky with cataracts.

But Tommy forgets about him, and the old man becomes a crinkled fashion magazine, opened up to a spread on bikini season where a page has been torn away,
stashed into the pants of an eleven-year-old waiting for its mama to get her blackened, busted-up eye sewn up for the twenty-second time. Tommy takes a sip, puts his lips where Al’s pressed, and it doesn’t mean a damn thing to Tommy, but we can finally fall asleep.

We got to the fountain early, before sun, full of coffee and nicotine, sitting in our running cars and waiting to see who showed. We twisted the radio knob, skipped past morning shows, one DJ’s belching laugh bleeding into the next one’s. We rechecked our phones, cycled through missed calls, still the same, nothing missed from missing Tommy and Al and Rex. And what if Rex showed up? We gripped our steering wheels, fingers wrapping, dirt-crusted nails digging into our palms.

Boss Stas arrived late for the first time ever. He stepped out of his truck, phone pinched between ear and shoulder. It looked like his neck was broken through our rear view mirrors. We got out to steal the words he spit quietly into the receiver: “Sorry, honey. We’ll get new rocks. I need them for this gig. No word from the boys yet.” Nothing that told us everything we wanted to know, and we didn’t ask when he snapped his phone shut.

Stas opened his tailgate, and inside a stack of slate steppers, one two-man rose rock, a rock like any other rock. Like the rock that stomped Al’s shin after smashing through the steppers. Like a rock we’d like to toss into the gash of earth that became a fountain. Toss in once Rex crawled inside and we closed our eyes and said a joke like a prayer. All the better because these rocks were Stas’ young old lady’s rocks, stolen from his home, transplanted.
Inside the truck bed, Stas leaned into the red rock, budged it inch by inch, rock screaming against the steel bed. He worked it to the edge, where we cradled it into our arms. We all carried it, two-man rock turned many-man, all the way up the downgrade, to the top missing an outcropping anchor.

The cul-de-sac rattled, backfired. Tommy’s Honda swerved down the blacktop, squealed to a stop behind Stas’ scraped tailgate. Al exited Tommy’s Honda, rapped on the hood, hollered, “Not done yet, boys?”

Tommy slid out next, and the two of them staggered up the downgrade, scuffling their feet against the sod. Al was wearing the same jeans as yesterday, and we were all wearing the same jeans as yesterday because there’s no point in washing away the sweat we’d make again today and tomorrow, but Al’s right pant leg was hacked off at the thigh. A bright white cast wrapped his shin, the part we couldn’t see, and we didn’t need to because Tommy and Al grinned like motherfuckers, reeked like Friday’s shots lined up across the bar.

“Are you two drunk?” Stas said, grabbing Al’s shoulder.

“What else do you do after getting out of the emergency room at four in the morning?” Tommy kicked at the new red rock. It shifted and we held our breaths, but it stayed put.

We replaced the chipped slate carefully, so as not to shift every other stone, topple it all, a delicate puzzle. Every rock pretty side-up for the ugliest boys in town, shucked shirts and smeared dirt and bear guts and Tommy’s appendicitis scar winking like a stab wound. We traded every sharded slate stepper, cleaned up the useless flakes, and the only thing to worry about was Rex’s Dodge popping through the houseline. But he didn’t
show, and he didn’t find his lost connection. Tommy found the frayed wire by chance, between him and Al betting quarters on where the splice could be. Al slapped the quarter in Tommy’s palm while we filled the fountain bed, diluted Al’s blood that was down there somewhere, dried and brown, now drowned away. By lunchtime, the drunk was mostly worn off of our missing boys, and they finished coupling the flex.

Stas fired up the fountain, and it pissed away, not a sputter, just a perfect stream. Tommy stood in the middle, on our new steppers. He swayed but our rocks didn’t, placed like they were all one giant fist of one hundred knuckles.
A SOLUTION FOR ROSS

Brilliant Solutions Consulting Incorporated lacked customers who were in need of brilliant solutions so they invented their own solution: a company picnic. A real morale booster for all their employees working on commissions, because there were no new customers, hence no new commissions, hence no morale. So they voted on biodegradable paper plates instead of Styrofoam, sporks instead of forks, bean burgers over beef. Absolutely no hot dogs and watermelons over bananas since they were less suggestively offensive. Planning proceeded smoothly until Mike asked if he could invite Philip.

“Is Philip your father, your brother?” Wanda asked, who was documenting the minutes in her yellow notepad, “because we only have so much Rosalynn Carter fruit salad to go around. In tough times, we need to economize, and that begins right here with our very own picnic guest lists.”

“Philip is my partner,” Mike said.

“Not so brilliant of a solution to start a side business when we must band together in this dire economic climate,” Sam said, clicking on his calculator with numbers as big as his oversized glasses. “Band together, not split apart.” Sam demonstrated by interlacing his hairless, chubby fingers into one giant fist.

“Philip is my partner partner,” Mike said.

Ross looked up from his laptop, where he was taking backup picnic meeting minutes, but since he knew Wanda was taking primary minutes, he was writing a space pirate romance novel that took place in the future near Saturn. “Philip is your lover?”

“In a sense,” Mike said.
Wanda stopped writing, and Sam stopped tapping his oversized calculators.

“Are you saying that in a sense,” Wanda curled her lips and tapped at her bleached teeth, “you are a homosexual?”

“In the sense that I’m in a relationship with Philip,” Mike said.

Ross clapped his laptop shut in the middle of a scene in his novel where his one-eyed protagonist, Captain Nova The Long-Nosed, was about to save a damsel from a black hole. He jumped up from the oaken meeting room table and rushed toward Mike, embraced him in a hug. His bald head pressed against Mike’s shoulder, the corduroy ribs grating against his scalp stubble. They’d been working together on the last Brilliant Solution still in commission, yet Mike had never opened his heart up like this in all their evenings of emails. Ross said into Mike’s lapel, “We’re thrilled for you. You’ve come out to us and that’s wonderful. That’s a brilliant and brave personal solution for these trying times.”

Mike shrugged, patted Ross’ bald scalp, and then Wanda yanked Ross away, hauled him by the collar back to his seat. “We apologize, Mike, for Ross’ reaction which is not brilliant, nor reflective of our social awareness. The answer to your question is yes. Yes, it would be economically feasible for us to invite your partner to the Brilliant Solutions’ company picnic.”

“We’ll be there,” Mike said.

They all bent their heads to their notepads and continued to brainstorm cold salads. No mayonnaise to avoid food-poisoning lawsuits in case it was sunny. No crock pots since they didn’t need company toddlers gnawing through the cords. Pasta salad seemed to be the safest solution.
Ross excused himself to the bathroom, splashed water on his face to wash away his tears of joy for Mike’s brave revelation. He dabbed his beard with the scratchy eco-friendly brown paper towel. He wished he had a Philip or a Phyllis so he could be as lucky as Mike. Instead, he had Captain Nova, and he decided right then and there that the damsel would be sucked into the black hole, and Captain Nova would courageously follow, both of their bodies sucked in, crushed, merged together in a pinprick of ultimate density, where their bodies would become one throughout the eternity of the cosmos. The end. Happy ending ever after.

After Mike went home for the day, Brilliant Solutions called a mandatory priority-invitation meeting in the supplies closet. Ross had never been invited to one of these emergency meetings, nor had he ever heard of one, so he strutted with pride to the supplies closet. When he opened the door, a hand reached out and yanked him inside. The closet was dim and reeked of bleach and cologne and perfume. He squeezed against Sam and Wanda’s torsos. Their noses almost touched, bodies crowded together by the slop sink and shelves of masking tape. Ross felt their breaths heaving hot on his chest.

“The picnic may not be as morale-boosting as originally planned,” Wanda said. “A slew of cold salads does not a productive workforce make.”

“And there’s the matter of personal exposure.” Sam puffed a few shots of air, shooting the lone light bulb’s dangling pull-string away from his face. It smacked back across his lips. “We have to think about our awareness, which is solid, exceptional, open-mindedly top-notch. However, we can’t count on every Brilliant Solutions employee being as aware as us.”
“I appreciate your awareness of others’ potential lack of awareness, Sam,” Wanda said, gripping a mop handle, “but the fact that you’re talking about this shows an unsatisfactory level of awareness about certain issues that need complete sensitivity in their awareness approach.”

“We should have a party,” Ross said. He reached up and held the pull-string away from Sam’s lips. “Balloons with hearts for Mike and Phillip. An ice cream cake with two plastic grooms on the top leaning toward one another. I’ll research a celebratory tune we can sing—of course one within public domain so we don’t get into the trouble we had at Frank’s birthday. We can all learn the song just for our new favorite couple, who have bravely opened up to us.”

Wanda lowered Ross’ jittering fingers and exchanged stares with Sam. They shook their heads, which made the pull-string strike Sam’s left eye. Wanda said to Ross, “There will be no picnic or party. Our time will be most productively spent with further awareness training.”

Ross wanted to bring up the brilliant solution they’d made for ex-governor Trudy Apple when her rescued pit bull broke through her fence and snapped the neck of her neighbor’s purebred Jack Russell. They had considered spinning the excuse of Trudy’s dog having secondary PTSD from Trudy’s impeachment after she blew all of Arizona’s budget on covering the state with Kentucky bluegrass sod. But Ross had the more brilliant solution when he formulated a three-pronged celebration strategy. Brilliant Solutions had Trudy host a black-tie dinner celebrating dog diversity and announcing the formation of the Jack Russells: Little Bodies, Big Hearts Foundation. With Ross’ help, Trudy became the reigning advocate of Jack Russell appreciation.
At the inaugural Jack Russell foundation dinner, Ross had been leaning against the melting dog ice sculpture, wondering if he should move it into the back room since all the dripping might give the negative impression that Jack Russells weren’t very good at potty training. He mulled over the decision, listening to the statue’s drip-drips. Then he noticed a beauty in a purple shirt winking at him from beneath the sculpture’s hind legs. Soon, they were making love in the unisex bathroom, which locked and was private and handicap accessible. After, he invited the beauty to his mother’s for Sunday dinner. The beauty smiled at him in the mirror, and then swung through the exit. That was the last time Ross had made love, even though his beauty hadn’t called it that, had said, “Thanks for the fuck,” before unclasping the lock.

Ross didn’t bring up his brilliant solution of the past. Instead, he sucked in the bleach-cologne-perfume air and held his breath. He squirmed his hands behind his back and fingered the lock on the door knob. When Sam gripped the pull-string in his teeth and tugged the lone light bulb dark, Ross was the first to spill out from the priority-invitation supply closet meeting.

Wanda cancelled the picnic, gifted Mike two days extra vacation for his superior spreadsheets and the PowerPoint featuring not ten, but eleven colors on his pie charts, a new Brilliant Solutions record. With Mike gone for two days, Wanda and Sam scheduled a company-wide meeting.

Ross squeezed himself between the shoulders of employees, a wall of brilliant minds wearing moleskin blazers all crammed into the Imagine-athon Octagon. He watched as Wanda pushed through the door, bent over, jet-black bangs pasted with sweat
against her forehead. And then came the body, the limp and lifeless corpse of plastic, shins squeezed into Wanda’s armpits. Sam strained over the body’s torso, toting him in a bear hug. Ross worried about Sam’s bad back, formulated a solution that they should have asked him to help carry that body, that plastic, pantless, shirtless mass of plastic flesh.

Ross recognized the body, the dummy they used to teach emergency training. Ross and everyone else had hugged it from behind, thumped the sternum, straddled the torso. The dozens of brilliant minds in the room had all pressed their soft lips against those plastic ones, breathed their brilliant breaths into the inflatable rubber bag inside posing as a set of lungs. All had practiced saving this life with their grips and pumps and spread thighs and lips and breath. All that passion wasted on plastic when Ross hadn’t even had the chance to kiss that beauty at the dinner for Jack Russells.

“This is Wilbur,” Wanda said as she and Sam struggled the dummy to a standing position. “For our training today, I want you all to center your creative energy on envisioning that Wilbur is real, is a new employee at Brilliant Solutions.” She draped her arm over the dummy’s shoulder. “Hello, new coworkers. How nice to meet you,” Wanda said in a high-pitched voice through the side of her mouth.

Everyone said hello back to Wilbur, except for Ross, who was calculating how much life-saving saliva had crusted inside Wilbur the dummy’s rubber-bag lungs.

“Most importantly,” Sam said, “we want you to imagine that Wilbur is a homosexual.”

“Not most importantly, Sam,” Wanda said.
“No, no. I certainly don’t mean to imply that Wilbur’s homosexuality is the key element of his imagined identity which you must imagine is real.”

“But this is a highly pertinent variable for today’s awareness training.”

“Forget that I said Wilbur is a homosexual,” Sam said, straining his free hand to his lumbar. “But don’t forget that you must remember this for our training.”

“Let’s try this again.” Wanda heaved up the dummy, snugged it closer to her chest. “Hi, new coworkers,” she said from the side of her mouth. “My name is Wilbur and my sexuality does not matter, but I am gay.”

The brilliant minds filed forward and shook hands with Wilbur the gay first-aid dummy, propped up between Sam and Wanda’s shoulders. When it was Ross’ turn, he squeezed the plastic hand as hard as he could, and after he loosened his grip, the hollow hand popped back into form. It was not like Mike’s hand, soft, thick blue veins, a deep red angel kiss between his thumb and index finger.

“There’s no reason to stare, Ross,” Wanda squeaked through the side of her mouth. “I’m no different from you and your heterosexual relations.”

Ross didn’t want to think of Mike or his hands anymore. Mike was somewhere distant from this training, this dummy. So he imagined rubber lungs, brilliant saliva. He chewed the side of his tongue.

“Perhaps Ross could aid us in the next step of training,” Sam said.

“Indeed.” Wanda turned her thick-framed glasses out toward the wall of brilliant minds. “We all share discourse on our home lives, our wives and children, and there’s no reason Wilbur should be shunned from such conversations.”
“Ask me about my plans for this weekend,” Wanda said for Wilbur, whose hand she lifted to Ross’ shoulder.

Ross didn’t ask about rubber-lung weekends, remained standing at the front of the room, staring at the dead hand on his shoulder. This weekend, like last weekend, he would work on the Albertson solution, the last commission. He’d perch his laptop on his thighs, the battery heating as he flipped through images of Mr. Albertson wearing his magenta Speedo, rubbing lotion onto his mistress’ naked back, her olive thighs, squeezing her buttocks, pulling down his Speedo, collapsing atop his young lover who was not Mrs. Albertson. Ross would set about his work, Photo-shopping a grimace onto Ramona Hidalgo’s smiling pout, editing the magenta Speedo back across Mayor Albertson’s half-erect penis. The adulterous Albertson would become a hero, rescuing Ms. Hidalgo from her throat-lodged clam. Ross was preserving family values. The leftovers from this project were a growing file of cropped-out genitals that he saved onto a separate file, that he masturbated to under the warmth of his sweltering laptop battery. After, he’d send the brilliantly family-appropriate pictures to Mike, who, like every weekend, would proof his work for any stray pixels of foreskin or scrotum or labia. But he didn’t need to. Ross hoarded them all on his hard drive, stowed next to his bed, where he alone slept.

“I’m going antiquing with my life-partner Carl,” Wanda said, shaking Ross’ shoulder with the Wilbur dummy arm.

“Does Carl make you happy, Wilbur?” Ross asked. “Will he let you kiss his mouth?”

“We are as happy as any boyfriend and girlfriend ever was.”
“But does Carl kiss you on the mouth after antiquing or fucking?”

Wanda and Sam raised their eyebrows at one another, whispered behind Wilbur’s hollow head and grooved plastic hairline.

“Carl and I love each other, and our bedroom is private, though certainly not taboo or generally shocking.”

Ross leaned toward Wilbur. The room of moleskin blazers and brilliant minds blurred. That rubber lung crusted with brilliant saliva, perhaps the beauty in the purple shirt’s saliva, was in there. Ross wrapped his arms around Wilbur, pressed his warm lips against the cold plastic ones. He sucked instead of exhaling. Exhaling like so many had done before to save this dummy’s life, imagining exploded hearts. He sucked and tasted the stale death of dried life-saving willed into Wilbur’s unappreciative mouth. Ross held it in, heavy in his lungs, refusing to breathe, even when Wanda dropped Wilbur to the floor and Sam yanked Ross’ arms behind his back.

Ross twisted his body, broke from Sam’s grip. Wanda rushed to the conference phone and chirped for security. The wall of minds before Ross remained placid, stares and gaping mouths. They did nothing but think. So Ross gripped the head of Wilbur the life-saving dummy and yanked. It popped free from the neck, the rubber-bag lungs trailing out the neck. He stashed it under his arm and rushed out of the meeting room, through the cubicles, out to his car.

As he drove, he glanced into the closed eyelids of the head sitting in his passenger seat. He could take Wilbur’s head and the precious brilliant saliva home to sit next to his hard drive full of cropped genitals. But Wilbur was a dummy. And Mike was gay. And
everyone else must have been heterosexual if they all needed training and Mike received
vacation days. What did that make Ross? A kidnapper abducting a plastic head and a bag
full of spit. A crotch that liked the heat of his laptop. A brilliant solver who thought a
party was a better idea than a broken dog neck. A bathroom stall-fucker who never got to
kiss.

Ross had never seen where Mike lived, but he knew the address from the Brilliant
Solutions directory, and he aimed his car in that direction. Mike had a lover, and Ross bet
they’d kiss if he stayed long enough. They’d invite him to stay for dinner, and he could
see lips press that weren’t plastic or pixilated, and that would be some kind of a solution.

He drove into their subdivision. He turned down one road after another, each
ending in a cul-de-sac. Every time he turned around and started again, he stopped at
another dead-end, lined by identical houses. He finally parked to get his bearings. He
looked up at the night sky, at the cluster of stars, but they all mashed together, and even if
he found that North Star, he had no idea where he was.

Next to his car, a house that looked just like the next house and the next spilled
yellow light through big bay windows. Inside, a family sat at a dinner table, a husband
and wife, a son and a daughter. It was probably the same scene in every one of those
windows except for Mike’s, but maybe Mike’s was the same, too. This family before him
had stopped eating, were frozen, staring at Ross. He tossed the dummy head onto their
lawn and then drove back into the maze of cookie-cutter houses.

And that plastic head might stay there until trash day, or longer, if Mom and Dad
were afraid to touch it, afraid of a strange man tossing a plastic head onto their perfect
sod. It would stay there until Christmas, coated in snow, glazed in ice. More special and
frightening than their neighbors’ fancy landscaping. They would have this head, the bag of brilliant saliva, and one identical house, one family, would wonder, frozen forever inside the frame of their bay window.
PITCH

The deck salesman opens his customer’s slider, holds out his hand, and ushers her onto her own deck, saying, “Imagine yourself lounging, an Arnold Palmer in one hand, fan in the other, on your new Ultra-Syntho-Balsa-Ever-After deck, but of course you wouldn’t even need a fan if you ordered our Remote-laxer-Awning, which will ensure that the sun never burns your retinas, that not a single drop of sweat ever crests your brow, ever seeps into your stinging eyes or falls between your lips disturbing your taste buds with its salty tang, because all Remote-laxer-Awnings come equipped with personal climate control coolers that condition the air, not an air-conditioner, but truly the conditioning of the air around you, lowering not only the temperature, because a perfect seventy-one degrees is only a number, but also rising the subatomic serenity of surrounding air molecules which will give the corresponding electrons and their bonds a state of perpetual quantum giddiness, all bumping and bouncing, like you did when you were seven and you fell in love with Zander, the next-door neighbor, who promised to marry you and buy you three ponies and four cows and seven sheep because he came from a family that never worried about money like yours did, his father the most successful realtor in town, and Zander took you to the biggest vacant house in town, a home no one could afford, but the two of you deserved it and plotted where the barn would be and the horse stables, and Zander taught you what a kiss felt like and then you played doctor and that was a little scary but you didn’t worry about any of it because this was love, and that’s how joyous your lungs will feel when breathing in a perfectly controlled climate, the fullest breaths you’ve ever taken, whereas your breaths now are
stifled half-inhales, little choking gasps, which I see you’re doing now, and I know that’s because you’re uncomfortable on this deck, this sun-soaked, sweltering mess of rusted-out screws and curled boards which prove that wood, real wood, is an obsolete relic, as old and absurd as one of those vibrating exercise belt things, you know, the ones that you wrap around your buttocks and then you flip on the motor and it shakes you silly, and silly is all it can possibly be because you’re not really making yourself any more appealing to your husband who comes home lugging a briefcase, wearing an overcoat and a porkpie hat and an oversized tie and he can hardly bear to look at you before he heads off to the bar in his Buick to find a lady of the night and forget about your C-section scar and your two beautiful children, Wallace and Salma, those beautiful children that you birthed, that you sacrificed your body for, and now they’ve forgotten about you, thank you for nothing, won’t even invite you to their air-conditioned homes during this heat wave where you may very well pass out in the heat and cook in your lawn chair, lost in searing dreams for a simple, quick, easy solution that you damn-well earned, yet the consumerist world has disappointed you with absurd jokes of innovation, but, of course, this is only a scenario I’m using to illustrate how important it is that we follow sincere innovations and not rely on snake-oil promises, and I certainly don’t mean to classify your body as being repulsive, your husband as unloving, your kids as ungrateful, but I would definitely, most positively, classify your deck as being in dire need of an upgrade, and no matter the state of your marital bliss, my company, Decks for Life, guarantees one hundred thirty-five-percent satisfaction in providing at least three increments of life improvement, including the soothing of your over-worked feet against our syntho-balsa-grain, and your sun-soaked eyes will be protected by our retractable awning decorated by
transitioning fiber-optic fabrics that emulate the shifting clouds you watched on your back with Billy Upshaw who you loved after Zander and his constant demands to play doctor to earn your future-imagined horses and cows and sheep, Billy’s love more pure, unspoiled by the desire for bodies, when boys began inching their clammy fingers up your tensed thighs, and you’ll look up, sipping your Arnold Palmer, and you’ll ask the ghost of Billy, who died fighting for our country before he ever even gave you a kiss, Does that look like an elephant to you, and the ghost of Billy will reply that yes, yes that fiber-optically simulated cloud does look like an elephant, but not just any elephant, an elephant carrying on its back a Pegasus on the verge of lifting off and soaring far, far away to some place like Uruguay or Kathmandu, and those places sound like the most lovely ideas you’ve ever heard of, but in reality, ma’am, those places are dirty and poor, evidenced by the fact that they don’t carry our awnings, nor our decks, and thus shouldn’t be visited, and you’re much better off staying exactly where you are, so long as you upgrade your deck which will only take forty-six easy payments, but judging by your deck perhaps you’d like our extended comfort payment plan which consists of ninety-seven even easier payments, and there’s no shame in that, and you’ll still have the deck paid off before this house that you bought on a thirty-year mortgage, when you and your husband were in your thirties and you both had wonderful new careers, he as a junior executive for General Motors and you as a vacuum saleswoman, but then he deemed your income frivolous, when you could be raising his children and folding underwear and dressing in lacy lingerie every night, which you had to wear all evening, and the thigh-high garters dug into your skin, as did the straps of your bra to keep your breasts floating high, nipples pointed to the sky, and your shoulders burned and blistered and then,
finally, he made love to you quickly, in harsh thrusts, before flopping onto his back and crying silently an hour later because in twenty years GM would be laying him off and you’d need to return to work, because there’s always work for a saleswoman, and indeed there is, and I know that you know what I know, these tricks we use to sell, to promise, to uphold that everything will be better if you just buy, and I don’t underestimate your skill or your knowledge, so let’s be straight with each other: this deck is still a deck, but it is a better deck, and is something you desperately need, if for no other reason than to make you smile and shake your head every time you slide open the door and look at that beautiful new, completely unnecessary deck and you think, Goddamn that salesman, who pitched his ass off, and I only pulled the trigger because of that, because he earned it, and he broke the code and shed the pitch and bared his honesty, nude and raw and a little shocking at first, but that is the kind of man that deserves my attention, not the liars who promised me a better life while intending something else, aching for my attention, my body, my sacrifice, and it’s all a kind of cruelty, ma’am, which I clearly understand, so I’ll say that this deck will bring you no happiness, except for the revenge you desire to spite Billy and Zander and your husband, who will all be intimidated by your amazing investment in your personal satisfaction, and they’ll think twice next time before making ridiculous promises they can’t provide, because all you ever really wanted was someone who will tell you the truth and stop pretending that love will simply cure all, slap its bandages of star-crossed blinders over your eyes and make everything perfect, when there’s no such thing, so why don’t we just tell each other the lies we want to hear, and will you take this brochure at the very least and leave it under your pillow and toss and
turn over this grave decision until you finally decide to run off with me to Uruguay where we’ll live happily ever after until we don’t.”
HOME THROUGH A RAT HOLE

Yadier and Melanie had rats in their apartment. They also had five years of marriage, two of those spent imagining a baby they’d name Evelyn or Joaquin. But first they made plans. Yadier would get his builder’s license, Melanie her master’s degree in anthropology. They made love carefully and never fucked. Yadier did the dishes and Melanie the laundry. They were happy until those rats in the hallway squeezed under their apartment door. A trap clapped in the middle of Melanie’s orgasm, made her jaw unclench and eyes open. She lifted her thighs off of Yadier.

“I will build us a house soon,” Yadier said to Melanie’s pillow.

“I love that you think you will build us a house soon,” Melanie pulled the comforter around her shoulders and stood from the bed, “but we could break our lease sooner.”

“You don’t believe I can build us a house,” he said, and listened to rat claws scraping linoleum, the death drag of a sprung trap.

Melanie walked to the kitchen, the comforter draped around her like a cape. She returned to the bedroom threshold naked. She held the trap, the rat’s tail dangling beside her belly. The yellow glow from the kitchen and the darkness of the bedroom cast her into a shadow. “We can’t live with rats.” She tossed the trap—springs and wire and corpse—into their trash. She pulled on black leggings, slipped her arms into a sweater. “I have to meet my professor.”
Francis gripped Yadier and Melanie by their waists and moved them around the back corner of his closet that he had cleared for their bedroom. He slipped tiny clothes over their smooth bodies so they could go to work. He thought about having them make love again. But Francis’ sisters would be home soon. Last time they caught him playing with their dolls, they waited until his friends came over to jeer him. Francis had turned pink and froze in front of the TV until his friends grew bored of his embarrassment and asked him to pull down the stack of magazines from the top of his dad’s closet. Francis didn’t like the magazines, didn’t like the way they showed the men’s parts stabbing into the pink wound between the tan women’s thighs, the rat-toothed sneer on the men’s faces, the black gaping hole of a mouth on the women’s tilted necks as they groaned in pain. He didn’t want to think about how his father had stabbed his mother, and maybe that was why she left. Francis wanted the dolls to make love by pressing together their smooth waists. He wanted them only to be happy.

After Melanie left to meet her professor, Yadier plucked the rat from the trash, wrapped it up in a blue handkerchief, and set it by his tools. Without money for gas, he couldn’t go to work, his tools as useless as the rat corpse. He’d have money once he received the check for building the fireplace at the Trubold’s renovation. He had to drive to the Trubold’s home first, though. Their home before his pay, before his home.

He didn’t want to take the cash Melanie stored in her dead grandmother’s wooden jewelry box, cash she said came from student loans so she could take classes with her professor. She talked about the professor every night while the traps clapped, how he disapproved of DNA as a means to prove human migration. What about stories, she told
him her professor said, the act of passing down, of claiming origin by grandmother of grandmother? Yadier’s grandmother came from Guatemala, still lived there, and when he called her she told him Melanie was certainly fucking this professor. There is no such thing as coffee and talk. There is only pale asses grinding against the upholstery of his convertible in a dark alley somewhere you are not. This is how white people treat commitment, promises. Mystery money is proof she is a whore, Grandmother told him. Yadier slipped one of Melanie’s mystery twenties into his wallet. She’d never know it was gone and he would never tell Grandmother in Guatemala.

Francis hid Yadier between his box spring and mattress, where he hoped Yadier could stop worrying. He wished Melanie could come too, but Yadier needed time to think and his sisters would know Melanie was missing. They would not miss Yadier. They preferred to put Melanie in the passenger seat of the pink convertible next to the pale-skinned doll named Albert. They hardly ever played with dark-skinned Yadier, which made Francis want to tear off Albert’s pale rubber head. But then his sisters would know, would tell his friends he liked to stick rubber man-doll heads into the crotch of his underwear.

The man in the coma shuddered. But no one witnessed this shudder. His family only visited once a week now, so he dreamed unsupervised about Francis and his dolls. The man in the coma used to wear a beard, short and trimmed and bright orange. It was all he could remember. Now his nurse shaved his face daily, sometimes twice a day, as if she had nothing better to do than erase his stubble. His family didn’t try to save his beard
and they no longer told him stories. They cried and held his hand. Tears and palms told him nothing of who he used to be. And he no longer knew. Whether he beat that black bear cub with his hiking pole on their camping trip or whether he cowered in the tent, arms wrapped around his children’s mouths. If his fingers were callused from pulling a lever at the foundry or from clutching a pencil at his desk. How much he loved his wife or hated her. When they first kissed, why he forgot to breathe after.

His nurse was the only voice. She told him a story for children about dolls named Raggedy this and that, treated him like a child, cooing while she wiped his anus. And since his family told him no stories about himself, he was stuck in this damn loop. Dolls and scratching inside his skull like rats when the nurse scraped whiskers from his skin. Hundreds of golden whiskers rinsed off the razor and down the drain.

Instead of going to work, Yadier searched for the professor’s convertible. He found it parked beside a pink café. The sun glared off the convertible’s pink finish and stabbed his eyes. He tightened his fists around his steering wheel. He had the professor’s pink paint in his eyes and mystery money in the gas tank. And so he had nothing, since Melanie was gone, locked inside the café with the professor, tangled up in debates about human migration.

Grandmother in Guatemala told stories of her land, how her grandpappa killed jackals, hundreds of them, shot and skinned and piked their skulls, buried them in shallow mounds, left their stiffened paws sticking up through the earth to scare off the other jackals. Their home was surrounded by rotting paws waving hello, turning to bone. Yadier needed such strategies of terror to ward off jackals, Grandmother said. But Yadier
only needed his builder’s license and materials. There would be no jackals in the subdivision where he’d make a house for Melanie. There were only rats in the apartment for now.

He pulled up beside the professor’s convertible and gazed down into the empty leather seats. He unfolded the handkerchief atop his tools, plucked the rat by its stiff tail, and hopped out of his truck. He crouched next to the convertible, opened the gas tank. He jammed the rat’s muzzle into the opening.

Francis yanked a plastic wheel off his sisters’ pink convertible.

The man in the coma gurgled.

But the gurgle was no sign of waking, just gasses escaping through his mouth. He was dead according to the hum of the heart monitor, had been, since the nurse told him a final story about dolls, wiped his anus one last time, and then unplugged his machines. His body stopped, but the story went on, like a dead man’s beard still growing in the casket. He missed his beard and being dead didn’t change that.

And being dead didn’t stop doll stories. And being dead sounds less like death. There are still seconds, last breaths and heartbeats after the machines quit, if I allow them. The man in the coma can imagine dozens more fantasies. They will tell him nothing about his history, but they will be a kind of history all the same. Truth and time and teller blur. So much in one second, in a flash of thoughts. A thousand lives wheezing up through a dying man’s chapped lips.

Francis knew his father would notice the twenty dollars missing from its hiding spot under the magazines. He’d notice the magazines moved, one corner slightly
jutting—the most miniscule page ruffle turned to rocket flares. He decided not to take the money, or examine the stabbing men again. Back in his own room he found Yadier moved from beneath the mattress to atop his pillow. He was stripped naked of his tropical shirt, his bright green shorts. Francis ran his thumb over Yadier’s smooth crotch. Nothing to stab with, so the need for love was greater. He loved Yadier more because his sisters loved him less, because his sisters hated both him and Yadier. If Francis could steal money like his sisters, he could buy Yadier and Melanie a pink plastic house with his father’s twenty dollars, and then they’d be happy.

The man in the coma could buy a dozen razors and snap them all in half, if his body wasn’t dead.

A police cruiser bleated behind Yadier. He turned from the pink convertible, from the rat’s bloated belly jutting from the gas tank, and watched the officer exit his cruiser. The butt of the officer’s palm pushed against the handle of his pistol. He chewed his red mustache, asked, “This your vehicle, sir?”

Yadier shook his head, slipped his hands into his pockets.

“Do you think you should be fiddling with the gas tank, then, sir?”

Yadier craned his neck, tried to see around the corner of the cafe where Melanie and the professor were now talking about family mythology, the truth in the fiction of a family story: Great Grandpa shoots a bear cub, for example. By the time Great Grandson hears the story, it has morphed into Great Grandpa thrusting a shovel spade into a mother grizzly’s heart, saving the life of a passing hiker, who ended up being an actor, a very famous one, in this black and white movie here, and if you look closely, you can see Great Grandpa’s name mouthed by the actor in close-up, in the scene where he cries
when considering whether or not to jump off the skyscraper. It’s like playing telephone, the telling of these stories. Still this, the professor says, has more truth in all its spiraling strands, than any microscopic genome helix.

“That there,” the officer said, “I would call destruction of property.”

But Yadier didn’t agree. Destruction seemed more like a taking away, and he had added the rat that had crept into their apartment, crept between Yadier and Melanie, when it should have been terrorizing Melanie and the professor. Now this was fair; this was the right place for a rat. Yadier wanted to tell the officer this. He pulled his hands from his pockets to begin, but the officer misunderstood, rushed him, bent him over the trunk of the professor’s pink convertible. Yadier’s head slammed metal, created a dent, and now Yadier agreed that this was destruction of property as the officer’s hands slapped against his inner thighs.

When Francis heard his father’s car rumble into the garage, he slid Yadier into the waistline of his jeans. He ran down the hallway to his sister’s room, and he could have tossed the naked Yadier under her bed if his father had gone to the fridge for a beer first, like every other night. But his father had already been drinking, was drunk, and had to piss. He wobbled down the hallway, slapped his palm against the wall to steady himself. He spotted his son. He smiled at his boy, staggered toward him, and wrapped his arms around him. He loved his son, hoped he grew up big and strong like his great uncle Pafko, who tore down half of Chicago with his lucky sledge hammer after the fires, and then built them back up with his holy hammer and welding torch the priest had blessed. Uncle Pafko breathed sawdust and shat rivets. Uncle Pafko was a man among men.
But Francis was a boy among sisters. This worried Francis’ father, all the pink and plastic and perfume and dolls. The magazines lessened this worry, the good dirty ones he knew Francis was thumbing. He pulled his son close in a hug and then felt a hardness in his boy’s jeans. A boy should not have an erection when hugging his father. To teach Francis this lesson, his father smacked the crown of his head. Tears filled Francis’ eyes, but he refused to cry, not in front of Yadier, who needed to see that sometimes the people you loved most hurt you, and you had to keep loving them no matter how drunk they were or how many rats spilled into your home.

The man in the coma who would be a completely dead man in four and a half more seconds knew that the hurt transferred by a loved one was often only a misunderstanding. His family didn’t know how much he needed them to tell him his name, his birth date, his social security number. Any solid fact he’d always known that would surely help him remember everything that was real. They knew these things but wouldn’t tell him. He only heard their cries, felt his wife’s fist pound against his chest after she kissed his limp lips. He wished he could explain this torture of misunderstanding to Francis. But Francis was the dream of a dying man. And Francis would never know that he’d been struck because of the doll that felt like an erection against his father’s leg. Francis’ father only struck him because he didn’t know what else to do. He loved his son, if harshly. And Yadier didn’t know that while Melanie loved her professor, it was never in the way she loved Yadier. The way she loved Yadier and his ridiculous dreams of homebuilding, the flakes of sawdust tangled into his chest hair, the way his hands shook from exhaustion after work when he jittered them down her calves,
the way he carried her to the bedroom like a child every night when she fell asleep reading her textbooks. She always woke in his arms, but she let him carry her anyway.

The soon-to-be-dead man was glad that in his last few seconds he had moved beyond dolls, had turned the nurse’s story of dolls into a story about people. The nurse hummed as she clicked off his heart monitor, as the room silenced, as her humming became the only sound.

The officer who jamméd Yadier into the back of his cruiser would hum to his sleeping three-year-old daughter that night. He hadn’t seen her awake in five days, because of the extra shifts he’d been picking up. Time-and-a-half on top of vacation pay was impossible to turn down, even if he’d miss the first Fourth of July fireworks his daughter would actually remember. Miss her awe over the red flower of incinerated strontium, her terror at the fizzle and whomp. The officer’s foot pressed harder on the gas pedal, stomped on the brake at the next red light. Yadier’s head slammed into the metal cage four times on the way to the station, his handsuffed behind his back, unable to soften the blows. His hands could not save him like they could build a home for Melanie. And maybe that home was impossible, would need more than two hands and a few flatbed loads of lumber and wire and PVC and shingle. Especially when Melanie could so easily spill through doors and windows while he slept and go find the professor. He imagined a home with no windows and one door. A mound in the earth, a cave mouth, warm in winter, cold in summer, a womb of earth. They would slip inside and he would dynamite the entrance into a cascade of dirt and clay, and then there would be no escape from the home that he had dug instead of built. This was a kind of love to make.
After the officer mashed Yadier’s fingers into ink and rolled them across paper, after they took his picture from the front and side, he led Yadier to a payphone, gave him a quarter. “One call,” he said, nodding at the black receiver, jealous of imagined fathers who could put their steady hands on their daughters’ shaking backs, lit by the momentary sparkle of fireworks.

Yadier couldn’t imagine daughters and didn’t think about fireworks, so he called Grandmother in Guatemala collect. Jail, Grandmother said, was only something every Durazo man must experience, like great uncle Felipe, locked up in a white sheriff’s holding cell for six days without food or water. He drank his own piss, broke the necks of rats and then sucked their marrow. By the time they found Felipe—and the sheriff who’d selfishly died of a heart attack while guarding him—he’d gone mad. Mad with rabies, they said. But he wouldn’t let any more white men leave him in a cell to die, even if they called the cell a hospital. Great Uncle Felipe broke free. He ran for three days. Three days of rain and plenty of water he was too terrified to drink and a flash flood that washed that white town away, sent the dead sheriff’s fresh coffin floating to the next county.

“I don’t think I can break away from this jail, Grandmother.”

“You won’t think when they make you an animal. You will only fight and run and bleed when they catch you.”

“What should I do?”

“You must become the hunter. They the animals. And leave that white bitch.”

Yadier hung up the phone, leaned his head against the wall until an officer led him to a cell. A cell like a cage, like a place where he could be forgotten and turn feral.
The man in the coma about to become a dead man felt like a snake in his last two seconds. He’d been sitting on a warm rock, paralyzed with a full belly, but then the sleeves around his legs inflated, tightened, strangling him awake. The nurse had forgotten to unplug this machine, the one to squeeze blood through his legs. And here was body again. A body with no history, no identity, but still a body to fight. His arm reached out for the nurse who hummed as she polished a bedpan and strolled past. His trimmed fingernails sunk into her thigh, drew blood, dropped her to the floor, where he could tumble from his bed, coil around her, and squeeze until he’d strangled out every memory from her head. But none of these things happened. Only the machine whirred, leg sleeves milking his veins. His arm wouldn’t move, and it was she who brushed the back of her knuckles against his slightly stubbled skin.

Flesh. Flesh to Francis was a shell of cured plastic, molded into outthrust breasts, impervious to gravity. Flesh was the outline of underwear grafted into skin, slices in the polished surface where crotch ended and legs began. Francis stripped all of his sisters’ dolls, flushed their neon-pink skirts and leopard-print blouses and impossibly tiny socks down the toilet. He laid a dozen naked bodies across the lawn. Each crotch the same smooth surface, the same absence of stabber and stabbed. No love could be made with nothing, without a bit of stabbing, a bit of pain. His father’s slap had proved this, because he knew his father loved him, had kept him and his sisters after their mother left. Away in the front seat of an eighteen-wheeler, riding next to the trucker who would show her the world.

Francis tugged on the starter of the lawn mower, like he’d seen his father do, but nothing happened. His arms were too small, too weak. He tugged again and again, sweat
dripping down his belly to his waist where it collected in Melanie’s hair. He stopped, breathed, forgot about his father and imagined Yadier’s arms carrying Melanie. He tugged once more, and the mower roared to life. He pushed over the dolls, and their bodies disappeared. Under the shield of the mower, the dolls made a sound like bullets firing. He worried that the blade might snap, that it might unhinge and come spinning at his shins. Or a doll hand might escape the mower and shoot into his scrotum, plastic manicured nails severing precious veins, and then he’d never know the stab of making love. Worst of all was the thought of the mower breaking. He’d have to explain to his father, who’d need to work extra overtime to pay for a new mower. His father’s grinding teeth, slit yellow eyes, his giant hand smacking Francis’ scalp.

But another slap was another moment of his father doing something his mother could not do.

Francis pushed the mower on. It dropped tanned scraps that Francis stepped over, fragment of nose, kneecap, snaggled abdomen, and hair, golden threads laced through the grass clippings. In his wake: a bevy of gold-laced lawn.

He pulled Yadier from his waistband, wedged his legs into the mower’s handlebars so the doll could watch. Yadier’s black hair was molded to his rubber scalp and would leave no gold clippings, nothing worth finding.

Melanie walked her professor to his convertible. He got inside and patted the passenger’s seat. She smelled rat. She told her professor she’d prefer to walk.

“Yes, walk until you find home,” her professor said. “It is the foot that traces out a history, not our damn theories and digging and goddamned DNA. May your feet make
your story. Though, your feet can certainly grace my floor mats, and I can show you my home, and you can fuck an old man and start a new story.”

“What will your feet do?” She wondered if her professor smelled rat, too, wondered if perhaps the rats from home had crept into her clothes, her hair, seeping out at this moment.

“My feet don’t walk. I collect footprints and hoard them and brood over them like a dragon and its gold. My feet will push these pedals until I’ve magically returned to my cave without a trace.”

“You’re full of shit, Professor.”

“That is my story,” he smiled up at her, “my bullshit to own.”

The professor drove away, leaving Melanie with her feet and a two-mile walk home. When she arrived home, there was no Yadier. She waited until six, until eight. No answer on his phone. No note in their apartment. She called his friends, his contractor, the Trubold’s home phone that Yadier told her never to call. She considered calling his grandmother in Guatemala, but Grandmother hated her. Finally, she called the police and found out where her Yadier had been hiding.

And now they rode together in silence, in the cab of Yadier’s truck, on the handlebars of Francis’ mower, in the last synapses firing in the soon-to-be-dead man’s brain. The last pump of his heart spent on these thoughts rather than a final glimpse of the nurse bent over, buttocks inches from his face as she got out the razor and the cream for one last shave.

One last heartbeat is so little, can be delegated for such small tasks. The results are unsatisfying. So I allow another breath, force a gasp, touch a tremor of electricity
through his body. The giving of this last breath, a dozen final heartbeats, is unattached to body, unexplained by reality’s science. I creep in only when I must, because they can’t end here, this way. Dolls, dreams, characters, but I’ve become attached, need to see how they live a little longer. Extension given.

So the soon-to-be-dead man thinks of Francis, the groan of his mower, two dolls jammed into the handlebar. Francis doesn’t want Yadier and Melanie to stop loving one another, but they have too much disappointment, in their home, in each other. Their plastic bodies break so easily, their history relegated to an inspector number forty-nine, a factory line worker, a stainless steel basin of bubbling plastic, a mold that will stamp ten thousand more Yadiers and Melanies.

Yet this Yadier looked at his hands on the steering wheel, still believed they could build walls to keep all of his love locked in closets and cupboards. Beside him, Melanie theorized a family history, Yadier’s grandmother and her grandpappa and dead jackals buried with a paw protruding through the earth, or the tip of a snout. Fodder for a thesis, praise from her professor. But she didn’t ask Yadier about his family. Francis threw him under the mower, his hands ruined, mulched up in the blades, no good for making homes to lock up his love. Then in goes Melanie. It will take years before Francis stops finding golden strands of her hair growing up through the summer grass. He will cringe when his father finds one, cusses at his sisters who comb too harshly. Francis’ father imagines curls of gold wisping through their window. All their dolls will be hideously bald before they grow out of them, his father will say and slap Francis’ shoulder. The slap stings, but in a good way, the sting of being a man who will love many women, who will grow many beards and shave them, and the skin underneath will always be his.
I. THE SILVERBACK AND MOM

Dad’s on his way out. And I hope I can see the signs if this sort of thing ever starts up with my wife, but the signs are gradual. Nothing in life ever happens without warning. It comes on slow, like the leaks in the roof of my alternator shop, like what happened with my mom and the silverback gorilla.

Every time Mom came to visit, we’d go to the zoo with my wife, my daughter Judy, and my son Trent. We always started with the polar bears, because they were out front and Trent liked to press his face against the glass when the cubs swam by and pretend the giant paws thrashed his cheeks. Then we’d go see the lions and the otters and the hippos, who always just floated lazily and looked like they might burst right through their own skin. And none of them gave us any trouble. Then we’d swirl through the aquarium and the reptile house.

At the monkey house we’d grow tense, the kids quiet, Mom fiddling with her purse, clasp ing and unclasping, offering the kids breath-mints and chewing gum repetitively. The orangutans and tamarins behaved just fine, didn’t bother us at all. Even when they pulled on their pieces we could all have a laugh when Judy asked what they were doing. It was cute and innocent. Those chimps got me, though. They always looked so concerned, watched us carefully, would scratch their chins in tandem with my own thoughtful gestures, and I’d wonder who was really watching who. They didn’t have to work for their food, and women in khaki jumpsuits cleaned up their messes daily. I had to
sell alternators all day for my food. The grease never came out of my fingernails, and I had to pay men in navy blue jumpsuits to clean up after themselves. And, after all, the chimps didn’t have to deal with that silverback gorilla.

The gorilla cage was always the last part of our visit. There was a whole family in there. A harem of mothers, a dozen kids running around and slapping every patch of grass in sight, and one big alpha male, with a long gray patch smeared across his back. When he saw us coming, whether there were thirty people huffing clouds of breath on the glass or no one there at all, he’d knuckle over to the window and stare at my mom hungrily. She’d pretend like she didn’t notice, but I could tell from the red in her cheeks and the way she’d start pushing the breath-mints and gum again that she definitely noticed.

That was his behavior for the first dozen visits anyway, which didn’t bother me too much. It all just seemed instinctual. But soon after, he took to pounding on the glass, which scared us right the hell away, hoping he wouldn’t smash through. The next time we came back, he didn’t pound. Instead, he waltzed up to the glass and pressed his outstretched palm against it. His fingers were huge, creased with deep black lines. It was charming, like in the movies where the lover ends up in jail and just wants to pretend touching is an option. And Mom obliged. She pressed her palm against his, and his eyes glossed over. My wife asked why I never did anything as romantic as that. I shrugged. The gorilla leaned over, plucked a dandelion growing in the grass and held it up to my mom. That was it. That was all it took: those glossy eyes, the deep lifelines in his palm, and a dramatic hand-on-glass embrace. Mom was done for.

I blame Dad, really. He never wanted to make the four-hour drive, his ass anchored to the soft routine of his worn red recliner, the world flashing by on the
Discovery Channel. My kids only saw him on the holidays. They grew up in spurts to him. He only caught the highlights. Crawling to walking, mumbling to talking, talking to cussing—my wife said I had to stop cussing around them so much because the oldest one was only seven, but I knew they’d hear it all soon enough. Dad didn’t have a stake in much of this, and he let his wife go to the zoo alone too many times.

The next time Mom came to visit, she wanted to go to the art museum instead, said she was tired of the zoo. I said that was fine. I was tired of the zoo, too, plus the kids were excited about the Rothko exhibit. They went crazy for those big blocks of color that looked like demon-possessed cotton candy. So we met Mom at the art museum. We showed up early. The kids climbed all over the Giacometti sculptures, and I told them to get the hell off because Giacometti always made his figures with such feeble, scrawny legs, and they could snap and crush them at any moment. I was telling them that they wouldn’t get to see any goddamn Rothkos if they didn’t get their shit together, when my wife tapped me on the shoulder and pointed next to the Goyas. There, right next to a print of that one where Cronos is eating up one of his kids, I saw my mom and the silverback from the zoo making out. At first, I thought he’d finally pounded his way through the glass, tracked the scent of Mom’s Lily of the Valley perfume, and was now attacking her in a fit of lust, but this theory didn’t hold up after looking closer. One of his hands cradled the small of her back, the other just fingertips glancing her cheeks. She leaned into his grip, as if she wanted to be swallowed, fearless of his massive jaws. I’d never seen her kiss like this before. Mom and Dad only ever pecked in public, in passing, like a brief high-five.

The kiss really got me going, and I was already plenty pissed about a bad day at
the alternator shop and my kids nearly crushing themselves on the Giacomettis. You see, the problem is, it’s getting to be about the same cost to replace an alternator rather than bring it to my shop and have it repaired. My guys told me I needed to get with the times and start selling new alternators too, but I always say, Why replace what you can fix? That was my problem at work, but the silverback and my mom were my problem that minute. I suppose problems have a way of snowballing and that might have had something to do with how I reacted to the painful scene over by the Goyas.

I ran over to the samurai room and grabbed a long spear with a red tassel and hurled it at him. My kids screamed, and that gave the silverback all the notice he needed to pluck the spear right out of the air and snap it between his fingers, his other huge hand still wrapped around Mom’s waist. My wife shook her head, but I could tell she was at least a little impressed by his reflexes and strength.

Mom looked pissed, but the silverback touched her shoulder and sauntered over to me, his bare feet suctioning against the hardwoods. I never realized how huge he was until I saw him up close. Standing upright in his pleated slacks and three-buttons-undone white shirt, he was a giant. And if I counted the tip of the beret on top of his head, I’m sure he would have passed the six-foot mark. I didn’t count the beret. I tensed up, squeezed my greasy nails into a fist. I wasn’t sure if I was going to try and hit him or just embarrassed he cleaned up better than me.

I read at the zoo that from fingertip to fingertip his arms measured past eight feet, but he folded his arms gracefully behind his back. He explained the situation, that Mom and him were serious and she wasn’t going back to Dad, and he asked if we could just be civil about this whole thing. I told him I didn’t think we could, and asked to see him.
outside.

When we got outside, a crowd of museum goers snapping pictures of their grinning kids in front of the museum turned their attention toward us. I was ready to throw down and wished he’d take off his beret and maybe his shirt because he looked pretty sophisticated, and I was just wearing a NASCAR T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He kept walking, ignoring the museum goers’ oohs and aahs and clicking cameras. I followed him across the street, through the parking lot, over a vacant grassy lot that made me think of the Serengeti and how much it would hurt when he ripped my arms out of their sockets. But he kept going. We ended up at a little bar across the street that was full of weekend warriors just off of their shifts, guys that build houses and work in factories. We sat down on some stools with round cushions on top that rotated on a single steel bar. He gave me a spin, and I couldn’t hold back a little chuckle. The place was dark, but there was a cut-out of a girl in a red bikini, strung up in enough Christmas lights to make the whole place glow in rainbows. He ordered me an IPA and himself a gin and tonic.

I tried to stay mad, but he was charming. I ended up telling him about the alternator shop, and he said he’d always wished he was better with his hands, how impressive it was to fix such an intricate piece of machinery. We talked about baseball, how he liked the Tigers too, used to work at the Detroit Zoo and catch games when he could. I asked if they really let him out to do that sort of thing, and he said hell yeah. And then I knew those chimps really were the ones with the better setup. But he sensed that and told me my life was enviable, and the chimps weren’t really as smart as I thought—constantly telling the same pirate joke, never caring how many times someone had heard it. He said intelligence had more to do with empathy than mimicry. Then, he gave me
another spin on the chair. I laughed harder this time. He bought me another IPA and spun around some of the other guys in the bar, and they laughed too. The whole place seemed as happy as Christmastime, and that made me a little sad because I wasn’t sure exactly how we’d split the time between Dad and Mom this year. But then he spun me around again, and I figured it would all work itself out.

I was a bit drunk, so Kevin—that was the silverback’s name—let me ride on his shoulders on the way back. Really, I could have walked back, but he didn’t want to risk it because we had a busy intersection to cross. And, wow, could he run. He sprinted right out into traffic and just missed getting smashed by a city bus. I guess he was a little buzzed too.

When we got to the museum, the kids had their fill of Rothko, their mouths smudged with reds and purples and blues like midnight. They wanted to climb on the Giacomettis one more time, and that got me pissed off all over again because I’d already told them how dangerous it was. I only said no because I loved them. Kevin told them they could climb him instead, so they did. They hung from his arms, climbed up his back, clawed at his nice beret, and he didn’t seem to mind a bit.

Everything looked beautiful and red with the sun setting over the parking lot, and I leaned on my wife. She smiled and squeezed my shoulder, and I thought about how I might as well just keep repairing alternators for as long as I could, because that’s what I liked doing and I was good at it. The last museum goers trudged back to the parking lot, cameras stowed, show over. I asked Mom for a breath-mint, but really I wanted to hug her. It wasn’t the IPAs either. This was sincere. This woman knew so much more than I did about people, and when to make a change, and I admired her for that. She said she
was out of breath-mints and she didn’t have gum either. So I just put my arm around her and my wife and we watched the kids swing from Kevin’s outstretched wrists.
II. STILL LIFE

The kids spotted a giant statue of a buck from the overpass as we trekked upstate on our first family camping trip. Its antlers stretched longer than the rear axle on our sedan, and it could have easily gobbled the engine block and the front seats with its massive muzzle. But deer are vegetarians, and this was something I knew for sure. So I figured it couldn’t hurt to take the exit and explore this massive, gentle beast. This adventure would be a nice break from the usual, Mom—and Kevin, her gorilla lover. I understood the northern Michigan wilderness, and it was hard to imagine Kevin, that citified simian, in this world, where the noble, the primordial dwelled.

My son, Trent, said the buck must be worth a hundred points. My wife laughed. I wanted to correct him, explain that the points had to do with the antlers, not like points in video games for a big kill. But he’d learn soon enough, once we got up north, where I’d show Trent how to shoot the rifle. There would be a lot of wilderness education on this trip, as I’d grown up camping. This was all new to the kids, who spent all day inside with their text books and computers. Book worms. Both of them were possibly geniuses, scoffing at math homework that scared the hair on my back straight. They’d grow up smarter and better than me, with my failing alternator repair shop. And that was great. But this weekend, I’d teach them something. Even though money was tight, the trip was worth it, my last chance to show my expertise to the kids before I closed up the alternator shop for good.

Off the exit, we could see the buck clearer, as well as the round building under its hooves. I was intrigued, and the kids were mesmerized. It loomed larger as we
approached from behind, its stubby white tail and anus beckoning our adventure off the beaten path of RVs and trailers flashing expensive red motor boats. The kids said, “Can we?” And I said, “Why the hell not?” My wife smiled and nuzzled her head against my shoulder, her lips smelling of Dr. Pepper lip balm. I loved these moments, when we all bonded together to discover our state’s great ceramic monuments of tourism. What a state we lived in! Only in Michigan were bucks constructed to match the size of men’s full hearts.

Flyers packed the windshield of the only car in the lot. We parked. The kids jumped out and ran around in busy circles, stopping every now and then to hug each other and point at the giant buck on the roof. My wife lifted a flyer from the rusted wiper blade and read it to us: *Whispers of Wilderness. Enter to learn the secret language of the Michigan forest.* I pulled another flyer and it was the same. They were all the same.

“Wow,” my wife said. “They really sank their advertising budget into the flyers.” She taught high school economics, so she knew all about marketing strategies and such.

“Kind of overkill, don’t you think,” I said, agreeing. But if I’d sunk any money into advertising, my alternator shop might’ve had a chance. I thought of those rows of greasy alternators lined across the shelves looking like gorilla fists. How could I advertise that? I should’ve listened to her suggestions to diversify with some starters or transmissions. I tried to keep my marketing worries to myself as Judy and Trent sprinted toward the front entrance. A father has a duty not to spoil his kids’ excitement.

The front doors were barricaded by a taxidermy bear standing on its hind legs and holding out its paw, containing a slot for money. Printed on his chest were the words *FIVE DOLLAR ADMITTANCE.* I jammed a twenty into the slot, and there went the
s’mores fund, but it was a solid investment for my kids’ education. After the twenty sucked in, the bear rumbled, “Grrrrrr-ra-rumba-rumba,” and slid to the side on a track, his eyes blinking with red lights. We entered.

The lobby was, of course, the souvenir shop, brightly lit and full of bins spilling plastic deer and bears and other Michigan wildlife. I didn’t see a single person working the counter, which must have kept their overhead low, but their thefts high. Every business choice always led to sacrifice. I understood that. Trent wanted a fox and Judy gripped a doe so tight I thought its head would pop off. I told them that if they were good little deer they could pick out something later. Kids need motivation, need to learn to work for rewards, even if that wasn’t true for me and my own work.

On the way to the exhibits, we passed a small cave, trimmed in Styrofoam painted to look like stone, with a sign above it that said: EMPLOYEES ONLY. A faint red light pulsed from the shadowy entrance. Trent asked what the cave was. I told him, “That’s where the animals go to hangout, have some lunch, use the restroom.”

And it was true, that was likely where the bathrooms were, right next to the owner's office and the break room, where all the workers were hiding, slacking off, when they could have been selling my kids plastic deer. I pitied the owner, imagined him hunched over his chair, crunching numbers, sweating over the flyer budget, while his workers smoked cigarettes and laughed about his ridiculous ponytail. Back home, that could've been me, but I was on vacation, couldn't let the alternator shop get to me here, in the untouched wild.

Glass cases staggered the dark hallway, displaying still-lifes of nature in action via taxidermy. Each case had a row of antlers you could hold up to your ear and press a
button to hear those talked-up whispers of the wild. The first one was a wildcat leaping over a felled pine. The kids pushed the antler-phones to their ears, pressed the button, and I could hear the muffled whine and hiss of the wildcat, followed by a low, masculine voice, probably explaining a little gem or two about the wildcat’s behavior or eating habits. Ah, education! I couldn’t be happier than for my kids to be learning something about their state, knowledge to give our camping trip more meaning. My wife and I stood behind the kids with our arms around each other, watching them as the wildcat pounced forward on a track. They jumped back. My wife squeezed my butt. We all laughed. And I told them that if they ever ran into a real wildcat they should make themselves as big as possible, stretch their arms high over their head. Judy said she would pet the heck out of that cat if she saw it, which worried me. But then Trent said, “Don’t worry, Dad. I’d shoot it right in the tail.” A shot in the tail wouldn’t do much, but I was glad he was excited about hunting.

The next cases were smaller. Robins perched over their blue-egged nests, hawks swooping on fishing line, two herons rubbing necks. The kids listened to each one carefully, taking turns pressing the buttons, sometimes listening twice. Then there was the snow owl, white and majestic and wise, and when you pressed his button his head spun in a full circle. The kids pushed an antler-phone to my ear, urging me to hear the owl hoot. I broke from my wife and listened, even though I’d grown up on a farm and was familiar with the hoots from our barn.

The recording was crackly and distant, but I floated back to my childhood, and could almost see the pale winter sun slicing through the grayed slats of pine, smell the rusty farm equipment. My parents owned that farm until I was ten, when we moved out to
the suburbs. My father failed at farming, and then failed at a string of small businesses: a coatrack store, a pillowcase outlet, a Lebanese deli. He never figured commerce out, hung up on specific needs. I was bound to follow in his footsteps, his failures. I was glad to have a break from thinking about it—a place, here, where I could escape into something natural.

The owl said, “Whooot-whooo-whooot-Whoo,” and then, “Who is that sexy lady with that wild pair of gozangas, and why is she wasting her time with the tubby oaf?”

I pushed the button again. “Whooot-who do you think you are, buddy? Your wife is bored, so why don’t you send her in here, and I’ll show her a good time.”

Who did I think I was? Who the hell did this owl think he was? So much for escape. I was so mad I could have punched the glass and spun the snow owl’s head until it screwed right off. No one talked about my wife that way, my best friend, the woman who could melt away the pain of days without a single customer by simply touching my face. But the kids were already on their way, running and laughing, to the next case. I had to let it go, but now I was worried about what secrets of the wilderness my kids were absorbing.

The dark hallways opened up to a scene of huge moose butting heads, their fuzzy antlers interlocked, a cow moose off to the side licking plastic birch trees. I decided to listen with the kids this time, and my wife picked up a phone too, like I was just doing this to play along with the kids. Trent hit the button. The moose wailed in between simulated antler clunks. And then the masculine voice came through, saying, “Male moose often fight to impress potential mates. But after their mates are secured, ramming passion is replaced by lackluster complacency. It becomes all TV dinners, and the female
will be lucky if her cheap mate takes her to a movie twice a year. Needless to say, sex becomes as banal as hiccups.”

I wanted to explain to the kids how wrong this was, but they didn’t seem concerned. They pushed the button again, and ran off to the next case.

“Can you believe this?” I said to my wife. “They’re feeding the kids crap sandwiches. These whispers of the wild are bullshit.”

“Honey, not everyone is the wilderness expert you are,” she said. “Besides, there’s a little bit of truth to it.” But I didn't want bits of truth—alternator brushes, diodes, frayed copper wires—I wanted escape, purity, parts unblemished by doubt and paranoia. She wrapped a hand around my waist and I felt a little better. All I needed was her arm around my waist and for the kids to be smiling and that was enough. I was willing to push on through a few more cases. Anyway, the kids read enough that even if they ate a few crap sandwiches, their intellectual diets would balance things out.

Then came the deer window. The glass was so clear. The kids straightened their backs and got ready to listen again. I went to grab myself an antler-phone, but my wife snagged a belt loop and urged me to just ignore this one. How could I? We had a stake in our kids’ futures. We needed to know what they were learning. I needed to know.

A pack of does were frozen in mid bound, mingling through the pines, a few bucks bringing up the rear. After I pushed the button, a fawn slid forward on a track toward the window and then through it, at which point I realized there was no glass on this case. Judy and Trent ran at the doe, stroking its ears, crying about how cute it was. The masculine voice came on: “These days, most deer are hunted by motorists, as they’ve become impervious to bullets, so there’s no use in trying to shoot us, tubb-o. Also, they’re
the smartest of the mammals, surpassing the far stupider ape family. A little known fact is that fawns love to eat quarters. Feel free to feed the fawn.”

Now I was really angry. Not so much about being impervious to bullets, because now I couldn’t wait to show Trent how untrue that was. The ape comment really got me, though. I took that as a personal insult to me, my kids, and especially Kevin. He was an amateur art historian, a member of Mensa. I stored his number on speed-dial for when the kids wanted help with homework. Certainly not the kind of species that lied about needing quarters for nourishment.

The kids tugged on my pant legs, jangling my change, screaming for doe feed. I wouldn’t give in. Even when the fawn’s jaw dropped down to reveal a coin slot, even when my wife tried to keep peace and pass out quarters, I wouldn’t submit. I barricaded the fawn’s hungry slot with my chest, crossed my arms, made myself immovable, for Kevin, for apes everywhere, for the truth of the wild. Judy started crying. Trent punched my thighs. I told them no souvenirs then, and stood my ground. I’d had enough of hearing these whispers of the wild. I pointed toward the exit. And that’s where we went, my wife now carrying Judy and Trent stomping out.

We passed the snow hares, the wolves, the bears, the geese. At one point we passed by a small case of penguins, and I tried not to even look cause I was mad enough about inaccuracy already. And then right through the souvenir shop where we’d entered. Judy stopped crying once she saw the plastic does again. How could I deny her? She was my only girl, and it hadn’t been her fault. It was all the stupid animal displays, all the lies. Trent got his fox, too. Still there was no one around working the register. I didn’t know how we were supposed to pay, and I’m not a thief, even though money was growing
tighter because of this ridiculous tourist trap. I left a ten on the counter, which would have been a six-pack to share with my wife, and we headed for the exit.

Instead of those pressure pads that open doors in supermarkets, this place’s pads made a fox drop down from the ceiling. My wife jumped, nearly smacked in the head. Judy whimpered.

“We hope you’ve enjoyed your visit,” the fox said. “Please consider all the lives that ended for you sickos’ enjoyment. Maybe you’ll consider dying yourself and being stuffed, so we can make a very educational human display. If that doesn’t sound so good, then please just think of the choice we had in the matter.”

Then the fox’s jaw dropped open just like the fawn’s, revealing another coin slot. Rumbling footsteps echoed from the hallway where the displays had been. I worried about the deer case without any glass. Perhaps I should've given in to sales pressure? Maybe if I’d considered pressure as a sales technique at my alternator shop, we wouldn’t be closing next week.

My palms sweated around the change in my pocket, gripped in my fist. Our exit was blocked, our nature vacation threatened by wild secrets. My wife breathed heavy in my ear. I wanted her to tell me to do something, to use my true wilderness knowledge to save us from the mistake we'd stepped into. She didn't, though. Didn't even ask, and the wilderness seemed so far away, blocked by glass doors and Styrofoam rocks and a taxidermy fox.

I left my family, guilt and adrenalin spilling through my body, ready for the hunt. I jogged toward the EMPLOYEE'S ONLY cave behind the sales counter to beat the pulp out of the idiots behind it all. The rumble from the halls thundered closer as I crouched
into the cave. The deeper I went, the lower the ceiling became. I had to drop to my belly, against the cold tile floor. I slithered, through the darkness, headed toward the red light of what I hoped was management.

The red light grew stronger. Mechanical chugging thumped from the other side, the heart of this business. I was almost there, my back aching as I pulled myself along another few feet. But what would it solve, coming out the other end to pound on the man in charge? The owner, making five hundred copies of the same flyer to slap onto the same damn car in the lot—business moves of futility, like a raccoon gnawing at its neck to release itself from a trap. I couldn't fight him. I didn't want to see a man I understood too well, better than myself. But I pressed on, into the very guts of the beast, to seek the man who'd corrupted my pure wilderness escape.

I met the red light, throbbing over my head where the cave funneled to its tightest point. I squeezed through into blackness, and then a bright light struck me. The break room, and there he was, standing before a mirror, over a small sink, shaving the last strip of stubble from his throat. He wore a white shirt, buttons open, his bare chest exposed, a tie yet to be knotted draping his collar.

“'I'm not paying to get my family out of here,’” I said, still lying on my belly with an aching back.

When he turned, I saw him bleeding from a nick on the neck. He looked murdered, gone, finished.

“Suit yourself,” he said and clicked his razor against the sink bowl. The mirror before him opened up, an exit. Eye-splitting daylight poured into the break room, overpowering the flickering tube lights. But it did me no good. I was alone, and I refused
to bring my family past this murdered man, so they could witness the exhibit of failure. I
headed back the way I came.

At the lobby, Trent said to my wife, “I think I got this one.” He held his chin in his
hand. “If fawn’s like quarters and bears like twenties...”

“How foxes must eat dimes,” Judy blurted from my wife’s arms.

“Of course,” my wife said. “But we’re going to need a lot of them. A whole fistful
at least.”

I didn’t understand the logic. It didn’t matter. I could worry about all the things I
didn’t know and didn’t understand later, while I was packing up the alternator shop. I
pulled out my fistful of change and slugged dimes into the fox’s neck slot. Maybe the
coins would slide down a chute, tink onto the desk of the owner, a hail storm of second
chances, tapping out enough gas money to drive away from his shop. My wife rubbed my
shoulders in small circles, and my kids counted out each dime I spent, until finally the fox
lifted back into the ceiling.

As we walked through the parking lot, I patted the kids on the back. My wife
applied more lip gloss and smiled at me brightly. They’d all learned something, and I had
a part in that education. I hadn’t saved them, but I’d been a part of an escape. That was
enough to fill me until I would get back on the road, reach the campgrounds by dusk and
assemble our tent, stretch out the sleeping bags, and build a fire, a big one. Things I knew
how to do. And the fire’s orange tails would nip the pine boughs, crackling us to sleep.
III. TAKE YOUR FAMILY TO WORK DAY

It’s Take Your Family to Work Day at the construction site where I work. I fitted the kids with OSHA-approved hard-hats: a little pink one for Judy and a blue one for Trent. Before our day gets started, they’re already chasing each other through the twenty acres we’ll be clearing today, weaving in and out of the birches and pines, a swirl of blue and pink. The painter’s eight-year-old daughter peeks out from a second-story window across the street, her face dusted white with primer, and the cement masons’ kids peep over the foundation next to us to utter guffaws before they slip back below. They take this seriously, apply themselves to their fathers’ trade. But am I embarrassed my kids are having fun? Hell no.

When I holler for them, Judy comes back with a palm full of acorns, which she holds out to me like she just found diamonds back there in the trees. Trent’s got a handful of rocks he chucks through the low-hanging poplar leaves in a pouty sort of way. He’s jealous of the acorns, wishes he’d made better choices in his foraging, but that’s how it goes: Sometimes you regret what you pick, and then you’re stuck with your decisions. Like me, I was stuck with my failing alternator shop for years.

Judy sees me smiling at the acorns in her hand and asks, “How much you think these babies are worth?”

“Well, they’re nuts, sweetie,” I say. “So, not much street value, but the little forest creatures sure love them.”

She shakes her head and then runs over to Mom and her boyfriend Kevin, who are giggling under the spout of my wood chipper.
“Hey, Kevin,” Judy says. “How much you give me for all these nuts? Dad said you’d be interested.”

My face gets hot, and I’m wishing she would have just found boring rocks like Trent. Kevin’s a silverback gorilla, and when I said forest creatures, Judy must have gotten mixed up. Now I’m going to look like the ignorant oaf, sounding like I don’t know the difference between jungles and forests, squirrels and gorillas.

Kevin reaches into a pocket of his khaki shorts, tight around his thick, black leg hair, and comes up with a huge hand full of pocket change. Judy trades him. He winks at me, and Mom smiles behind him. What a guy. Judy beams. Trent throws a stone at a pine way too close to Judy, and I tell him he can sit in the damn truck till lunch if he can’t deal with his choices. He gets teary, kicks the backhoe tires. My wife takes his hand and tells him we all make bad choices. She always knows how to empathize, how to rightly teach the kids the lessons I bark out too quickly. I know my faults. I’m not proud of them. And I know I have one hell of a partner on my side. Like Kevin and Mom, we’re a perfect pair.

My wife has suffered, though—the expectant smiles at cocktail parties when she told colleagues her husband repaired alternators, them waiting for the punch line, when, no, it was really just alternators. Last year, I went to Trent’s school with all the other dads, had to follow up the civil engineer who donated a little model city to their classroom. They shooed the class hamster through the model city the whole time I talked about sliprings and rotors and brushes. My lecture hardly garnered a glance. Trent wouldn’t even look at me. And poor Mom, who helped me box up the shop when it closed, slapping packing tape over expectations that her son would make something of
himself.

That’s why I’m running a landscaping crew these days. I sold the alternator shop and bought myself some backhoes, a stump grinder, a few chainsaws and mowers and shovels, and the chipper my crew named Gabby. There’s plenty of work with the construction boom. Everyone wants a house right now, even more than a model city, and my work now meets that crucial desire.

I line up the family a few feet behind Gabby before I start her up and make her roar. That’s my crews’ cue to go full force. We choreographed it all yesterday. They go at the forest with the backhoes and chainsaws and the stump grinder all at the same time, felling trees in perfect harmony. The backhoes converge just behind me and circle each other like Shriners in their tiny cars. It’s beautiful, and they pull it off like champs, not like the old alternator crew who’d be playing euchre every time I stepped into my office. They were good guys, but terrible workers, and I guess that’s what happens when you don’t have any customers and no work to do.

With the backhoes doing figure-eights behind me, I shout over Gabby, explaining to the family how by lunch we’ll have at least five acres cleared, which means room for twenty houses and twenty mommies and daddies and their babies. I lecture with exuberance and confidence, pointing with both hands to this machine or that one, telling them what they all do. I planned my speech too, spent last evening in front of a mirror rehearsing. I considered wearing a button-up shirt, maybe even a tie, for my presentation, but then I realized how stupid that would be. If a man can’t be himself in front of his family, he’s in a sad place.

Judy and Trent look so excited, like they might start chasing the backhoes, but
I’ve raised them to know better than to mess with dangerous machinery, plus I just mentioned it in my lecture. Mom and my wife both clap. I feel redeemed for the terrible day in Trent’s class.

Kevin stares out at my handiwork like a statue, mesmerized. He’s the only one that ever praised my skill and entrepreneurship at the alternator shop. Here, he is speechless.

I ask who wants a ride in the backhoe and Judy and Trent’s hands shoot up. I let them ride on Murray’s lap, as he’s my best worker, the only one I brought over from the alternator shop, the one who’d be scrubbing the grease out of the walls when the others were jabbering about bowers and going it alone. Murray promises Trent he’ll let him steer, promises Judy she can work the bucket. Off they go, swerving through the trees. My wife and my mom want to try their hands at the stump grinder, so I tell them, “Have at it.”

That leaves Kevin and me watching over the work, everybody’s shiny new hard hats gleaming in the morning sun. The lot creaks and cracks over machine growls as trees topple. Judy and Trent’s backhoe trucks over to us, and Judy drops the first load at my feet. They’re catching on so quick, could be journeymen in no time, if they wanted. I jam pine boughs into Gabby’s mouth, and the sweet smells of sap and minced tree shoot out Gabby’s spout in a sawdust blizzard.

“What would you like to run, Kevin? Anything you want. My tools are your tools.”

He doesn’t respond, just thumbs his lower lip, so I get a good view of his massive canines.
“Wanna feed Gabby? She’s always hungry,” I joke, loading another armful of boughs into the chipper. Some of the sawdust drifts, peppering the black hairs on his face like the streak of gray on his back, only this makes him look older instead of more majestic.

“I believe,” Kevin says, releasing his lip so that it slaps back over his chompers, “I’d like to speak with you in private.”

Kevin and I hike across the subdivision’s road. He asks how many families live here, and I tell him zip right now, for all forty in the sub. But that will change once the road gets finished, which is still a rough layer of asphalt over dirt right now. I tell him if he wants to talk, we can slip inside one of the houses, and we do.

I choose our show house, a massive two-story with gleaming hardwoods and a big picture window overlooking our landscaping site. Kevin asks if I miss the alternator shop at all. And, yes. Hell yes, I do. It was my place, my idea, my crew, our repairs. Last week, I drove by the old shop, which I sold to a lumber company that now stores their inventory there. Two-by-fours and plywood and trim and molding, and never a single customer, just storage. When I was passing, I craned my neck to watch the blue-painted bricks flash by and almost rear-ended a school bus. It makes me sad to see it. But I didn’t tell Kevin this, just nodded.

He has a way of reading me, though, as if he can feel the kinks in my neck. He tells me he wishes I would’ve stuck with it, kept doing what I loved. I explain how landscaping pays the bills like alternator repair never would.

“Anyone can knock down trees,” he says. “My kids used to tear up saplings just for fun, swat at each other with the dirty roots.”
Past Kevin’s head, out the kitchen window, one of the frame carpenters’ kids climbs up a ladder with a power-nailer in his hand, the red compressor cord thumping behind him like a dead snake, slapping his father who holds the ladder. I haven’t thought about it since Mom met Kevin at the zoo last year, but now I remember Kevin has kids, that he’s a father, too. When he’s not with us, after hours, days off, he’s working with them. Every day is Take Your Family to Work Day for Kevin. I wonder if they miss him, wonder if they’ve found someone better to take his place off hours like we’ve done with Dad. Maybe they’re too busy to miss him, ducking into buses after zoo hours to go to the library.

“Very few fix alternators,” Kevin says. “I’ve only ever known one person. That’s you.”

“Because I was the only one dumb enough to stay at it,” I say, punching his arm.

“If you were the last one, who’ll fix them now?”

He’s right. My customers always came back. Loyalty kept me going. Every few years when their alternators bit it, they came knocking on my shop door. I bet they’ll be doing that for years at the lumber yard, cradling their broken alternators like sick dogs. Eventually, they’ll make their way down to the auto parts store and get new ones. Not my problem anymore.

“You loved that work,” he says.

“What about you? The zoo? You can’t tell me you love that. Why would you be with us if you did?”

“I’m good at it, acting like a gorilla.”

This makes too much sense for me. He is a gorilla, and somehow I’ve forgotten.
It’s who he is, what he does. Then, what does his time with us mean?

Just as my mouth gets dry and coppery from preparing to ask about this, Kevin unbuttons his shirt, unties his shoes, slips out of his khaki shorts, and then neatly folds them all up and places them into my hands like a trophy. There’s something final about the clothes in my hands, this trophy. I understand something I wish I didn’t—Kevin is leaving.

“Working today?” I ask, hoping.

“It’s about time, don’t you think? You have yours, and I have mine.”

“What about Mom?”

“She’ll be okay. She knows what I am.”

“What about my kids? You’re their personal hero.”

“You’ll bring them to the zoo. You’ll hold their hands and read about silverbacks off the plaque outside my cage.”

“Is it my fault, why you’re leaving?”

Kevin, now all black except for that gray patch shimmering down his back, reaches into his khakis I’m holding and retrieves the acorns Judy sold him. He drops them on top of the clothes, gives them a pat, and steps out the back slider.

At first I’m embarrassed for him, worried about him walking down the street naked, but he’s a gorilla. There’s no naked for a gorilla, no shame.

Kevin hurdles the fiber-board porch rail and lopes off toward the soy bean field, the one the builders have already bought up and will develop soon. The farmers get this one last harvest, so this is the last time I’ll ever see Kevin’s muscular black frame silhouetted in stubby green sprouts.
Outside the kitchen, the framer’s kid is comfortable on the ladder now, nailing down an A-frame his father supports with a small crane. The kid’s face is shiny. He clamps his tongue between his lips, and shoots a half-dozen nails home. I can’t see the father, just the arm of the crane, but I bet he’s smiling, real proud.

I don’t know what I’ll tell my kids, my mom, how I’ll break more disappointment to my wife, who has her sleeves rolled up past her shoulders now and is joking around with one of my workers. But they all seem fine, like nothing has happened. They don’t know yet, or maybe they do. Maybe they’ve understood what Kevin is all along. I’m the only one who fooled myself about Kevin, convinced myself what a terrible idea the alternator shop was.

Trent and Judy ride in the raised bucket of the backhoe, hands over their foreheads like they’re scouting from atop the mast of a great ship. The masons’ kids chuckle to themselves, but my kids’ imaginations go on forever. This is one thing I have left.

All I can imagine is no more trees, flat dirt, twenty acres, and then a ghost house plopping down its foundation over where Mom grinds furiously at a stubborn stump. Perhaps she’ll rise from the foundation, up into the kitchen, sopping tiredly at the dishes, making Dad’s dinner.

In my hands, I feel the phantom weight of alternators, the smell of new gaskets, which will soon be replaced by much heavier logs. I miss that weight, that smell. I miss alternators and Kevin, and when I was the best at my job.

I stash Kevin’s clothes in the back of my truck and head back over to the chipper. I kick at the wheels a few times, but my boots are steel-toed and it doesn’t hurt. I’m still
holding the acorns, and for a moment I consider tossing them out into the lot, seeing what happens, as if trees might sprout up instantly, right around the stump Mom’s ground into a dimple in the earth. Mom walks over and asks what I have in my hand, watches my fist carefully, as if she wants to open it up and hold my hand. I want to lean into her shoulder, tell her of my mistake, but instead I say, “Just some acorns,” and then plunk them into Gabby’s mouth. I hear them zip through the blades. Nothing special comes out Gabby’s spout. It’s all the same sawdust.
THE PLUMBER WHO FOUND TREASURE

The holes in Dean’s shoes let in the rain that streamed in rivers down the sleek asphalt of Ruby Lane. His feet squished miserably along the rows of dark Tudors built on spec. His pockets were empty, save for the picture of his daughter he kept stowed in a plastic baggie. He hadn’t seen her in two months, since entering KPEP, where the men slept in bunks and traded cigarettes and thanked their higher powers they weren’t quite in jail. Dean would’ve preferred jail, which was cheaper, which didn’t require anger management meetings and The Life Enhancing Decision Series and those big twelve steps. Every session meant bills stacking up in his wife’s mailbox printed with the numbers 4358, a number he no longer called home.

Dean trudged down Sapphire Drive, to the end of its cul-de-sac, the fields of wild pines bordered by more grand spec houses. He tucked his bearded chin into his chest, hid his eyes from the houses he’d help build last year and then left to rot in wait for home buyers who now seemed dead as dinosaurs.

When he lifted his chin, the three-story house in the middle of the cul-de-sac stared back at him, its columned porch waving him out of the rain like an open palm. Dean walked up the porch steps. He took out the baggie protecting his daughter. She was four in the picture, wore a mermaid costume with a bright red wig and smiled so hard it looked like her teeth could shatter. Under the picture, Dean fished out his last bent cigarette. He thanked his higher power for good carpentry, vinyl siding, a dry porch. His higher power, he’d decided in KPEP, was a giant, glowing mermaid who didn’t smile too hard but was always nodding, nodding and swishing her golden tail. They’d tried to coax
him against choosing a giant mermaid in favor of Jesus Christ or Allah or Buddha or the amorphous blankness of simply A Higher Power. He preferred his mermaid.

Dean lit his cigarette, and the spark of his lighter gleamed off the brass door knob, the lock box slung over it. The only light he’d seen since stalking the Treasure Springs subdivision. Dean punched in the old code they used when he’d worn an American Plumber T-shirt instead of the soaked and threadbare Hard Rock T-shirt he wore now. 1-2-3-4, a code he was sure they’d changed. The lock box clicked and when he opened its tiny door, a key tinkled to the floorboards. He flicked his lighter again, and the silver metal winked back at him.

Inside the grand oak door, Dean praised his golden mermaid for giving him a dry cavern of a house to sleep in with plush Berber carpets and water sparkling from faucets and not the sky and even electricity he found when he flicked the light switches. Cobwebs crowded the ceiling corners. A long crack zigzagged between the big south windows on the living room wall. He flicked off the light. The house was a splendid cavern again. Twenty foot ceilings his giant mermaid could fit inside and have room to swish her tail.

Dean fumbled to the basement, into richer darkness. His breaths surrounded him, filled the hard silence of cinderblocks and concrete. Lightning sparked through the egress windows and flashed against the copper plumbing. His plumbing, or at least plumbing like he’d done once. Lightning sparked again and the brass fittings flickered. He closed his eyes and could still see the layout of the plumbing in lavish purple under his eyelids.
He found the shutoff valve, twisted it tight, ran up the stairs and turned on the faucets throughout the house, until the water bled out. The sky mimicked the plumbing, slowed to a drizzle. He thanked the giant, golden mermaid for agreeing with him.

Back in the basement, he gripped a copper pipe above him, gently tugged, and a length of copper broke free. The solders and fasteners snapped like fish bones. Too easy. The house wanted him to have its pipes, had no use for such things when it was just a house with no people. No family. No home.

Dean stripped all he could carry. He loaded his arms with pipes, pockets with fittings, and then locked the house. He bowed on the porch, told the house he would be back, after he scrapped the copper and brass, filled his baggie with a few crystal grams and rented a motel to get his head straight. The next morning he’d buy stock in a Life Enhancing Decision Series, live off the profits, pay off his debts. He’d return and fix up the spec house, fill it with his daughter on the weekends, for Halloween even, and she’d wear her mermaid costume and knock on all the grand oak doors that would have people inside.

Dean wanted to get out the picture of his daughter again, but his arms were too full of treasure. So he thanked his giant, glowing mermaid, and then slogged away down Sapphire Drive.
SAWDUST AND GLUE

While we’re taking lunch with the painters, my son Ramon tells Big Dave his job is easier than ours. Something you don't say to any working man and certainly not to Big Dave. When I was a twenty-three-year-old dumbshit like Ramon, I sat down with my crew at a Denny’s for an 8:00 pm Moons over My Hammy, after a ten-hour day of framing. A scraggly-bearded Mexican bussed our table, and I told him not to strain himself carrying dishes for real working men. My crew laughed through two more coffee refills and three more cigarettes that we smothered into our empty mugs. That Mexican ambushed me in the parking lot, busted one of my teeth. I landed a jab on his right eye, kicked his gut when he fell. I got in my truck and drove home, and that guy went back to work.

But he was small. Big Dave is not. And now Ramon is so worked up he can't hit a shiner with his nail set, keeps slipping and pounding deeper holes into the baseboard. It’d be painful to listen to him cracking through the wood, except it’s particle board. All sawdust and glue mitered together to look like nice houses instead of the cookie-cutter junk that fills the subdivision. I haven’t sunk a nail through the grain of oak or cherry in over a year. Sometimes I imagine all the good trees have been used up.

“Maybe,” Ramon says to the baseboard, “Big Dave won't come back to the sub if it's raining.”

“That could be.” I look through my window trim at gray clouds rolling over the fresh shingles across the street.

“Maybe Big Dave’s so big he’s scared of storms. So big he gets hit by lightning.”
Thunder rattles the panes. Instead of lightning Big Dave jumps in front of the window. A thin layer of glass separates our faces. He’s painting trim outside while we put it together inside. Big Dave and me stare at the same wall on our respective sides, would be shaking hands if not for the sheetrock and studs and siding between us.

Ramon is right about Big Dave being big. Big Dave’s arms are so wide they split shirt sleeves, we guess, because we’ve never seen him wear sleeves. I feel my trim shake against the pressure of his mashing brushstrokes. Big Dave’s so big he can’t find a pair of pants that fit him, flashing ass crack when he bends to jam his four-inch barn-brush into the cutting pot. And Big Dave’s so tough he chews a bent nail to help him quit smoking. I see it through the window, flickering between his lips. The flicker disappears, and since I don’t see him spit the nail out, I’m pretty sure he swallowed it, has a stomach like a porcupine.

“I’ll just stay out of sight.” Ramon doesn’t look our way. I hear him rip another hole through the base. “Give him time to cool down and deal with it tomorrow.”

“What will you do tomorrow?” I watch Big Dave bite off a few bent bristles from his brush.

There’s always tomorrow, another house, another quarter-acre plot, another slippery tentacle of cookie-cutters made of plastic and glue and vinyl, so little metal and wood like the old days, when I was doing renovations and Ramon’s mama was changing his diapers. Ramon used to chew up the handles on my tools. Ramon’s mama didn’t like that, and I didn’t like his spit rusting up my good hammer. She punched me one night, drove my jagged tooth through my lip, after I slapped a Stanley measuring tape out of Ramon’s mouth. I didn’t last much longer as a father after that night.
Now Ramon has got two kids he never sees, two grandkids as imaginary to me as pink ivory wood. Judge wouldn’t even dare an every-other-weekend situation. He has child support to pay, a background that’ll never check out clean since he got busted with a one-cook two liter for meth snuggled into his kid’s empty car seat. Then there’s the bullshit anger management classes for biting that cop’s neck after they cuffed him. That’s what Joni told me the newspaper said the next day, but they exaggerate. Ramon has always been small, was a quiet and shy kid when I had him on my weekends. Now construction is the only job he can get, and I’m the only dope that would hire him. I needed someone reliable, someone I could count on for every day, and he has proven to be a decent nail bender for the last three weeks. And Ramon needs me, this job, his last option.

Ramon rises from the corner and stretches his back. Big Dave spots him through the window and stabs the butt of his brush against the pane. He gives Ramon the finger, but Ramon doesn’t see it, and I’m the one who has to face that giant finger pressed against the glass.

“You shouldn’t have talked shit about the painters,” I say.

Telling Ramon what he shouldn’t have done today is as useless as when I told him last week that he shouldn’t mix making babies and making meth. I apologize to Ramon for that one by nailing my window casing home, filling the silent room with the roar of the compressor that drowns out Big Dave’s knocking. Once the compressor dies out, Big Dave has disappeared. The window shows nothing but gray clouds bunched together like knuckles.

“That stupid asshole just swings his brush around out there,” Ramon says. “You
gotta agree they got the easiest job in the sub. Anyone can push paint.”

The front door handle rattles and then the door booms, someone kicking outside.

“Why’d you lock the front door?” I say.

“Let’s keep working. Maybe he’ll just piss off.”

Locked doors are for homeowners. Seven to seven, these doors are open to anyone lugging a tool. So I open up, and Big Dave fills the threshold, hands full of rollers and brushes, sandpaper strips curling out his pockets, gallon cans hanging from each pinkie. His eyebrows look like they’re trying to collide, creases in his forehead small rodents could hide inside.

“Should have known it was the Smiley crew,” Big Dave says. “Locking up so you can take naps in the closets?”

And, yes, I named my business Smiley Carpentry because that’s my name and it sounds friendly. Smiley guys are the type of guys you let in your house, maybe even leave them a spare key. But, no, I’ve never napped in a closet, and every one of my guys I caught sleeping in a closet got sent to sleep in their own bed permanently. That’s the good thing about Ramon. He doesn’t sleep, out late every night. And when he’s in bed, he growls all night through my paper-thin apartment walls. I’m hoping Smiley Carpentry works out for him so he can afford his own place soon.

Big Dave stomps toward Ramon, and Ramon shrinks back to the base, smacking away, pretending he didn’t notice anyone come in. Big Dave plunks his paint cans behind Ramon, and Ramon flinches each time one drops on the OSB. We pop nails and buzz trim all day. He should be plenty used to loud noises.

“Hey, Dave,” Ramon says when he finally pivots around to face him. “I was just
setting the shiners for you.”

“Should I thank you for doing your job?”

Ramon laughs and I shoot a few more nails home, make sure to leave the heads gleaming. “We’ll be out of here in a few hours,” I tell Big Dave. “And then you can get to painting.”

“That’s all right.” He digs his canine into a can of nail filler and cracks it open. “I don’t mind getting chummy with the hardest working guys in the sub.”

“I never said we worked the hardest,” Ramon says, but gets cut off when Big Dave starts whistling. I think it’s a Rush song. We need to buy a radio. A silent house is a tryout for the amateur talent show. Big Dave whistles through a whole set list, not unlike what I’m sure is playing in the other houses: more Rush, Steve Miller Band, AC/DC. He hits the high notes so loud I expect the contact cement to curdle and the laminate on the counters to curl. I pop out twice as many nails as the trim needs, just so the compressor kicks on more often. I cut each board twice, three times, four. Big Dave whistles through the compressor rumble, syncs his notes with the saw’s whine, as if I’m his backup.

Ramon sings along. Quiet and falsetto. Ramon is trying to make nice. My sir, you might not work as hard as a Smiley, but your whistling is infectious.

I finally head upstairs and leave the love birds to jam it out. I’m only up there an hour before I hear Ramon yelling. He has a high and light singing voice, but he roars like someone punched nails through his spine. Now I know why his neighbors in his wife’s apartment complex phoned the cops. It must’ve sounded like a bear loosed in Ramon’s unit when they called in those domestics. I never believed he really had it in him. My skinny kid. Even a small Smiley T-shirt looks too big on him.
I hustle downstairs and Ramon is covered in white primer. He stands in the middle of the room, arms outstretched, eyes closed, chest heaving. Some fancy breathing pose he learned in anger management. The primer drips from the hem of Ramon’s shorts and tap-taps against the subfloor. Big Dave smirks, and Ramon’s face glows red against the primer. He shakes his finger at Big Dave’s cleft chin, and Big Dave bites at it. I wouldn’t be surprised if Big Dave’s diet consisted of carpenters’ fingers. Ramon crams his finger into a fist, says, “Five-thirty, in the middle of the cul-de-sac, I’m gonna rip your ass off.”

I wish people would choose their threats more carefully. That’s the heat of anger. And, I don’t know, maybe someone could rip an ass off. Maybe Ramon has done it. Maybe his teenage bedroom in his mama’s basement was lined with torn asses, hung on his wall like bearskins. I wasn’t around for that, wouldn’t know.

“You got it,” Big Dave says, and then swipes up all his tools in the curls of his fingers, jangling them along as he moseys out the front door. Ramon kicks the empty primer can, splatters the last of its paint against the wall. He grits his teeth, flashing his perfectly straight incisors that I spent all that child support on. Joni thought a nice smile would help him in life, but his name’s not even Smiley, and I did okay with my chipped tooth.

Ramon slaps his forehead, pulls back his hair, which is already thinner than my own. They say a kid gets his hairline from his mother’s side. A father shouldn’t ever have to see his son go bald first. I buzz a few baseboards through the saw to give him time to stew.

He shakes his hands out and a few strands of his hair flutter to the OSB, where
they’ll be covered with carpet next week, under homeowner toes in a month and then for
however long it takes a family to grow.

“Now would be a good time to cut out early,” I say to the saw.

“You were right about tomorrow. I’d still have to deal with him then.” Ramon
slips the primer-drenched Smiley shirt over his head. It slaps wetly against the OSB.
Ramon kicks at the pile of shirt, and there’s my logo, smiling mouth now crinkled into a
grimace, looking up at me like a ghost through all that white. Ramon’s bare torso is so
thin, as if God ran him through the planer. “Fuck assertive problem-solving. I’m gonna
fight that bastard.”

I head out to the van and open the back door. Above the scrap particle board, I
keep a shelf full of Smiley shirts. It used to be full. Now there’s one left and it’s an XXL.
I never found anyone to work for me that would fill out that size, even though most of
them ask for a shirt one size too big. Everyone pretends they’re bigger than they are, and
they end up looking smaller buried in their too-large shirts. That’s probably why Big
Dave can’t find any clothes his size. All those guys wishing for bigger and all the big
guys wishing they could find a shirt that fit.

Back inside the house, Ramon snaps a piece of casing over his knee. He busts it in
half and then picks up one of the halves and busts that one over his knee, too. The shards
of casing get so small I think it will be impossible for him to break another, but he does.
Ramon is hiding strength in those spidery hands, that bony knee. I throw the XXL over
his shoulder.

He pulls the shirt on, and the hem lines his kneecaps. It looks like a dress on my
son. He looks like a child, like when he was five and Joni bought him Superman and The
Incredible Hulk pajamas. He never wore them, preferred my old work shirts reeking of dried sweat and sawdust. I used to think he’d grow up to be a fine carpenter. Joni wanted him to wear cute pajamas, to go to college, become a lawyer or something like that. She couldn’t even afford a lawyer when Ramon got busted with blow back in high school.

“Dave’s not so big,” Ramon says, looking out the window. The over-sized Smiley logo on his back flashes an absurdly wide grin at me. “And he sucks at his easy job.”

I look out the window, too. Big Dave’s in front of the house across the street, where one of the other painters has straddled his shoulders and is reaching up to slap white on the top of a porch column. Dave’s pushing a roller up to the other guy’s cut. It’s quite a sight, this two-headed smattering of white paint, Big Dave getting bigger and smarter, hurrying to beat the rain that’s surely coming now. The sky is nearly black, though not a drop has fallen.

“He’s a better ladder than a painter,” Ramon says.

Ramon never sat on my shoulders. My back is all kinks and spurs. On his sixth birthday, I took him to the zoo. This other kid was sitting on his dad’s shoulders so he could get a closer look at some tamarin monkeys perched on a tree branch. Ramon asked to sit on my shoulders, and I pretended I couldn’t hear him. It was either that or explain to my kid that the job his dad did, the one he wanted to slip into like his Smiley shirt pajamas, had warped his spine into a hook. Then that kid on his dad’s shoulders screamed. The tamarins had snatched a fistful of this kid’s hair through the fence and wouldn’t let go. The dad tried to reach up and wrestle the monkey’s pencil-thin arm. He couldn’t reach, just flailed his arms at that tiny monkey. I smiled to Ramon, but he looked worried, looked like he wanted to help. That’s what they get for being stupid,
underestimating that monkey just because he looked like a fluffy toy. He was still in a cage. They only put wild things in cages.

Ramon lugs a stack of base upstairs, and I should follow him, but I linger at the window, keep my eye on Big Dave spreading white, making those fat porch columns glare against the black sky. Ramon pounds up and down the stairs, dropping off base with pencil lines scratched where he wants me to miter. I do this for him. I cut his boards quick so he always has something to nail, work to keep his mind off quitting time.

The sky punctuates five o’clock by ripping a thunderclap that rattles the windows. I answer the sky by shooting my last nail home. It’s nice when we finish a house at the end of a day, but it means little since there’s always more to do, since there’s Big Dave outside my window boxing the first fat drops of rain. He swings high and heavy, jabs low, obliterating the drops before they touch ground. It feels like Big Dave’s sparring shakes the whole house, but it’s just the thunder. The other painters scurry around him, stretching masking plastic around the porch columns so they won’t get wet. A loose piece of plastic blows away. Big Dave uppercuts his sledge of a fist at the plastic and I imagine the plastic smashing into pieces, reverting back to oil and splashing onto the tarvy. His blow hardly makes a difference, the plastic so light, and it floats upward, over the houses, into the road and then the corn fields. Might not stop until it strangles a crow pecking a rotting husk, or until it finds another road, plasters itself across a windshield and sends a car hurtling into a ditch.

Ramon creaks upstairs, double-checking our work. I pop a squat on the stairs and wait. There’s no rush. And maybe Ramon will diddle around up there all night, do some meditative breathing, skip his date with Big Dave. But Ramon hops down the stairs, his
over-sized shirt flouncing around his thighs. “Ready to go, Pap?”

“Big Dave’s still out front. Slip out the back and cut through the cornfields. I’ll pick you up in the van.”

He approaches the window, runs his fingers over our casing. Lightning flickers against his pale skin, and I wait for the next big boom to tell me how far off the real storm is.

“Those are some tight miters. Could hardly fit any of Big Dave’s caulk in there.” Ramon thumbs my cut, the casing he nailed. “Wish he’d recognize the kind of work we do, how we make their job easier.”

“It’s junk particle board. Doesn’t mean much.”

“Let’s go see that big fucker,” he says, and his back is the hugest Smiley I’ve ever seen sliding through the front door.

I step on the van’s gas once Fondly Lane comes into view, but Ramon points a scabbed finger left instead of right. To the cul-de-sac instead of the exit for the subdivision, where Fondly Lane turns onto 43, where a real road with a number could take us home.

“We did that one and now someone’s living there,” Ramon says, nodding at a ranch with green siding. “What other ones did you do on this street?”

“All of them.”

If I straightened out all the hallways and rooms, merged the window frames and door jambs and baseboards, into one straight line, how far would it go? All the way to Oklahoma where Ramon spread his mama’s ashes? Farther, I bet. If it went straight down through the cemetery where Joni and I bought two plots when we weren’t more than kids,
that endless line of trim would make it all the way to the molten center of Earth, and then on and on and on. Hell is a hallway of trim that never ends. When my back gives out, Ramon will step over my collapsed shoulders and go right on sawing and nailing. I won’t find an end, and if my son ever gets there, he’ll have to go back to the beginning and set all our shiners.

No one lives in any of the five houses surrounding the cul-de-sac. They aren’t selling this deep in the sub yet. Big Dave is waiting in the rain, five other painters, some electricians and plumbers, the garage door installer. They’ve made a half-circle around Big Dave, who’s stretching his arms behind his back.

“There’s nothing to prove here,” I say.

Ramon pops open the door. I hop out and follow the thinning spot on the back of his head, glistening with sweat or rain. Big Dave jogs in place a little, cracks his knuckles. Ramon tugs the shirt over his head and tosses it to me. His bare toothpick frame makes him look a little taller, defines each vertebrae knuckling through his skin. Ramon doesn’t do any stretches, doesn’t grin at me like Big Dave does to his half circle. His chest heaves faster and faster. His spine bounces up and down. I can’t hear him, because of the rain, but if I could he’d sound like a cat hissing, a dog growling, some mad animal.

Big Dave finally notices my boy’s grinding teeth and gasping lungs. He says, “How cute that both father and son Smiley showed up.” He points to his chin. “Go on. I’ll make it easy for you and give you a first swing.”

Ramon swings so fast he hits Big Dave’s finger still pointing at his chin. He swings again, mashes Big Dave’s nose. He keeps swinging, stretching his thin arms high
as they’ll reach to connect with Big Dave’s face. Big Dave chuckles between blows, but Ramon shuts him up by digging a knuckle into his teeth. Big Dave probably expected a shoving match, where he’d knock Ramon on his ass and that would be it. They could go to the bar and laugh about it, over a beer and a shot.

That’s not what Big Dave gets. Ramon won’t hit anywhere else but Big Dave’s face and he doesn’t slow down. Big Dave’s lips and cheeks swell. He pushes Ramon away, but he keeps on coming. The half-circle of guys gawk. They won’t step in, and Ramon’s fists keep wailing until Big Dave falls sideways, clunks his head on the tarvy. No splash, even with all this rain because the tarvy guys are good, smoothed their work fine, bowed it just right so no water collects in the middle. No break for Big Dave’s huge head that hits just as the thunder booms again. I forget to check for lightning. I’m watching my boy straddle the huge chest, pound Big Dave’s motionless head against tarvy. I’m waiting for Big Dave to spit nails from his belly, to stand up and hurl Ramon onto the freshly shingled roofs.

But that won’t happen. Big Dave is big, but Ramon smashed three of his wife’s TVs, bit a policeman on the neck, huffed a pint of turpentine when he fourteen, wore Smiley shirts his whole life and dreamed of sawing wood, pounding nails, and now growls like a starved wolf.

Ramon stops swinging for a moment, looks up at me. I don’t know if his perfect teeth are smiling or grinding. I run my tongue over my tooth, the broken edge that’s dulled down over the years. Ramon’s straight teeth look sharp enough to slice his tongue.

I could step in, yank my son off Big Dave before he gets himself into real trouble. Hell, I could just tell him to stop. But it’s Ramon’s fight, and sometimes a father has to let
his kid figure things out on his own. Or sometimes a father is afraid of someone he
doesn’t recognize. I twist the XXL Smiley shirt in my fists and wish for workers sleeping
in closets. That’s a problem I can deal with, work easier than watching your son turn into
something wild, something made of blood and guts and fire. Joni would know what to do,
but all I can think about is the worthless trim I cut into perfect miters, how when Ramon
gets out of jail this time I won’t have any more Smiley shirts left.
When Ren told Maggie he’d triple-mortgaged their hovel to buy twenty acres of bluestem grass for his fourteen sheep, she hacked off her curly blond ponytail and threw it in his porridge. “Might as well take this, too,” she said. He didn’t blame her rash reaction. He should’ve led with the good stuff, how his life had changed, how he’d become a better businessman, hence a better all-around man, and all for the price of admission to the weekend shepherding seminar, Baba in the Black. Tommy Two-Bags of Wool had been the lead guest speaker. He’d swooped the skirt of his purple robe like a magician upon entering the stage. He told the audience, “It takes grass to make green. It’s not just your sheep that are your sheep—though your sheep are your primary sheep. You must dream big, guide the arms of your loved ones—who are your secondary, metaphorical sheep—into the extra-large sweater sleeves of a better, woollier future.”

Maggie turned her face to the front door, and Ren plucked her ponytail from his breakfast and sucked the strands clean. He snuck her hair into the robe pocket nearest his heart. Her newly bobbed hair quivered as she pulled her over-sweater over her undersweater and then disappeared out the door. He liked Maggie’s hair short. It reminded him of the second week after shearing season, when they had coin to spend and budding curls replaced naked, scabbed sheep flesh. But the extra coin always ran out quickly.

No more small-time for Ren. He had staked his land, his right to a better, woollier future. It wasn’t just for him, but for Maggie, for the family they would make. More sheep would come, as would the bulge in her belly. He’d skipped the Mary Had a Little Lamb and so Can Ewe artificial insemination class, because he didn’t need that. He didn’t
need to force it. He had a plan, knew all the secrets necessary for life and wealth and happiness. Maggie just needed to trust in his potential.

Ren finished his breakfast, grabbed his staff from the wall, and headed outside to the sheep pen. He slapped open the gate and led his fourteen sheep the three miles to his new rolling hills of green. Green not like emeralds, but like Maggie’s eyes shimmering in the electricity of twilight, the time when she used to be waiting for him to return from shepherding. Now she worked at her brother’s flute shop. She was a natural at flute carving. Ren was proud of his wife, almost as proud as he was of his head ewe Winona, who, upon reaching the new land, bent her neck, dug her teeth into the lush bluestem grass, and set about masticating. She glowed ivory against all that green.

Ren’s new land dipped into a basin, surrounded by deep gray slate on the peaks of the western hill that blocked out the wind. A stream trickled from the eastern lip of the basin, and it sounded like diamonds tinkling into a woolen sack. Ren guessed that’s what it sounded like. He’d never actually heard diamonds tinkling, nor had he seen a diamond. He had seen sheep molars. And now he listened to them grinding, grass turning to mush, sliding down throats. The sound of profit. The whisper of coat-growth that only a fifth generation shepherd could hear. Shepherding was in his blood. Thanks, Papa Ander. Thanks, Grandpa Nork. Their inept philosophy of sitting and waiting for the flock to flourish to that impossible goal of twenty sheep had led to this moment of perfect evolution, this moment when Ren would realize their failed dreams. Now that he had the land, the lambs would come.

He plopped himself upon a boulder and pulled a thin block of oak from his robe. He smacked it against his palm. His brother-in-law Flann gave him the block last week,
told him to get a feel for the wood, the music hiding inside. Flann’s flute business was growing, and he wanted Ren to join him and Maggie. He could ease into it, Flann had said, by roughing out some flutes while he shepherded. It was all a ploy to end Ren’s herd, for Flann to grant security to his baby sister. But security was on its way, would come with the new land, which would set the mood, induce insemination, and Ren wouldn’t need to do anything artificial. That’s what Tommy Two-Bags had done. It would all happen naturally now.

Ren held the block up to his ear, heard nothing. He rapped it against the boulder. He got out the knife Flann loaned him and made four scrapes at the block. He heard nothing hiding inside, and he chucked the block to the ground. When he looked up, the sheep all stared, their jaws agape and full of cud, orange eyes twinkling.

“As you were,” he told his sheep.

He planted the heel of his sandal on the block, pushed until it sank into his lush new land. He didn’t need Flann or flutes. Soon Maggie would be rolling naked through seas of fresh wool. Her fingers would be smooth again, freed from the calluses of flute-carving, and she’d run them over his chin, down his sternum, past his waist, curl his red pubic hair. Ren pulled the side of his robe over his erection. But all that surrounded him was the vast basin. He threw back his robe and allowed his erection to jettison upward, the same direction his business would grow.

Ren leaned back and watched cloud fluffs meander by. A breeze danced up his frock, tickled his leg hairs.

And then a tinny clanging. Ren smiled at the new sounds of his basin, imagined wobbling newborn lambs adorned with bells. The clanging grew louder, off toward the
west. Over the crags of the basin, a man jogged waving a stubby sword, wearing a rusty breastplate, chainmail gauntlets, bare-footed and mud-smeread. Their eyes met, and the shoddy soldier sprinted toward him. Ren reached for his staff, made fists around its base.

“Did I miss it?” The soldier clanged toward him. Up close, Ren studied the man’s mud-kissed chubby cheeks, dopey eyes, blond fuzz over his lip. He was nothing but a child of a man. “Fuck. Am I late for the battle? Fighting for the honor of Finneus the Third’s land, slayer of giant salamanders—”

“I think you’ve lost your way, son,” Ren said.

“Thank the fifteen and a half gods above, then. I’m on time. Fuck’s sake, I’d say I’m early.” He sheathed his sword.

“This is grazing land.” Ren leaned sagely against his staff. “There’s no battle to worry about. You can run along.”

“Nope.” The soldier pushed his fists into his back and swung his hips, stretching. “This is definitely the place. Always has been.”

More clanging rang from the basin lip. Another man emerged, waving a halberd.

“Time for me to die a glorious death, pops.” The young soldier rushed toward the other man. They met, just past Ren’s sheep Franklin, and their weapons crashed against one another. Franklin bleated at the men, trotted back and forth. Ren wanted to explain that this was private property. He trotted toward the squabble, but stopped when an arrow squished into the earth in front of his sandals. Along the basin lip, a dozen archers drew their bows, let their arrows sail. There were still only two men with Ren in the basin. The archers’ use of resources made no fiscal sense to Ren. Wasted feathers and wood and flint
heads plopped down all around the basin, one almost nicking old Whitey’s yellowed hind quarters.

More breastplates and muddy faces and swords and maces and spears crested the basin lip. They shouted as they loped down the hills, hurdling Ren’s sheep. One man slid through Whitey’s legs. All of the sheep’s jaws were frozen, black lips curled and raised from the grass. They couldn’t concentrate enough to eat, let alone be lulled into lamb-conceiving romance.

Ren sucked a deep breath and trotted toward his herd. Arrows split the earth around him. He waved to his sheep. They remained frozen, watching the men, transfixed, orange eyes glazed over. He prodded Whitey’s yellowed rear, jabbed his staff between Franklin’s eyes. Nothing. No reaction. Ren’s stomach twisted. The breeze blew cold beneath his frock, nipped bitterly at his groin.

His blood grew hot. Ren’s fingers twitched around his staff. Tommy Two-Bags always said, “The level of the shepherd’s serenity equals an equivalent number of full bags of wool.” But Ren’s serenity had transformed into blood-stained wool. He tried to clear his mind, take deep breaths, consider the best fiscal plan to fit the situation.

Three years ago, a clowder of flame-red bobcats had eaten one of his sheep, tore into the meat under its full coat. Maggie had wanted him to quit, said his dead ancestors’ profession wasn’t worth dying for. But Ren didn’t quit. He fought back.

He channeled the bobcat battle of ’82 now. He screamed and growled, spit frothing over his lips. He twirled the staff over his head, swung blindly at the wind. His throat burned and his ears buzzed. He targeted the man-boy soldier he’d first talked to and charged. The soldier lay on the ground, bracing his sword above his face to block
halberd strikes from a larger warrior. The man-boy winced toward Ren, eyebrows raised, a slice in his cheek leaking a trickle of red.

Ren charged the halberd man and the shoddy man-boy soldier. He yipped and yowled, jabbed the curved end of his staff at the sun. The halberd man dropped his weapon and ran. The archers screeched like a murder of magpies and disappeared over the hill. Ren’s land became all green again except for a few glints of dropped blades. The shoddy man-boy raised himself onto his elbows and curled his lips into a yellow-toothed smile.

“Hell if you ain’t the savior of the giant salamander slayer clan, mister.” The man-boy reached his bloody palm toward Ren. “My ancestor’s would bless you, if they weren’t all dead and rot.”

Ren offered the man-boy the end of his staff and pulled him to his feet. “I don’t need your blessings.”

“My children’s runts will sing your praise, Scream Down the Stars Shepherd.”

“And I don’t need any damn songs, just quiet for my sheep.”

“Shit,” the man-boy clapped his shoulder, “you’re a piece of my fucking heart now. All will know who won back the land of my father’s father who slew Francis the Fat Fuck Stump-Plucker.”

“This is my land. I bought it.”

“Sure, sure, Shepherd. Now that we’ve won, you can graze here until the cows come home.”

“Sheep.”
“Sure, sheep or cows or anteaters or whatever the fuck. You got it, friend.” The man-boy pounded his own chest and then slapped Ren’s chest. The man-boy walked away toward the basin lip. At the slate crest he hollered, “See you tomorrow.”

Before Ren could protest, the man-boy soldier was over the edge. He tried not to think about what tomorrow could mean while he wandered through the basin, plucking arrow shafts from the dirt. He bundled them in a pile, nearly fifty. Across the basin, he noticed Franklin’s head dipped to the ground, still eating, and Ren was glad. At least one sheep could still focus, would grow strong, would father fine lambs. But when he got closer he saw that Franklin was licking a puddle of blood, its muzzle streaked pink, pink darkening to brown. He imagined lambs covered in tainted brown wool, stupid and dirty and worthless.

By dusk, his land was clear, pure green turning deep blue as the light waned, as the sun disappeared over the rim of slate. His sheep still stared at him, as if questioning their next move. Eat and grow hair and make lambs, he wanted to shout. Do what sheep do.

His sheep were supposed to find a haven here, and the lambs and wool would appear. Now he had these fighting men, giant salamanders, and irresponsible arrowheads. He missed his old half-acre plot, the sprouts of crab grass and pocks of dandelions. That land was quiet. Barely enough to eat, but no warriors, hardly ever a wolf. Before Maggie started crafting flutes, she used to bring him lunch. Her hair long and full of tangles from sleep. She’d sit in front of him in the grass, and he’d work a brush through her hair. They’d watch the sheep forage, and it was good. But that wasn’t production.
He needed Maggie to know that her brother wasn’t the only success. He couldn’t just sit around combing hair, waiting for wool to grow. He fingered Maggie’s hacked-off ponytail coiled at the bottom of his robe pocket. It would hold him until things took off and she could quit the flute business and join him on the new land with his giant herd. He’d give the coil of hair back to her one day, and she’d laugh at her brashness, and he’d tell her about these men playing war and she’d laugh at that too, one day.

Darkness settled as Ren led his sheep two miles out of their way, to Delbert’s cave. Why build an office, Delbert always said, when God leases caves. Caves saved on overhead. Ren had marveled at Delbert’s business savvy, but now he wanted to rip down the vines draped over the cave mouth. Ren pushed the vines aside, cleared his throat, said, “You open, Del?”

“Never closed. Sleep is for the unemployed, the retired, and the dead.” Delbert sprang from the darkness. “What can I do for my favorite shepherd?”

Delbert neared Ren as he spoke, almost touching his chin to Ren’s chest. Ren smelled fish and rhubarb on his breath, could see a pus-filled growth on his tongue when he licked at his red mustache. Ren wanted to back away, but he stood his ground at the cave mouth.

“You sold me some bunk acres. There’re a bunch of idiots fighting there.”

“You’re imagining things.” Delbert’s wet eyes glared in the moonlight. “I can set you up with a hell of a doctor. Do hypnosis on you and poke around in your head to find what tragic fissure of your childhood is causing hallucinations. Great price. Change your frigging life.”
“I’m not hallucinating.”

“Probably working too hard. I got roots you could chew. Relax you into oblivion. But it’ll keep you sharp, too.” The lesion on Delbert’s tongue flickered as he spoke. “Just the essentials you need. Bottom-dollar deal.”

“I don’t need any damn roots.”

Ren fumbled for the arrow shaft he’d brought and shoved it in Delbert’s face. “See. I’m not imagining anything. They were shooting these.”

Delbert snatched the arrow, pressed it to his nose, ran his tongue down the shaft. Then he chucked it over his shoulder, into the black cave.

“That looks legit, and I appreciate you bringing this concern to my attention.”

Delbert gripped Ren’s shoulder, massaged the muscle. “Truth is I forgot about those salamander boys. They’re harmless, but if you’re looking for a refund, I can give you two-thirds what you paid.”

“Why not all thirds?”

“The price of doing business and such and such. I’ll be losing more than that to help you, pally,” Delbert said. “I could sell you some different acres, trade it for those boys’ playground plus a few hundred extra.”

Maggie’s brother could loan Ren the money, would insist on no interest and that would be so much worse. There was always a debt. Maggie and Flann would laugh about listening to wool grow while they sweated out five thousand more flute shafts, while they took lunch break and played with Flann’s three boys and two girls, and then before break was over Flann’s wife would pop out another boy.
“I just want peace and quiet for my herd. I need a safe, quiet place so my herd can make lambs.”

“Oh, is that how you make them?” Delbert snickered. “There are other ways if you’re willing to get your hands dirty, if you know what I mean.” He punched Ren’s shoulder, raised his eyebrows. “I can show you, for a miniscule price.”

“I know how it all works. My family’s been doing this for generations.”

“Or how about I find you some more ewes? You still just running on the one, that pretty little Winona?” Delbert’s pocked tongue flicked at his mustache. “Could just loan you a few more until you get your numbers up, for a low-low price.”

“What’s the low price we’re talking?”

“Low-low price. Not a single coin. How about a barter?” Delbert’s tongue worked quicker, seemed to brighten his face, so that Ren could see his sharp cheekbones, the wisdom lines in his forehead. “I’m thinking you loan me Winona after next shearing season, once she’s all shaved up nice.”

“What do you want with her?”

“Don’t worry about the intent. Consider the investment. Small. Miniscule. Low investment for a high payoff.” Delbert raised his palms, shifted them up and down as if they were a balance. “Nothing to lose and all to gain.”

Ren considered this, wanted the lambs, knew he needed the ewes. But it would be like giving up on Winona, who had always been good to him, who Maggie’s father had gifted him at their wedding so many years ago. Since the bobcats, Winona was his best hope.

“Just talk to those soldiers. Get them the hell off my land,” Ren said.
“Sure, sure. Easy smeasy. No ewes and a few words. A responsible investment.” Delbert slipped into the shadows, leaving Ren alone at the gaping black cave mouth. He leaned into the vines covering the darkness. They felt like Maggie’s hair against his chest, when she wore her hair long, when they used to go to bed early just to be in bed early.

Maggie was sleeping by the time Ren found his way to their bed. One of her hands lay splayed next to the short, uneven chunks of hair on the back of her head. Red slices and brown scabs flecked her fingers, casualties of flute work. He pulled Maggie’s hair from his pocket and swept the curls over the wounds, because the right hair cured all that ailed. He believed that as hard as he’d ever believed anything.

She snorted in her sleep and her hand disappeared beneath the wool blankets. Blankets made of his sheep. He pinched a loose thread hanging from the hem, imagined Winona’s haunches, how her locks always grew softest there. Soon, once he had peace, he would have dozens of Winonas’ daughters, all with soft haunches, and he’d save all of that softest hair to make blankets just for Maggie. Fifty-seven of the softest blankets. So many blankets she’d never know cold again. Only warmth. A womb of wool. So many blankets. But then she’d never need his body heat again, unlike the winters they’d spent years ago when all they had was the one threadbare quilt. Back then they would drag that quilt to the stove, pull it tight around their toes, their legs twined, arms quivering until their shared body heat meshed and the shivering stopped and then they made love softly at first, slow hip thrusts so as not to break from the blanket. And then Maggie would become daring, roll on top of him, yank off her sweater and escape from the quilt, her bare breasts glowing in the frigid moonlight.
Cold became another kind of touch then. Sweat stilled over goosebumps. Movement of hips and arms and bodies pressed until heat wasn’t a thing to be kept in a blanket or locked in the stove, but a burning between their waists that could fill a cold and empty house.

But their heat never filled anything. Her belly never grew. And now they each had their own thick woolen blanket.

Soon, soon, they would have more wool and more money, and that would bring Maggie back inside his blanket. He’d pay off the mortgages and build a second story add-on to their hovel. She’d be comfortable and safe and they would make love with precision and purpose and love. That would work. That would have to work.

Maggie’s tired arms and scraped hands stretched across the mattress. Ren would need to push her aside to sleep on the same bed, would need to wake her from a dream he hoped was of those cold nights under the quilt. He took his blanket and curled up on the floor.

When he woke at dawn, Maggie was already gone to her brother’s factory, the bed left unmade, blankets twisted like withered husks.

The sky still blazed pink when he got his sheep to pasture. Ren felt his fortune renewed, his to grasp like starlings fluttering overhead, and all he had to do was reach up and snatch one, wrap his fingers around spasming wings, squeeze a jittering heart. It was all about active shepherding, like Tommy Two-Bags had stressed: No more lying in the grass musing over clouds. If we let the sheep do all the work, then this occupation is fate and luck. Grab hold of your destiny. Let the grazing become a mutual effort.
He started with Whitey, who had taken to munching a yellow patch of brittle grass. His lips puckered around a buried stone. Ren thwacked Whitey’s rear with his staff, led him toward a greener area. As soon as Ren turned his back, Whitey moseyed back to the yellow patch to suck at the rock again. Ren tore fistfuls of green, pulled Whitey’s mouth open, and jammed the bounty between his teeth. He kept cramming grass until his stained fingers cramped. His arms throbbed with the work, his back smarting. This was active shepherding, real work, and it felt good. Blood pulsed through his arms, thrummed in his ears.

The other sheep stayed in the greens, and Ren jogged from one to the next, shouting encouragement, jabbing his staff into the air and chanting, “Chew, chew chew!”

By noon, sweat soaked his frock. He collapsed onto the rock where he’d wasted the previous day and caught his breath. This was the work his father and grandfather had never known, because they hadn’t paid admission to Baba in the Black, would have shook their wrinkled heads at the idea of innovation. At his feet, Ren spotted the block of wood he’d stomped into the earth yesterday. He wondered if Maggie’s brother was working this hard. He doubted it, doubted any working man had ever worked so hard.

He hopped off the rock to begin the next stage of active shepherding. He hooked the crook of his staff around Franklin’s thick neck and led him to Winona. It would be natural, unlike the artificial insemination business and whatever Delbert had planned. Perhaps his flock just needed a little natural nudging. Today would be the day when the flock would flourish. The mood was perfect.
Until that shoddy man-boy crested the rim of slate. He waved his sword at Ren until he lost track of his footing and tumbled down the hill. He rolled all the way to Whitey’s feet, who stopped sucking his stone, and preceded to lick the man-boy’s arm.

“Hell of a sheep you have here,” the man-boy said. “Cleaning my wounds, I see. And I didn’t even have to call for a healer.”

Whitey’s chin was coated in red again from the man-boy’s bleeding arm. Ren thwacked Whitey away. He turned back toward the man-boy. “We’re into some active grazing, so I have to ask you to leave.”

“When I eyed you today, down there with your mighty-fighty lungs and your tough old staff, I said to myself, Thank Gurfay the Lucky Star-Smasher above,” the man-boy said. “I’m outnumbered like a shepherd to his herd, though it would have to be about three times as big as yours, I calculate.”

“I don’t think you’re hearing me. Have you spoken to Del—”

A giant boulder crashed into the earth a dozen yards away from them. Ren looked up to the basin lip and saw the frame of a catapult. In moments, four more catapults appeared. Each one was surrounded by a group of men, far enough away that they looked like ants, all rushing and bustling to hoist another giant rock.

“You see, pops! I’m not just yammering. Those projectiles are getting bigger and bigger. Makes a man feel bitty.”

Another giant boulder thudded, this one even farther away. It made no sense to Ren, even less than all the arrows from the previous day. It must have taken a dozen men to lift those boulders and mule teams and carts dragging them for miles and miles. A dozen wives and three-dozen children left at home while they worked. The overhead was
astronomical. The effect was, well, Ren and the man-boy could look up into the sky and see these giant things blotting out the sun, and then move a foot or two to the left.

The boulders hailed down aimlessly, the men heaving and grunting on the basin lip. And eventually more halberd- and sword-wielding soldiers ran down to clang swords and sidestep thunking boulders. All of Ren’s active shepherding ambition faded. He was too busy gathering his sheep into a huddle around him so that they wouldn’t be flattened by airborne boulders. Once his herd circled him, he lifted Winona and clutched her to his chest. She felt heavy. He didn’t know if he could hold her until the soldiers finished.

The sun turned red, hid behind the basin lip, and the catapults ceased. The clanging blades silenced, and the soldiers retreated up separate hills. Ren didn’t see any bodies, any decisive victory. The only casualty was his lush grass now acned with giant rocks.

“A battle to rattle the ancestors’ graves!” The man-boy planted his foot on a boulder near Ren. “Looks like we’ll call it quitting time until tomorrow.”

Ren watched the man-boy sheath his sword, crack his back, sigh with satisfaction. It all made him furious. This idiot got to feel the satisfaction of a good day’s work, yet Ren was left to pick up boulders it had taken a dozen soldiers to heft.

“If anything, your ancestors are annoyed,” Ren said. “You did nothing today but make noise.”

“Now wait a damn minute. I landed dozens of thrusts and blows, fought for my life, earned honor for my clan.”
“How much honor, do you figure?” Ren waited for the man-boy to respond, who held his mouth open while he tapped the air with his finger, as if counting something. “What I can’t figure out is what you’re all doing here. What the hell do you want?” “Well, you know, land, religion, freedom from tyranny and ogres, if they’re ever proven to exist. For the safety of my family, when I get one someday.” The man-boy took out his sword, tapped it against the boulder. “Peace mostly, I suppose.” He smiled, proud. “So that’s how it’s done.” Ren laughed, slapped the man-boy’s sword away from the boulder with his staff. “You make peace with all this ridiculous clatter?” “Listen, shepherd, I don’t tell you how to shepherd your sheep. My family’s been doing this for generations.” “And I imagine quite pathetically, if this is the end result.” “I’m walking away, shepherd,” the man-boy waved his sword at Ren, step backward, “so that I don’t make peaceful pieces out of you, my oldest ally.” “I doubt that with the aim you boys have,” Ren said to the man-boy as he turned, as his shoulders drooped, as his sword dragged in the dirt, as the man-boy became a tiny speck on the basin lip and then disappeared again.

On his way home, Ren stopped by Delbert’s again, leading his band of hungry sheep. A sign that read FOR LEASE THROUGH GOD blocked the cave mouth. Ren leaned over the sign and yelled. Nothing stirred. He wondered if Delbert was hiding, giggling, biting the lesion on his tongue. Or maybe Delbert was dead, a pile of bones chewed by bobcats. Ren considered going in, but turned toward home instead. It was late, but he hoped Maggie might still be awake.
The hovel was empty. No Maggie. No note. Just a pile of tangled wool blankets. She was likely working overtime. Ren could do that, too. Ren could do overtime even better, could become more of a ghost than Maggie. And his overtime would produce more than just coins. Living, baaing lambs. He could make those alone, without Maggie, without anyone.

He pulled his razor from under the washbasin and drew it over his scalp. His hair fell in red clumps. He skimmed his hand over his smooth skull, and when he looked at his hand it was smeared in blood. It didn’t matter. A little blood always came with a shearing. He gathered all the strands into a bushel, left them lying on the folded blankets. And then he headed back outside, his scalp cold in the crisp breeze of twilight. He felt streamlined, like the beginning of a new season, ready to grow fresh.

By moonlight, Ren couldn’t gauge the greenness of the grass, and the cratered surface of the half-buried boulders smoothed out and looked like full bellies. That was the magic of night, the imprecision of sight that could become whatever you wanted. Ren leaned into his staff, tired, dazed, but also focused, what his Grandpa Nork used to call the shepherd’s drunk. That was a joy he’d forgotten about. He watched his sheep disperse and maw at the night-blue grass.

When the man-boy appeared from behind one of the boulders, Ren wasn’t surprised. The man-boy’s annoyance was perpetual. Ren had half-planned on this. He slid his body behind a boulder and watched the man-boy staggering, lift a cask to his lips, drink. The man-boy spotted Franklin and rushed toward him. He smashed into his flanks and knocked the sheep over. Ren waited.
The man-boy gathered himself and stood. He headed toward Whitey, lifted his foot to the ram’s shoulder. Whitey craned his neck, licked the man-boy’s toes, which made him pause. Ren could hear him blubbering, one foot in the air, one on the ground, frozen like some kind of crying dancer. Ren was enjoying the show, waiting for his moment to enter. He fingered the knife in his robe pocket, the one Flann had loaned him for flute-carving, for real work.

Whitey toppled to the ground in a flurry of snorts and baas. The man-boy unsheathed his stubby sword, raised it high. This was what the man-boy did, Ren understood. He had to fight someone. That’s what he’d always done. It didn’t matter that the fighting didn’t make the peace he said he wanted, that there was no way a battle would erupt into hugs and dancing, that a bouquet of posies would sprout from the neck of a decapitated sheep. The man-boy kept doing his job the way he knew how to do it, swinging at wisps in the dark. It would be a mercy to stop him.

Ren felt sorry for him. He pitied the man-boy as he charged him, as he rammed into his chest, as he stabbed his flute-carving knife into his thigh, as the two thudded against Ren’s lush grass. The man-boy screamed out, and Ren twisted the knife until he screamed louder. They rolled into a boulder, and now Ren yelped, his shoulder smashed into the stone. The two men worked at grunting and hollering, and they only stopped when they heard a higher-pitched bleating.

Winona lay on her side a few boulders away. Ren hadn’t seen the man-boy knock her over, but now that he knew, fury filled him and he kicked at the knife hilt sticking out of his thigh. Ren jumped up and ran toward his ewe. When he reached her, she looked unharmed, but continued to bleat. He wondered if it could be that. He checked under her
tail, and there was the water bag full and glistening. This was why she’d felt heavier. A lambing. This was what he’d been waiting for, what he thought would take months of security to produce, but it had been here all along. Ren knelt beside her and pet her haunches, massaged her muscles, cooed into her ear.

An hour passed, and nothing happened. Another half-hour, and Ren wiped his hands against the inside of his robe. He wished he was closer to home, closer to Maggie, who would bring clean, warm water and coffee for him, and would rub the ewe’s hind legs in perfect circles. Ren bunched his fingers into a cone and pushed inside Winona. She struggled to get up, and he could feel the flesh around his wrist tensing. If she continued to fight him, she’d never have this lamb, and never have another. But he couldn’t stop her. He was just one shepherd.

Until the man-boy emerged from behind the boulder, swaying above him against the stars, wide-eyed and gripping the hilt of his sword. Ren was unable to defend his herd now, his hand trapped, his fingers searching over wet lamb legs. The man-boy’s thigh oozed blood. The man-boy gritted his teeth. He dropped to his knees and held Winona’s neck. Roughly at first, in a way that made her jump, but then she calmed, and the man-boy eased his grip, and Ren felt the flesh around his wrist loosen. He concentrated, felt the knotty angles of lamb elbows. He pushed the lamb inside deeper, until the elbows unlocked and the hooves came forward and out, and then the nose, the muzzle. He removed his hand, and soon out the lamb came.

It laid there on his new land, motionless, a wet pile of blood and moon. The man-boy sat back, and Winona craned her neck and licked at the still lamb. It baaed. It baaed beautifully, impossibly, a little screech in the dead of the night, in a place where men
went to fight and work and lie to themselves, but now this. Now this lamb, which would
become an ewe, which could save everything for Ren. But he knew Maggie would not be
home when he returned carrying the new lamb. So what he had was this moment of
looking over Winona’s lapping muzzle at the man-boy, who was blubbering again, who’d
dropped his sword and forgotten about his bleeding thigh and was smiling.
THE ICE CREAM DREAM

Many ice cream trucks trolled the streets of Defiance, Ohio, but mine was the only modified 1986 Astro Van painted beige with brown spots. My customers liked buying ice cream from a man popping his head out the side of a giraffe. They ran down the street, chasing my bumper, and I kept coasting at seven or eight miles an hour, my boot kissing the gas every now and then. A trail of kids lured more kids, which lured parents screaming for them to get out of the road. That mess made a crowd, and crowds meant business, and business meant I made rent and paid the electric bill, and the gas bill, and maybe even bought a new old movie from Lacy Stacy’s Adult Boutique. But before I paid any of that, I’d drop fifty bucks into Roger and Frida’s bank account. They came first, and they always will. Even if I never see them. Even though I can’t pay child support because their mother ran off with them when they were just learning to wobble on their stubby legs. A father doesn’t stop loving his kids, no matter how long they don’t know who the hell he is.

But for all of the boys not named Roger and all the girls not named Frida, they’re all just little shits. Sometimes when I had five or six kids chasing the van, weaving in and out of my sideview mirror, I hovered my boot over the brake pedal. The pedal beckoned my foot, and I’d imagine hearing five or six kids pinging against the bumper. They’d get a big bite of steel. That would teach those little shits, who shoved sweaty crumples of money through the window, blocked the line while they jammed sweets down their throats, and then flicked their push-up sticks into my face. Some of them would take their Hippo-sicle and jet without paying. I wasn’t fooled by a big smile missing two front teeth.
or mussed up golden locks or happy squints pocked with an adorable mess of freckles. There’s no telling who’s going to fuck you over.

My second week of ice cream-selling, I was driving down this real prime suburb just after dinner. Usually I’d have a dozen little shits chasing my bumper as I circled the cul-de-sacs, but all was silent. No kids playing on a single one of those sod lawns. Just me and the ice cream and my van tinkling “Flight of the Bumblebee.” Every door was shut tight, every air-conditioner humming away. Not an SUV creeping along the fresh blacktop. I was waiting for a goddamn tumbleweed to roll across the road.

Instead, in my sideview, a zebra-striped van appeared in the distance. I stuck my arm out the window, waved hello to my brother in arms, and he sped up, worn-out muffler roaring. The zebra van tinkled out “Camptown Races.” Its tinny notes clashed with mine as it sucked up to my bumper. I pulled my arm back inside, kept driving, wondered if he needed to borrow some Sea Urchin Sammy Cream Pops. Just as I was counting inventory in my head, planning out a real nice gesture of sharing, another van appeared in my mirror, this one painted up like a Dalmatian. It sped past the zebra van and sidled up next to me. It was tinkling some tune, too, but at this point I couldn’t pick out one tune from another. It just sounded like a big pile of tinkles, like a swarm of fairies having an orgy. The Dalmatian stayed tight on my side, and I waved again, but I couldn’t see inside the van, the side window tinted black as a missing tooth in a six-year-old’s smile.

I sped up, tried to break from these vans closing me in, mucking up my “Flight of the Bumblebee.” The zebra behind accelerated right along with me, closer than ever, and the one to my side swerved in until my rims ground the curb. I thought of Roger and
Frida when they were toddlers. If their ball skidded into the road, well, shit, Roger and Frida pancakes. As much as I hated little shits, I couldn’t live with their deaths caused by all us vans filling the street, flying through the suburbs at twenty-three miles per hour.

The subdivision exit appeared, up ahead on my left, and soon I’d be on the main road, and then the freeway, and then back in my studio apartment watching Selma Slams St. Louis on my twenty-one-inch. I was ten yards away, when another van pulled out from behind a house, this one painted up like a cow and barreling straight at me.

They had me. Boxed me in and brought me to a stop, and the next thing I knew they yanked me out my van and were kicking me in the head, pummeling me in the gut with ice cream scoops. They worked quick and wore Jimmy Carter masks, so I couldn’t get an ID on any of them. And I should’ve been figuring out how I’d survive this, but instead I wondered, just as the shortest Jimmy Carter ground his sneaker against my nose, where the hell they found Jimmy Carter masks. Nixon masks, sure. Reagan mask, no problem. But Jimmy C. didn’t seem like a face that would demand a factory mold. I voted for him the day after Roger was born. We were busy with the new baby and scared as shit because we were just babies, too, nineteen years old. But I made time to vote. Jimmy said he was going to make the country “competent and compassionate.” A sweet baby like Roger needed competence and compassion. He deserved all of that. Frida came a year later, and two years after that my ex stole them both away to Idaho. All the compassion in the world was sucked away, and I was left with a president who couldn’t get a couple of his boys out of Iran. I was stuck working a shit job at the same go-nowhere freightyard where my father worked until he collapsed on a crate of duck-shaped pacifiers, dead instantly from a blood clot in his brain.
That scrawny Jimmy C. mask-wearer gave me a final kick to the jaw. Of course the smallest guy would have to end things. It made me hope Roger had grown up to be a monstrous man who didn’t need to prove shit, six and a half feet of confidence.

Those Jimmy Carters told me that I was entrepreneurializing on Scream-a-Dream Ice Cream turf, infringing copyrights with my unregistered animal van. They zip-tied my hands behind my back, jammed a map into my pocket. Then they tied me to a mailbox and pulled out knives. I’m not a man that’s easily scared, but I’m also not an idiot who thinks he has a body made of steel and would talk shit to a glinting blade. I knew I bled, so I kept my mouth shut, watched silently when they slashed my tires and spray-painted STAY OFF SCREAM-A-DREAM TURF on the side of my van.

When they left, I tried to wriggle free, but I couldn’t budge the ties, couldn’t snap a tiny width of plastic. So I hung my head, leaned against the mailbox, resigned to stay there until some little shit found me and started pelting me with stones. I didn’t have to wait. The mailbox snapped under my weight. It wasn’t my muscle or my ingenuity that freed me, but all those pounds I’d put on since I stopped working the freightyards.

I called a tow. I got home. Didn’t need no damn emergency room, just a microwave Salisbury steak and a movie. Before I watched, I double-checked the back of the Selma Slams St. Louis box for the date. I didn’t watch anything that came out after 1995. Frida turned eighteen in 1997, and I added another two years, just to be safe. Every father prays his daughter doesn’t get into that kind of acting, but I wasn’t around to raise her right. There’s just no telling. Selma donned her heels and G-string in 1985. She made me feel safe, banging dozens of men in a time before Frida would have grown to learn the incompetence and cruelty of this world.
I scrubbed blood out of my shirt while Selma moaned. I’d taken worse beatings. Before a tiny curdle of blood killed my dad, he spent years thrashing me with the rubber insoles of his work boots. I don’t know why he used the insoles. All that matters is he was a cruel asshole, slapping the foot-stink of an eight-hour all over my face.

I spread the map those Scream-a-Dream bastards gave me across my kitchen counter. Every halfway decent suburb in town was highlighted in blood-red ink—Scream-a-Dream turf. They left me freeways and industrial districts and dirt roads on the county line. I took the giraffe van out on the road the next day thinking about all of the places I couldn’t go. A free man in an unfree country, an anchor the size of Toledo tied to my bumper. How was I ever going to make enough money to give Roger and Frida the life they deserved? When I drove to one of my designated work zones, the freightyards over by the Maumee River, I considered spinning the wheel, aiming my van at the bridge guardrails and barreling through. At least Roger and Frida would collect the life insurance policy. And then they’d know my name, know their real daddy. Only, I didn’t know their names. The ex could’ve remarried. Any name could’ve landed in their laps. Any faceless man could be the one they called Daddy.

I didn’t drive the giraffe over the bridge. The Maumee smelled like shit, and that’s no way to drown, lungs filled with brown water all foamed up by melting ice cream. I drove past the subdivisions where I couldn’t go, my tinkler silent. I listened out the window for the sounds of my competition, but heard nothing, and what a damn shame that I couldn’t work the routes they weren’t even using. I was about to say fuck it and drive on into a no-no zone called Emerald Pines, when I spotted a subdivision with no name out front.
The blacktop was fresh out front, smooth and black. Not a house in sight. After a quarter mile of gnarled brush lining the curbs, they finally appeared. Not the clean vinyl and brick facades of the usual subdivision houses. The birth of new construction was an ugly sight. These houses wore siding like scabs, speckling the nakedness of plastic house wrap. Deeper into the subdivision, I watched two-by-four skeletons cast their stringy shadows onto the parched dirt. Or no skeleton at all, only holes in the ground where a house might grow. No families here, no little shits, no place a Scream-a-Dream van would ever stalk. Instead of painted-up tinkling vans, plain white ones littered the curbs, ladders strapped to their roofs. Or half-ton pickup trucks, their beds spilling scaffold and sheets of drywall and copper wires and brass pipes. And all around me, grizzled men stared, aimed their unshaven chins at my van, gripped their shovels and nail guns tighter.

Now, if I was a Scream-a-Dream sucker, I would’ve whipped my van into a U-turn and high-tailed it out of there, dragging my zebra tail between my rear axle. But this challenge of entrepreneurship made my heart race, my teeth itch, fingers tap-tapping the steering wheel. No little shits as far as the eye could see, but there was potential here. I flicked on “The Flight of the Bumblebees” and slowed the van to a creep. The men who hadn’t looked before did so now, craning their necks from ladders, hammers halted in mid-swing. I kept my eyes straight ahead, focused on the work of keeping my foot just barely pressed against the gas, tried to forget about my van that could’ve hauled lumber but was painted like a giraffe, tried to forget about my flabby biceps, my soft hands. But I’d put in my time at the freightyards, lifting crates until my arms burned.

I heard a yelp, and when I looked into my sideview, I saw one of the workers following. He wore a baby blue polo shirt a size too small so that the bare bottom of his
belly wiggled brightly as he jogged behind me. His toolbelt jangled with the rattle of nails and hammers. I fought the urge to press the brake. One frenzied customer could easily turn into two, two to four, four to a snaking tail of hot and hungry men, dying for my ice cream.

But no one else picked up after the fat man in the polo. The road ended in a cul-de-sac, and I parked. The man jogged up to the side window where I kept the menu. He planted both hands on the van, gasping and studying.

I slid out of my seat, withheld opening the side window as long as I could. A customer waiting to order was the start to a crowd of followers. I opened my coolers, took a quick stock of my Quintuple-Berry Pops, pulled a roll of small bills from my pocket, and then, finally, slowly, slid the window open.

“Christ on a stick, you nearly killed me.” His chest heaved. He licked his lips.

“I’m going to need an IV of Fudge-O-Saurus Bars stat.”

I spread ten bars across the counter and smiled.

“How fat do you think I am, asshole?” he said. “They’ll saw off my left foot if I eat all of those.”

I moved to pull them away, and he grabbed my wrist, said, “Shit. I have some hungry boys back at the house. I guess I can put them to use.”

He gave me a fifty, told me to keep the change, and the profits there were ten bucks in the kids’ account and half an Annie Poke-Me video.

After the fat man left, I was alone again. I needed to get rid of my stock soon or it would start to get freezer burnt, and then I’d have to eat the loss. Except I couldn’t eat the loss literally. I’m lactose intolerant, ever since I was a kid. When my daddy used to take
me to get ice cream after laying into me with his boot insoles, it would just mean more punishment. Knots in my belly, welts on my back, a night spent curled over the toilet crying, and that would just get the old man all fired up with the insoles again for my being an ungrateful little shit.

The tinkler ran through a half-dozen more rounds of its tune before I heard a knock at the window. Two men stood outside, picking flakes of drywall mud off their shirts. They asked me if I had any water, and I didn’t, but I told them how refreshing a Weasel Pop could be. They shelled out a couple bucks, and then one of them said, “Now, if you had water in there, you could make a killing.”

The other one, whose baseball cap barely fit over a mess of curly brown hair, said, “Or if you had a shitter we could use, guys around here would pay for that. You get a little tired of shitting in buckets.”

I didn’t have the heart to try and sell them more ice cream after hearing that, especially with my own lactose intolerant stomach twitching just feet away from freezers full of torture. But they got me thinking. If life hands you lemons, you don’t have to make lemonade. You sell those lemons for better product. Or you carve those lemons into bowls made of rind, or little lemon hats for dogs, or pelt the giver of lemons with his own lemons until he relents and gives you oranges. Life is full of lemon-givers, and a smart man takes his fate and makes more than just complacent lemonade. Those tradesmen, for example, had pockets full of cash, yet no water to drink, no proper pot to piss in. But they had plenty of buckets, and they made that work. They had new sinks and copper pipes to install, but no water. Now they had me, who could provide life’s simple necessities.
Before I went home that night, I stocked up the van. That man with that mess of curls stuck in my head at the store, haunting me through the aisles, tugging at my pant legs, saying, I want this, I need that. And when I showed up the next day, I had ice-cold water and beer and sandwiches and cigarettes and, sorry, though, no solution for the bucket issue. What I did have was barber scissors, and for twenty bucks, they could eat a sandwich, drink a beer, and get their hair cut. I remember working the freighyards; by the time you clocked out, all the barbers were closed. Curly’s paychecks probably went straight to the bartender because no one else was open.

Within a few days, I was banking more than I’d ever made hawking ice cream to little shits. Roger and Frida’s bank account swelled up and I had a queue of classic videos from Lacy Stacy’s stacked on my VCR.

And the workers, my boys, I was so proud of them. Through the weeks of my visits, those holes in the ground bloomed. Those boys took the materials stacked in their truck beds and built full-fledged homes, easy as Lincoln Logs. They couldn’t have done it so fast without me there to hydrate and feed them, to take care of their every need. They loved me for what I provided them, and I loved them for loving me. We were happy.

One day, a few weeks in, I was trimming Julius’ brown curls, him straddling a sawhorse, me smiling over top of his lush, sawdust-filled locks. It was lunchtime, so a dozen of the other young men lounged around the van, sipping beers, licking Freedom Cones, gnawing my homemade egg salad sandwiches. My boys and my profits surrounded me. And then, in the distance, I heard a tinkling that turned my scissors to stone. The long-healed bruises on my skull pulsed anew. I tried to hide it from my boys, but my grinding teeth betrayed me, flashed my anxiety like an insole-welt to the
forehead. They huddled around me, offered sips from their beers. Julius tipped his head back, stared me right in the eyes, and once he got a look at whatever showed on my face, he reached back and patted my arm, nodded.

The zebra van rolled into view, slowed near the finished houses. Finished but not sold, not yet full of little shits. This was still a place for young working men. My customers. The boys mingling around me crossed their arms, snarled their lips at the van. All except Wilson, the one who’d chased me the first day, the biggest man on site. I couldn’t blame him, the hunger he bore deep in his endless gut. He sprinted after that zebra van, yelled, “I scream for ice cream, boys!” And the boys around me shook their heads, said, “Fuck him, Mr. Denning. That stupid fat-ass can’t find his own dick, let alone a sense of loyalty.”

And I said, “I don’t mind, boys.” Because I knew he was young. They were grown men but still boys in so many ways, still guided by flitting wants. The long-term was eons away.

The zebra van slowed, parked, and Wilson ran up to the side. He spread his thick fingers across the window, peered inside, rapped on the glass. And I thought that was fine, just fine. A man can’t hold onto his customers any more than he can hold onto anything he loves in this world. If you love something, let it go and all that.

The zebra stripes started to quaver, bounced slightly up and down. I wondered if maybe the van was rumbling on a bad engine. The stripes bounced more, and then the tires facing me left the ground for the briefest of seconds. Wilson wasn’t waiting for ice cream; he was pushing the van, rocking it back and forth. Three more boys from Wilson’s framing crew sprinted toward the van, hammers waving above their heads.
They pounded against the zebra stripes, the ring of steel on aluminum drowning out the
tinkle of “Camptown Races.” Soon, more boys ran toward the truck. The ones who’d
stayed by me, who’d crossed their arms and rebuked Wilson, now smiled like children,
sprinted toward the van, until it was swarmed by men, swinging their tools, rocking the
van with their grime-smeared arms, work boots dug into the hot blacktop.

I thought I heard a squeal, and like to imagine that was my competition inside,
shrieking in fear. The van stuttered forward, pushed out of the mob of my boys and out of
my subdivision.

Julius leaned back on the sawhorse, pointed at the van. “We only need one ice
cream man.”

The men chased the van as far as they could, until it rolled out of sight and the air
grew silent. The back of Julius’ head faced me, so he didn’t see the tears I held back. I
think he knew how I felt, though, when he said, “A little more off the top, old man.”

But nothing lasts forever. Frida and Roger grew up and disappeared with their
momma. Just the same, my working boys thinned out. The SALE PENDING signs popped
up, and the trucks and white vans drove onward. They didn’t tell me where they were
going next, just nodded their trimmed heads and shoved off. Maybe they thought I knew
where they were going. Maybe they figured the world was full of men like me who could
take care of them. Providers are just supposed to be there. I tried not to hate them, tried to
understand that’s just how it goes.

One crew remained, though. The painting touch-up crew was always the last to
leave. They had a final day of work left and two haircutting appointments with me. I was
sure one of them would invite me to the next site, tell me how much my van meant to
them, beg me to follow them forever. I hopped into the giraffe van, the morning sun
gleaming up those glorious last strands of fraying hope. I smiled and turned the key,
thinking about Roger and Frida and how they could be as close as a plane ticket, when I
got smacked in the temple.

I came to in the back of my van, arms tied behind my back, three Jimmy Carter
masks staring at me. A fourth Carter sat in the driver’s seat. It was one thing to knock me
around, but quite another to drive another man’s giraffe. So I kicked the closest Carter in
the groin and tried to scramble to my feet. They shoved me back on my ass, and the
Carter I kicked lay into my back with the ice cream scoop.

Once he tuckered out, I said, “All right, boys, what could possibly be the problem
now? I’m off your turf. I did everything you asked, much as it hurt my pride.”

“We’re claiming new turf,” the biggest one said. “We claim all suburbs. There’s
no more need for your freezer-burnt products.”

That got the heat burning into my face. I’d never sold a bite of freezer-burnt ice
cream to any customer and never would. But I fought back the rile inside me.

“No business there but working men. They hardly buy enough ice cream for me to
pay insurance on my van.”

“Been selling more than that.” The Carter I’d kicked picked up my barber shears,
snipped twice at the air. “And I don’t remember us giving you permission to sell products
outside the ice cream family.”

Those air snips didn’t intimidate me. I gave up permission a long time ago, after
my daddy died in a box of pacifiers and after I quit living in his work boots, clocking in
and out of the freightyards. I rushed the Carters, slammed head-first into that bastard
snipping my barber shears. We fell to the floor, me on top, him screaming like a little shit who’s just dropped his Super-Dipper Cone. I didn’t see what all the screaming was about. I’ve become a husky man, but short, not the kind of frame that could carry scream-inducing weight. A young fellow should be able to take a blow and wear a bruise like a man. My daddy taught me that lesson my whole life.

I rolled free of the screaming Carter and waited for the others to pound on me again. But they stood there, toothy Carter smiles gawking down on us. And the one just kept on whining. The orange handles of my scissors jutted from his gut, made him look like one of those toys you wind up.

The Carters hovering over us wheezed through their breathing holes. Their eyes flitted behind molds of shiny rubber. Finally, one of them nodded and then whispered into the driver’s ear. The van slowed. I stared at the stabbed Carter, writhing on my van’s floor, a trickle of blood streaming toward the freezer. I only looked up once I heard the door slide open. The Carters jumped out, tucked and rolled like they evacuated moving vans every day. The front door popped open, and out went the driver. They all jumped ship, left their little friend to bleed out in my truck.

The van crept along unmanned. Just as I scrambled to the front seat, it smacked into a telephone pole. I sat behind the wheel, staring at the pole, waiting for it to snap and crash down on top of us. The van had stalled out, and I listened to the cooling engine. Tick-tick-tick. The pole didn’t budge. So I had to decide what to do next. And sometimes the world is like that. Sometimes it’s not as easy as getting smashed by a telephone pole.

That bleeding bastard in the back hollered worse. He’d rolled over onto the shears and switched from shrieking to sniffling, moaning for his momma between sucking snot
through his mask’s breathing holes. Why didn’t anyone ever call for their daddy when they get stabbed with barber shears?

I started up the van. The hospital was only a few miles away. I could drop him off and still make my appointment with the painting crew, if I hurried. The telephone pole had cracked the windshield, two streaking lines shaped into a Y, two skinny arms reaching out from a center. And the tinkler wouldn’t shut off, kept bleating the same first dozen notes of “Flight of the Bumblebee” over and over again. Each time it restarted, which was every two seconds, the bleeding Carter in the back howled.

I couldn’t just drop moaning, bleeding Carter at the front door of the emergency room. My busted-up giraffe kept spewing an insane flurry of incomprehensible notes. Not much of a getaway vehicle. So I pulled up to the back parking lot, slid open the door, and rolled Carter’s slumped body to the strip of grass between road and parking lot.

Just as his body tumbled out, he got some fight back in him, said, “Fuck you, old man.”

I laughed, standing over him, me safe in my giraffe and him bleeding out in the grass. Goes to show that the man who seeks his manifest destiny beats the man who stumbles along as a follower, wearing a mask, cowering in the crowd. You see where it got him. Whereas I was free to continue on, making a difference for my working boys and supporting my babies who were no longer babies. No longer babies but full-grown people who probably called some insurance salesman named Bob Dad.

I drove onward to my appointment with the painting boys, toward—I don’t know. Freedom, money, the American Dream. A giraffe and a broken song and a van full of ice cream. Carter had called me “Old man.” If I was old, how old was he? Where did he
come from? Anyone could hide behind that mask. And maybe a kid with spunk like his would’ve left Bob the insurance salesman’s home and struck out on his own. Maybe he’d hit the open road, seeking to feel the hot blood of freedom pumping through his rebellious veins, that blood now dripping through blades of hospital sod.

I turned back toward the hospital, left the painting boys wearing their hair long. They’d keep building houses, keep moving, find their own needs. When I got back to the parking lot, no one had found Carter yet. It was me or nobody. I parked, left the engine running, stepped toward the crumpled body in the grass. He was still moaning, but quieter now, a guttural lullaby. He didn’t swear at me when my body cast a shadow over him. I knelt, slid my arm under his neck. He was all Carter from the neck up, but through the rubber eyeholes, brown—like millions of others’ eyes, but like mine, too. I slipped my fingers under Carter’s chin, felt the tight skin of a young man underneath. The sandpaper of two days of stubble, a man who didn’t care about being clean-shaven, about strangling himself with a tie in a cubicle. I pulled back the rubber mask to his lips and then stopped. I would see this man’s face soon, after I took him inside, paid his hospital bill with Roger and Frida’s savings account. And then I’d know. This young man could sit in the passenger seat, learn the true meaning of freedom, see a man run his own business. He could follow my path to freedom, a path that didn’t need a past, only a will to drive down any new road, still soft with fresh blacktop, the tires sticking at first, but then pulling free.
THE SALES MEN APPROACH

We’re watching your subdivision. The entrance sign reads MEADOW CORNERS, but we know there is no meadow. We know how you all leave at sun-up, return in your hatchbacks when the sky melts into copper. We know you avoid us, escape to your office where you hide, knees hugged to your chest and back against the door, biding your time until our working hours evaporate, and we turn to husks in two-piece suits, too tired to sweat after a day of lugging our briefcases. You imagine that we return to our unfed children, swaddle them in our limp arms. And then you tire of imagining our lives, kick your feet up, and we disappear. But you imagine wrong, underestimate your adversary.

We’ve changed tactics. We’re raiding at night. We’re storming the lanes, attacking the cul-de-sacs, ambushing from the manicured shrubs, where we’ve planted scouts. We pour in at twilight, twelve dozen lines of hunched shoulders and swinging briefcases and neckties knotted snug around our perspiring throats. You see us coming, and you try to pull the blinds, but they are designer valences, too short and sheer and silky, and we see your silhouettes quivering back there. We take aim, stab our fingers at your doorbells, and there’s no escaping us now. We buzz and ding and knock and buzz and ding and knock. We’ll wait all night if we must. We’ve been here since before your foundation splashed into the earth. We’ll be here long after your mortgage goes sour and the real estate agent stakes a foreclosure sign into your browning sod.
So answer this damn door. Face our wrath. Face our bleached smiles that hide the
disappointment of ten thousand slammed doors. Open this door, face us face to face, and
then try to make us disappear.

You give in because you must. You give in because there’s only so much guilt
one man can take. Because you know what it’s like to be turned down for a raise once
again, turned down when your family desperately needs it, when that extra $94.35 per
pay period is the only thing that will save your Eames lounger nestled in your favorite
nook in this house you can’t afford in this subdivision that’s split into twelve dozen
quarter-acre plots that used to be meadow, swamp, cornfield, where a farmer named Enos
finally gave in and sold his great grandfather’s land because he just couldn’t afford to
keep it going any longer. Enos is one of us now. That’s him over there, also wearing a
blue necktie, also flashing bleached teeth, also knocking away, his finger poised over the
clap of his briefcase, waiting for you to open the door just a little farther, because how
can we possibly do our job through such a tiny slice? We can only make half eye-contact
with your one hazel eye peeking wildly at us. We require full eye contact. We require
your fullest attention.

Open fully, we say unto you.

That’s better. Hello. My name is H----- and you will forget it by the time I’ve
finished this sentence. But let’s not get personal, even though I’m standing two feet from
you and your home where you keep your wife and your three children and your English
setter Elvis, where stowed in the attic is your childhood baseball card collection you were
sure would make you rich one day, though now it’s just kindling printed with the faces of
men you’ll never meet and you can’t remember ninety-eight percent of their names.
Hello. My name is H----- and I’m selling widgets. Yes, widgets. They are indeed real. You always wondered. After seven years of algebra problems where you had to solve for widget, and you asked Mrs. Dunwoody what a widget actually was, and she ignored you. And you asked her again, and she knelt by your desk, whispered in your ear, told you to forget the details and focus on the numbers. That stung your twelve-year-old heart, made it impossible to fantasize about marrying Mrs. Dunwoody and someday unbuttoning her beige blouse and touching those wonderful breasts. And yet you asked again, and she said it was the magic thing your father bought at the bar every night so he could stand coming home to you. The next month your father left home, and your mother said that he loved you and your sister, but he had this problem. That problem and the need for a new Mustang and a twenty-seven-year-old blonde named Lindsey Callison. And these problems were a problem of solving for widget, and the problem of widgets explains why you can’t get an erection some nights, why other nights you can’t quit holding your wife, why you can’t get that raise, why your boss secretly thinks you’re a sniveling ass-kiss with a business degree and no business sense.

Well, guess what? The widget is real, was real all along, and is not merely a substitute variable for a problem you can’t solve. The widget will in fact solve your problems. All of them. Gaze at my briefcase. Slowly, slowly. I’ll unclasp slowly, open the lid slowly, creaking hinges echoing through the darkness. It’s not actually an echo because all 144 of us are opening our briefcases right now for you and all of your neighbors in near-perfect synchronization. Creak, creak, creaking, like the sound of your father’s Mustang’s door at midnight. Creaking open and, behold, the widget.
What is it made of? Paper, steel, positively charged ions, hope and envy, all-natural herbs, astronaut-grade plastic, limes and lavender, centuries of ingenuity.

How does it work? Just flip the switch, clutch it to where it hurts, tell it what you want, plug it into a 240 volt outlet, turn the page, you don’t need to do anything at all except sit back and let it do the work.

What does it do?

What a question to ask. This gets to the heart of why we spilled down your streets, marching like an army, like a parade. So sorry if the clomp of our loafers woke your daughter. She was having a nightmare anyway. A nightmare where you are a bear and your lips are ringed with blood and you try to open the jar of peanut butter but your paw just keeps spinning the lid, around and around and around, and it never opens.

Just let the widget do the work. Just think about this: if you buy thirteen widgets for seventy-five dollars and sell them for a house payment, what is your profit margin? If those thirteen widgets are riding in a train from Chicago to Detroit at fifty-seven miles per hour, how many more will you need to buy to make it to Defiance, Ohio? If those thirteen widgets are in a canoe, and one-third fall out, how many more widgets will you need to buy to save those that are drowning? Think hard about these questions. Answer slowly. Dip your hand into our briefcase and caress the smooth surface of this widget, and we promise not to snap the case shut on your fingers.

A demonstration is required. But you must open your door more fully, invite us in, let us stay with you for the full two weeks and three days necessary to illustrate the effects. Thank you for your trust. How lovely are your valences, your oaken mantelpiece, the pastel stripes on your daughter’s walls. It must have taken excruciating hours to get
the lines so perfect, so straight. Did you use blue tape, and when you pulled it away, how hard did your heart break when you saw the paint bleeding through, or did you use chalk lines and yard sticks and pencils and trust your steady hand to follow the line, even though your hands shake, and you can’t stop them, because you know the color of the envelope the mailman will bring tomorrow?

Don’t worry. Your mailman also works for us. He’s three houses down at the Palmers’ residence. The Palmers are, as we speak, deciding whether to purchase a bushel or a palette or the complete volume library of our widgets. The Palmers are watching right now as your mailman demonstrates how to paint perfect pastel lines with the aid of a widget. The Palmers are learning about the serene afterlife achieved through the guidance of our widgets. The Palmers have always been a few steps ahead of you. Like when they refinanced and rented out the guest room to Ruta, who fell in love with Mrs. Palmer, who got the kids in the divorce, and now Mr. Palmer is renting out the garage from them. They will not lose their house. And if you simply trust in the widget—in us, in me—neither will you.

Hold your breath while I remove the widget from its protective case, its vacuum-sealed cellophane, its leather-bound cover. If this seems like an excessive amount of packing peanuts and bubble wrap, just remember the joy you took as a child in snapping the bubbles and frightening your dog Rudolph. Remember how you filled your hamster’s cage with these Styrofoam peanuts because, you told your mother, rodents love nuts, but really you understood the difference.

Behold how the widget clears up that carpet stain in one pass. In three passes it’s completely gone, and you won’t even remember how after you got the raise that was
supposed to fix everything but still wouldn’t make the mortgage you drank all the rum
from four New Year’s Eves ago and vomited and passed out right there. No matter. That
memory is all gone now. The widget has fixed it. The widget is here to hold your head, to
stroke your cheek with the back of its polycarbonate knuckles, to kiss your children
goodnight and lock the doors after you leave with us.
I’m long finished with my days of jamming fingers into eye sockets, burying my blade into hollow chests, spreading ribcages and excavating sins. We crusaded while the Pope cheered us on, lied about God’s growing favor with every murder. No sin too great to be absolved by a pierced Moslem heart. Commandments amended. Glory filled our blood-slick hands. But that’s behind me. These hands now wield the quill. I promise you nothing, will not profess to know God’s plans. I set out only to show you all I have seen with complete truth, like a polished mirror. I know simply that I was here and that I saw, and you shall see, down to the last scrapped corner of our holy land.

We visited Jerusalem in the year of our Lord 1354. On this last trip, we squinted through the gilded halls of The Holy Sepulchre, and then on our way back home, we scoured the cobbled ruins on the outskirts. We filled our pockets with chips of holy bricks until our breeches sagged sacredly. We’d seen it all: a dozen frayed whips Jesus beat the money changers with, endless pouches holding holy grime that lined Mary’s foot washing basin, seventeen of the first tables Jesus built as a carpenter, John the Baptist’s burnt-black sockets and mandibles and shattered braincase fragments, his skull scattered into one hundred fragments.

The road home awaited us, and I was dismayed. I’d found no truth, except for the throbbing in my ruined feet. I prepared myself for a wretched rest where I’d pen the lies of the holy land. I yearned for one scrap of miracle in this land we killed for. And then we met Lazarus, who stopped us at the gates, pawing our tunics with his grubby nails.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked and dipped to his knees to sweep our boots, swish-swishing
his camel-hair brush. “You’ve missed the greatest relic of them all. Don’t you wish to see
the Christ’s blessed skin?”

“We’ve seen the shroud,” Bedard said. “The impression of skin is all there is.
True skin is blasphemy.”

“I speak of healing, clarity of vision,” Laz said, still stooped and sweeping my
toes now, “back pain, heartache, chronic cough. Is that a swelling I feel, Sir John
Mandeville? His skin will cure that, too.”

The gout had cursed me since the second year of our pilgrimage. I’d toed the
Ganges, dipped naked into the Jordan; nothing sacred helped. Fear filled me at the
thought of removing my boot each night. My foot grew monstrous, red and purple.
Perhaps I’d sprout a giant foot, like the Ethiopians I’d read about. My heel would
umbrella, topple me onto my back so I could never stand again, my giant toes blotting out
the sun.

“If this skin exists, I shall kiss it to my lips,” Cornelius said. He’d kissed
everything. Cornelius’ log was filled with tastes and textures: myrrh and marble, sea bass
and splinters, rosemary and silk, mare’s milk and gravel.

“It exists, as sure as Prestor John, as sure as Alexander, as sure as John
Mandeville himself.” Laz concentrated on my big toe, jabbed his thumb at its sore sides.
“If you have faith and a few extra coins, you can all be witness.”

“All dead flesh rots, liar.” Bedard drew his sword. He lifted Laz’s chin with the
tip of his blade. “Holy or no, bodies are only fodder for the dirt.”

“Surely after all you’ve seen you can hold some faith. A fleck of childhood, his
pure prepuce, treasured and stowed by Mary, passed on to Mary Mag, who was my
ancestor on my father’s side.” Laz’s Adam’s apple warbled beneath the tip of Bedard’s blade. A trickle of blood snaked through Laz’s whiskers.

“I have faith,” Cornelius said. “And it tingles against my teeth.” He drew his sword too, raised it, and bounded off toward the ramshackle tent where Laz pointed. The fighting had ceased long ago, but my companions still drew their swords. Cornelius at the hint of a new relic. Bedard drew for different matters, a goat bleating in the night, a beggar yanking at his sleeves. He’d killed dozens of idolaters and never received a scratch, but he awoke screaming every night, reaching for his blade. This habit of drawing swords was hard to break. We had been men of steel and blood for years. It’s enough to make one’s own flesh feel paper-thin, as if one could disappear like the clapping shut of bookends, especially when our cause was the Pope’s fiction.

Bedard shook his head, grunted, sheathed his sword. He kicked Laz away from my big toe, sent him tumbling across the dusty ground. “I suppose Cornelius is going to need to kiss this, too,” he said.

Cornelius the Ardent of Avignon’s lips curled around every ridiculous relic. His wife, who he hadn’t seen in these two years of our pilgrimage, was home suffering. The muscles in her bony limbs twitched and flicked as if perpetually swatting flies. Enough flies to fill Rome’s streets, to blacken the paths right up to the Pope’s door. The doctor knew nothing, prescribed a priest. The priest diagnosed a dozen magenta demons scuttling through her veins. Cornelius joined our pilgrimage to heal his wife, his lips constantly pursed, his eyebrows curling rapturously. And I’m sure every dusty camel bone, every rusted scrap of metal and shard of wood became his wife’s lips. He loved
her, loved his six children, and perhaps that was why he could believe so easily in what was so obviously a trick, a trap, a manufactured miracle, as all the sights we’d seen were.

The owner of the tent was Laz’s uncle, Cyrus. Somehow he knew we were coming. We found Cy amid the act of dragging a wooden coffer to the middle of his tent. He clutched the spine of his naked brown back and gritted his teeth against the weight of the box. When he turned toward us, his brown teeth sneered. He set about unclasping and spinning and snapping dozens of tiny golden locks.

Once Cy finished off his locks, he plopped down on the coffer. “You want to see the foreskin, and I want to see a Florin.”

“A Florin!” Bedard laughed. “I’ll show you better, the back of your tongue when I cleave it from your mouth.”

I gripped Bedard’s shoulder and reached into my purse. The killing still buzzed inside his ribs. It wasn’t his fault. I’d met Bedard when he’d been known as the Spleen Splitter. Crusading days. We spent three years fighting in the East, piercing brown skin wherever we found it. But that was just a speck for him. Bedard had indulged another twenty years. He once told me there weren’t enough souls to even the balance of his sins. His only hope was to die fighting. But he hadn’t. And after decades seeking a glory as hollow as that old man in Vatican’s giant white cap, he was left a sinner. Time threatened to turn Bedard’s thick shoulders and gray mustache to ash and then blow them into the sea. As plain as that. Holy decrees matter little when the body becomes ten thousand flakes.

I tossed Cy the coin, and he slipped it between his mossy teeth, bit down, and then raised his creaking bones. He opened the coffer. Cornelius gasped. A whine escaped
through Bedard’s lungs. But I, Sir John Mandeville, saw nothing spectacular. Not like
the Khan’s mechanical hawks or the perfect aim of a one-breasted Amazon drawing her bow,
miracles I’d read about but never witnessed. I rubbed my eyes, and still no golden glow,
no winged choir trumpeting glory. I saw a crumpled scrap of brown. It could have been a
beetle’s thorax, the cleaved tip of a Moslem’s nose forgotten for years on the battlefield,
an ounce of sun-dried mule dung.

“This is what we’ve been searching for,” Cornelius said, chest raised, head
shaking slowly from side to side. “The flesh of Providence.”

Cy bumped between our shoulders holding a flask of wine. I pushed it away.
Bedard drank deeply, his eyes never straying from the coffer.

“May we touch it?” Cornelius asked, and my toes curled, gout-sore skin
squeezing against my boots. I needed my boots stretched. All our time in Jerusalem and
we’d ended at one final lie. The only miracle I wanted to see was a damn cobbler.

“Very delicate, the skin of our Lord,” Cy said. “It could whither to dust against
even your fine white fingertips. But take it in, brothers. Glory in this miracle.”

Cornelius dropped to his knees, bit his knuckles. I knew this was one more false
holy relic, like the thirtieth pouch of Mary Magdaline’s holy foot grime in Israel which
looked to be nothing but hoof shavings. Cornelius had kissed those, too, smiling
afterward with specks of dirt clinging to his upper lip. If I didn’t care so much about the
truth, in my travel log I’d make that dirt glow like diamonds in Cornelius’ Christlike
smile. I feared mine would be a history of cynicism. Perhaps men needed dirt
transformed into diamonds, fish to loaves, water to wine, wine to blood. But for me, lying
miracles wouldn’t bring back the four men I killed near the Jordan, the fifth one I met
near the shoals, his newly emptied eye socket bleeding into the current. I had ended his suffering, slid my blade through his throat, a mercy, and then bowed beside his body, promised to his departed idolater soul and to the Christ that this would all mean something, that I wouldn’t let a single body perish in vain. Jesus’ prepuce, like dirt and grime and water and wasted body, was simply another failing.

I’d had enough of Christ’s prepuce. Bedard could help me lift Cornelius to his feet. We’d forge some story, one about Doubting Thomas’ left sandal a few miles up the road guarded by a sand dragon, a few miles closer to home and my desk and proper candlelight where I could try to write some noble truth for the ghost of the man with the empty eye socket. When I looked to Bedard, though, he was thumping his chest, crossing himself.

“For love of the Christ, how much more to touch it, then?” I said.

“How does one put a price on the potential and probable extinction of a miracle?” Cy tapped a long fingernail against his teeth, as if they were beads on an abacus. “Three more Florins, I suppose sounds fair, since you men are worthy and holy and will carry the memory should it parish. And tell your friends, if not.”

Cornelius plunged his arm wrist-deep into his purse, but I knew it was empty, knew he’d spent the last of his money buying his fourteenth nail yet another hawker had told us came from the cross. He wore all of them under his shirt, didn’t seem to care that not all of them could’ve pierced holy wrist and ankle. He sucked them sloppily every night between sobs in our tent as we drifted to sleep.

“I’ll give you one,” I said, “and you should be pleased to have that.”

“I could take no less than two.”
“Then allow me to contribute,” Bedard said. It was the first coin he’d spent on the trip for anything other than food or wine or whores. He gave Cy both coins. I peered at the crumple of dead flesh again, wondered if I’d missed something. I waited for the amorphous brown prune to sprout to life. Perhaps eyes and a tiny mouth to whisper secret eastern wisdom: *Those souls died to make you, in this moment, Mandeville.* Or: *The path home is a circle you must skirt twenty-seven times like the vulture, like the falcon.* Or: *All you need is to lose a little off the top.* Instead I heard nothing but dead and brown.

Bedard stood and slowly backed away from the coffer. I wondered if he might draw his sword again and drive it through Cy’s palm and then drop the coins into a pool of blood. Instead, Bedard leaned into my shoulder. “Can you believe we’ve found it, Mandeville?” He wiped a tear from his cheek. “Something true and real in all this world of blood and lies. Here it was just waiting for us. Can you believe it, John?”

“Indeed, I can’t.” And I couldn’t.

“So who’s doing the touching?” Cy slapped Bedard’s back, and I heard chainmail jingle underneath his tunic. I was surprised he was still wearing it, still bracing himself for the mace that wanted to smack into his spine. And I realized I should have known about the mail, but I didn’t because I never clapped my closest friend’s back. I never drew him close and embraced him, chest to chest, never pulled his sweaty forehead against mine after all the battles. Brothers in war who rent so much flesh from the bones of others but had never touched each other. I felt the old desire creeping into my knuckles, that urge to press my hilt into Cyrus’ skin, and that squish, that suck of stabbed muscle and ooze of blood. That gesture would show Cyrus who was his true brother.

“Get on with it, Cornelius,” I said, shifting my weight.
Cornelius turned toward us. His eyes watered. He tightened his fists in the air, and made one quick jerk, as if battering away a fleeting thought. “That I could, my brother. But my body won’t move. He won’t let me.”

“He’s been paid,” I glared at Cyrus, whose arm finally fell from Bedard’s shoulder. “He’s bound by the only honor he knows.”

“No, no, Sir John Mandeville,” Cornelius’ lips curled into an obscene, quivering frown, “I speak of He, the one and only He, and He finds me unworthy.”

“Nonsense. This is—”

Bedard halted my words by squeezing my shoulder. That touch of brothers that I couldn’t initiate. “I will do the kissing if Cornelius cannot.”

He moved to the coffer and kneeled beside Cornelius. The two kneeling men aimed their backs at me. Bedard and Cornelius could have been awaiting the severing of head from neck. But who would do the severing now? Not I. Not Cyrus with his jutting ribs and twig-thin wrists.

So I waited for my two friends to finish the game of make-believe. I waited while they whispered, heads drawn close, whimpering or laughing, I couldn’t tell. I waited while Bedard preened his head forward and then baulked a half-dozen times, like a pendulum marking the seconds. I waited while Cyrus moved to the corner of the tent, chewing at his nails and spitting them to the dusty floor. I waited while my toe throbbed, swelled large as a child’s fist inside my strangling boot.

Finally, Bedard turned his head, as Cornelius had done, his eyes full of the same tears. “I am also unworthy, Mandeville. I cannot do it.”
Cyrus chuckled quietly in the corner. I swung my chin toward him, and he shrugged his shoulders. “The power of the prepuce is great, I suppose,” he said.

“It must be you, John,” Cornelius uttered. “Only the noblest of our party can kiss the skin and bless our journey and heal my wife and wash away our sins.”

“I am not noble.” I, who had slaughtered so many men just like Bedard, but only I staked a claim to write our tale, to give meaning to our fight, this land. My inkwell swirled full of idolater blood, unlike Cornelius’ clean hands wrapped around the twisted shoulders of his loving wife and children. Worst of all, I had no faith. “I am not the man to do this task.”

“Oh, but you are, my friend, my better,” Bedard said. “It could only be you. You’ve always been the best of what we are.”

I had to shut them up. I trudged over to my two friends. They slid over. I kneeled, and they both put their hands on my back. I stared down into the tiny drawer jutting from the coffer. Inside sat the tiny curl of beetle corpse I’d seen before. I squeezed my eyelids shut and tried to pray. Lord, let me see Your truth clearly, without my cobweb heart and moth-eaten soul. Allow me the strength to see the innocence of your son. I opened my eyes slowly. Still, dirty and withered and dead. I squinted. Perhaps, yes, a fold, a crease in the rotted mound, like lips. Kiss me and know, Mandeville. Kiss my sacred prepuce of the ages, and let my wisdom wash over thee. And if that’s what it would say if it had tongue and was imbued with miracle, then I wouldn’t have felt a bit better. I wanted to kiss nothing. I start over, this trip, the fighting, this life. A true start where I needed no lies to heal the wounded hearts of my friends, my readers, my country. Where is the truth
to be found? Where is the center? You have come to the wrong teller in me. My lips are not strong enough.

“Draw it to your lips, John,” Cornelius said. “I feel Him, and he says you can, you must.”

“You’re going to kiss it?” Cyrus grumbled behind us. “White religion makes no sense.”

“Kiss it, John,” Bedard said, “and bring us to the heart of our journey.”

“A kiss is a bit more than a touch, boys,” Cy said. “Hold, while I figure a fair price.”

I ignored him. I pinched the brown crumple. The flesh still held a miraculous moistness. It made me cringe, donkey dropping, withered corpse’s thumb. But I felt something more strongly than my repulsion. Not a shining light from above, not the trumpets of Gabriel, but the palms of my friends, hot, burning on my back. I drew the shrivel toward my mouth, and it smelled sweet. I pursed my lips, closed my eyes, thought of Cornelius’ wife, how beautifully straight she’d stood before I’d left for war. I thought of Bedard, when we were boys and would swim naked in the Rhine, splashing, laughing, diving deep and pulling each other under. I pressed it to my lips and kissed.

The canvas of the tent entrance flapped, as if God was at the door.

“There goes Cyrus,” Cornelius said.

“In great haste,” Bedard added.

I couldn’t put down the holy prepuce. I was showered in light. I felt pure, perfect, the best man I’d ever been. Wings would burst through my tunic and carry me to heaven. Even the throbbing in my boot subsided, and I knew I’d been healed. Cornelius’ wife’s
spine snapped straight a thousand miles away. Bedard was a boy diving into the Rhine again. A gust of wind swept through the Vatican and knocked the Pope’s hat into a cask of wine, red creeping up the pure white fabric. Judases revealed. Doubting Thomases assuaged. Only truth and beauty left over. Who knew it could happen this fast? And it was me, John Mandeville, the only one who could do it. Now I knew, I felt, it had been me all along. I was the only one who could find the righteous truth.

“Let me see that.” Bedard grabbed the prepuce from my fingers. He sniffed at it.

“Gone most immediately,” Cornelius said, rising to his feet, “as I suspected.”

I waited for my friends to clap my back, to embrace my breast, to shed weary tears into my hair. Instead, Bedard kept sniffing, rolled the holy prepuce between his fingers, squeezed its middle until it strained bright purple. And then he popped it into his mouth. His jaw rolled. The prepuce was gone.

“Didn’t I tell you John would do it?” Cornelius laughed.

“We wanted to give you a little something for your stories, John,” Bedard said.

I couldn’t stand. They’d given me a story, and I’d believed it, had found faith for a moment, but it disappeared just as fast. Where was the truth? I stared into the secret drawer of the gilded coffer saw nothing but a dark imprint outlined by sand.

Bedard drew his sword. “We should be able to catch the liar, brothers, if we hurry. String that heathen up by the ankles and slit his belly.”

“A fine idea,” Cornelius said.

My two friends left the tent. I watched a vein of sunlight bleed through the canvas. Nowhere to go but out, back to that world where the Khan was infinitely far away, where the Amazons were simply a group of girls playing with their fathers’ bows
in a field, and Prester John’s bones were a buried camel next to a sand-battered cairn. To exist in this world, they required a little ink and perhaps a map where etchings of monsters and beasts overshadowed cartography. All lies like the prepuce. But I’d felt something like truth.

I lifted the canvas flap and followed my friends. Outside, Cornelius was laughing for the first time in years. Bedard had tracked Cy’s path, which was obvious, a pair of bare feet imprinted in the dry earth. The tracks ended where Bedard stood, his sword hovering over a stack of lion’s furs, that weren’t really lion furs but the hides of camels with crudely fashioned heads of papier-mâché. We’d been offered these before—hero cloaks fit for western conquerors at three florins apiece. We were conquerors, and there was no shortage of us.

“Which one of these finely-crafted coats should I guess first, my good fellows?” Bedard said, and then thrust his blade into one of the lion-head cloaks. “Ah, my sword strikes empty.” He drew it back and rested the blade on his shoulder. He kicked at another fur, knocking over its stand and toppling the cloak into a crumple. Loose hairs fluttered into the air. A bright sphere rolled to my foot, clunked against my toe, the one that throbbed anew, like a tiny heart in my boot.

Bedard stabbed again, and Cyrus grunted somewhere in the pile. I leaned over to pick up the sphere. It sparkled white, made of opal with a black dot painted upon it. It was the lion’s eye from one of the fake lion heads with pathetic rows of teeth sculpted from sandstone shards. I rolled the sphere in my hand, clenched it in my fist. Bedard threw another camel pelt into the air in a puff of dust and mangy hair.
My toe throbbed harder. The sphere in my hand mashed against the inside of my palm. Bedard thrust. Cornelius covered his eyes with one hand and stabbed wildly with the other. They hadn’t found Cy yet, but he was surely in there, and soon one of those pathetic pelts would seep red. It was a game, like the time we raided that village south of Alexandria, Bedard and I and a dozen other men. We’d fought off three boys, the only ones who approached us with swords to protect what was left of their smoldering huts. They were nothing, but the battle went on for nearly an hour. We formed a circle around Bedard as he fought all three at once, slapping his steel against their scimitars, which they’d drop, and then he’d wait for them to pick them up again. Each time they bent over, Bedard had pricked them on the ass, on the thigh, just the point of his blade, just enough to make them howl. And the circle of men would roar, myself among them, because here we were, hundreds of miles from home, and this was our holy mission. We were earning God’s favor. By the end of the battle, Bedard panted, glistening with sweat, his mail shucked, down to only his pants. He pounded his bare chest, grabbed the last boy’s sword by the blade and drew the tip to his heart. That last boy, circled by a dozen of us and the dismembered limbs of his comrades, didn’t thrust the sword. He fell to his knees and babbled in some foreign tongue.

I hope it was a prayer, a prayer to whatever God he had that was not our God, a God who left the man with the tallest, whitest hat in charge bargaining with our sins, making us feral in order to civilize the world.

Bedard and Cornelius took more stabs. Only three cloaks remained. I looked around for someone to stop us. But we were customers. We’d brought them Christ ten
years ago and now brought them coins. Silence and sand. Synthetic lion heads affixed to rotting camel hides. A throbbing toe instead of a heart.

I squeezed the opal eye in my hand as hard as I could, wanting something to pop, the stone or my skin. Neither did, so I opened my mouth. The eye felt smooth against my tongue, clacked against my teeth, and when I swallowed, it slid easily down my throat. I drew my knife and jabbed the point into my palms. My friends didn’t notice, wrapped up in their game of piercing the idolater. My blood dripped into the starving sand. I fell to my knees and babbled like that brown boy from years ago.

Now they looked. Now they saw me. My little lie. They sheathed their swords.

“His hands,” Cornelius said, “they bear the stigmata.”

Bedard kneeled, cupped my right palm in his hands. The blood pooled, and he dipped his forehead, christened his brow with my blood. “It was you all along, Sir John Mandeville. We’ve finally found the center, and it bleeds through you.”

Cornelius took my other palm, kissed the dripping blood. His lips came up smeared and red. Both men bowed their heads and chanted the Lord’s Prayer.

Like a flask of Cy’s strongest wine, they were drunk on my blood, on lie-forged miracle. The trick was so easy, and I wanted to laugh. John the Baptist’s skull fragments, scattered across this holy land, congregated, puzzled themselves back together, formed a shining skull that smiled hideously. But a hideous smile can be sincere. It sneered at all the pierced lungs and lopped limbs and brown blood all over the deserts that sunk through the loose sand and eventually crept into the Jordan, and a millennium and a half ago Jesus dipped his head there, his brown forehead that turned whiter with every history written until it shined almost transparent.
I wanted to laugh along with John the Baptist’s skull and the ghostly white Christ, but I held it back. I closed my eyes with these men, my two blind brothers. I imagined what Cy would charge for a spectacle like this: sip the white Judas’ stigmatic palms for a half a Florin.

For this moment, my brothers found their faith, found a truth, like the one they’d given me. Those moments could sustain us. And I could write of my travels in whatever method of truth might sustain you most. But this, this is the real story: I squinted open my left eye when I heard the shuffle of hide, and there, through that slit of sun, could I watched Cy scuttle away, carrying the jingle of our coins off to the prune seller to find the next perfect fleck of holy skin.
A plumber died in the trenches. The red earth caved, made a sucking sound as the cold clay swallowed his knees and then the topsoil cascaded in a sigh. In that first second of his boots sinking, he thought about wet socks. When the ground viced his chest, he imagined the mess he’d make of his laundry room. In that last second of seeing the sun set past five o’clock, soil stinging his nostrils, he calculated how long it would take to dig out the rough-in lines. He felt them push into his heels. He knew he’d be the last to touch them for days. And then the sun was gone.

The plumbers screamed like women, and the women living in the subdivision slid their drapes, called 911. Two roofers hot-wired the landscapers’ backhoes, punched at the controls, circled the fresh divot too close and clanged buckets. The tradesmen heard the clang, spilled from their half-built houses: three painters, a Spanish-speaking sanding crew, one framer. They scratched at the earth bare-handed, stabbed with hammers and extension poles. They dug like children aiming for China.

The builder arrived later, parked his hatchback, loosened his tie, gripped a clipboard and cell phone.

Ambulances and fire trucks flashed into the cul-de-sac. Shovels were distributed, the backhoes ordered cut so as not to scoop buried scalp. An hour passed before they found the first pale flash of flesh. Floodlights cut through the dusk, poured over the men, who were brown smears of dirt. It was fingers they found first. One of the plumbers jumped into the hole and grabbed the hand, pulled, grit his teeth, but the earth wouldn’t budge. Inside his pocket, the builder squeezed the sharp teeth of his car keys.
A lone officer circled the pit with yellow tape, as if mapping buried gas lines. The sky was black before they reached the plumber’s ankles. Two sanders buttressed his limp body while the roofers dug out his legs. They plucked his body free. The men dispersed into darkness. Under the floodlights, set into clay, the plumber’s boots remained.

Paramedics placed him on the gurney, the white sheet streaked in red earth. The workers circled the ambulance. One of the painters passed out cigarettes, and they all smoked silently. No one offered the builder one. No one had ever seen him smoke.

The workers flicked their butts into the pit then washed the city’s shovels under someone’s spigot. They lined them against a fire truck. They locked their houses and went home. The builder stayed, stared at his empty clipboard until a fireman snapped off the floodlights then drove away without sirens. The builder climbed into the pit, tugged at the empty boots, but they wouldn’t give.
BRANDY’S STREETLAMP

We’ll screw you and your daddy and your grandpa all at the same time tonight, but each generation costs extra. We can suck or fuck or just jerk you off, and, sure, we do anal. Except for Brandy. Brandy saves that for just one john. Brandy’s in love.

Brandy thinks this john’s gonna marry her and put a baby in her and then fly her to Tahiti where she’ll tan her giant baby-belly in a string bikini. She’s waiting for him now. Bought new pleather pumps, cherry red. Looks like she’s a ballerina, the way those high-as-a-skyrocket heels shoot her on her toes. She prances a few steps, out under the streetlamp, and we’re thinking she looks pretty as a painting, like the ones we saw when we all went to the DIA free museum day last February because it was too cold to fuck, and we saw those dancing girls that are kind of blurry and turn into a swirl of colors up close. All the right colors on Brandy tonight, under the light, that light where we don’t go.

We stay in the shadows, lean against the brick wall of the shutdown tire factory where our granddaddies used to work, where they worked all their lives, where they got jobs for their sons—boys who turned into our daddies—and then our daddies got laid off. Our work will last longer than a tire factory.

Irene struts out of the shadows, under Brandy’s lamp, to ask her for a light, and Brandy says she don’t smoke no more, ain’t got flame or even a spark. She turns her back, all stitched up by the criss-crossing straps of her pink corset. She cranes her neck down the street, watching for that Range Rover to crest the hill and her john to take her to stained satin sheets at the honeymoon suite of the Stop and Go-tel.
Oh, here’s mine, Irene says, and pulls out her lighter and lights her smoke and blows a cloud at the back of Brandy’s bleach-blonde wig. We bet that smoke’s killing Brandy. She lied about not smoking, and now she won’t be able to smoke all night, else we’ll laugh at her. We laugh anyway, when Irene comes back to the shadows, slams her ass against the grime-smeared brick, and says, Bitch putting on a real show for that no-show trick.

When ain’t it a show? That’s what the johns want, to see us all lined up in a row, wearing our best, but not quite our best. We make sure to tear our thigh-highs, yank down a strap, smudge dirt on asses, let a strand of our bangs curl all wanky. Most of them they want that fantasy of rescue, charity. They’re all thinking, My dollars could help this bitch out, and maybe she’ll use it to buy a fix but maybe she’ll use it on food for her baby, on an online class, toward first-month’s rent on a quiet studio. Truth is we use those dollars on whatever the fuck we want.

But Brandy, she puts it all toward new shoes, new fancy tangas she orders online, new corset that cost more than a businessman’s blazer. She’s looking new every day for one trick, one man, and one man ain’t never enough for any one woman. Not anymore. Not since our daddies couldn’t find work and their pensions turned to dust and the men who might’ve been lovers are scanning want-ads for the same fucking job that none of them will get, waiting for the sun to go down, so they can come find us.

And finally Brandy’s john is coming. Headlights bouncing up the hill, one slightly brighter than the other, like Shakes’ uneven nipples. Little bit of asymmetry never scared off no john. They like the way Shakes’ tits looks. We like them, too, named the smaller one Jed and the bigger one Elvis. Brandy can’t quit glancing down at her own tits, chin
buried in her cleavage, neck all smushed up, eyes going cross, like she’s looking for notes she scribbled in there with eyeliner to cheat her GED. Brandy’s hot as shit, a bombshell wrapped up in nylon and vinyl, ready to explode. But she won’t. She holds that shit together for this one trick, who’s slowing, turning his face through an open window, looking at Brandy, looking at us, and then speeding up, and there go those taillights, bouncing down the other side of the hill.

Brandy waddles a few steps in the disappeared headlights’ direction, like the Range Rover’s bumper has a silk lasso strapped around her waist. It snaps quick, and Brandy stops on the edge of her streetlamp, that bright rim of the bubble, and on the other side is night, is us, is what’s really going on when this job is a job and not a fantasy fucking fairy tale.

Irene saunters back into the spotlight, and Brandy glowers at her, balls up her fists at her sides. Irene, though, she plays it cool, sways over to the edge and wraps an arm around Brandy’s shoulder, puts a cigarette in her mouth, flicks a flame. They smoke together and kind of sway in that light, and this shit is too fucking cute. We want to join them, want to be Brandy in love, want to be Irene the mother. But we stay back in the shadows, leaning our asses against Granddaddy’s shit-outta-luck tire factory.

Then the uneven headlights pop up again, second lap around. Irene turns toward them, raises a middle finger with one hand, lifts her skirt and flashes her pussy with the other. We laugh. Brandy laughs. That Range Rover keeps on coming and does its slow-to-a-crawl-check-out-the-goods move again. Like he hasn’t seen the goods a dozen-hundred times, like he hasn’t taken Brandy into alleys and hotel rooms just as many times.
He stops, right next to where Brandy stands, Irene hanging over her shoulder. We can see his squinting eyes, his mustache goatee and his starched collar wrapped too tight around his barrel no-neck. He raises one hand, sticks out his pinky finger with the awful chunk of fake gold around it like a block of stinky cheese. Fuck-face is pointing at Irene. Irene, not beautiful, perfect tits Brandy wearing her new shoes and dry-cleaned corset.

Irene walks up to the window, leans in, her ass aimed at Brandy. And we’re waiting to see if she spits in that asshole’s face, or pulls out her knife to give him a good scare, or the mace to send the Range Rover swerving down the street and into the stop sign post on the next block.

Irene gets in. Gets in and down the street go the bumping taillights, eying us like some wolf backing into its cave. Irene’s lent cigarette dangles between Brandy’s fingers, the cherry so close to sending up her spotless corset in the prettiest ball of flames. She’s watching the street, waiting, and the ash gets longer, wilting toward the pavement.

We want to hug Brandy, wrap our arms over her shoulder like Irene did, but what would that change? We know that tomorrow Brandy will stand under her same spotlight, and we just hope she won’t be wearing those painful fucking pumps.
Suzie and Tofer are running away from home together. Not so much because they are in love but because it’s easier to imagine lives run away in pairs. They are fifteen and fourteen, respectively. Tofer is younger, Suzie more in love. She imagines a twenty-seven-year-old Tofer, tall, bearded, more beautiful than he is now with his pocked jawline of acne. Tofer imagines a clean, empty apartment, without Tofu-To-Go bags rotting around the trashcan and piled on the oven, without exercise schedules and schematics glued to the carpet, an apartment where his ancient baby bouncy seat and stroller and crib aren’t used to store unsold Tupperware.

Suzie and Tofer are running away and they are free. One mile and three-quarters and two miles and one-quarter from their homes, respectively. They jump the creek that divides the city of Kalamazoo between houses and plots of nothing where factories used to exist. Suzie jumps first. Tofer doesn’t jump because he doesn’t need to because the city has drained this creek. With the extinction of paper mills and beavers in the year 2042, creeks were deemed useless and converted to damp trenches. His sneakers squish into the loose loam, sink for a moment, and then they’re free.

On the other side, Suzie breaks into a sprint, hoping Tofer is close behind. She knows boys like to chase. She’s been chased by boys before, by Simon Winkler, Lance Duhadway, and Uncle Wallace. She hopes Tofer will notice the silver-studded belts around her waist bouncing in the night. These studs mean she is hard, like a thorn, like a brick of concrete, and Tofer will want to smash that concrete, jam his thumb against that thorn until he bleeds or the thorn snaps. Suzie also wears a low-cut tank-top, no bra, and
if Tofer catches up, he’ll notice her soft parts, too, and will want to catch them, cup them in his hands, because that’s what being in love is all about: the running and the catching and the cupping.

Tofer lags behind. He lets her run and thinks that running away can also be accomplished by walking. That’s how he has lived for fourteen years—slow and solitary. Alone in his room, tapping his snare drum, a gift from his seventh grade band teacher, Mr. Freese, who was a good man but was fired anyway for smoking meth in the school parking lot. Tofer doesn’t actually tap his snare. If he does, his parents bang on the wall, on his door, and eventually on his back if he doesn’t stop. So, Tofer has made an art of almost hitting his drum, of coming within a millimeter of stick meeting head. Tofer plays the rhythm of silence as well as any fourteen-year-old ever played the rhythm of non-silence.

Tofer’s parents can’t be disturbed; they are at work slimming down their souls. The healthy adult soul should weigh exactly fifty-five grams. Scientists discovered that the soul is fattened by watching game shows and eating tomatoes and looking up, and this fat leads to a lack of logical capacity, fits of screaming, and an invisible, yet disgusting skin disorder called soul moles. Soul weight can only be reduced by performing exercises that are a cross between a half-lotus meditation pose and a kind of half-sit-up where one says “boof” at the peak of muscle contraction. Tofer’s soul weighs seventeen grams and Suzie’s weighs sixty-four. Doctors would diagnose her as suffering from soul obesity, if her parents cared about the soul exercises. They do not. They eat tomatoes every night, tape the newspaper to the ceiling and stare out their two-dozen skylights, their necks endlessly tilted. They live to spite the fashion magazines’ glorification of anorexic souls.
Suzie, however, despises her parents’ soul neglect. Her parents keep her from having the soul she deserves. She sprints across the open field, tumbles to the ground, pulls one foot over the other, and does a kind of half-sit-up. “Boof,” she says. She hopes Tofer notices from wherever he is behind her. But on her twelfth “boof” Tofer passes her, walking, almost-tapping on his jeans without making a noise because his hands stop a millimeter from impact.

Suzie hops up and follows, catches up to him. “Your soul is so slim,” she says. “What’s your secret?” This is something she’s heard girls at school say, and this is something the girls at school have heard their older sisters say, and this is something the girls at school’s older sisters have seen in the movies and TV, which is exactly what Suzie’s parents are afraid of. In truth, no one can see anyone else’s soul. This is scientific fact.

“I don’t think I have one,” Tofer says.

“I wish I could get rid of mine. It’s too fat, don’t you think?” Suzie pulls the top of her tank top away from her sternum and points down at her breasts. This is not where the soul would be viewed if a soul could be viewed, but Suzie figures she has nice breasts so why not start there.

Tofer looks down her shirt, at her wonderful, braless breasts. He wants to almost-touch them. He wants to hover his fingers so close to her skin that it raises in goose bumps to meet him. “I think it’s exactly as fat as it needs to be.”

Suzie pulls Tofer close by the belt loops of his jeans, presses his crotch against hers. Tofer squirms backward, slightly. She kisses him, slides her tongue into his mouth, and inside Tofer’s mouth his tongue retracts, hides against his lower teeth. Suzie’s tongue
stabs at the hidden lump, and it darts back farther. She rubs her tongue against the front of his teeth. She swabs her tongue against the thin flap of wet flesh that connects his tongue to the bottom of his mouth, and she thinks that the thinness of this bit of flesh might just correlate to the thinness of Tofer’s slim soul. She feels his dick hardening against her, pretends it’s his soul swelling, and she feels less alone in the world of obese souls.

Suzie is only half-right about the physical body’s correlation with soul weight. The tongue’s frenulum linguae does indeed reflect the soul’s density and stores sixty-two percent of its matter. The penis and its swelling contain exactly none of an individual’s soul. The specific anatomy of the soul will soon be discovered by a scientist named Gertrude Cust in the year 2047, when she renovates the super collider in Geneva to accommodate human bodies. When propelled at one mile below the speed of light, a human cadaver flails madly. Cust’s assistants will laugh, and then feel ashamed for laughing at the bodies so generously donated by the deceased. Eventually the bodies will smash into one another in a flash of luminous magenta, eviscerating all matter but the parts that contain the soul, which is primarily the frenulum linguae. And aren’t the minds of adolescents wonderful things? The way they think about bodies—as they explore their own bodies and each other’s bodies—can foretell the greatest discoveries. This has been happening since 4053 BC, but then and now no one really listens. And Gertrude Cust will win her Nobel Prize in physics without the aid of Suzie, who will by then no longer be an adolescent, but will still remember the feel of that shy little scrap of wet flesh below Tofer’s tongue.
Tofer will remember the terror in touching, of Suzie’s fingers clutching his belt loops, and then descending to his dick which is hard and which only he touches which his parents have told him is a great way to ruin the fitness of his soul which he didn’t care about, but he was embarrassed so he took to only rubbing against the fabric of his jeans without using his hands. But now here is Suzie’s hands, Suzie’s lips on his, Suzie’s tongue in his mouth.

Suzie stops exploring Tofer’s thin strip of flesh under his tongue when a deep voice speaks. Suzie and Tofer part and peer into the dark field that used to contain factories and creeks. They see nothing, so Suzie says to the nothing, “What?”

The darkness replies, “You’re too young to be going at it like that.” And then a body emerges. A tall man, thin as a closed umbrella, who crinkles as he walks closer. He wears a white plastic bag on his head like a bonnet. His shirt is made of white plastic bags knotted together. His pants are also made of white plastic bags, ruffled layers, as if he stepped through three hundred of them. This is in fact what he did.

“How old do you think we are?” Suzie says. “Maybe we just fucking look young.”

“You’re too young to be dry-rubbing and tonguing and such.”

“And what’s the cutoff for something like that?”

“Look, little lady,” the man says, “if you want an exact number, you’re not going to get it. I’m retired from that game.”

The man wearing all the plastic bags is indeed retired from the game called The Mysterious Murray Guesses Your Age and Weight, which he used to perform at the carnival, back when there were still paper mills and beavers and just before there was a
scientific measurement for souls. Murray had an accuracy rating of ninety-two percent, the best in the age-weight-guessing business. But once souls became a factor, and carnival law required this weight to be subtracted from body weight and then itemized as a separate guess, Murray’s accuracy dropped like a plastic bag full of bowling balls. He was fired, and never found another occupation. Age-guessing is a sore subject for Murray.

“Well, that’s just fine, because I don’t really give a fuck how old you think we are,” Suzie says.

“Why are you wearing bags?” Tofer asks.

“That is a stupid question,” Murray says. “Why aren’t you wearing bags? Does your cotton repel water? Is your cotton completely free and found in nearly every trash bin you encounter? Does your cotton ward off evil and block microwaves and draw out sweat to extract toxins?”

“Does it extract soul weight, too?” Suzie asks.

“That is also a stupid question.”

Suzie crosses her arms over her breasts, and feels her cheeks flushing. What Murray says echoes what her parents have said about soul weight: stupid. Someone somewhere must care about the dangerously high weight of her soul and how perfect she could be if she was lighter.

“So, just sneaking out for a little tongue exploration,” Murray says, “or running away from home?”

“How did you know we’re running away?” Tofer says.
“Again, I’m retired from the guessing game, so stop asking me stupid questions. If I’m right just confirm by nodding your head and maybe give me a dollar.” Murray dives his hand inside the hundreds of plastic bags ruffling his legs and eventually comes up with the plastic bag designated for his wallet, which contains 354 cents in various coins. “Do you have a dollar?”

“We don’t have any money,” Suzie says, even though she has all the money she’s ever had and all the money she managed to steal from her parents before she left. If she converted her bills into coins they would weigh twelve pounds and four ounces, or fifteen pounds and seven ounces, or eight pounds and zero ounces. All of these weights would tear a hole in Murray’s bag-wallet, which is already stretched. Though it doesn’t leak now, it would with Suzie’s money, which he would convert to coins, because only coins can be melted down. Dollars can only be burned and are worthless if America’s currency system rips apart like a stretched plastic bag.

“If you don’t have money, you should come with me,” Murray says. He turns away and starts walking.

Tofer follows. Suzie grabs his arm, tries to stop him, but Tofer shrugs her off. He does not know what to do with her touch, but he likes the swish-swish rhythm the bags make to Murray’s stride. Tofer says, “Where else would we go tonight?”

So Suzie goes along, too. Goes because he goes, and so they both go, and there are better reasons for two to go, but one reason is as good as another.

The three of them trek across the great sodded plains of the Eco-Take-Back project, which is just ten acres of sod slapped across ten acres that used to be paper mill ruins. The Eco-Take-Back project was seen as a great success, since grass is much more
aesthetically pleasing than ruined brick. Murray stays in front, walking at a brisk crinkle. Tofer taps his hands to the rhythm of the crinkling without actually tapping anything. Suzie bides her time, cranes her neck, looking for something that will distract Tofer, something that will bring him back to her. But there is nothing but sod. If she started digging, she’d find exactly what she needed, two brick shards she could clink primordially, like the first notes the Earth every played with it grinding tectonic plates. But she doesn’t dig. Her nails are freshly painted black and she would prefer to maintain the dark sheen rather than burrow, if the choice occurred to her, which it does not.

At the far edge of the Eco-Take-Back preserve, they traverse another empty creek and reach a row of huddled houses, dark and empty and boasting dangers on bright orange signs stapled to their front doors. Murray ignores these warnings, trudges toward a blue one-story with a mossy roof and a cracked bay window. He avoids the front entrance and weaves through a broken fence. Tofer follows and so Suzie follows. At the back of the house, Murray drops to all fours and squishes through a small window in the foundation. His swish-swish bags crescendo in a great groan of crumpled plastic. And then he is gone.

Tofer drops to all fours, too. That unapologetic plastic music beckons him, but Suzie digs her heel into his pant leg.

“Why are we following this nut job?” she says. “He’s probably going to rape the shit out of us down there.”

“He’s going to show us something,” Tofer says.

“He’s going to show us the tip of his dick before he shoves it in your mouth.”
“How can we know unless we follow him?” Tofer yanks his pant leg free. “If you’re scared, just go home to your family. You don’t have to follow me.”

What Tofer says causes Suzie to lose exactly 2.5 grams of her soul instantly. More soul excision than two weeks of doing 150 boofs per day. Rather than feeling slim, it feels like when her parents let Uncle Wallace take her to the Exploding Elbows’ reunion show. And the music through the speakers thumped so loud her chest rattled and he shared his beer with her and bought her a patch stitched with the band’s name, and then he drove home with his dick sticking out the fly of his jeans. She looked out the passenger window the whole way home, at her face reflected there, Uncle Wallace’s dick behind it.

The Uncle Wallace feeling sucks the will out of Suzie, and she lets Tofer slide into the basement window and disappear like Murray. She feels like disappearing, too, like there’s no point to continuing on toward freedom and no way she can return home. Suzie lowers her palms to the dirt, careful to keep her fingernails out of the grime, and slides through the window.

Suzie’s feet touch ground, but she sees nothing. Inside is pitch black. Suzie hears Murray’s crinkling, and something like tinny metal, and a squeaking. The noises and the darkness scare her and she reaches for Tofer and there he is. Her hand touches his small bicep, trailing down to his twitching wrist, his tapping hand, which she clutches, squeezing away those silent taps he’s always doing. A nervous tick, she thinks.

And then the darkness erupts. Murray has lit a lamp, a candle blazing inside a plastic milk jug. He raises it above his head and latches it to an eyehook hanging from a
beam. Suzie spots stairs behind him, but the basement is cramped and Murray and his bags stand between her and escape.

“Kids, this is the gang,” Murray says. “Gang, this is some kids.”

“Howdy,” one of them says. This one of them is Turkey. Tin foil covers his entire body, except for protruding pink toes. Only his toes and his mouth are uncovered, and two holes the width of a pencil where his nose should be, and two more for his eyes.

“And the other one is Pete.” Murray points to a pile of Styrofoam. Big blocks of Styrofoam and small blocks teeter in one giant pile. The pile says nothing, does not move. Suzie doubts a man crouches or squats inside. She doubts anyone is there. Suzie does a lot of doubting in this basement of a vacant house with men she assumes are crazy, yet are most certainly free.

“How old are these two?” Turkey rises in a roar of twisting tin foil.

“Old enough to know we shouldn’t be hanging around you nut-jobs,” Suzie says. She still clutches Tofer’s hand and tugs it toward the window. The window appears tiny in the dim lighting, and sits so far above them. She wonders how they even found the floor without splintering their ankles. But this is the magic of the dark, of not seeing, and thus not wondering. It’s the same combination of unknowns that allows Pete to exist without proof under his pile of Styrofoam blocks.
Styrofoam must be capitalized, as it is still under trademark, still a brand name. Copyrights are funny things that cause word-processing software to auto-correct, even when capitalization seems unnecessary, when a thing feels so common it doesn’t need to be distinguished, like Styrofoam. At one time, dumpster required capping. Now it does not. The patent must have expired, as all patents expire, which is too bad for Pete, since he holds the patents on 253 inventions, including the Love Popsicle, the Syringe-fork, and the Soul-mometer, which is currently receiving offers from top retailers, but they get no reply on their offers since Pete is here or not here under a pile of Styrofoam and only moves in complete darkness.

Murray crinkles over to a metal shelf and removes a small, red gas can filled with whiskey. He takes five Styrofoam cups from the pile, asks Pete, “Do you mind if I use these?”

The pile of Styrofoam doesn’t move.

Murray pours a little whiskey into each cup, then passes them around to Suzie, Tofer, and Turkey. He downs his own. He lifts the last one toward Pete, holds it in the air, swirls it, waits. Finally he sets it on the pile of Styrofoam.

Suzie looks inside her cup and studies brown stains above the rim of brown liquid. She has drank alcohol before, knows she’s too young, but her parents find age restrictions absurd. She drinks, wishes someone cared. Tofer digs his fingernail into the cup, makes a squeaking sound, does not drink.

“These kids have come seeking answers to their questions,” Murray says. “Questions like how old are they and how much do they weigh, souls included, and what will they be when they grow up, and when will they die, and how will it happen.”
“We don’t care about that,” Suzie says. “We never asked you those things.”

“Not directly, my dear,” Murray says, “not directly.”

“Are we counting previous lives?” Turkey asks. Turkey worked at the carnival with Murray and read Tarot cards and crystal balls or customers’ palms or sometimes just their general auras, which Turkey can smell. One whiff and he can tell Tofer’s soul has lived five hundred years, eighty-nine lives, fourteen of them very brief stints as a beetle, an earthworm, a blood worm, a moth, and a now-extinct mammoth tick. When Tofer was a mosquito he lived only twenty-seven minutes. That part of his soul is still very disappointed at not getting a fair shot, never even sucking a drop of blood. Tofer the mosquito froze to death because his neglectful mother laid eggs in late November.

“No, we are not counting previous lives,” Murray says.

“This is pointless,” Suzie says. “Let’s get out of here.”

Tofer squeaks his fingernail across his cup.

Pete understands what Tofer means. He scratches a toenail against the inside of his cave. He would like to invite Tofer to come live with him in the safety of Styrofoam, where all sound is protected and swaddled and even the most minor almost-tap of fingertips reverberates, sways electrons, makes a fine tinkling sound.

Turkey tips up his cup, throws it to the floor, stomps upon it. “To reveal these answers, a reading is absolutely in order. To the roof!”

Turkey jogs up the stairs in a great chiming of crunching metal. Murray crinkles up after him. Suzie turns and jumps at the window, but can’t reach it. There is nothing in the room for her to stand on. The Styrofoam, she knows, would snap under her weight, which she overestimates when factoring her obese soul. She shakes her head, spits out a
“Fuck,” and then trudges up the stairs, hoping for a door through which they could slip and get away from these people and be on their way to freedom again.

Before leaving the basement, Tofer balances his still-full cup of whiskey on Pete’s pile, rests his hand on a large piece of Styrofoam, and asks, “Are you coming, too?”

Pete wants to tell him no, wants so badly to unbury his right hand and place it upon Tofer’s. But the world outside Styrofoam is too harsh, too loud, all those sounds bouncing around on every surface willy-nilly. Pete’s soul weighs .00786 grams, and could disappear in one boof-inducing bang. So he does nothing but let his heart thump, which he can hear perfectly in his Styrofoam nest, a rhythm Tofer would love if he were in there, and their respective heartbeats could thu-thump together, playing off each other, a percussive two-man, two-heart, four-ventricle symphony of whomps and gurgles. But Tofer is gone, up the stairs, following the others, and Pete’s heartbeats slow. Thump. Only four more left. Thump. What a wonderful thing to be alive and hear it so clearly. Thump. The blood swooshes an accompaniment. Thump. So quiet you can hear nothing.

Suzie clomps up the basement stairs. She reaches a giant hall with parallel staircases hugging each wall and goes up the right side. From there an iron staircase spirals up to a tiny platform holding a step ladder, which she climbs, until her head smacks a ceiling access panel. She no longer knows if Tofer follows. She only knows up is the only direction left. So she lifts the panel, and there is the night sky hanging heavy and present above the roof’s sparkling shingles.
She walks to the roof edge, feeling alone. But she also feels free, so far above the home she left behind, until she looks over the eave and sees the ground only about twelve feet below.

Tofer’s hand taps the air at her side. “We could jump,” she says. “It would hardly hurt.”

“Oh, you could watch as we reveal your fortunes,” Turkey says, rattling between the two. He carries a white sink basin and heaves it over the edge. The shards explode on the concrete. Turkey rubs his tin foil chin, studies the shards. “Inconclusive. We’re going to need more porcelain.”

So Murray brings a toilet, missing its tank, and heaves that over, too. “More, more,” Turkey says, wringing his wrists, crumpling the foil until his arms become tiny sticks. And Murray brings the missing tank and heaves it and Turkey calls for more and more.

Murray and Turkey take turns hurling more sinks and toilets. When Suzie is sure they’ve exhausted their supply, they break out naked dolls, cat figurines, and sculptures of praying hands.

“They’re from the carnival days,” Murray explains. “You would have won a cat or porcupine if I’d been wrong about your weight, the praying hands if I’d misjudged your age. Or a comb or a harmonica or a screen-printed Scorpions collector mirror, but we ran out of those long ago. The dolls were a little harder to earn.” Murray tosses three more praying hands, and then Turkey yells, “Stop,” and Murray throws another.
“For Christ’s sake, Murray,” Turkey leans over the eave, studies the porcelain-littered concrete, “you’ve overdone it. You’re a child of excess just like the rest of them. Now we’ll need more.”

So the two men chuck twenty-two more porcelain knick-knacks until Turkey is satisfied and has worried his fingers thin as pencils.

“Now it’s perfect,” he says. “Just look at that.”

Suzie and Tofer look, and they see a street of white shards. Like dinosaur bones, Tofer thinks. Like a brontosaurus exploded, Suzie agrees. Like a pterodactyl exhibit that got the shit shaken out of it, Murray concludes.

“It’s like looking into the future, right?” Turkey says.

And no one agrees to this, but that doesn’t bother Turkey. He reads the shards like tea leaves, sums it up in his head. He sees a Cro-Magnon’s quarter skull-case, and that means the dead will rise again. He sees a toilet plunger, and that means the return of lost desires. He sees a boat anchor for a three-quarter size sailboat, and that means lost travelers will hesitate. He sees a half-full Styrofoam cup, and he knows that Pete is dead. He sees a candy apple and he sees oak leaves and he sees a tire iron and he sees Jacques Cousteau and he sees a lasso, and these things mean something, but he doesn’t explain any of that to Tofer and Suzie. He peers over the edge, waiting to start like an arcade game waiting for its nickel.

“We’ll need two carnival tickets now,” Murray says.

“Two what?” Tofer says.

“He won’t read a fortune unless you give him two tickets. Routine is hard to break, children.”
“Why would we have carnival tickets?” Suzie says.

“Or you could just tell him you’re giving him carnival tickets and give him a hundred dollars or twelve cereal box tops or the promise of your first born son. He won’t know the difference.”

“Or we could just leave,” Suzie says.

“That is impossible,” Murray says. “We’ve already started, and what’s started can’t be stopped. I mean, what would we do with all that porcelain? It doesn’t glue itself back together. Hell’s bells, you could have just told us from the start that you didn’t have any tickets.”

Turkey looks worried. He rubs his now crumpled fist into his eyeholes, leaving dents in the foil. He crosses and uncrosses his legs which grow thinner and thinner. There will be nothing left of Turkey if they don’t do something to appease his need for carnival tickets. Tofer understands. Tofer understands needing something to the point of silence, of disappearing. He near-taps his hips, imagines the impact, and where he usually envisions contact and sound, now gaping holes have replaced his thighs. His fingers have become rogue black holes that would eat through his body if they came close. Contact is a millimeter away and also nowhere.

“Tickets please,” Turkey says, poking at them with his thin fingers-claws.

“Tickets please oh please oh please.”

And then Turkey drops to the shingles, wraps his arms around his knees in a fetal position. He hugs himself until he is nothing but a giant ball of tin foil.

“Well, now you’ve done it,” Murray says. “It’s going to take days to unfold him.”

“I think we better go,” Suzie says.
“You think?” Murray pulls up his plastic bag sleeves, and underneath is more plastic. He closes in on Suzie, towers over her. “Who asks to get their fortune told and isn’t prepared to pay for it? What kind of patrons are you?”

Tofer watches and worries, near-taps his hips faster. Murray reminds him of his father before Tofer went silent, when Tofer used to waste the day tapping pencils against cardboard and tire pressure gauges against buckets and his fingers against a pocket full of nickels and pennies. Murray glowers down at Suzie, who rolls her eyes, and that makes Murray’s eyes squint harder. Tofer could fight this man, shove him off the peak and let him tumble upon porcelain shards. This is what he should do, to be a man, to protect his girl, to make contact, to make a sound.

But Tofer does something much meeker. He grabs Suzie’s hand, yanks her away, and he runs to the other edge of the roof and jumps. They fall. They fall and the earth approaches, but they have plenty of time to enjoy the push of the wind, the drop in their guts, weightlessness and also dropping as fast as porcelain praying hands. They fall and fall, passing the first-floor bay window, and they hear Turkey begging for tickets so that he won’t disappear. They fall and fall, and when they look up, there is Murray waving, saluting, winking, saying, “Attaboy, attagirl, only one real path toward freedom. Imminent death for all and to all a good night.” They fall and fall, and there goes the basement window, where they get a peek of total darkness, but even in total darkness a sliver of light reflects, a fractional percentage of .000493, and that’s enough to see the Styrofoam pile shudder and then tumble, and the nothing inside revealed, the lack of body, a ballooning soul that is invisible.
They keep falling, and they keep holding hands. The ground is closer, but it never comes. They will shatter to pieces like so much porcelain before them. And Tofer has made peace with that. He’ll make impact in a brilliant slap of flesh on concrete. It will be loud and heartbreaking and completely beautiful. His millennium-old soul will rise again, and perhaps become a creature who makes sound. Maybe a spruce pine growing wild from a trench that used to be a creek, and his branches will slap the neighboring houses crammed around him. Then he’ll be chopped down, stripped of bark, sliced, and he’ll be a pair of drumsticks.

But Suzie has a parachute. She pulls it from her tank top, wraps her legs around Tofer’s waist. She stole Murray’s largest plastic bag from him when he was yelling at her. She raises it above her head, where it catches wind, rips at her arms, her grip, but she holds tight, and Tofer and Suzie float.

The sum total of their souls is now fifty-nine grams. They night has slimmed Suzie, stretched Tofer. They float and enjoy the feeling of fifty-nine grams, which is the perfect weight for two souls together, on the run.

They land on the sidewalk under a lamppost that seems burned out but will relight in twenty-three seconds, as it has almost been five minutes and forty-four seconds—the exact amount of time a young Gertrude Cust discovered it could be dark on a street in a city of this size before ex-carnival worker squatters start moving into abandoned houses. This is what Gertrude Cust has proven. Later, at the end of her life, when she has moved into recluse at the once-again abandoned collider, she will prove the existence of Pete, the greater importance of soul volume over weight. No one will publish the findings.
Suzie lets go of Tofer, and he near-taps his thighs. Tofer moves toward Suzie, but he’s afraid his lips and tongue will be required again and he won’t know what to do.

Suzie doesn’t kiss him. She presses her hips against his. She grips his wrists and shifts his tapping fingers to her thighs, which are wider than his, exactly wide enough so that Tofer’s fingers touch and make a soft sound. The lamppost flicks on. Tofer taps on Suzie, and the sound echoes toward their homes, two miles and one-quarter and two miles and three-quarters away, respectively.