

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
ScholarWorks@UARK

Graduate Theses and Dissertations

8-2014

Still Circling the Sun

Stefan Rafael DeLaGarza
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Citation

DeLaGarza, S. R. (2014). Still Circling the Sun. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/2187>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu.

Still Circling the Sun

Still Circling the Sun

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Stefan DeLaGarza
University of Colorado, Boulder
Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing, 2001
University of Colorado, Boulder
Bachelor of Arts in Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology, 2001
San Francisco State University
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, 2008

August 2014
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Professor Rilla Askew
Thesis Director

Professor Geoffrey Brock
Committee Member

Professor Tim O'Grady
Committee Member

ABSTRACT

This work is a collection of traditional and experimental short stories that explore dynamic human relationships in a variety of settings: a bunker, a beach, and a family home, to name a few. Each character is on a journey to find deeper meaning in his or her life, and oftentimes, this means finding a path to forgiveness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Standing Still.....	1
Love in the Time of Bunkers	16
Learning Curves.....	33
Imaginary Numbers	44
Seeing the Light	55
Hey Fatso	69
Jupiter.....	76
How High Deer Jump Son	92
Strange Bodies	110
Chiaroscuro.....	122

Standing Still

I watched my father leave us in a near-blizzard, snow falling thick like God had torn up all our prayers and cast them down on us. It was Midnight Mass one Christmas two months after mom died. He had asked for me and my three brothers to fly out to Detroit and visit him and we had obliged, fearing he had stopped eating or washing himself. The four of us waited in the vestibule of Our Lady of the Lakes, altar boys and attendants lining up in the procession to begin the service. He was never late, never allowed any of us to be late growing up, especially to church. I grew suspicious and walked out to the parking lot and there he was, standing by his car. I waved and called out to him, but he only turned to the still-running sedan, got in, and drove off, disappearing like an early morning fog.

I walked back inside the church to my waiting brothers. “He just goddamn left us here!” I yelled, the words echoing off the marble floor and walls. Everyone in the procession turned and looked, the priest’s glare so intense it could have boiled Holy Water. My three brothers instantly crossed themselves. I pulled them into a huddle, just like when we were kids.

“What do you mean he left? Back home?” Ethan said.

“Probably back home,” Elliott said.

“Then we should go home,” Mark said.

“He’s not home,” I said. “He’s fucking with us.”

“*Language*,” they all said at once, just like mom used to do. But we went home because we had no other place to go.

For us boys, “home” was a strange, unknown word that we would have never used to describe where we lived or what we experienced. War zone, prison, or a Case Study for Divorce

and Sterilization were all more apt. We sat in the driveway in silence, snow accumulating on the windshield. My brothers prodded me forward. We saw a light on upstairs, and one porch light was burned out. They followed my lead as I high-stepped through the deep snow where the path to the front steps should've been.

Walking through the door had always made me anxious, and my body still flinched from instinct. The house itself seemed to have absorbed the life it had contained for all those years and now looked flat but foreboding. The walls had faithfully listened equally and calmly to my mother's whispers or my father's silence, the nightly crying spells and the glasses thrown at the walls, whisky stains that never came out but were simply covered up with potted plants or out of place rugs. It felt like it was still holding tightly onto every word that was ever hurled.

I opened the door and the smell of coffee and bleach poured into us. I was thirsty and nauseous at the same time. I saw a light on beyond the foyer, in the kitchen. My first thought was, *Mom?*

"Jesus, it smells like an emergency room in there," I said. We walked in cautiously, fearing a crime scene, but instead found a gleaming kitchen torn from a glossy magazine and pasted right before us. The tiles in the kitchen were unusually white and seemed to wink at us in the light. The sink was completely empty and whiter than sun-dried bones. The oil spots cooked onto the surface of the stove, the ones my father made me scrub for hours as a punishment, had miraculously vanished. The fridge and cupboards were empty. The kitchen had never looked like this, not even when our bodies and bank accounts had grown big enough to move out and messes stopped being made. Not even when the five of us scrubbed and polished and cleaned and swept to get ready for the reception after our mother's funeral. My mother *lived* in this

kitchen and it had never looked like this. We didn't just see that there was a problem, we could also smell it.

We turned up the thermostat and opened the windows. We poured the warm coffee down the drain and looked for bodies.

Ethan called from the living room, where a bare Christmas tree stood. "He left a note here, in the branches." We sat on the sofa and I opened the letter. *What am I without your mother? I wasn't anything with her, so I guess I'm everything now. I wanted to leave her the day I married her, I knew she was gonna be trouble, but I stuck around for all of you. I feel lost finally, full of possibility. Fuck eternity, is what I always say.* "He never said that," Elliott said. *She was still the biggest part of me and knew me better than I knew myself. I never wanted the life I had so I did the best I could.* The letter rambled on for 15 more pages, ending with these words: *I'm leaving to find myself for a while. Don't worry about me and don't call the police or put my face on milk cartons (do they still do that?) or try to trace my movements with credit card purchases. I'm an adult and maybe I'll call when I figure it all out.*

We stared at each other for a little while, wondering what the hell *finding myself* meant to this 65 year old man. Become a Retirement Community Cowboy, bringing wine and seducing any wrinkly old ass with a walker? If the answer to life wasn't here, with family, it certainly wasn't out wherever he was going.

The truth is, no one in this house ever tried to hide their unhappiness. He'd slap the shit out of us some days and more often than not he'd fall asleep in his recliner sipping Johnnie Walker and spend the entire night there. He'd wake up while it was still dark, head to work, and get home when most of us were about to fall asleep, the creaking of the stairs as he'd thud his way up to us seeding our dreams with nightmares. My mom never got involved when he'd grab

us by the arm and say “How many times did I tell you?” It always upset her. All the things she never said.

“So what do we do?” my brothers asked.

“We wait.”

Our father’s expectations for us seemed impossible to live up to. It was obvious that none of us were particularly athletic, but our father took it upon himself to try and train each of us in whatever sport he had enrolled us in, thinking that endless practice would overcome our lack of raw talent. As the oldest, the greatest expectations were on me. Whenever he was drunk, which was practically every night, he would talk about how good he was at just about everything. How if it wasn’t for us, he could have been a professional anything. At 6’4”, he was an imposing figure, but he never seemed to us to be very talented. I maxed out at 5’9” and often told him that we were nothing alike. Those hands, big as sheets of paper, would wrap around my arms and draw me close. He’d stare at me with bleary red eyes and say, “You and me, we’re exactly alike, not like those shits you call your brothers. We have greatness in store.” He’d leave marks on my thin arms.

I don’t blame my mom for keeping quiet, for keeping herself safe. She was just waiting for our non-existent growth spurts. Dad had always used me as an example to keep my brothers all in line. When they started laughing in church my dad would tell me to quiet down and then take me out and spank me five or six times. My brothers, disciplined much less, feared him much more. I made a point to push him to his own limits of patience in order to find my limits of pain or embarrassment. I don’t think we ever got to the place where enough was enough.

One Sunday after church he kept me out in the front yard to practice grounders, over and over, and pop-ups, over and over, until he was satisfied that I was on my way to mastering those pointless skills. We all hated baseball, mostly because of him, because it was his favorite. Once, after I had missed a grounder in a game the day before, he decided a couple hundred practice grounders would keep me from making the same mistake. The more I missed with him that afternoon, the harder he'd throw them at me. The sun was setting. His arm was tired, I could tell. I started missing them on purpose, and he'd just eye me. My mom came out of the front door and said, "When will you two give it a rest? Dinner's getting cold." And my dad just yelled back, "We're staying here until he gets it right. He's got to earn this, like everything else, because right now he ain't worth a paper sack to shit in." And we stayed out there until it was almost midnight.

I called the house almost every day for a couple months and left a message. He was still my father. "Wondering if you're home yet. Give us a call. We want to hear about your trip," I said, as calmly as possible. Part of me felt jealous, envious even, that he could just leave, and practically start a new life without us. How many times had I dreamed of that, taking my brothers and my mom someplace and starting a new life without *him*. My calls dwindled to every couple of weeks and then once a month until I filled up all the space on that 30 year-old machine he had and tried to forget about him.

It wasn't until early October that he finally called. "Thank you for all the positivity," he said.

"The what?" I asked. His voice sounded smooth and crisp, relaxed, and I could tell the ends of his mouth were curved upwards in a half-smile.

“All the messages, on my machine, great positive energy, thanks for them. You are very thoughtful, you were always the thoughtful one – out of all my boys.”

“I don’t think thoughtfulness is on the paternal side of things,” I said. “So you’re back.”

“I’ve been back for a month or so...readjusting...to life. I wanted to tell you that I’m selling the house.”

“You’re selling the house? When? Where are you going?”

“As soon as possible,” he said with a chuckle. “Life’s timing is always perfect and I feel like a big change will do me some good. Everything is as it’s supposed to be.” I didn’t say anything, it felt like he was reading out of a book and I was trying to figure out what he was really trying to say. “It’s been on the market a little while and already has a few offers. So it might be pretty soon actually. I thought I’d call to see if you wanted to see it one last time. Make peace with your home.”

“Make peace with my home, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Houses are just bigger symbols for our bodies, they hold the energy that we put in them, and like any sacred space, they have to be respected, and healed,” he said. There was a silence over the line that lasted about twenty seconds. “Just come to the house. I want to see you.”

“I’ll do what I can,” I said, and hung up.

I called my brothers and we talked about what would happen on this visit. It somehow made sense to them that dad would call and ask to see me after finding himself. He’ll present his will, they said. He’s not going to sell the house, he’s gonna burn it to the ground, they said. He’s gonna tell you you’re adopted or that we have some weird deformed half-sister living with our new mother in the South, they said. The South? I said, laughing. Yeah, they said, they’ll fit in because hiding family members in attics isn’t so weird down there.

I landed in Detroit a month later, thick gray afternoon clouds using the city as a spittoon. The only way to make peace with my father was to agree with him and be agreeable, so I stopped and bought his favorite, Johnnie Walker. It was almost a year since I'd seen him and while sitting in the driveway, it felt like I was on some blind date I knew would turn out badly. I cracked the cap of the booze and took a long pull. The difference today was that my brothers weren't around. There were so many times I'd step in and own up for things I didn't do, take the heat for them all. Their presence made me feel stronger, like I was living up to my duty to them, saving them from something more than the impending slaps or punches. Without my brothers propping me up, the muscles in my arms and neck went slack and felt unusually weak. I fingered the keys in my pocket and thought about driving off.

My father opened the door with a smile that didn't fit his face, grabbed my arm gently and pulled me in to a hug. My arms were limp at my side, heavy with whisky, my face way too close to his.

"It's so good to see you, Mikey," he said, a nickname I always hated. "Come in, sit down at the kitchen table, coffee's warm."

"I think we'll need something a little stronger," I said, raising the bottle like the trophy he always expected of me.

He sat down at the table while I went to the counter. He looked uncomfortable and said, "There's a couple mugs above the sink."

"What the hell's that smell, are you smoking weed?"

"Heaven's no! It's sage. Native Americans use it to clear negative energies and bless houses, rooms, people, anything."

Everything was empty and clean, un-lived in. “So did the house sell?” I asked.

“We’re just waiting on the bank now,” he said. “I don’t drink anymore, but I’d love some coffee.”

I tried to ignore him while I poured some Walker and put it in front of him on the table.

“Oh, son, I said coffee,” he said, pushing the mug away from his reach.

“I know what you said, but I think you need this,” I said, picking it up and setting it right in front of him. “So where were you?”

“I drove out of here...”

“No shit.”

“...*thinking* that I had no place to go, so I drove east first, then south.”

I couldn’t believe he was going to tell me about my deformed half-sister.

“I stayed in a motel outside Boston and got drunk for several days when I heard a voice that said I wasn’t living up to my Highest Good, and that I should go south.”

“Living up to your what?” I asked, finishing my whisky and getting up to pour another.

“My Highest Good. We all have one.”

“Wasn’t there when we were growing up.”

“It was there...but I’ll admit that it wasn’t in my consciousness then.” He stood up with the mug and walked to the sink, dumping the whisky and grabbing a new mug from the cabinet. He filled it with coffee and sat back down.

“So you went south.”

He took an inordinately long sip, his hand slightly shaking. “Yeah, so I went south. A voice kept telling me to go to Arkansas so that’s where I went. Did you know that Arkansas has the second largest deposit of natural crystal in the world? Right after Brazil?”

“Are you going to Brazil next? What else do you have to find?”

“I can understand your skepticism about all this. I have to remember that we’re all on different paths and some people just aren’t ready for these messages. Anyway, in Arkansas there were some spiritual retreats and everyone was just so nice that I stayed for a week, which led to 3 weeks which led to 3 months. I’ve given up most of my possessions and I’ll start looking for houses in Arkansas.”

“Wait, back up. Spiritual retreats? Arkansas?”

“Yes and yes, son, it’s really nothing like you’re thinking. Mostly we did yoga and would sit and meditate for hours on end and talk about whatever we were feeling, I mean really feeling, deep down. Your cells *feel*, did you know that? Have you ever allowed yourself to *feel* what’s deep down?”

I stared at the bottom of my mug.

“Only a disciplined mind brings happiness.”

“You used to discipline our bodies more than anything else,” I said, gulping down what was left in my mug.

“I was strict sometimes, but it’s a father’s job to make his sons better than they ever thought they could be. If you want to learn how to give up the attachments to your body, these memories, I can help you. I’ve done a lot of work forgiving myself *and* the past.”

“Well, I don’t think any of your sons will get to doing *that* work anytime soon.” I stared at my father until his eyes were forced down.

We must have sat there for 4 or 5 hours, and I tried as hard as possible to not have a look of condescension on my face as I listened to all the great insights he had while sitting in

whatever-the-fuck a yurt was in the Ozarks. The grayness of the day eventually turned into evening and it began to rain harder. As a kid, I always loved the sound of the rain on the roof, there was something comforting about the random pattern the drops seemed to make, the unknown inevitability of it all. I'd never heard my dad talk so much. I kept refilling my mug, and he kept refilling his with coffee. He started looking jittery, talking faster. My fingers felt numb, and I couldn't tell if it was the whisky or the rising anger of just wanting to call out his bullshit that was causing my heart to race. But my dad was right, my cells did feel, and they felt *a lot*.

“So I guess I should also tell you about what I plan to do once I move to Arkansas...”

“You can do whatever you want, you don't seem to have a problem with that these days.”

“It's more about who I'll do those things with, is what I'm saying, son.”

I stared down into my mug and rubbed my forehead. I should have known.

“Once I get a house down there, Starlight is going to move in with me and we'll work in the community, maybe start a program to help the poor there, build houses, help feed them, we haven't decided yet.”

“This is ridiculous. You're ridiculous. Can you imagine what mom would say?”

“I've had these conversations with your mom in some dreams, she totally understands.”

I laughed out loud. I couldn't help it. “Are you listening to yourself? Where in the world is this coming from? Mom gave you everything and made your life a breeze,” I said, practically going hoarse.

“You don't know the first thing about your mother,” he said. “Relationships are complicated, Mikey, we were doomed from the beginning, from your conception, in fact.”

“It wouldn't have happened if I had had a choice about it all.”

“Don’t be like that, you’re a blessing, but you’re also the reason your mom and me got married, things were very different back then. She never loved me,” he said.

“Mom never loved you?”

“We made a mistake and we tried to live with it as best we could. She never stopped loving her high school sweetheart. Don’t you remember when your mom would just take off for a weekend?”

“I remember because we always had fast food for three days straight. She was meeting someone?”

“Not someone – him. Barry.”

“Get the fuck out,” I said. “Is this Barry character my real father?” I asked, unable to hide the excitement in my voice.

“Heaven’s no,” he responded. “We made sure of that early on. But I can’t hold anything against your mom. I’ve forgiven her, she did nothing wrong, we both made each other miserable.”

“Do you think someone like you can really change?”

“I know this must be very strange for you, it was a big change for me when all this stuff started happening, but just like my spiritual leader Sung Hung Mung helped me, I’ll help you through all these changes, but you have to give me a chance.”

“Give you a chance?” I remembered what he used to do when we were kids, and I was starting to have some bright ideas. “How about you earn it?”

I stood up and grabbed the mugs and put them in the sink. My legs felt soft and tingly, and I had to use the counter as a support. “Come with me,” I said, walking to the laundry room and opening the door to the garage. He was right behind me.

“What are you doing?”

I turned on the lights and looked around. The wooden bin we had with all our sports equipment was still there in the corner.

“This place is a mess,” he said. “Sure you don’t want any of this stuff?”

I walked over to the bin and started pulling everything out. There were helmets and soccer balls, bats and skateboards, and piles of shoes.

I opened the garage door and a cold wind surged through us.

“Jesus, what the hell are you doing, Mikey?”

My brothers and I had gotten rid of the baseballs and gloves long ago. But I found a basketball and a pump.

“Oh my God, Mikey, I can’t believe you’re doing this. Let’s go back in the house and finish talking. I haven’t even told you about how Starlight and I worked to start an organic, community-supported farm.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about crystals, or some slut from the stars, or whatever other shit you did out there.” I pumped up the ball until it was hard as a skull, turned on the light over the garage, and walked out into the rain. I threw the ball to him. He caught it and dribbled it a couple times, testing it out, probably thinking about what it was I wanted out of this, how he could somehow win.

“Remember how’d you make us practice baseball, basketball, fucking ping-pong? ‘Practice makes even gods stronger,’ remember that little gem?”

“It’s true,” he said.

“Did you just make all that shit up to compensate for your own failure, *as a fucking husband?*” I could tell the air was knocked out of him a little, his shoulders slumping.

“Mikey...”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Mikey, we don’t have to do this.”

“Get the fuck out here. Now.”

He walked out into the rain and stood there like a scolded child. “I can barely see the backboard.” He dribbled the ball a couple more times. “I was never very good at this, basketball was never really my sport—”

“Everything you’re bad at you definitely passed on to us.”

“Listen, I did a lot of things I’m not particularly proud of, I realized that at the retreat, and that’s why I wanted us to talk—”

“You can’t realize shit sitting down, you have to experience it, like we all experienced it.” I could barely see his face it was so dark. The cold air took my words to the sky as I stood there shivering. I was completely soaked and suddenly felt totally sober. “You didn’t answer my question...do you remember how you made us practice basketball?”

“I asked you to score on me while I guarded you.”

“So score on me,” I said, moving closer to the basket.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” he said as he started dribbling. He dribbled close to me and I put my hand on his hip, pushing lightly.

“Let’s see what you got old man.”

“Just like my high school days, Mikey, better bring your A-game.” He dribbled to the right and stopped fast, pulling up to shoot. I jumped and waved my arms and caught the ball on my hand, knocking it back into the yard.

“You’re gonna have to do better than that,” I said. My hand throbbed from the contact. He got the ball and started dribbling again. I saw the ball glisten in the light and reached out, stealing it from him mid-stride. I went in for a lay-up, caught it after it passed through the net, and threw it back into his chest. “You’re not earning shit. What do you want?”

“This is not how we have to learn about each other, we can have some coffee and dry off and really be men.”

“We’re staying out here until you get it, until you understand,” I said.

He started dribbling again, now with a bit more bounce in his own step, moving the ball from hand to hand. He stepped back and jumped up. I lowered my shoulder into him and he fell back onto the concrete. The ball had enough velocity to rise a couple feet straight up before bouncing between his sprawled legs.

“Shit, what are you doing, that’s a foul!”

I laughed. “Get the fuck up,” I said, standing over him. He rose, and I could hear the squish of our tennis shoes on the ground as we started again.

“This is crazy—” he muttered, dribbling to the right, then bouncing the ball between his legs, and moving to the left. He pulled up and shot. I put my hands on his chest and flattened him again. The ball thunked off the rim.

“Fuck, that hurt,” he groaned. “Shit, my back.” He writhed there on the wet ground. “Gotta work harder son, because you’re still weak on your right side, not worth a paper sack to shit in,” he said, chuckling to himself.

I looked down on his crumpled form. All this time I had been battling to be anything but like him, but I was just battling myself. The coldness of the air made my chest constrict and I

saw the bedroom lights in the house across the street turn on. We were just a couple of dumb pricks in the rain. I reached out my hand to help him up.

Love in the Time of Bunkers

Day 0

Bombs were dropping all around the world, raining down across every continent, falling on mountains and into oceans. A girl and a young man sat next to each other with their knees pulled to their chest. They were against the wall in the fully-stocked pantry of an enormous bunker.

“Shouldn’t we be able to hear what’s happening?”

“Not this far down, with this much concrete all around us. We have to have a strange faith that it’s enough to withstand the bombardment.” He put his arm around her trembling shoulders.

And they waited. They knew that for the rest of their lives, they’d wait.

“Will you tell me a joke, to take my mind off this?” she said.

“How many bombs does it take to destroy humanity?”

“That’s not funny—”

“One—

“—and it’s not helping.”

“It takes one. Just one to hit the last people on the planet,” he said.

“It’s really really really not funny, like not at all, not one bit.” For generations their families had prepared for this, but the reality of the situation was setting in.

“There’s nothing I can do or say to take your mind off this,” he said. “Can you sing? Can you sing me a song? If you sing maybe we’ll fall asleep and wake up and the worst will be over.”

“Two lovers entwined pass me by, and Heaven knows I'm miserable now, I was looking for a job and then I found a job, and Heaven knows I'm miserable now...”

“What the hell kind of song is that?” he asked.

“It’s really old, my parents used to play it, it’s from ‘Louder than Bombs.’”

“What?”

“It’s all I can think of right now,” she said. She grabbed his hand and held it tight in hers.

Day 2

“Isn’t there something we should be doing?” the girl asked, as they paced quietly up and down the hallways, stopping every so often to listen to the earth, and any messages it might reveal to them.

“I think we’re doing it.”

“Is it over? Do you think it’s over? Why didn’t anyone build a window in this place? I want to know what’s happening.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.” They stood across from each other, exchanging awkward glances, the intermittent flicker of the lights above them casting awful oblong shadows.

“It’s kinda funny, I guess,” she said.

“What is?”

“It’s just that...well, it’s ironic. It’s ironic that we can even live down here. It was an essay we had to write about irony, and I chose the wars and this place. There’s a nuclear reactor even further below us that keeps everything running, but it’s a different type of nuclear energy that put us down here anyway.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen, almost eighteen. It was for a class called Advanced Social Dynamics. I won’t miss going to school, that’s for sure. The food sucked.”

“The food? Fuck the food! You’re thinking about food? These walls are driving me crazy! I was planning on proposing to my girlfriend this weekend. I had it all planned out. Drive to a cabin on the lake. Ask her at sunset. Look, I still have the ring with me.” The gold circle winked in the light. “I have no idea what fucking happened to her. She was pregnant. The sirens went off late, didn’t they? Weren’t they late? Why didn’t the doors stay open longer? Why didn’t I wait?”

She went to him, put her arms around his waist, his body as tense and rigid as a Doomsday missile.

Day 3

The girl kept as busy as possible. She wiped the countertops of the large kitchen, swept the floor, and re-organized all the utensils and pans in the cupboards. She made pancakes and concentrated as hard as possible on perfect flips, on the spatula in her hand, and nothing else, refusing to let a single memory break into the attention she was paying to cooking breakfast, to the golden sheen searing the batter.

The lights flickered as she walked down the long hallway and into the young man’s room on the other side of the bunker. She took him a glass of condensed milk mixed with warmed, ultra-purified, water. She sat on the bed next to him.

“It’s time to wake up.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s 7.”

“In the morning or at night?”

“In the morning, silly, I made some breakfast, and it’s important to stay on a schedule,” she said.

“It’s impossible to know down here.” He sipped the milk. She stared at him, watched his eyes blink the arrhythmia of waking up.

“We’ll set alarms and stick to a schedule and do the work we need and save time to relax and try to live as normally as possible.”

“Live normally, are you kidding? What in the world is there to even do? We’re going to spend eternity in this cement coffin, waiting for the air to run out.”

“We trained for years and years for this. Don’t be so melodramatic. Even up there we wait for the air to run out and then spend eternity, well I don’t know where...Besides, there’s plenty to do. There’s endless dusting, I’ll tell you that right now. I guess no one thought about how much dust would accumulate in a huge concrete basement, lots of other cleaning too. Or you can read, do crosswords, do yoga, there’s so much. I think I might start writing a book.”

“A book about what?” he said, laughing a little.

“The future. A future full of clean air and—”

“Sounds like fiction to me,” he said, teasing her.

“You should work on your jokes,” she said. “I’d like to think we’re not the only ones, and that someday we’ll open the doors and walk back out. Swap recipes for all the best bunker meals.”

“You don’t need much of a recipe for powdered milk and powdered potatoes and powdered eggs. Listen, you’ll walk back out to an empty world that you have to rebuild.”

“And *we* // build everything just the way we want,” she said.

Day 29

The cool mornings in the concrete enclosure were still startling to the girl. She rose from her bed shivering and went to the kitchen to warm some milk. She drank one glass, still steaming, with a dash of cinnamon, and took the other one and walked to the young man's room. She entered the dark room and closed the door behind her. She walked slowly, carefully, to the edge of the bed and found the nightstand with her hand. She put the milk down and quietly raised the edge of the comforter folding it back. She took a deep breath and slid her body next to his, being as careful as possible not to disturb him. Almost instinctively, the young man rolled over and placed an arm around her waist, pulling himself up as close as possible behind her.

“Rise and shine,” she said. “Time to wake up.”

“I know, I've been awake,” he said, “I've been waiting for you.”

“You have?” she said, her smile rising faster than a warm breath in a cold room.

Day 99

She heated two glasses of milk, humming. He was already awake and called from his room. “What day is it?” She walked over to the makeshift calendar she had drawn on the wall, put a slash through “Week 14” and started a new week.

“It's the 99th day,” she called back. She heard him groan as she looked over to the meter that measured the outside level of atmospheric radiation. The red bubble filled the entirety of the glass encapsulating it. Still off the charts. It looked like the bubble was ready to break out of the glass and climb up the wall. She wouldn't mention that.

“The 99th day, but what day really?”

“I could probably figure it out, but it’d make my head explode.” She looked at him from the doorway. “Poor choice of words?”

She sat next to him on the bed and watched him drink his milk. She liked this part of the day the best, before they mostly went their separate ways in the huge labyrinthine bunker, built to house 1,000 comfortably for over forty years. She never felt sad when she thought about spending a life down here, with him, this stranger she was so close to, or that she’d die down here never again to see the world. But what really brought on deep anxious breathing was that there was more food, books, and things to do than she could ever finish in that lifetime and when they were gone, everything they left here would stay in this bunker without anyone. “What are you going to do today?”

“I’ll go the gym and workout a little. Read a newspaper from 25 years ago, I like to do that, ‘This day in history,’ go to the bar and have a beer.”

“Do you want to sing karaoke later?”

“You know I hate doing that...” he said.

“It’s just us, it’ll be fun.”

“It’s a date. First round’s on me. But I’m not singing.”

She smiled. “Pick a number,” she said. “From 1 to 100.”

“6.”

“Way off, you lose,” she said as she walked out. “No prize for you.”

Day 110

She hadn’t slept well again. It had been getting worse the past couple weeks or so, and was always due to terrifying, and boring, dreams. She was driving her parents’ car. She was

playing checkers with her older sister. She was walking in a forest. She was on a bus, going to school. Small actions that would never be repeated. People who would never again be seen.

He was standing in the doorway. “Hey sleepy-head, you slept through your alarm.” His shadow shifted. “I have some milk for you.” He walked over to her and sat on the bed, leaning back against the cement wall. She put her arm around his waist and put her head on his chest.

“What do you miss from the world?”

“You really have to ask?”

“I want to know,” she said.

“I just miss life. All of life. My girlfriend.”

“We’re living down here now. You have me now,” she said.

“We’re living, but I don’t think we’re alive. The air we breathe, the water, it passes through I don’t know how many purifiers and whatnots so we can survive, but it’s dead air, dead water. The food, all canned and jarred who knows how long ago, that will last who knows how long...”

“Okaaaay,” she said. There was a silence. “Do you think the people who did all this regret what they did?”

“If there’s any justice in the world, they’re holed up in a bunker with a leak—”

“That’s not nice,” she said, “that’s how we got here.” She closed her eyes but just saw sky.

“It’s impossible to know why people do things. I think some sleeping pills will help you though.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“I’ve been taking them for months.”

“You have?” she asked, laughing now.

“Yeah, head down to the clinic and help yourself. I’ll even write you a prescription, and, in my professional opinion, I’d also recommend some valium.”

“I’m not in any pain,” she said.

“It’s existential pain. You should really trust your doctor.” She smiled at this and held him tighter. She liked to think that they could be anyone they wanted to be.

Day 137

The girl walked down to the clinic. There were six beds, two operating rooms, and cabinets full of drugs. Most of the medications had at least another decade before reaching their expiration date. She was still having a hard time grasping their predicament. On one hand, she felt like she really could live a happy life, relatively speaking, underground. But on the other hand, thinking about all the days that were left, how the wall would be covered in her slash marks and notations of the days and weeks and months made her feel lightheaded, as though she couldn’t continue another second, as though she wouldn’t allow herself to. She hated feeling close to the young man but also totally separated from him. Like the bunker separating them from the world they were nestled in, from the dirt surrounding them, the dirt she’d never again run her fingers through.

She walked to the shelf with all the women’s health products, searching for contraceptives. There were twelve different types, and she carefully read the directions of each, including all the different condoms, before choosing one. In the end, she just chose the pill with the name she liked the best: Rising Dawn.

Day 147

She found him playing pool in the bar. He watched as she walked in and started mixing up a couple drinks. She handed him a tumbler and walked over to the jukebox.

“What’s all this?”

“It’s so quiet in here and I feel like dancing a little, come dance with me,” she said. He put his cue down on the table and slowly walked over to her. She danced around him, putting her hands on his waist, moving them to the rhythm as she sang along, “*You are tired and you want to be free.*” She grabbed the drink from his hands and led him to the couch and straddled his legs.

“Pick a number, 1-25,” she said.

“I don’t know,” he said, rubbing his hands over her legs, “two?”

“Close enough,” she said, raising her shirt.

Day 365

The girl walked to the calendar with her milk. She looked at the meter and thought she saw a meniscus. She tapped the glass a couple times, the red bubble quivering. The lights above her flickered. She turned her attention back to the calendar and wrote the day in on the wall with an exclamation mark. “Guess what today is?”

“What?” he asked.

“Come on, guess.”

“I’m tired of guessing. I guess that today is just like every other day. And will be like every other day.”

“Stop it. What I’m saying is that we’ve been here for a year. A whole entire year.”

“It’s our anniversary...kind of. Sure it’s not a leap year?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Jesus...it feels more like fourteen.” He looked down for a while, before looking back up. “We missed our birthdays. It was June when the sirens went off, so we missed my birthday by about seven months.”

She sat on his bed, “Let’s just start over. Today will be our birthday.”

“I like that,” he said.

“How old are you now?”

“I’ll be nine, if we’re just choosing whatever we want.”

“Stop it, how old are you?”

“I want a bike for my birthday, have you found a bike around here, I’ll need training wheels I guess,” he said, and they both laughed. “I’ll be twenty-nine, and would have never thought that so much could change in a year.”

“I think we should celebrate,” she said.

“It’ll be nice to have a party.”

“I’ll see if I can find some colored paper and make decorations, go through some other closets to find a nice dress. Even bake a cake? Can we sing later? Will you sing with me?”

“I hate singing, you know that. What do you want for your birthday?”

“Just this,” she said, as they wrapped their arms around each other and kissed.

Hearts and handmade streamers of different colors hung all around the main room of the bunker. He picked her up at eight sharp, with a flower fashioned from discarded toilet paper

rolls. It was a very sweet, but failed, effort, she thought. He took her hand and walked her to the bar.

“I’m going to name a drink after you,” he said, swirling four or five different liquors into a tumbler. “Try this, I call it the Bunker Buster.” They clinked glasses. “I really hope you’ll bust outta here someday,” he said.

“Won’t you be with me?” she said.

“It’s just so hard to imagine. How long can we be down here? It was never supposed to be just us.”

“What happened to your family, when it happened?” she asked, feeling light-headed now, and as open as an atlas.

“I was working close to the entrance of the bunker when the sirens went off. I looked up, the sky was so clear, the cardinals and mockingbirds were all singing, I could hear the wind move the leaves, it was hot, and at first I thought it was just a drill, so I just kept painting the fence down there, by the road. It seems so ridiculous now, thinking back, that painting that fence was something that needed to be done, something that I was asked to do and I did, and liked, I liked painting that fence. Maybe I liked it because I thought I’d be able to look at it over the years, know I did it, watch it fade, re-paint it.” He had turned to her and looked her in the eyes. “I started running for the entrance. I couldn’t stop running. I knew the doors would close on me when the bombs got too close. There was no thought in my mind until I got past the doors. Didn’t think about anyone else but me. What do you think that means? Then I turned around and watched. Watched for everyone to come. Watched for anyone to come. Then I saw you.”

“I was at a friend’s house swimming. I always loved the backstroke because I could watch the clouds and the sky as I swam or floated. I was riding my bike home when I heard the

sirens. I remember seeing the fence, the section you already painted,” she said, putting her hand on his, “I remember thinking, ‘The fence looks better’—”

“No you did not—”

“Yes, I’m serious,” she said, both beginning to laugh. “Oh God, what do you think happened to everyone? Why didn’t anyone else come? Why were we the only lucky ones?” she asked.

He had looked down at their hands. “As the door closed, I saw my mom, little brother, still far off down the street. There was nothing I could do. We’re not the lucky ones, we’re the cursed ones.”

“What could you have done? There wasn’t anything.” She had watched tears well up in his eyes. She held him tight, trying to feel a connection to something other than just memories, to feel like a bird in the nest of him. He put his lips to her neck and kissed up to her earlobe, and then he said something odd, that one thing she never let herself think about, he said it inside a kiss and she didn’t know why he had done it but there it was and she had felt disgusting in just those few seconds. “They’re all gone...” he had said. She felt claustrophobic. She wanted to run, to go to the bunker doors and hit Manual Override, prove him wrong, open up the bunker to the world it sealed from them, filling their lungs with whatever was floating out there, hoping to know what everyone else experienced. She pushed his head away and wobbled trying to stand. He grabbed her arm and held on to it as he stood up.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he screamed, tightening his grip. “Do you wanna leave? You can go to the cement bedroom, or the cement library, or the cement bathroom—”

She kicked his shin and pulled her arm away and ran down the hall to her room, locking the door behind her.

Day 366

He gave a knock and called out, "Let's just talk, baby, I need you."

He was still drunk, or even drunker, she couldn't tell. "Please leave me alone," she said. "You hurt me last night, you really hurt me, I have marks on my arm because of you," she said.

"You know that's not me. Will you just come out please?"

"Go away," she said.

Day 375

She tiptoed to the kitchen, barely breathing for fear of making a noise and waking him, when she turned a corner and saw him sitting there at the table, staring at her. He stood up and she started backing.

"Please stay away from me."

"We need to talk. We've got a life down here, and we need to be as happy as possible."

"Have you been drinking?"

"No, I haven't been drinking, I've just been doing a lot of thinking."

"About what?"

"About us. We do need each other. We can build something down here, together, I don't know what, exactly, but we'll build something just for us." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the gold band he'd been carrying for so long. "I want you to have this. This is my commitment."

She walked slowly towards him. She always believed he had an unrealized potential that was being stifled underground, and this was perhaps awakening a change towards hopefulness.

Living in fear in a bunker would be impossible, it was place built to keep people safe, she reasoned, and she missed him in the mornings, missed taking care of something. She wanted to put everything behind them and move forward.

He held her hand and slipped the ring into place. She admired it, a tiny freckle of a diamond trying hard to squint out its light in the dim kitchen. How things change, she thought. They held each other there for what seemed like the shelf life of freshly canned green beans.

Day 535

She woke up extra early, made some milk, wrote the date in and checked the detector for outside radiation. It looked lower than other days, but it was hard to tell. It wasn't possible. It had to be impossible. She tapped the glass, but nothing.

She spent her days in the library now. She read Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Nabokov. She looked through the encyclopedias and read about weather patterns and oceans, birds and every element that made up the atmosphere, nuclear warfare and gardening, memorized the Latin names of plants and their common pests. She read about turbulence, lift and knots. She wrote her own story, everything she could remember, most pages wet with tears.

The young man made a real effort to be with the girl. Each night they ate dinner together, and talked about what they had done that day. He wouldn't allow her to talk about her writing, about her memories, so she made things up, told him about fake stories she read in the paper, adding details of all her research. He was learning to play the guitar and was writing a song for her, and while she served up dessert, he'd play whatever he was able to, slowly building up his song, note by note, day by day.

She only smiled and thought, *How long can we really last here?*

Day 701

The girl stopped taking her birth control. She had gone through the three or four different brands stocked in the clinic, but each one had a different side effect. They mostly kept their separate rooms and separate lives, but every once in a while one of them would sneak into the other's room, wrapping their arms and legs tightly around each other, and have sex. Sometimes she would sneak into his room and wrap her arms around nothing but a pillow and not see him for days. The door to the bar was always shut and locked, but she could hear him fumbling through chords, strumming, could hear him piecing together a song through the long days and longer nights.

One night, she knocked at the door and waited for him to answer.

"Hey."

"Hey," she said, "I haven't seen you for a while."

"I got busy I guess."

"You look...tired," she said.

"Shit, thanks. I look at the clock but time doesn't mean anything anymore, so I sleep when I get tired and drink when I don't," he laughed. "Come in, let me fix you something."

"I just want a root beer," she said.

"Well that's boring."

"Listen, I know living here, with me, has been hard, but, I mean, I hear you playing music, and that's great, but I was thinking, we could, what if we had a baby, made a family here, together, we can still have real meaning in our lives."

“Stop right there. Fuck no. If you keep thinking like that we really won’t be sleeping anywhere near each other. Fuck that. I’m already going crazy here and adding a screaming fucking baby, holy shit, I’d lose it.”

“Okay, take it easy. God,” she said. “God.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just saying, I need time to myself right now.”

“How much goddamn time could you possibly need down here?” she blurted out.

“What if, I don’t know, you died during childbirth? I can’t do anything in the clinic except pop tops off prescription bottles. You want to leave me all alone here? You want me to go crazy? Is that what you’re planning?”

“Just calm down and listen. I saw all the newspapers you read through,” she said. “What were you looking for?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing there.” He poured vodka in a glass with a splash of tonic.

“But you were looking for something, right?”

“I thought maybe, I don’t know, maybe it wasn’t as bad as we thought. Maybe everything malfunctioned, radars, alarms, this place. Maybe the bombs were defective. Not everyone could get their hands on radioactive shit, and making missiles was super easy. I don’t know.”

“There’s nothing wrong with holding on to that idea, I mean—”

“I’m tired of hearing this shit that is so far outside of our reality. I’m not going to sit around and just wait to find out if it’s true, wait for someone to dig us the fuck up. Why haven’t they done it yet?”

“I don’t know!”

“That’s right you don’t know, you stupid kid, you don’t know shit. This,” he said as he held the tumbler up in his hand, “this is real.” Then he flung it to the concrete wall across the room.

She stood up and ran to the door. “This is real too,” she said, holding up the gold ring he gave her, throwing it at him. He’d been right all along though, she was just some stupid, overly optimistic kid. This was life, their life now, and it wasn’t a life she wanted.

Day 730

She kept her schedule, and spent her days in the library combing through all the materials there and any other encyclopedia entries she could think of. The Gregorian calendar, supernovas, the speed of light. In the corner she looked through old newspapers stacked and assembled in several different rows, and she began reading them, turning each page like some ancient holy script. This was his research. What he used to do, what he used to read. He was looking for something. Some articles were circled in red, headlines were underlined. “No End To Proliferation.” “Scale Ups Hastily Completed.” “Dead Hand Operational in 29 Countries.” “Nuclear Ultimatums Given.”

She read each word now, looking for something, if not a reason, or a justification, then at least to complete his thought, understand what he had been hoping, or fearing, to find. She turned to the encyclopedias, read about fission and black body radiation, alpha decay and X-rays, isotopes and half-lives. Then she turned to Uranium-235, and saw the frantic red scribbles of his shaking hand. The half-life of U-235 was 703.8 million years. She closed the book and pulled another. She flipped through “P” until she found “Pregnancy / human / first trimester / 3 weeks.”

Learning Curves

Things were never supposed to turn out like this, driving disabled people up and down Hwy 84 from their assisted living facility to rehab and back, three times a week. I stare out the window, trace the ridges of the desert mountains as red as a girl's lip gloss, wondering what my life would be like if I had never picked up the phone that night over 10 years ago, never took that unnamed road off the highway that goes up to the highest point of the Manzano Mountains. People get lost all the time on the back roads out here thinking it would just be a nice scenic drive to Santa Fe or Albuquerque. But I lost a lot more than my sense of direction out there, that's for sure.

I pass that turnoff six times a week, and each time I pass it, all I think about is Julia. I don't know how many times that is over all those years, and I don't want to know, all it means is that Julia's always on my mind.

She was the prettiest girl in school. Everybody loved her because she was the palest girl in probably 150 miles, a sheet of bright, perfectly white artists' paper mixed in with all the piles of soggy cardboard around here. Strawberry blond hair none of us had ever seen before, freckles spread over her face and shoulders like some sort of confusing treasure map. Every group in school wanted her, and she fit in with every group in school. She'd smoke weed with the burnouts, then watch over the geeks in study hall, she was our star volleyball player and then she'd go try on clothes with the rich kids.

Julia sat behind me all throughout elementary school and middle school, and we were inseparable from the beginning. We planned on running away together, once riding our bikes all

the way to the highway, but we were so thirsty that we turned around. I gave her test answers and she gave me the cookies from her lunchbox.

She was a late-bloomer, at 15 the small stones of adolescence barely tempted the limpness of her shirts but she didn't have to flaunt anything, she didn't have to do anything except look at you and smile, her eyes as bright as turquoise in a bowl of water. In high school, she'd sit out smoking with the boys in the parking lot and I even saw teachers out there hitting on her too. Even if she was smoking with all the seniors and I'd walk by she'd call out my name and walk over to me, cigarette hanging out of her mouth, a smile rising, and say, "Come hang out for a while," and I'd lean against some car right next to her as she talked and laughed and all the guys would just kind of stare at me and usually someone would get close to my ear and whisper, "Get the fuck off my car man." She liked me above all others, though. It was the one thing they couldn't ever figure out. She was my first and last kiss. She was all mine.

Julia would call me late at night. We had a system set up for her phone calls. After one ring she would hang up and that meant I was supposed to call her back right away. If it rang twice it meant *come get me*. When we were kids I would just ride my bike over to her house when it rang twice, but later, she wanted me to drive her out of town to some party she said she knew about. For a long time though, even if it rang twice I'd still just call her back because I didn't have my license yet. I asked my dad once if I could take the truck out to get Julia and he just looked at me for a little bit and said "If I catch you doing that shit I'll kill you."

My dad was an unusually strict U.S. District Judge, but only when it dealt with upholding the law with every single person except himself. And having a driver's license was one law he was taking seriously. My dad scared the hell out of me and Julia. Sometimes she'd come over, and we'd be listening to Björk in my room, and my dad would kick it open half-drunk and start

talking about how we had no idea what good music was, and then he'd start singing songs from some band named Cheap Trick, and doing air guitar and everything. It was kind of frightening. Once when he did that and I pushed him out and locked my door, he just punched a hole through the whole thing, stuck his head in and said, "Lock that."

It was Julia who said that people who were drunk didn't normally act *that* strange, and the next day we snooped all around my dad's room after school. We didn't find anything. At first. "I saw this in a movie once," Julia said, as she headed for his bathroom. I followed behind her and watched. She lifted off the back of the toilet, let out a scream and yelled "Jackpot!" It was a huge bag of coke.

"Oh shit," I said, "I can't see that, why am I seeing that?"

"Get over it, I sneak some of mom's weed all the time, stop being a pussy."

"Have you done coke before?"

"Just a couple times," she said, "at a party out by the reservoir. Maybe 10 or 11 times."

She held it in her hands judging the heft of the bag. "We could get high forever," she said, starry-eyed.

"You'd OD," I said, staring into her wide deranged smile.

"You could sell it and make a ton," she said, still dreaming of possibilities.

"He'd really kill me, and I'll leave a note saying that you found it and made me do all these things, and then he'd come get you too."

She walked up to me and put her arms around my waist and pulled me close. I could smell her strawberry lip gloss. "Forget all that. But maybe," she said, "we could have a little fun ourselves."

"No way, Julia, we shouldn't even be in here."

She Frenched me so deep I was sure I'd have to get a new passport.

“Then you wouldn't mind me having a little fun, would you?” She did a bump off the back of her hand, and then put a little more in her compact.

That was just about the time Julia stopped coming over and started calling more.

Take the fourth dirt road on the right after the Fuel-N-A-Flash and drive about 10 miles to the trailer park, and there you'll find the best tamales this side of a migrant's kitchen. My dad would take me there very Sunday before taking me to the mountains to teach me how to drive. Keeping up appearances in the community was something he was dedicated to. We'd show up early for church so he could shake hands, but we'd leave before our knees ever hit the pads. Dad would throw his tie in the glove compartment and drive as fast as he could out of Española and pick up a dozen tamales to go.

He'd drive around the back roads, stop, get out to piss and then we'd switch. He'd take out some tamales and eat them with his hands, sipping from the small cups of hot sauce they threw in the bag. “Everything you need to know about life is in these roads,” he'd say. “Knowing when you've gone too fast too far, will teach you about women. Knowing how to take it into a lower gear and tap the brakes as you take a curve, well that's like, I don't know right now, but it'll help you with something, I know that. Probably women.”

We were deep in the mountains once. He stopped the truck and got out to piss, which was a good time for him to get high too. I could tell because the talking started ramping up. The sky was a shiny metallic blue, small piñons lining the red-dirt road, other pines rooted high along the hills showing their roots. I started driving, slowly pushing down the accelerator and speeding up.

“This is freedom son, freedom, you can kill a man out here and nobody’d know about it, nobody, not a soul. We call this the Wild Southwest and we’re the good guys,” he said.

I was scared shitless that he’d found out that I’d been sneaking from his stash. Every couple of days Julia would beg me and tease me with long kisses and I was pretty sure I made a noticeable dent in it.

He unscrewed his flask and started laughing. He reached down under the seat, pulled out his gun and pointed it out the window. “Bad guys there,” he’d say, “BAP BAP BAP,” and start laughing. “Faster,” he’d say, “There’s more up there, BAP BAP BAP.” I’d get the engine going and take the curves but this one curve was tighter than I thought and I only realized it as we started rounding it and I put my foot on the brake and the back end started swinging left. I took my foot off, turned the wheel and tapped the brakes again but I was still losing it so I tried to right the wheel, but it wasn’t working. I pushed the brakes harder, the tail almost slamming against the side of the mountain, the gun thumping to the ground before we came to a stop. My dad started yelling, “Jesus Holy Christ Jesus Holy Christ Holy shit what the fuck were you thinking?”

I turned to him, my hands shaking, but nothing came out of my mouth.

“Get out,” he said. We switched places and he said “If I need a new alignment you’re gonna pay for it.” He sat there for a minute before speaking up again. “Listen, whenever you take a curve, always brake into it and accelerate out of it, and you’ll never get into trouble,” he said, laughing. “Ya gotta go nice and easy at first, just like putting your hand down a girl’s pants, you done that yet?”

I just looked straight ahead. “No sir.”

“Not even that girl you hang out with all the time, what’s her name?”

“Julia.”

“That’s right. Well, what’s your problem?”

Julia called me one night, let it ring twice and hung up. I didn’t feel like talking to her and there was no way I could go get her, but she called again and let it ring twice and hung up. We never came up with a signal for me not wanting to pick up the phone because I always just picked up. I grabbed the receiver on the next ring.

“What the hell, you’re supposed to come pick me up,” she said.

“I know what the signal means, but I’ve never picked you up,” I said.

“I know, but I always thought you should have. Come on, come get me please, my dad’s here screaming at my mom, I have to get out of here, you’re the only person who understands, the only person I care about.”

I just said “Shit. Julia.”

“Bring me some more happy dust,” she said.

She was all I ever wanted. I said *Goodbye*.

It was after midnight and I cracked the door to my dad’s room, he was out cold, whiskey spilled on his bed and lines of coke on the dresser, sleeping in his black judge’s gown, his ass in the air. I knew he’d be showered and shaved and ready to go by 6 AM like he always was. I scraped what was left on the dresser into a baggie and closed his door. I snuck outside and got in the truck, put it in neutral and pushed it out, starting it at the end of the street and pushed down on the gas.

The wind felt cool as it rushed over my face, I couldn’t remember being out so late, on my own, and I never knew how nice it was, the hot infinite welt of the sun no longer making my

skin crawl, the moon high above the black mesas, and I knew that Julia was at the end of all of it. When I got close to her house I stopped the truck and let it roll right in front. All I could think to do was hit the horn a couple times. Before the second sound even came out I swear the door was open and she was glowing in the porch light.

That's how I remember her, smile as big as a runway.

"You came," she said.

"Get in." I flipped the baggie into her lap.

"I love you so much right now," she said.

I pushed the truck for a little bit, hopped in and started it. I said, "Your dad's not going to do anything to your mom, is he? Should we be there or something?"

"No, my parents are on vacation, they leave me at home all the time, I just told you that to get you here, the silence in that house was killing me," she said, smiling. She reached into her pocket and pulled out some cigarettes and lit one.

"Shit Julia, you can't do that, my dad'll freak out."

"Relax," she said, rolling down the window.

"Besides," I said "This is a snort only vehicle." We both started laughing.

My hands were tense on the wheel. "Where am I supposed to be going anyway?" I asked.

"Just drive to someplace secluded, someplace quiet," she said.

I knew what that meant, it meant someplace secluded together, it meant alone, it meant alone with me. I pushed down on the pedal flooding the engine with gas.

"Have you ever wanted to not be alive?" she asked.

"I've never thought about killing myself, no," I said.

“Not that, just not being alive, driving this fast feels like you can leave yourself behind or something, you’re not alive, but in some other state. Try it, close your eyes, I’ll steer.” She grabbed the wheel and I slowly let go. The road ahead was straight, dark, empty. She was right. I knew I was moving but at the same time I felt like I wasn’t anywhere, like how they say sitting in a bathtub can remind you of what it was like being in the womb, not anywhere but still somewhere. I felt like I was being born in that truck.

I drove up the hill where a monastery was. I parked on the far edge of their property, overlooking a deep canyon. We sat there for a little while, the headlights shooting out past the slope, fading and disappearing in the darkness beyond us. I looked at Julia and could see the outline of her face.

“I had no idea this stuff was back here. What’s this place called?” she asked.

“Christ in the Desert.”

“Do you ever pray?” she asked.

“Not really, I mean, my dad takes me to church every Sunday, and we’re supposed to be praying, I think, but I’ve never really known what to do, or to who.”

She put her hands together in prayer. “Oh Great Big Deserty God-thing, may your rage and vengeance on us tonight, for what we’re about to do, be more dry than sandy,” she intoned.

I leaned in close, “What are we about to do?” I asked.

“Anything we want, but I definitely feel a sin coming on.” She got out of the truck and walked in front of the lights, I watched her move, the slight swing of her hands at her sides, and she stood there looking out for a while.

She came back to the car and got in. “Do a little with me, I want you to feel what it’s like.”

“I don’t think so Julia. I brought it for you.”

“Come on, it will make us feel closer,” she said, running a hand up my thigh. She put some coke on the end of a key and held it under my nose. “Just sniff really really hard.”

I did as she said. It felt like a couple beetles were let loose in my forehead. I started coughing and Julia started cheering.

“I know where to take you next,” I said.

We drove down to the highway and crossed it into the Manzano Mountains, taking the long way, a way my dad took me a thousand times, the truck embroidering the hills in blissful darkness, and it was hard to imagine a world that wasn’t just us.

Julia touched my arm and said “Thanks for coming to get me.” Her hand so soft I would have sworn that my skin went swimming. She pulled it back and reached for another cigarette.

We headed past Ghost Ranch and I put my left blinker on, slowed and took the unnamed dirt road out to the Abiquiu Reservoir. Kids just like me and her were kissing sloppily in the night, cringing as my headlights strafed their faces, but I kept driving. Faster and faster.

Right past the reservoir the gravel road headed up into the mountains and started curving with switchbacks. Julia put her arm out the window feeling the wind rush by. “The air is perfect” she yelled, her hand waving in the night. I looked over at her. Her smile shrank to a thin line, and I saw what was in front of us. Darkness. No more road. I braked late around the curve and pulled the wheel hard to the right and that’s when I knew I lost it, it was all over, we were fucked, and the truck flipped.

It rolled over a couple times until it came to a rest right-side up, cops later saying I was the luckiest kid on earth that the truck stayed there on the road and didn’t go over the edge. I never saw my life flash before my eyes but I saw my future, a distant future that would never

exist, could never exist, I knew that, but it felt so real, and each flip of the car took a lifetime and got me closer to what I saw. There was a small house, a desert-rock yard and cacti everywhere and I walked through the front door and saw picture frames with me and Julia, older now, and I walked through the kitchen where the smell of tamales was everywhere, and through the kitchen to the garden in the back, and a woman in a hat, strawberry-blond hair flowing out. Julia was digging there and looked up and waved to me and I walked over to her and put my arms around her, around her growing belly. We held each other there for that strange forever.

Then my future slipped. I slid back into life. My head was throbbing. There was a pained numbness in my legs like they had fallen asleep and would never wake up. I could feel the bits of broken teeth floating around. My mouth filled with a fluid that tasted like I was sucking on pennies. I looked down and my clothes were covered in blood. I had bitten off half my tongue. I looked over at Julia, her eyes big as lemons and she just shook her head. That's when she pulled her arm back into the truck and held it up, her hand clean off at the wrist. I said "Oh Thit" and all I could think to do was honk the horn.

Within minutes the reservoir kids arrived. I stumbled out of the truck and fell, both of my legs broken. Julia had passed out and some kids went to get her but couldn't find her hand, it was only the cops who found it a day later, mangled and already rotting. The kids found my tongue under the gas pedal and put it on ice right next to their beers and I don't know if it's a psychological thing or something but I can't stand the taste of beer, or any drink that's cold, and most things I eat now just taste like dirt anyhow. At the hospital they re-attached my tongue and I had stitches and gauze in my mouth for weeks and could only drink liquefied food for a month. I kept asking for Julia but was told that her parents moved her to a different hospital.

I was in the hospital for over a month, and never once saw my dad. Cops were always outside my door, but it was only when I was interviewed by the feds did I understand that I probably wouldn't ever see him again. The story hit the local papers here. It said that the feds were investigating my dad in connection to running drugs with the Mexican cartels. Reagan's War on Drugs needed a successful battle somewhere to keep its momentum. With the slightest hint of an impending arrest to local authorities, my dad drove as fast as he could out of town, out of state, and who knows where now. Every couple months I get an envelope with a thousand bucks in it. Post office stamps from different states every single time.

Julia's parents moved, and I didn't go back to school again. But I saw her once. She was a couple aisles down at Fiesta Mart. In one of those electric carts with the basket, a crutch by her side. God if she still wasn't one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen. I was too afraid to talk to her though. I just followed her around for a little bit. I pray that one day she'll turn up on my route, and this time I won't turn off the highway, but instead drive faster and faster to the future I witnessed that night.

Imaginary Numbers

I've been sitting at this intersection for 79 seconds and the girl I love sits next to me. She's humming along to whatever awful pop-song she stopped the dial on. She's done that twice now, sang along to the radio. And she talks a lot, too. But I love her and so I tell myself that it doesn't matter what she does. That being annoyed by the person you love is normal and just comes with the territory of any long-term relationship. I've told myself this eight times already. Jan has been my girlfriend and confidant for 19 minutes.

"Don't you just hate this traffic?" she asks, interrupting thoughts that were on the verge of truly breaking new ground. She's always looking for more conversation.

"I survive," I say. Survive. Poor young thing doesn't know how to do that yet. If you don't learn these skills the world can give you some serious problems. And I'm pretty sure Jan has some serious problems she needs me to help her fix. The traffic starts moving again.

"Have you ever noticed that there seems to be more red cars than other colors?" she asks, in no way joking.

"That's pretty obvious," I say. "Just on this short 15 minute drive, we've passed 19 red cars, 12 black cars, 10 blue cars, six silver cars, five white cars, three maroon cars, an old cream-colored car, an old brown-colored car and a yellow car."

"Don't you get bored of keeping track of all that stuff?"

"Keeping track,' as you call it, is how we, as humans, are able to access and expand our superior consciousness, it is one of the only things that separates us from primates..."

"Other than language, opposable thumbs, art, culture, being hairless..."

“...and it behooves us, nay it is our duty, to parse and quantify knowable phenomena in this impossibly expansive universe full of unnerving, unending possibility,” I say, surely proving my point.

“I like gardening,” she says. “Keeping the bushes pruned, spreading some seeds and seeing what comes up.”

“You got great bushes,” I respond, building her confidence. “I did notice earlier that you have 36 tulips blossoming, if you want, we can dig up the other seeds and figure out what seed-to-flower percentage you’re dealing with.”

“That’s okay,” Jan says as she turns the radio back up and starts singing.

The heat of the day is rising off the black pavement, and I start counting the wires on the telephone poles and then the telephone poles themselves. The truth is, it’s not at all about surviving, it’s about existing, and existing is very active. Surviving means simply dealing with what happens, and that’s the passive approach to life. It’s like I’m counting each moment of existence and as I count them I necessarily and simultaneously create the next one. Jan’s too young to understand these things. There’s two ways of living: in reality, or in unreality, and I just don’t have the heart to tell her she’s not where she thinks. Reality is real and therefore immutable, thus not a part of this observable world, even though we have the perception that it can be understood. Unreality is the mess propping us all up. Money. Bodies. Only by embracing the unreality of life can you then become real. And we’re not there yet.

Two hours before, I walked the 63 steps to her condo across the street and invited Jan for a drive. She said yes, unsurprisingly. “Can’t we go somewhere,” Jan asked, “like the beach?”

“How about the park?” I offered, because I really hate being anywhere near an ocean.

“Let’s go to the beach, the beach sounds wonderful to me, I haven’t been there in such a long time, what a great idea, thanks for getting me out of the house today, I was just planning on working in the yard, but it’s a perfect day for the beach which is one reason why I love living here, I love the sand and the sun, thanks for asking me, I was wondering when you’d finally work up the nerve to come over and talk to me. A girl like me can only wait so long,” she said, giving me a wink. Some of the love drained from me thinking that what a mistake I made by inviting such a big talker to go anywhere with me.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“It’s just such a perfect day for the beach, I love swimming and besides it’s too hot to sit in a park, I like to get in the ocean to cool down, oh my gosh, doesn’t it sound just so fun?”

“Sounds great,” I said, as flat and passive-aggressive as I could make it sound. She didn’t pick up on it though.

I can smell the salt in the air now. The only good news in this is that she’ll definitely burn quickly with such a light complexion, maybe in a little over 2000 seconds, I’d bet my life on it, so we may not have to stay too long. She has a smattering of freckles running over her shoulders, across the top of her chest and face and over to her other shoulder like someone had spilled faded glitter on her. It would take me only a couple days to count them all. My head starts spinning.

We see the ocean extend before us, we are so close, and I can feel my hands start sweating and my right arm seems to twitch involuntarily. “Let’s stop for some beers,” she says, momentarily pausing her singing, “we can sit and drink on the beach and maybe watch some kids kicking a ball or chasing a dog or see couples walking or some boats sailing. It will be nice

to be in the sun and listen to the waves and just chat..." I look at her out of the corner of my eye and try to smile.

"Sure," I say. "Did you know the light from the sun takes eight minutes and 18 seconds to reach us?"

"I think I heard that once," she says.

"Don't you know what that means?"

"I guess not, if you're asking, because you must be trying to say that it means more than light takes eight minutes to reach us."

"It means," I say, pausing for gravitas, "that everything you see in your life has a delay of almost 10 minutes." She just looked at me. "Take us, for example, I can only see you because the light is bouncing off you, but that light takes time to travel through space and then travel off of you and into my eye. We can't ever experience a moment as it really happens. You feel the forces of the car press on you as I accelerate, but by the time you recognize that feeling, it's taken your brain one quarter of a second to interpret it, every decision, every sensation you've had in your life all adds up to how much time lost? It's all history." I'm laughing now. "When you die, and you lay there thinking, 'I'm dying,' you'll already be long dead." Jan is practically catatonic, her eyes rising, her body going limp, and I swear there's drool coming from the corner of her mouth. This might be the only time I'd like her to say something.

Finally she turns to me and says, "Anyway, I don't think all those big ideas will help me pay the bills or anything, I enjoy my life just fine and what's the difference if you think you're dying while you're already dead, 10 minutes isn't going to matter much because after all, you're dead, and that's why I don't have any regrets or anything and try to enjoy every single day, just turn those thoughts off for a couple minutes, for 10 whole minutes, and enjoy the day, like me."

The day is already feeling longer after listening to her rambling and nonsensical philosophizing. Our first fight, which is totally normal. I have a lot to teach her though. How can you appreciate the days if you don't know the moments that create them, Jan? I watch the odometer click through each tenth of a mile. If I drive consistently, I can tell just how far a tenth of a mile is, and I start counting myself. That helps. See that Jan, I call out in my mind, I am actively engaging my life! Jan stares out the window, stupidly speechless.

Jan is right about something, though, I'll give her that. It really is a perfect day. It's the perfect day for not existing. When nothing exists, everything is possible because anything can be created. We arrive at the parking lot of the beach, and the graffiti on the ramparts separating us from the sand and water seems to be especially bright, like it was done just for us. I stand staring at it, mesmerized. I feel both elated and completely nauseous. I have no idea how to count anything about it. There're so many swirls and swoops I have a hard time understanding what's there. The only choice I have is to start counting how long I'm standing here.

Jan's voice breaks through, "You alright, honey?" she asks, and I just stare ahead, out to the ocean. "You had such a good idea, this is really perfect, even the traffic and now coming here with some beer, really perfect." She sits smiling for 13 seconds, which took all my power to count, but I'm soon swallowed up by the vastness again. "I don't even mind the fact that the light's not in my eye yet...or yet...or yet," she says, trying to make a joke, I'm sure, and she even laughs to herself. I'm pulled out of my anxious trance with my stomach still uncomfortably fizzing and begin looking around again. We take our shoes off and then her hand slides into mine, she has a big smile on her face now. She pulls me away from the sidewalk and onto the warm sand.

On the south side of the beach is an outcropping of trees and a trail. We place a blanket under the shade and Jan opens two beers and nestles them in the sand. “Wait,” I say. I go back to the car and take a small box from the trunk. I take the 337 steps back to the blanket where Jan is lying down.

She looks up as I get closer and says “Ooh, what’s that? You brought some goodies? You are such a sweetie! When did you pack goodies?”

“It was right before I walked over to your house. I knew you’d come with me.”

“No you didn’t....”

“Yes I did,” I say, as I drop to my knees with the box, thinking that my powers of creation through counting brought us here and this wonderful woman is all mine, if I want her.

“What did you bring, I didn’t even think I was hungry but you know me I guess,” she says playfully, running her hand along the edge of the box and over my hand. The hairs on my legs stand up. “It’s nice to be known,” she says with a smile.

“Well, let’s see how I did.” I set sandwiches and a bowl of fruit salad in front of us. “Two avocado-and-cucumber sandwiches with mustard, manchego and brie with crackers, and a fruit salad.”

“That is wonderful...you can really take care of me...”

“The fruit salad has 19 strawberries, 61 grapes, two apples, one-half of a melon, and one-quarter of a pineapple...” She stares at me for a little bit and smiles, captivating with stale light marauding off her hair.

“Well...that’s a silly thing to say.”

“It’s important.”

“I wouldn’t say so. Maybe it *was* important, but it’s not *now* important.” I watch her take three breaths through her red-lipped mouth. I wonder if I can truly love someone who doesn’t know, on average, how many times their heart beats in a given day, or how many breaths are needed for the brain to receive the minimal amount of oxygen to keep oneself from a vegetative state.

“It’s vitally important, actually. How can it be anything if you don’t know exactly what’s involved in it?”

“Why are we arguing over fruit? This isn’t really a big deal, right? Right? Let’s go ahead and eat and drink and walk in the sun and swim.” I hand her a fork and she starts eating the fruit salad.

“I don’t feel like swimming,” I say.

I take off my shirt and she pokes me in the ribs with her finger. “Are you angry at me?”

“No,” I say, and really mean it.

“The fruit was wonderful. All hundred-and-something halves of grapes and bits of everything else,” she says laughing. I laugh too. I hope she’s starting to get it.

“I think I’m going to swim a little.” We hear the voices and laughter of kids playing down the beach. There’s a small group of them, but we can’t see any adults. Some of them are playing with a kite, running and trying to get it into the air, caught in the wind. Others are throwing a Frisbee back and forth.

Jan stands up and unwraps the cloth from her waist. Her strawberry-blond hair is cascading down past her shoulders. With the sun behind her, I can see light-colored hairs on her thighs, and if I stare long enough, I know I can count each one. I’ve never felt such a rush of energy flow through my body. I sit up on my knees and put my arms around her waist and pull

her close to me, and she momentarily loses her balance. I put my face to her stomach and kiss her bellybutton.

“Whoa there big-bubby, there are kids present.” I can tell she loves it so I don’t stop. She pushes on me more. “Come on now, this isn’t the time, I don’t even know if you have a police record.” She pushes my head back and I let her go and sit back down.

“I’ve been watching you since you moved in two months ago and I just can’t stand to be away from you anymore.”

“I know you’ve been watching, girls have a sixth sense about that sort of thing, but I kind of liked it. But some things take time and I think this is one of them.” She sits on her knees, and then pushes me back and crawls into my arms and we lie there holding each other for a while. After nine minutes and six seconds she gets up and stands in the stale light, and says “It’s time for me to swim. Wanna join me?”

“I think I’ll just watch you,” and really I said this so I could count something about her if I wanted to.

“Are you sure?” she asks, “We came all this way...”

“I want to feel the sun on my face for a little bit,” I say, flat-out lying to her. The truth is, the ocean scares the shit out of me. It always has. As soon as I wade in I start feeling dizzy, my legs feel like they are about to give out, the sky comes crashing down or the ocean goes reeling up, I have no idea which one happens, or if they both do, but if someone’s not there to grab me by the waist, then I’ll fall in and drown. It almost happened. But I can’t have that happen when Jan’s with me, I won’t be able to count her freckles or any other part of her when my limp body is in her strong arms.

She stands and walks to the ocean, and I wish it was 184 steps instead of just the 92, the landscape of her body changing with every step, new universes spring up in seconds and disappear, I want her to come back so I can put my arms around her, to count the worlds she created. If I count them then I can take her with me, I'll have those pieces of her that won't ever leave me.

Jan wades out and waves to me, and lowers her body. I feel like fainting, and grab a handful of sand to start counting. I start counting each grain in my palm, and put what I've counted into a small used cup. I can hear the kids laughing and now I hear their parents calling them and the kids say "Awwwww, noooooo, can't we stay?" but I don't look up, I don't want to count the same grain twice.

Jan's body is standing over me, her hips wide like a satellite dish and I wonder if she can pick up on what I'm thinking. As fast as possible I look back down to my hand and keep counting, desperate to count, I can feel the earth turn on its axis now and see the waves crash higher on the beach and I feel like I'm slipping into that wet maw, being poured into it. "757, 758, 759, 760, 761," I say under my breath.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey," I say.

"Won't you look at me?" she asks.

"I will, but not right now," I say.

"But I want to show you something," she says.

"How about in a second," I say, my head still spinning, I can feel her love and it almost makes me sick, my hand is trembling, the sand is shifting. "Have another beer, there are four left."

“Are you counting sand?”

“I might be,” I say.

“Look at me. Please look at me. It’s important that you look at me. I want to show you something.” I look up. She’s holding a starfish over her gloriously white belly amongst a galaxy of freckles over her skin, I count five arms of the starfish, then look away, it’s just too much. She crouches down and grabs my hand.

“Are you counting sand?”

“Yes,” I say, barely able to look her in the eyes.

“It’s time to stop. You’re here with me and now I’m here, back from the swim, and it’s time to look at me and talk to me.” My eyes go back to my hand but she squeezes it harder.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I’m...I’m counting...miracles. See, this is 801, 802, 803...”

“Counting this doesn’t mean anything. Are you going to count every grain here? You want to count instead of being with me?”

“I have to count...this is how I can come back to you. Don’t you see that you just let the ocean wash over you, the breeze smack up against you? You’re the one who makes no sense. I am the one in the act of creating every fucking second you have.”

Her eyes get wide and she smacks my hand, spilling the sand in my lap. My head is reeling but I feel like I’m falling as I stand and I try to put my arms around her, two shoulders, two arms, two eyes, one waist, I am making her right now, right in this moment, and if I create her here than that means I must also be here, a complete and necessary being amidst everyone and everything around me, like the universe creating itself, and I am the center of experience, the

centrifugal forces of our motion bringing us closer, pushing us into each other, she is everything I want, and I make her everything that she is.

She pushes me back. She slaps my face once. Three tears slip from her eyes. She starts walking off, taking that first step to the car, then the second and the third, and I watch her as far as I can, counting as long as possible, 52, 53, 54, 55.

Seeing the Light

Victor woke up in the light of a clear, early morning, the sky still bruised purple. Steam was rising off the damp street. But he had a hard time hearing anything. There was a persistent low hum in his ears. He was soaking wet from the previous night's rain, which had pooled in the ditch he was lying in. A small, bright yellow bird with black circles around its eyes was walking on his chest, pecking at the buttons next to the large burned hole in his shirt. He brushed the bird off and looked down at his feet. His shoes were blown open at the toes and his nails were blackened. The bird hopped up again, chirp chirp chirp. Victor opened his mouth and tried to call out but his jaw was tight and all that came out was a jumbled mess of "Llllllaaaaa. Reeceeeeeeee." Hungry, he thought. Is the bird hungry, or me? Did I just read the mind of a bird? How does the bird know telepathy? The bird was saying, "You've been struck by lightning. Better get the fuck up and get home." The bird gave a knowing wink before flying off. The flap of the wings sounded like cast iron skilletts being forged by hand. It gave Victor a headache.

When he got to his place the front door was unlocked. He opened it and took in the delicious aromas that instantly massaged his nostrils. His stomach cringed and gurgled in appreciation, until he realized that his kitchen had been in a state of dusty desuetude since he moved in, by himself, four years ago. His brain slowly churned like the gears of a Triumph wending its way through the Himalayas.

But before he could make all the connections, he saw a man with long brown hair and brown beard walk around the corner with a plate and fork, which he placed on the small fake-wood table between them. "You're right on time, Victor," he said. "I even made your favorite

dish.” The man was wearing a white track suit with gold piping down the chest and down his arms and legs.

“Oh shit, not you again. How did you get in here, Raoul?”

“How do I do anything?”

“Did you break in?”

“The question is why.”

“Why did you break in?”

“Wrong, the question is *why* am I *here*? I’m here because your keys got blasted out of your pockets, and I knew you’d be locked out. P.S.: You’re welcome.”

Victor checked his pockets and sighed. He felt a moment of relief, though, realizing that the keys would not be permanently grafted to his thigh. “You always do this, answer questions by not answering questions. Why are you here, now, again, in my apartment, today, right this second, keeping my door unlocked and making food in my kitchen, in pans you’ll probably make me clean?”

“I work in mysterious ways.”

“The last time you worked in mysterious ways you almost killed my sister. You said you’d never come back.”

“Well...I changed my mind. You changed your mind. You need me. Besides, never is, like, really really long in eternity.”

Victor grabbed his head and sat on the couch. “Oh Jesus...”

“It’s Raoul, you know that.” Raoul grabbed a chair and placed it across from Victor and sat down and crossed his legs. “Victor,” he said, moving his hands in front of his face as though he was walking through a wisp of smoke, “I’m here because your prayers have been answered!”

“What the fuck are you talking about? What prayers?”

“Well, if I’m not mistaken, you tried to kill yourself, and you prayed to God to save you and change your life.”

“Well, guess what Raoul, you are mistaken, because I tried to kill myself about 10 years ago and the only sign that came then was that the microwave beeped and I remembered that I was heating up a burrito. I wouldn’t call getting hungry divine intervention.”

“Perhaps not, but I’m the one who took a minute off the timer.”

“So that’s why it was still frozen in the middle...”

Raoul smiled, nodding, and walked back to the kitchen. “Speaking of being hungry,” he called out, “ready to eat? I made you an egg scramble, with all the fixings.”

Victor’s stomach growled again and he sat down and licked his lips, grabbing the fork in front of him. He looked at the plate Raoul brought out, hissing as if he had stumbled across fresh road-kill on a morning jog. “You’re on a mission from God and can’t get my eggs right? Did you just drop the shell in there and mix it around? ”

“Well excuse me, it’s been hundreds of years since I’ve ‘cooked’ eggs!” Raoul stormed out of the kitchen and into the bathroom, slamming the door.

Victor hung his head, remembering how sensitive Raoul was to criticism. He walked to the bathroom, and gently knocked. “Hey Raoul...friend...I’m...sorry, it’s just that I was struck by lightning, and spent over 12 hours in a ditch, and I’m still a little confused, and still waiting for my fillings to stop burning my tongue, I wasn’t trying to be mean, really. Come on out, will you?”

Victor ran over and snatched it out of his hands. “Stay out of my business! I’m not listening to anything you say, I’m fine, I’m perfect, you seem to mess up everything when I listen to you. Remember when you almost killed my sister?”

“I remember you daring your sister to lick the dead rat you found in the garage.”

“You told me to dare her!”

“And then she spent a month in the hospital, and your mom fell in love with the male nurse who was taking care of her, and he is now your stepdad. It’s not always about you, you know.”

“I hate Jerry!”

“That’s all on you, my man,” Raoul said.

“I’m not going to do anything you tell me to do. In fact, I’ll do the opposite of everything you tell me to do.”

“Well, that was dumb to tell me that...now I’ll just say the opposite of what I want.”

“Just leave,” Victor said, “no one wants you around, especially me.”

“That’s simply not true. The sooner you listen to me the sooner I’ll be out of here. I’ve been your Guardian Angel for a while now, but it’s time for me to move on. You are my last project.” Raoul wiped a fake tear from his eye and gave a fake sniffle. Then he smiled. Raoul pushed back the cuff of his white sleeve to pretend he was looking at a watch. “So anywaaaaaaaay, it looks like it’s just a hair past a miracle, friend. Your destiny is waiting for you if you’ll just walk out that door,” Raoul said.

“Then I think I’ll stay.”

“Perfect.”

At that moment a knock came at the door, the sound of which sounded like a rifle shot to Victor's still-sensitive ears. He opened the door to a beautiful young woman. His jaw slackened and his arms fell limp to his sides. It was Madeline. The one person he had loved all his life, since the first time he laid his eyes upon her in third grade. His cubbyhole was next to hers until their cubbyholes turned into lockers and sharing crayons turned into sharing spit. It was with her that the physics of friction took on a sublime, real world meaning later in high school. Her soft skin had the whiteness of a freshly-peeled orange and her hair was the color of a flapjack straight from the griddle. Her eyes were the color of the most ripe of limes. His stomach growled. He was still really hungry.

“Hey Victor, it's been a long time...*oh my God are you all right?*”

Victor looked down to where she was looking at his abdomen and could see his skin through the burned fabric the size of a basketball. He tried to cinch it but it wouldn't close. “I'm, of course, I'm fine.” Raoul was right next to him saying, “Tell her you think you need to go to the hospital, internal bleeding and all.” Victor ignored him. “I'm fine, yes, a little, of a, well, misunderstanding I guess, I was pretty much struck by lightning last night. Would you like some tea or coffee or water or juice or eggs or oatmeal or a sandwich or we can order a pizza...”

“I actually found your wallet and these keys on the side of the street this morning, I had no idea you lived so close. It's been a really long...Are you sure you're all right, you could have internal bleeding or something.”

Raoul said, “Say yes, say yes, say yes, internal bleeding that's what you have.” Victor tried not to look at Raoul, whose face appeared next to the door creating an awkward and disturbing threesome. “*I'm fine thank you!*” Victor yelled, drowning out Raoul. He grabbed the

wallet and keys and started closing the door. “Good to see you again,” he said through the crack of the door.

“If you need anything let me know...” she said, trailing off.

Raoul grabbed him by the shoulders and yelled, “What the hell are you doing? I’m trying to get your life back on track!”

“Raoul, I need a rest, and a shower, and some decent fucking food, today has been too much, look at me, my feet are still practically smoking and it looks like all my body hair from the burn mark down has been singed off. I literally stink.”

“Okay, okay, can I make you something to eat?”

“Hell no.”

“You should lighten up a little, friend. Maybe this will cheer you up. I got this from her when she wasn’t looking.” He threw her university ID to Victor.

“You prick.”

Raoul disappeared for a while after Madeline showed up. It took Victor three days of showers, three showers a day, and his favorite loofah, to get the smell of burned hair out of his skin. When he wasn’t showering, he would stare at Madeline’s ID, sketching her. He’d had no idea they lived so close to each other either. He had tried to stop thinking about her the past four years, with little success. He knew it would be impossible to avoid her in this small town, where everyone he knew and grew up with ended up at the same university, yet he had done just that since high school graduation. It made no difference though, because she was never very far from his thoughts. He had dozens of sketchbooks with drawings of her remembered-face and thousands of photos on his computer that he couldn’t allow himself to delete.

Madeline and Victor had been inseparable all throughout childhood. At first they were forced to be “buddies” and hold each other’s hands as the teacher led them to the cafeteria or the waiting buses after school, but then they started holding hands everywhere they went. It was Madeline who gave Victor his first pencil and sketchbook, then sat and posed for him. It was Madeline who, in 8th grade, pulled him by the hand at the last dance of the year, picked the lock and snuck them into the empty choir room, where she produced a flask and straddled him, kissing him deeply. It was that year that she created her list of Useless Talents, and all through high school they spent their time identifying and cataloging every possible useless talent. They performed rigorous testing to determine if it was truly a talent or a mere quirk. Staring At Wall Sockets officially became Useless Talent #55 when Madeline out-stared Victor, and six hours later he woke up early in the morning and shook her out of her unblinking trance and turned out the light. By the time Madeline dumped him, right before college, she was up to #104, Launching Rubber Bands Over 40 Feet Into A Canister With A Diameter Of 9 Or More Inches.

Victor had to see Madeline and decided to return the ID to her. He smelled his arm to see if he needed to shower again, then inspected them for any hair-sprouts. Not a single one. He put on a shirt that didn’t have a hole in it and found some shoes that had not been reduced to leather flaps by 20,000 volts. It was the first time he’d left the apartment in almost a week and the sunlight tasered his retinas. Walking around, he became acutely aware of the new-found freedom of having absolutely no pubic hair.

Madeline lived in an apartment building on a wooded street down the road, on the other side of the cemetery. A low-flying bird flew by his head, scaring the shit out of Victor. He recognized the bird’s beady eyes, and put his fingers in his ears, afraid of hearing its thoughts.

Victor stood in front of her door. Number nine. Four years of free mental health consultations at the university all went out the window. He knew his therapist would look down to make notes and ask probing questions if Victor were to tell her what he was planning on saying to Madeline. He wrung his hands and pulled the ID out of his pocket to stare at her picture, again. He took his own out and put their pictures next to each other. Her pomegranate-red lips were full and moist, and he could see the greenness of her eyes, those big, inviting apples...he'd go to the store later. He looked around, saw that yellow bird on the ledge staring at him. "Just knock on the door. What's there to be afraid of?" He heard it laugh as it flapped off.

Madeline had a big smile waiting for him when the door finally opened. "Victor, it's good to see you, you didn't exactly seem like yourself last week."

"I'm feeling better now, you know, getting struck by lightning can put a little dent in your fender, so to speak...but I found this...um, in my wallet," he said, handing over her ID. "Somehow they must have gotten mixed up. Funny how that happened, right? Isn't it? Pretty, funny, because I'm here now."

"Oh, I was looking for this! Thanks for returning it."

"Sure, as I was saying, it's funny that you of all people found my wallet."

"I know, it's been so long, I miss you. Come in, have a seat, tell me what you've been up to, besides being an amateur storm chaser." Victor thought it was still too early to laugh about.

"Well, not much," he said.

"Aren't you dying to graduate? It will be so good to be out of the classroom and into the real world. Just wear a wood helmet during thunderstorms, okay?"

"Ha. More jokes, great. A wood helmet, that's a good one."

“I’ve already got a sales job working for Cost-Mart when I graduate, in a couple years I’ll totally be making at least five figures, I’m told.”

“That’s great, really, and how many Useless Talents are you up to now? It’s gotta be thousands!” Victor said excitedly.

“I don’t have time to waste on frivolous ideas like that anymore. Modern humanity demands we make money to spread the wealth throughout society, helping everyone. A lot like Gandhi.”

“I don’t think he’s really known for that, exactly.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of Tinkle Down Economics?” Madeline asked.

“I think it’s actually Trickle Down...”

“Of course the tinkle trickles down, that’s the whole point! Johnnie Walker was no dummy. What is it that you do?”

“I became an artist...”

“Ha!”

“No, really, I’m getting a Fine Arts degree.”

“Oh. Ugh.”

“But, uh, what I was talking about earlier was really that I have a strange feeling, like, that it’s important that you found my wallet. And me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Fate, I guess, it’s fate that guided us here, to this exact miraculous moment, together. Again.”

“I just found your wallet and gave it back to you. Don’t be a creep or anything. It’s been so long, you know we’re just different people...” Madeline started to raise herself from the

couch. Victor grabbed her shoulder. “Let go!” Madeline yelled, as Victor tried to lick her neck. He heard movement from a back room, and footsteps. Funny, he thought, those sound like big feet.

Victor shuffled back to his apartment holding up his left arm with his right. The yellow bird with evil eyes mocked him all the way home. He had an uneasy feeling when he reached for the doorknob. Raoul was in his white track suit doing yoga in the living room. Victor stood staring right into his downward dog.

“You knew she had a boyfriend, didn’t you?”

“Well yeah, everyone knew that, she’s gorgeous man, and she ain’t gonna stay single for long. They’ve been together ever since she dumped you, and they’ll probably get married. They’ll probably have five kids too, because of all the sex they have. And actually there’s no ‘probably,’ I know the future so we can be 100% confident that’s exactly what will happen.”

“Boy, you just can’t keep from helping out!”

“Okay, let’s settle down, what did you expect was going to happen?” Raoul kept yogaing, doing a lunge, a bend, and finishing in a sun salutation.

“I think that brute dislocated my shoulder when he pushed me to the ground.” The bruising and swelling around Victor’s eye was impressive, and it was becoming harder to keep open.

“I’m not saying you deserved it, but you did go a little too far with the grabbity-grab, if you ask me. You still did great, though, buddy.”

“I have a real desire for you to not be here anymore,” Victor said.

“Gee, I love you too. Even though you may not understand it, this was the first step towards really getting you back on track. And soon enough, I’ll be gone, for good this time.”

“Getting beat up put my life back on track?”

“Don’t you feel invigorated? Even putting up the puny fight that you did, you still fought for something. Do you really want to be with her?”

“Of course!”

“You’re just saying that! What were you thinking about when you were talking with her?”

“I guess I was just realizing how much she’s changed. We’re really different. She’s also kinda stupid.”

“How could you want to be with someone who doesn’t even have that many useless talents? What’s your count up to?”

“I have 83 confirmed Useless Talents, and about 300 that need verification.”

“And wouldn’t you like to be with someone who will help you verify each and every one? How long has ‘Eating an Entire Box of Cheerios Without Milk or Water in Under Ten Minutes’ been on the verification list?”

“At least two years, and now it’s actually any box of cereal...”

“Wow. What’s your plan now?”

“Well, I guess I’m ready for a new start. I guess I can be environmentally-responsible and recycle all my sketchbooks,” Victor said as he gathered up all his drawing materials.

“Wait a minute, keep the blank ones, I have a funny feeling you’ll need to keep drawing,” Raoul said. “I’m really proud of you. You needed closure, and you got it. Speaking of things

closing, your eye's not looking so hot – it's going to swell more and split, and you'll have to get a couple stitches. Those stitches are about four years late.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you remember when your friend came over, and told you about this killer party that he was going to? Later that night he was arrested after lighting a dumpster on fire?”

“Yeah, I decided not to go and I just sat around smoking weed listening to Fleetwood Mac...”

“And crying. Sounds like you burned up some brain cells too, don't forget the crying part.”

“Okay, and cried, jeez...”

“Right. Well, you were supposed to get arrested too, you were supposed to get in a fight with Madeline's boyfriend four years ago, and get your eye busted, and go to the hospital to get stitches. I gave you all that time to get your life back on track by yourself, but it's all in the past now. Hey, I was happy to help.” Raoul paused. “Seriously, I don't need a ‘thanks,’ or any other verbal gratitude that may come to mind or even the simple expression of a job well done commonly referred to in this plane of existence as a high-five.” Raoul raised his arm, but Victor walked up and hugged him.

“Thanks, Raoul.”

“Hey, don't mention it.” The outline of Raoul's body started fading away. “Don't waste any more time, and you should probably go ahead and get that eye checked out.”

There was a knock on the door. Victor looked at the last wavering visage of Raoul's face. Victor answered the door. There was a woman standing in front of him. From his one

good eye he could see a smeared blur of metal braces covering her teeth, and her skin was the color of day-old tofu, her neck as wide as a pork chop.

“I found your wallet and...*oh my God are you alright?*” she asked.

“Not really,” he said.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m a nurse.”

“It must be fate,” said Victor, his eye swollen in a flirty, perpetual wink.

Hey Fatso

You were a fat kid. You felt horrendously, hideously, stupidly fat. You weren't just any fat kid, you were *the* fat kid. You were the fat kid without any talent, which made your fatness even worse, and most days you felt fatter than you were. The other fat kids at least played football or lifted weights or did shot put on the track team or were funny or could draw or tutored the pretty kids after school but the fat kids even tutored you. You were sad. You were round. You were *hungry*. You only drank milk in the cafeteria at lunch but you always had food stuffed in your pockets. Sandwiches and cookies and Pop-Tarts and small cakes from the vending machine and candy bars in the elastic of your socks and every period you went to the bathroom and ate something in the stall until the time Antonios Angelopoulos, the meanest kid in school, saw your feet in the stall like you were leaning against the wall and when he knocked on the door you answered like you lived there. Bad move fatso. You realize now that you probably should have made some fart noises or started pissing or something. You were never the freshest Ding Dong in the carton. Instead you said Yes? while you were chewing 2 or 3 Oreos at once and then you got swirlied.

As the fat kid, you forgot what your name was and you started writing your name on all your homework as just Me. You were called every name in the book and even names that weren't. Lard Ass. Fat Fuck. Flush Face. Tubby. Blubby. Fruit Fuck Up. Cake Breath. Skittle Butt. Pie Hole. Munch Monster. Twinkie Toes. Pop-Tard. Reese's Piece of Shit. Cookie Brains. Sugar Tits. Third Wheel, which you didn't understand until you got to college where you seemed to walk the hallways of the dorm for hours every single night until your roommate gave you the signal that he was done having sex. Once your 2nd period teacher stuck

up for you and said to the class that you were just “Big boned” and in a poorly-timed attempt at being funny you said, “Big bonered is more like it,” but no one laughed. Mrs. Lanfear slapped the smile right off of you. In the principal’s office, you felt with your tongue a tooth that had been knocked loose. You can’t entirely remember, but you don’t think you looked at her again for the rest of the year. You’ve learned to hold grudges and although you aren’t violent, you sometimes scour the internet looking for Antonios or Sara Mathis, the girl you liked, dreaming of some karmic revenge the universe exacted on them. You have an incredible memory for the bad things that happened to you. One of the only times Sara looked directly at you, you stood right behind her after school while she was twirling the lock of her locker and said you had a very important question to ask her. She knew what you wanted to ask. She rolled her eyes but let you continue. You took that quiet moment to stop focusing on the opened faucet of sweat running down your back, the excess accumulation of which dripped into your pants making your butt crack feel weird, to puff your chest out with confidence. You remember quite clearly how her hairspray bit at the soft lining of your nostrils and how her bright red lips trembled, you hoped it was with curious anticipation. All she said was, “You’re ugly,” and walked away. A simple “No” would have sufficed, you thought. Your mom made you go to the dance alone and you watched her from across the gym dancing so close to Mike Sherwin you knew she could feel the buttons down his shirt press through her dress. You danced with Tammy, and her hair smelled like bleach and shellfish. You wonder what their lives are like now, and hope to find pictures of Sara on the internet with some jagged scar on her face or 10 kids pouring out of a trailer or something. When you do find her you see that she’s still gorgeous a thousand miles away. Shit. You just realized she’s much more gorgeous than you ever remember her being. She never responds to the message you send that starts out, “Hey you, long time no see!”

You're happy. You tell yourself you're happy. You tell yourself every morning that you're happy and some mornings you tell yourself that if you're telling yourself that you're happy that you must not be happy but then shake that out of your head and then go down to breakfast. You're fat. You're still fat. You wondered for years when all that would change and it hasn't. You are only now accepting that fact. You're married though. Your wife is beautiful and patient and understanding. You've never known anyone else's embrace and you like that. She loves you. She doesn't think you're that fat but sometimes you're tired of you. You're older and you're even more sluggish now and sometimes it doesn't feel right. She makes cookies and pies and cakes all with sugar substitute and you eat them and love them and are thankful for her feeding you and making you healthier and you've even lost a little weight. She makes you feel good, mostly, and you tell yourself this is all you need.

You liked birds as a kid. Even now you like birds. You'll sometimes see dozens of sparrows sweep across the sky over the tops of trees flitting like someone threw huge sprinkles in the sky and you stop and watch until your retinas strain. You take walks in winter trying to determine what birds are in the nests in the skeletal branches of the bare trees. You've even made a map of the nests around your subdivision. Behind your house are crow's nests. You've seen robins in nests next door. American Woodcocks are down the street in trees next to the Gray's house. You've seen bitterns and cormorants and swifts and doves and warblers and meadowlarks and blackbirds and grackles and starlings and vireos and thrushes and finches and in the dense shrubbery around the Cox's house, you've identified your favorite bird and during spring time you take your binoculars from the drawer and sit nonchalantly across the street from

their house in your car and wait staring at the nest of the cardinal, trying to see how many babies they have.

The only foods you won't eat now are doughnuts. Ever since that day in the 8th grade, you can't even stand the smell of doughnuts. Smells are one of the most important triggers for memories and doughnuts give you flashbacks. Chills run up and down your arms when you think about the jelly filling in the center. You've gone over that morning almost every day of your life, every step you took, trying to change it in some way, but every step leads you back to the same place.

You remember it was the day after your birthday. Out of all the invitations you sent out, pretty much to everyone in your grade, only 3 or 4 of the fatter kids showed up. You didn't mind though, more pizza and hamburgers and French fries and pie and cake and ice cream for you. Your mom gave you a book. You remember how happy that book made you, your eyes watering at the corners as you peeled away the wrapping paper, the weight of it in your hands like a baby brother, straining the minuscule muscles running the length of your arms. It was *The Fully Ultimate Complete and Unabridged Guide to Every Bird that Ever Lived in North America and Some Other Places Too* or some ridiculous title like that. All night you flipped through the glossy pages of birds you've never seen. You stopped on the cardinal and read the little biography over and over and over again. You read the description of the cardinal's song, and memorized it. You thought to yourself that you'd listen especially hard to hear it. You knew what to listen for now, you knew their language now, the things they'd say to each other while they flew from tree to tree to tree. Tiw tiw tiw tiw purty purty purty purty. Woit woit woit woit chew chew chew chew.

Your favorite time is spring time because the bird nests are full and the momma bird and the daddy bird are working hard to feed all their babies and you walk around to the different nests sometimes standing for hours waiting for the little ones to take their first flight. You've seen dozens of these over the years and it always makes you happy. You've seen baby birds try to fly and fall flat and break their necks as well. You remember these times too, because it makes every flight you see even more wonderful. Whenever you get back to the house your wife always asks you, "How was it today?" and you always say, "Oh. Amazing."

It was Monday morning. Thinking back on it, you marvel at the logistical maturity those bastards showed at such a young age, how they pulled it off you'll never know. You slept that morning with your arm around your book and wanted to take it to school to make all the kids jealous. You imagined walking up to kids saying "Ever seen a xantus's murrelet? I didn't think so!" On the bus ride to school you closed your eyes and listened to the cardinal song in your mind. You imagined that when you said it out loud all the cardinals would rush to land on your outstretched arms and everyone would come over to marvel at you and want to talk to you and be your friend to hopefully understand your magical bird powers.

You felt invincible with your book under your arm as you walked from the bus to your locker. Sara passed you right outside the school's doors and gave you a small smirk. You felt your groin tingle. You opened the door and the fact that the hallway was as silent as the nest of a migrating dusky flycatcher in winter didn't make you think twice because you were thinking about Sara and birds and you yourself wanted to sing. Every single student stood facing his locker with his back to you. Like a blubbering fat idiot, you walked right down the center with a

smile on your face. That was when Antonios called out, “Hungry for breakfast blubber breath?” and as you turned around so did everyone else with cartons full of doughnuts. They pelted you relentlessly and as the powdered sugar hung in the air like exhaust you dropped your book to cover your face. A stale bear claw hit you right between the eyes and you fell into the fetal position just like your mom taught you. They kept throwing everything they had and all you kept thinking was *woit woit woit woit* *chew chew chew chew*. You heard a woman’s voice angry and loud like a crow’s *caw* and then you heard feet stamping around you and felt a hand grab your arm and pull you up. Your mom picked you up later as you sat in the principal’s office. She brought you a burrito because she knew you’d be hungry. You sat in the backseat with your book on your lap. You stared out the window wondering about all the birds in all the trees you can’t see. You couldn’t look down without crying, the pages of your book creased and stained with the jelly of smashed doughnuts.

Jupiter Rising East

Jupiter

Dedicated to the Klacking girls

It was the summer 1988 broke records. I was 11 and I broke records too.

Rode my bike as fast as the engine of my youth could take me and late into summer after countless orbits around the small park at the center of our subdivision, the 2 mile stretch finally buckled under the weight of my speed breaking the 2 minute barrier I set for myself a year before, the small group of friends that I played soccer with and traded baseball cards with timed me and said Now He'll Stop Riding That Bike but I didn't stop. Finally beat my older brother at HORSE shooting baskets in the driveway even though he started punching me right after calling me a cheater and taking back the E but I still know I really beat him.

In school that year my science teacher Mrs. Svoboda told us all about Jupiter. It was my favorite planet because it was so big and cold and looked like it was looking back at us and just looked sad. She said that we didn't know much about it but probably it was all gas and I used to sit in class and think about me floating through space doing cartwheels past the moon dodging potential asteroids in the Kuiper Belt and then I would run into Jupiter and I thought how nice it would be to shoot right through the entire thing pass through all the storms on the inside because Mrs. Svoboda said it was probably all storms on the inside with its own lightning and everything and the storms never stopped moving and the outside looked all smooth and calm like a swirling marble countertop and then I'd come out on the other side back into the silence of space. And then Mrs. Svoboda told us about how the Great Red Spot was a storm that just kept circling the planet over and over twirling and spilling

over itself that takes at least 10 years to go around the whole planet and then she said Just Imagine – This Storm Is So Big Two Entire Earths Can Fit Inside It Can You Imagine That and I really couldn't imagine a storm as big as that.

That summer I rode my bike in countless orbits around the small park at the center of our subdivision riding as fast as I could feeling the wind push the hair back past my ears and on the straight-aways I'd close my eyes into the darkness there. That summer the heat chiseled itself into our skin at one point reaching 105 without humidity which was always about 80% and everyone said This Never Happens In Michigan but it did happen happened for at least a week straight and all the newscasters said What A Strange Summer We're Having and they didn't even know the half of it really. And we never had any air conditioning just big old box fans that sometimes made you feel hotter and at night I could never sleep because those fans would still be on High, one in every room in the house spinning all night long and they were just so loud, but I didn't really mind and neither did my brother because it was summertime and we got up late and watched the Price Is Right in the afternoon with a bowl of cereal and that summer I think I won about a hundred cars and probably 50 trips all around the world I was that good. My mom would always make big vats of Sun Tea on the weekends on the back patio and even though I never liked it I would drink it and put a bunch of sugar in it when she wasn't looking and then it tasted better. My parents hated the heat and that was the summer that for a week straight my parents would come home from work and it was still 90 degrees and they'd take us straight to the bowling alley and dinner was Coke and bowling alley hamburgers and they'd say Take Your Time No Need To Rush In Eating Wanna Bowl Some More and my brother showed me how to put spin on the ball just like a professional and when we all finished we'd go to a movie

because it was still too hot and we'd get home late at night and that was still probably the best week of my entire life.

This was the same summer Luke and Jade broke their legs when they tried to build a tree house in Luke's backyard, both Luke and Jade up in the tree with a box of nails and a hammer calling down to me to strap another board they got from that old barn down the street to a piece of rope and hoist it up and when it swung in the air Jade went to grab it and he hit Luke pushing him out and Jade lost his balance too and fell and I saw them land in front of me hearing the chopsticks of their legs breaking. And then I ran away as fast as I could. Luke's dad watched the whole thing from his kitchen window and they were both lucky they did it on a Saturday and Luke's dad was home and then Luke's dad called my dad and told him what I did and then my dad spanked me hard much harder than that time in church on Easter Sunday when I started laughing thinking about how funny Jesus looked all up on the cross looking down on all of us and all of us just waiting there looking back saying stuff I didn't even understand. They never finished that tree house and they only ever got two boards up and hammered down and I don't think they ever climbed a tree again.

It was the same summer the Klacking girls just two houses down right next to the dead end died of cystic fibrosis one after the other first Holly and then Amy one month later, the bricks of infections finally covering the window of their lives. It's only after I went to college that I learned what cystic fibrosis was the gears in the body churning too slow to move that swamp of mucus growing in their chest only realizing ten years later what all their coughing meant, how I never wanted them to sit next to me on the bus because I was afraid of getting sick from that perpetual cold that cycloned in their lungs and my mom never letting me play with the Klacking boys either saying You Never

Know What You'll Get Over There, Better Stay Away, And Remember Whenever You See Those Girls Cover Your Mouth but she never mentioned cystic fibrosis or what I might get I just believed her and even when they got a trampoline I wasn't allowed to go over, You'll Break Your Leg And Then Come Home With Something Else Too but I did sneak over there once, after school, right before summer started and I didn't break my leg or catch anything but I did hurt my hand because I never jumped on a trampoline before and I was too close to the edge and I got scared and came down on the plastic part covering the springs and hurt my wrist and even now almost 20 years later I always know when the weather is going to change and it's about to get real real hot because my hand'll start hurting.

In a couple years when I'm 31 I'll meet Patricia and after 6 months we'll get married and 2 months after getting married she'll find out she's pregnant. I'll wake up every morning thinking that I'll never be able to see her exactly as she is because of the time it takes for the light to reflect off her and her smoky green eyes the color of pine needles just dropped on a campfire and into my eyes so no matter how close we get we'll always be at a distance no matter how tight we hold each other there will always be that sense of falling we'll always be spinning around on the Earth spinning around the sun spinning around the Milky Way the Milky Way flying into Virgo at a quarter million miles per hour but still we'll smile reveling in the things we'll never know.

For most of us kids though the thing that really stood out that summer happened just one day towards the end of summer, right after that week the temperature hit 105 and a week before Mr. Klacking died of a heart attack 6 weeks after his daughters when we found an alligator in the cul-de-sac at the end of our subdivision. It was Erik who really found it right at the end of his driveway but looking

back it wasn't all that strange because that was a strange summer because it was also the same summer a panther got loose from the small Keego Harbor Exotic Animals Hospital a couple miles away and my mom would always say before she left for work You Boys Stay In The House I Don't Want To Hear About Any Of You Getting Eaten Or Your Father Will Kill You All but nothing ever happened to us and I don't know what ever happened to that panther people just stopped talking about it.

Looking back I wonder how the girls always seemed to be so happy because in college I learned that no one with cystic fibrosis ever lived beyond about 25 because there weren't many advancements in the drugs they used, but now people with CF can live okay lives until they're about 40 or something and then they die. And we consider our drugs and treatment very advanced now. And I just feel bad now as a man regretting that I used to masturbate to Holly and Amy because I liked how they looked on the outside but never knew they were dying on the inside and I'd mostly masturbate to Holly with her short curly hair and glasses, 2 years older than me the flag of her smile always waving briskly in the wind of her short intense life always throwing her hand in the air for me to say a quick hello and once holding an umbrella over me when it was raining and walking me home from the bus stop all the way to my front door just two houses down saying Don't Want You To Catch A Cold and I said Thanks and I remember as she turned away she was shivering a little and I didn't see her in school again for 2 weeks.

Even though Patricia will always be happy always smiling she'll have a darker side and like to play a game she'll make up called The Worst Of Times. No matter where we'll be or what we'll be doing she'll always think of the worst thing that could happen in that moment like when we'll be stuck in

traffic she'll say with a smile This Would Be The Worst Time For Giardia-Induced Diarrhea or at a July 4th parade she'll say This Would Be The Worst Time For a Coup or if we'll be walking down an alley she'll say This Would Be The Worst Time For An Elephant Stampede and while in the doctor's office getting her blood drawn she'll turn to me and say This Would Be The Worst Time For An Earthquake.

Right before summer started the last thing we did in school was study the solar system and that was my favorite because it was really the only time I remember that my dad took an interest in me or anything I did in school because he always left for work when it was still dark out even during the summer and came home really late and just ate dinner watched TV and went to bed. One of our projects in school was to make a diorama of all the planets and my dad had the idea of making it really great with spinning planets made of Styrofoam attached to small metal poles my dad formed from some wire we had sitting in the basement and all the planets were painted different colors with lines and rings and whatever the planets looked like from the pictures we saw in the old Encyclopedias we had and then after school I put it on my desk to look at and remembered watching my dad's hands carve and glue those big white orbs my dad's hands as big as maps and I'd look at the orbs and wonder when my hands would get that big and I liked remembering all that and my diorama was the best even though I got a B because my Jupiter was too small.

Mr. Klacking died of a heart attack probably because he spent so much time in the hospital that week the girls died and thinking about all the times he and his wife saved their daughters' lives, the endless patting on their backs when they were just little girls when the mucus in their lungs turned to a bottle of rubber cement with the top off, all the drugs and the colds and the infections and the late night

hospital runs when nothing would get that shit out of their lungs and I'm pretty sure it's just too much stress for anyone's heart and he died six weeks after both his daughters and there were even rumors of Mr. Klacking dying the exact same hour and minute his daughters did and then other kids said it was even in the same room and the same bed probably. But no one believed that.

The alligator wasn't moving much anymore, Erik found this out by repeatedly poking the belly flattening under the animal's own lethargy and by raking it across its wide snout with a broomstick with the broom broken off. The alligator only twitched its head like a kid with Tourette's on Valium. It didn't even growl or groan or whatever it does when it's really alive so much as make a pained and throaty gurgling sound. Luke and Jade hobbled up on their crutches and we sat there watching Erik hit and poke this animal running around to each side and the alligator tried as hard as it could to chase him moving his head trying to situate its teeth near Erik's legs but it never caught him, its eyes glazing over more and more with each blink and becoming more and more white and cloudy. And then we all saw Donny walking down the street and when he saw us he said What's All This Shit and then he saw and got a big smile on his face and said Cool.

About 6 years later scientists found out that Jupiter wasn't just all gas but that it probably had a relatively solid core and anyway the planet was so big and had such a gravitational pull that all the gas that was swirling around inside it became denser and denser so I would never be able to fly through the whole planet like I wanted to and astronomers found this out by watching pieces of comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 hit the southern hemisphere of Jupiter and explode and you could see the scars they left on Jupiter for months afterward and then they knew it wasn't really all gas but mostly gas.

When I'm 31 Patricia will give birth and I'll watch her face and hold her hand and see the tiny head of our daughter in the hands of the doctor and then I'll start crying and crying and I'll see Patricia and watch her take a deep breath and not release it and then I'll hear a weird sound come from deep within her chest not a groan but a pained gurgling sound then a flutter of high-pitched beeping from different machines and so much talking and Patricia's hand will lose its grip from mine and fall to the side of the bed and a nurse will stand in front of me and push me from the shoulders back against the wall and all these people in blue scrubs will surround my wife like fruit flies on a rotting orange and I'll never see so much blood for as long as I live. They'll wheel her out and into the hall and down the hall and I'll say What The Fuck Is Going On That's My Wife Where's My Baby and some nurse will say There's Been A Difficulty and leave and I'll say No Fucking Shit and stare at the pool of blood and then I'll leave the room and follow the blood down the hall and past a sign that says SURGERY.

I remember the night my dad and I worked on our diorama in the basement for that entire week he didn't watch any TV just came home and ate and said Let's Go Downstairs And Finish Piecing The Universe Together and he'd get a sly smile and laugh a little but it wasn't the universe we were working on just the solar system. The night he finished I went to bed early and woke up and the whole diorama was sitting in front of my door and all the planets were spinning around the sun which was really just a Nerf ball, we cheated on that one, and I took it downstairs and noticed that my Jupiter didn't have the Great Red Spot so I looked in my mom's purse and pulled out her lipstick and drew a big oval on it and then my mom came downstairs and said What's My Lipstick Doing On

The Table and I just finished my oatmeal not saying anything at all I didn't even look at her I was so scared then she drove me to school because my diorama was so big.

Hailey will be born and she'll be healthy and Patricia will recover from the surgery for her hemorrhaging and she'll only have a tiny scar to the left of her belly button and everything will be really good for a couple years and I'll always remember those two years as the best in my life when I would come home and hold my baby and help my wife make dinner and kiss them both on the cheek and watch them both smile and I will think that this is everything I'll ever need and I'll look down at my little girl in my lap and think how small you're really mine and put my hand on her chest and it will cover her entire chest and wrap around on both sides of her waist and I will feel her short breaths under my fingers and her heartbeat and wonder if my hands will ever get as big as my dad's probably not and I won't even feel like a dad yet because my hands aren't that big There's So Much Life To Live, I'll whisper that in your ear Hailey every night, Don't You Ever Forget That and after Hailey starts running around and talking and telling stories I'll think life can't get any better and it won't because the worst thing to happen in my life will happen and my wife will die.

Holly watched it all happen from her bedroom window that day I hurt my wrist on the trampoline and by the time I reached the front door to run home she was standing there with a small bag of ice and she said Come Upstairs You Have To Ice It and so she took me to her room and closed the door and sat next to me on her bed and I said It Hurts So Bad My Dad's Going To Kill Me and she said The Pain'll Go Away Soon It's Not That Bad Everything'll Be Okay and then she coughed and put her arm around my shoulder and pulled me close to her and her hair smelled like coconut. Her arm

felt nice around me and I can still remember her voice perfectly and no one at that time had ever been so nice to me.

Patricia will wake up in the middle of the night with a dream where she was inside a giant womb and she'll wake me up and I'll say Where Am I and she'll say I'm Pregnant and we'll both fall back asleep and wake up happy. She'll start writing letters to her stomach every single day and I'll say Please Don't Tell Me How You Plan On Mailing Those Things You'll Get A Paper Cut and she'll just laugh but really I'll be a little jealous and I'll ask her what she's writing but she'll just say dreams and things about how she was a little girl and then I'll say And Me Too and she'll say Maybe If I Feel Like It with that smile that made her nose crinkle at the sides. Every night we'll put the letters in a big box all in order and I'll even write some letters too and put them in and we'll decide to give them to Hailey when she turns 18 which will be a good idea because that's the only way Hailey will remember her mom and when Hailey turns 18 I'll give her all the letters just like we planned and she'll read each one to me and we'll stay up real late crying and reading together and almost every letter will talk about how happy Patricia was becoming a mother but it wasn't about having a baby it was about having a baby with me and I'll never be happier in my entire life because even though she'll have been dead for 16 years I'll know her better than I ever did before.

Donny walked up to Erik and grabbed the broomstick and said Awesome and Erik said Hey and Donny said Fuck You and pushed Erik and then crouched down and started sticking the broken broomstick into the side of the alligator as hard as he could because Donny was bigger than the rest of us and Luke and Jade started cheering and laughing and Donny looked at them and smiled which didn't help anything and when it finally poked through all this blood starting coming out and Luke

and Jade had to hobble to the other side to avoid it and then Luke said Just Like Jesus and Donny said Shut Up. Erik went to his garage and pulled out a small hatchet and gave it to Donny and we all looked at each other and you could tell we were all thinking Uh-oh.

Once Hailey is put down for the night Patricia and I will clean around the house and prepare for the next day and then we'll lie in bed for our own time to just be next to each other and sometimes my hand would curl over her hips and I would pull her waist close into me but most times it will be just us holding hands, quietly, looking into each other's eyes, talking about whatever thoughts people about to fall asleep have and there will be so many times when she will say It's So Amazing That Right Now All These People Here Are Doing The Same Thing As Us, About To Fall Asleep, Whole Nations even, And Then We'll All Be In That Place Of Dreams And Even Though We're All Separated I Feel Like They're Nearer To Me Somehow and our eyes will glaze over and our lids will fall silently most nights before the lights are even out. And many nights she will lie on my chest and say It's So Amazing and I'll say Yes, The Dreams and she'll say You Know and then I'll say Tell Me Again What Happens.

That summer was the same summer I kissed a girl for the first time her name was Samantha Eagle and I went to school with her almost all my life but we never really talked or anything and one time when I was riding my bike around the block I saw her walk out to her driveway and wave at me and shout something but I just kept on going and then when I came around again I saw her still standing there and waving some more so I stopped and said Hey and she said Why Do You Always Ride Your Bike Around And Around And Around and I said So Sometimes I Can See You and she got a big smile and I think that was really the first and last time in my life I said something right to a girl. She

said Do You Want Some Water and I said Yeah even though I didn't and then she took me inside and we had some water and then she took me around the house and finally upstairs to her room and showed me her plastic pony collection that went all the way around her room and she told me all the names too and I was standing in front of the window when she said This Is My Favorite and then she kissed me on the lips and I didn't do anything I was so nervous and then I got an erection and I was wearing those tight spandex cycling shorts just like the professionals wear and she looked down and started laughing and I ran out of her room down the stairs and out of her house and rode my bike home and it was really hard to ride my bike with an erection.

Patricia will get in a car accident on her day off from work on the way back from a massage I got her as a present and the accident will be so bad everyone like the doctors and police officers will say she died instantly and didn't feel anything but I know that can't be true and I won't even know how that's supposed to make me feel. The accident will be so bad that the doctors will recommend I not even look at her No Reason For An Autopsy No Salvageable Organs they'll say and I'll be a widower at 33 with a 2 year old who keeps asking about mommy and she'll keep asking about mommy for another 3 years until she quietly forgets about having one. I won't even get that last chance to see Patricia and say goodbye I'll have to whisper it to her urn and for the rest of my life I'll have to live with the last conversation I had with her a stupid fight about how I wasn't doing enough around the house to help her out and neither of us had really slept for what will feel like weeks and then I'll yell out You Know It's Sometimes Hard For Me To Do Things When It Gets Real Real Hot And My Hand Starts Hurting and she'll say It's Not Hot It's Raining and I'll say Drive Safely and she'll say I Will and kiss me on the cheek not on the lips and she'll whisper in my ear I Love You

But I'm Still Mad At You and then she'll leave and I'll think all I should have said was just Wait. I'll Do Everything I Can. But I didn't.

The hatchet was kinda rusty and Donny pulled on the alligator's leg and started hacking it over and over and the skin was really tough to get through but soon the joint was broken and the leg was almost coming off and there was blood splattered on his face but mostly on his arms and then he went to the next one and Luke and Jade took a couple steps back and Donny didn't even look at them and then he started hacking at another leg. Jade said Gross and took a couple steps back and lost his footing because of the crutches and fell backwards and Donny started laughing. I dropped my bike and helped Jade and Donny started on another leg. Jade hobbled off and Donny said Where's That Pussy Going and then turned to Erik and said Help Me Flip Him Over and then they both knelt down and started flipping the alligator onto its back and then my brother came up the street bouncing his basketball and said Awesome and started helping them.

Mrs. Svoboda showed us time-lapse movies of the Great Red Spot and said that it takes 6 days to swirl over on itself and that it's been circling Jupiter for over 300 years and during that time America didn't even really exist and people were still settling here from England and then the creation of the United States and two World Wars where almost a hundred million people died and a Holocaust where millions and millions were killed and two atomic bombs when almost 200,000 people were instantly vaporized Some Sitting At Desks In Schools Just Like You And All Of You Breathe In Their Atoms Probably Everyday and then the births of grandfathers and grandmothers, and the deaths of some, and then the birth of our mothers and fathers, and the deaths of some, and the births of each of us, and it was up there watching it all turning over and over on itself, and it will probably

just be circling around for another hundred years at least which is enough time to see all our grandparents die and our mothers and fathers die And Even All Of You Too and after she said that this one girl in the back started crying and the rest of us started laughing because death was funny then but Mrs. Svoboda said Be Quiet and walked over to her and whispered something to her and it will only be much later that I'll understand how that storm must feel just going in circles by itself but as a kid I couldn't even imagine history being anything more than drawings in books and this was the first time I ever thought that history is much more than whatever it is we do here.

A couple weeks after the accident I'll break down and start crying on the bed wishing that Hailey would go away because I can't be a dad right now and I'll just want to flip up those hinges and leak into darkness. Hailey will climb up and say Dad What's This and she'll run her fingers over the scars on my wrist and I'll say I Tried To Kill Myself A Long Long Time Ago and she'll say Like Mommy Did and then I'll hold her real tight and I won't let her go even though she'll be pulling away and all of a sudden I'll feel like a dad and I'll say Let's Sing The Song Mommy Likes To Sing To You Every Morning Okay, I Love You Cock-A-Doodle-Do, Wake Up, Wake Up, Whatcha Want To Do, Today, Today, Let's Play, Like The Little Chickies Do. Hailey will get real quiet and sad not even knowing why and then I'll say You Wanna Hear A Story About An Alligator.

When they got it onto its back Donny said There That's Better and started rubbing its stomach and said Feel How Soft That Is but no one moved or did anything we just watched Donny because he seemed to be off in some other place with a hatchet in one hand and rubbing the belly with the other and he looked so peaceful and kind of happy and it lasted about 5 minutes and no one looked at each other or said anything we just all looked at Donny and waited because it seemed like he needed this

time, whatever it was he needed it, and then finally he got up and wiped something from his face with one hand and then he smiled and said Watch This and started hitting the alligator with the hatchet and then my brother started yelling Fuck Yeah Fuck Yeah Let Me Try but Donny didn't hear anything and then put his hands in and pulled out whatever he could grab in there. He stopped and stood over it staring deeper and deeper into something I don't even know what. My brother ran back to the house and came out with my diorama all the planets spinning ferociously around the sun and he said Watch This and I said Don't That's Mine but he pushed me down and pulled off all the planets and the sun and shoved everything in the alligator's belly and said The Alligator That Ate The Universe and started laughing but it wasn't the universe it was just the solar system. My solar system.

It will be three years after Patricia dies that I'll finally start cleaning out the closet and getting rid of her clothes by that time they won't smell like her anymore because I probably sniffed it all out those quiet nights after Hailey goes to sleep and I'll have a pain in my chest reminding me of the love that will not have left and something missing from my arms the exact shape of my wife and I'll think about how all the secrets I ever told anyone just went away and even the secrets I forgot to tell her will keep lingering and I'll regret not ever telling her why it was I haven't eaten Chinese food in a good decade or why I sometimes buy Almond Joys and carefully scoop out just the coconut and leave everything else and I'll find a bunch of old boxes of my own with all my old yearbooks and I'll start flipping through them and looking at all the kids I used to know but don't know anymore and haven't even really thought about for 20 years and it's weird because all these kids will seem like they have really mature faces even at 5 or 6 and I'll remind myself to look at Hailey in the morning and I'll see myself in the yearbook and I'll think that I look like an old man and then I'll see the

Klacking girls and follow them from yearbook to yearbook until I get to the one that says 1989 on the front and then they won't be there anymore and the only reason why we named Hailey Hailey was because Patricia didn't like the name Holly and Patricia will never know why I wanted to name her Holly and neither will Holly. In 1989 there's just no more pictures of the Klacking girls even though all the other kids around them were the same and they had the same smiles from year to year and even this year when the girls disappeared it will be like nothing ever changed and I'll think now, right now, Amy and Holly will be dead much longer than they were ever alive.

I didn't see Holly in school for the last two weeks before summer that year and every year Luke always had a big party for the end of school at his house because he was the only kid with a pool and even though I couldn't swim I liked putting my feet in the water and when it started getting dark they had music and cake inside. Amy and Holly showed up late and didn't stay that long and even though it was already getting hot outside they showed up in sweaters and Amy was coughing and trying to smile watching everyone dance and Holly came over to me and said Hi and I said Hi too. She grabbed my arm and said Let's Go Outside It's Too Loud In Here and we walked outside past the pool and a little further so we couldn't see the lights from the house and laid down to look at the sky our hands so close the tops of our knuckles were barely touching. She would cough for a full minute at a time saying It's Okay. Don't Worry. But I was still scared. We looked up and I said You See That That's The End Of The Milky Way and she tried to talk through her coughing and said The Edge. Of The Universe. I said No Just The Solar System. She said What's That. That Really Really. Bright Star. I said That. That's A Planet So Big You Wouldn't Even Believe It.

How High Deer Jump Son

The first day of seventh grade everyone was really excited because we all knew we were going to take an anatomy class with Sex Ed. because everyone got letters sent home to the parents during the summer explaining why it was being done and what they were going to cover and my dad called the Principal and said What's All This and I heard him say that he didn't want any Pornography In The Classroom and then I told my friends that there's going to be pornography in the classroom and they got all excited. More and more parents started calling because all the kids were talking about pornography and they even had to have a meeting about it.

That fall my brother started as a freshman in high school and started playing more and more basketball in the driveway after school practicing and practicing and by the time I got home he was already shooting baskets and sometimes he'd ask me to guard him, to push the small frame of my body against him so he could score while being fouled but he never really scored when I did that and his body didn't even really move even when I pushed and pushed. All summer and all through the fall he waited to grow another 6 inches that never came and he kept saying that it was going to happen, it just had to happen because his feet had already grown to size 11 and he was just waiting for the rest of his body to catch up and he'd say If I Don't Make At Least JV I Won't Get Laid and even now when I talk to him he still doesn't understand why he didn't grow and his feet still look all funny on his body.

For science class I had Mr. Petsch and on the first day of class I looked to see if there were any of the girls I liked and as I watched the door Samantha Eagle walked in and I gave her what I

think was a smile I was so nervous and embarrassed I couldn't feel any of the muscles in my face and she looked at my crotch and rolled her eyes. Her dad didn't want her to go for a long time until finally he called my dad and told him that I was a pervert and then my dad came up to my room and said What's This About You Being A Pervert With The Eagle Girl and I said Nothing I Swear and he said If I Hear Anything More About This You're Soup he used to always say that, You're Soup because he thought it was much much worse than just being dead. And as I watched the door in science class I saw Theresa Novetsky walk in and that was the girl I really liked because I liked her freckles.

This was the season my dad sat me down in a big leather chair in the office we were never supposed to go in to and gave me a small glass with some whiskey at the bottom and said You're On Your Way To Being A Man It'll All Start In Just A Couple Months and then he told me about deer hunting and that he was going to take me on a trip, the same trip he took my brother on when he turned 12 and the same trip that he went on when he was 12 and so on and so on until I don't even know how many. He looked me in the eye and didn't even blink and told me to drink my whiskey because this was part of the ritual that everyone did and mom didn't even know about it he said he'd never tell mom even and that if I did I'd know what I'd be and I knew it was worse than being dead. I knew all this though because every fall my dad would take me and my brother to the shooting range once a week for 3 or 4 months until winter and tell us all about the traditions and rituals our family had and we'd shoot targets and he'd keep saying that he's getting us ready and then when I drank my whiskey I started gagging and coughing and my mom yelled up What's Going On In There.

The Cross Country coach Mr. Nagy came to my class and pulled me out into the hall and put his arm around me and leaned down to talk to me and I could smell his breath and it smelled like the inside of an alligator and he said You Gonna Be Running With Me Again Right and I just nodded my head yes and he squeezed my shoulder a little bit kind of like a massage and he whispered in my ear so close I could feel the prickle of his moustache on my cheek Country Day's Got That Stevenson Kid But I Know This Year's Your Year You're Real Real Fast because Mr. Nagy always wanted me to be as fast as my brother who had a couple records on the walls above the gym that I'd look at every single day for 3 years but I never was that good not as good as my brother and all I thought was You Should See Me On My Bike Coach.

Everything changed like everything always does and when the seasons changed in Michigan it always started with the clouds. The clouds would come not the tall white bubbling clouds that sometimes brought relief from the heat but the dark gray clouds that brought the angry face of rain and the rain would hit all the trees and knock the dead leaves off because when fall comes the trees send the nutrients to the roots to store for the winter because they know what's going on with the seasons and that it's time and a lot of times my friends Jade and Luke and me would lay down in one of our driveways and stare up at the sky and watch all the clouds change over on themselves because when they brought storms they moved really fast and finally we'd start to feel some of the raindrops on our faces and it felt good and because we knew what was going to happen because we had a game to see who could stay out there the longest which was hard when the rain really started coming down and the thunder and lightning got closer but this one year Luke and Jade still had broken legs from their fall from the tree house that never got finished being built and everyone said they walked like pirates so that Halloween they dressed up like

pirates and put brown construction paper around their legs and that year I won every time because they weren't allowed to get their casts wet and then they stopped playing.

Mr. Petsch told us all about how the heart works, that it has four chambers and pumps and pumps and pumps all the blood in your body around in a big circle, pumping from electrical signals from the brain and that the type of muscle in the heart is the only place in the body that that type of muscle is found and that if you make a fist, Hold Up Your Fist, that's how big your heart is and can you imagine that that small piece of muscle does so much and is so important and no one could imagine that and then I thought about my dad's hands hands bigger than textbooks and thought that his heart must be huge and that he'd probably just live forever it was that big.

Whenever things change like everything always does I'll never be ready not as a kid not now and not when I'm 33 and my wife will die. Right after she'll leave for the massage I bought her I'll feed our 2 year old daughter Hailey and I'll do some of the dishes and take the garbage out and then take Hailey into the bathroom and I'll have left food all over her face for about an hour and I'll think that my wife would have killed me if she had seen that and I'll start running a bath for her and I'll be complaining to myself about how bad my wrist is hurting and how weird that it is because it will usually only hurt when it gets really really hot but it will be kind of cool and raining outside raining hard and it will feel like it takes forever to get Hailey in the tub and even when she'll be in the tub I'll think this is impossible I want Patricia I need her help and then I'll get the phone call to get to the hospital There's Been An Accident and then years later I'll remember those moments picking Hailey up out of the high chair and laughing to myself

touching the faucet to turn the water on and think that while I was taking the garbage out my wife was already dying without me.

The plan was to go hunting a week before my birthday so my dad could get the head stuffed and show it off at the party downstairs in the basement they remodeled, it was going to be placed right next to the head of the deer my brother shot and the one he shot was a huge buck and when they got home after that trip we ate deer meat for at least 3 months straight for every single meal it's true I even had deer sandwiches for lunch at school and no one wanted to sit next to me and no one would ever trade me their regular peanut butter and jelly. And the deer head was put on the wall downstairs and after that I was always so scared of going down there because those eyes would always follow me, big black marbles that always looked at you no matter where you were Just Like God that's what the priest would always say He's Still Watching You and even though I knew those eyes weren't real they still scared me mostly because they had a sort of lazy look about them like they were thinking I Don't Care That You Killed Me Because I'll Always Be Here Watching You and so wherever I went they would just stare with that sickly smile those eyes telling me my own secrets like Stop Looking For Porn In Your Dad's Closet After School and I Know What You Think About When You Masturbate And I Don't Like It.

Everyone in school knew it was my birthday because I started telling everyone that I was going to have a big party and that if they weren't nice to me I wouldn't invite them and then I watched people to see if they started acting nicer to me but no one really did. My parents said that this was going to be the last party that I would have because I was getting too old for cake and presents and really I didn't think so and when I got older I still had small parties with cakes and

presents you can't ever outgrow that and even when I'll be dying in a hospital from a long battle against cancer Hailey will bring me a little cupcake that she made just for me she won't think I'll know that that I'll be able to hear her but I will and it will say 68 on the top I won't see that, she'll tell me, and I'll really be happy then, it sounds weird I know, but I will because she'll be a great woman when we'll get past all the nasty things we held on to for years and the last thing I'll hear are her gentle sobs and her hands rubbing my arms and then my chest and back down to my arms and the soft touch of her baby's hand on my face and she'll name her child Patricia and for that single second I will feel cradled somehow like I must have felt back in my own mom's stomach wrapped up so tight right beneath her ribcage and there'll be something in me that won't be death but a tingle in the fingertips that I will not be able to move.

It was weird waiting at the bus stop that fall without the Klacking girls there and that was when I thought about them the most, once in the morning and once in the afternoon after school walking home alone and no one ever really asked about them everyone had heard different things during the summer about what happened to them, a lot of kids thought they got eaten by an alligator even though their brother Donny was still around and no one wanted to ask him but I saw some of my teachers pause when they got to the K's during attendance probably thinking about Amy or Holly and in the yearbook that year everyone else's smiles were all the same like nothing ever happened during that summer. And on one of the bus rides home I sat in the back and all of a sudden a bunch of kids started bunching around Tim's seat and so I looked over the seat and he hit me on the head and said Ever Seen Pussy and I said Yeah and he laughed and then he said Look and he showed me a Playboy and he said I Stole This From My Dad's Closet and I looked

down and saw a naked woman and then he said That's Pussy And That's Tits. And all I thought was What.

I'll always feel guilty about Patricia's death because some mornings after we're married I'll lie in bed staring at her while she sleeps wondering what her skull looks like, if I would still recognize her face when you strip it of everything that makes it familiar and if I would have to turn away or not. Sometimes when we'll have sex I'll imagine two skeletons moving around on top of each other and wonder what it really will be that makes me do all the things I'll do. And so when I finally get to the hospital with Hailey crying in my arms the doctors will take me to a room and say that she's already dead and that there's no way I'll be able to look at her because her body will be mangled and then he'll turn on the X-ray and tell me that they thought there was a chance if her spine was intact but the X-ray will show that the steering column will slam into her neck disconnecting her spine from the base of her head but I'll barely hear all that because I'll see the X-ray of Patricia's head and I'll understand that in a terrible way I'll be getting the things I'll want and seeing Patricia's skull will be the last time I'll ever see her smile the way skulls have that smile and the doctor will grab Hailey because he'll see me starting to drop her because I won't believe that's my wife and I'll see two earrings floating off to the sides of her head and I'll think I didn't even notice them when she left but there they'll be, two metal hearts.

Mr. Petsch told us that the heart has four chambers and as it beats it wrings itself out and that's how it pushes the blood through the body almost 65 million gallons if you live until you're 90, which I won't, beating almost 3 billion times and that's including all the times you're in love or are nervous and your heart beats faster and faster and he said Can Anyone Write That Number

On The Board and no one could. That year we learned that a cow only has one heart but four stomachs and that worms are all just one big stomach with five hearts and everyone thought that was weird and didn't make much sense until one day he brought us all worms and told us that we'd all count the hearts for ourselves and maybe even be Lucky Enough To See Its Tiny Heart Fill With Blood and we got split up into groups and I got stuck with Samantha Eagle and she gave me the scalpel and said Start Counting and I said I'm Not Doing That because I hated anything that didn't have skin and even now I won't even touch them and then Samantha turned to me without looking at me and said You Pussy. And all I said was What.

Slowly the axis of the Earth changed and Michigan moved a little further away from the sun and then all the leaves on all the trees turned bright red and then orange and then yellow and then brown and then they fell off and it was only then that it was really fall. Every weekend my dad would wake us up the clouds still heavy and gray and take us to the garage and give us rakes and garbage bags and tell us that he wants to see the grass no matter how dead it was on the front and backyards and then he'd leave and my brother would always call the front and punch my arm really hard sometimes I'd have a hard time raking for a couple hours it was so hard and then I'd have to go to the back which was bigger and would take me longer and afterwards my dad would walk around the yards to make sure we got everything and sometimes I'd fill up 8 or 9 bags and if he walked around and saw that we'd miss something he'd take a bag and dump it out and say Do It Better and we'd even do this when it was raining.

The month before the hunting trip my dad took me to the shooting range and I'd practice shooting fake deer was always dead on and sometimes my brother would say Can I Come Shoot

Too and my dad would look at him and say This Isn't About You Is It. My dad would put his hands on my shoulder while I was aiming and his hand probably reached around my entire back and he'd say Watch Carefully Aim For The Base Of The Neck and I'd concentrate real hard You Wanna Shoot The Shoulder And the Bullet Will Break Through It And Hit The Heart And Even If You Miss By A Little The Shoulder Will Be Broken And It Won't Get Very Far Get It and I nodded like I understood why we were doing this but really I didn't.

Coach Nagy always put his arm around my shoulders at the beginning of practice and bent down and always asked How You Feeling Today Doing Okay This Year's Your Year and if that was my year I don't ever want another year again. Our first Cross Country race was the day before my birthday and Coach Nagy kept talking about beating the Stevenson kid but I didn't even know who that was. It was raining and real cold out and all we were allowed to wear were our running shorts and sleeveless tops and it was so hard to catch my breath because I've always been small I mean my shoulders aren't very broad at all and I never filled out very much anyway even as a man and when the race started I ran as fast as I could I've never run so fast I wanted to prove to everyone that I could do it and towards the end of the 2 miles I was breathing so hard and all the rocks and my shoes were wet and slippery and then I slipped and fell and soon after I stopped hearing everybody yelling at me to Get Up Get Up I just stayed there laying in the mud holding my chest in the rain. When I finally got up I saw a lot of the runners stream past me and I couldn't even walk my ankle was so sprained I could feel it pulse as my heart pushed more and more blood to it and I limped off the course not even through the finish line and to the bus and then my dad came by and said I'm Glad You're Taking The Bus Home.

Sometimes I'll wish that Hailey was in the car with Patricia so she will not have to go without a mother because for a long time I'll be such a terrible dad without a wife and for weeks on end Hailey will cry in her crib and nothing I will do will make her stop it and sometimes I'll imagine me in the passenger seat and we'd be a family again even if just for a couple seconds and I'll finally lay in my bed late at night thinking about all the ways you will be able to die like that's the biggest secret to life not what death is but just how you'll die and it's too bad it can't last longer that quiet process that's truly only yours so you better appreciate it. There will be plane crashes, stabbings, electrocutions, suffocations, uncontrollably bleeding exit wounds, beatings, falls, drownings, dog maulings, fires, chainsaw accidents, falling rocks, prison executions, out of control protests, alligator attacks, poisonings, failed train crossings, stampedes, hit-and-runs, tornadoes, drive-bys, gangrene, spontaneous combustion, appendices bursting, lightning strikes, earthquakes, houses falling on you because of earthquakes, rattle snake bites, FBI raids on your house, choking at the dinner table when you'll be in the middle of a sentence and you'll think you're about to laugh. And then I'll think Jesus, What About All The Diseases.

Early one morning while the sun's eyes weren't even blinking open my dad came into my room and woke me up his hand big as steering wheels around my shoulder and I wasn't even scared I just slowly came out of sleep like initially sinking when you try to float on your back and finally coming up and he'll say It's Time and I looked over and it was 3 in the morning and all I thought was Oh God. I was tired still and at the kitchen table eating oatmeal I opened my eyes and wondered for a minute about what I was doing there I must have floated into my clothes and down the stairs and sat down mom had our lunches and coffee for dad some hot chocolate for me and no one said anything at all and I remember seeing my dad walk over to mom and say

something and try to kiss her on the cheek but she pulled away and walked over to me and said Be Safe and then I'm Going Back To Bed. We walked outside and the grass crunched down under my boots and I looked back and saw the tracks I left and my dad got in the truck and started it it took a while to start it was so cold and he saw me looking at my tracks I was thinking how nice it would be to leave some of me behind right there I don't want to risk taking all of me with me now and then he yelled out Hurry Up. When I got in the truck I fell asleep and I don't remember anything until we got to the site and I wished I didn't have to remember anything after that either but I do. I remember all of it.

Patricia and I will play the game all couples play in bed early on Saturday mornings dismembering each other's bodies and seeing who will love the other the most under the worst conditions and I will always win loving her after gaining 200 pounds with half her face missing she'll stop loving me with both my arms and legs missing and I won't hold it against her I know that I'll be a real pain with both my arms and legs missing but with half her face missing we agreed she'll still look on the bright side of things like still having the other half of her face and we'll laugh about that. Hailey and I will get into a lot of fights when she gets older and at one point when she's 14 she'll yell at me telling me that I should go out on some dates that I don't have to be so lonely that I should have loved her differently and that I should move on because She's Already Forgotten All About You A Long Time Ago She's Dead Dad. Hailey will always be a little too reasonable about things and after she says that I'll barely talk to her for a month but will then realize that she's right and after 12 years I'll start putting all the pictures of my wife away in boxes and push them deep into my closet.

All I remember is waking up in the truck seeing my dad loading rifles and he came over to my side of the truck and said Wakey Wakey Let's Get Going and he opened the door and handed me a rifle and we walked off into the woods. We walked for about an hour in silence the sky finally bluing at the horizon and my dad whispering every once in a while to me about what to look for when you're hunting deer Look At This Tree and we'd look at the tree and he'd point out how the bark was coming off and that's where the male deer was rubbing his antlers marking his scent Telling The Girls How Good He's Feeling and he'd have a slight smile on his face and lick his lips. From the tree markings he didn't think any of the bucks were big enough so we kept walking You're Such A Good Shot We Can Wait Can't We and I'd just nod and follow him and finally we found a series of trees that were scented and my dad said this was a good sign that there's a lot of activity and it was close to the end of the hunting area almost up against a fence and a farm.

Patricia and I won't know each other very long before we'll decide to get married there will just be something about it that will be too right to think about for very long don't you know those couples the ones that are impulsive and get married and they're always much happier than the ones that are together for a really long time so that will be us so after 6 months of dating we'll decide to drive to Vegas and get married and for our honeymoon we'll take an extended road trip camping out in the desert and up to Colorado and Idaho and one night we'll be camping and I'll see a big buck and put my finger up like I'm about to shoot it and I'll say You Wanna Hear A Story About A Deer. Then I'll point up to a bright dot in the night sky and say That's Jupiter Rising East The Biggest Planet In The Solar System and I'll tell her all about Jupiter's different cycles like that its days is only 10 hours long but that it takes almost 12 years to go completely

around the sun so every 12 years Jupiter is in the exact same place as it was when you were born. And then I'll tell her all about when I turned 12.

My mom started decorating the basement with balloons and streamers and lights that she put in the corner with different colored paper over the bulbs and she said If I See Any Funny Business From Your Friends This Is Over and she made nachos and popcorn and a big cake and 3 different kinds of punch and even though she said the party was probably a bad idea I could tell she was happy but my dad tried not to talk to me because he was still mad about the cross country race and the hunting trip and he hung the deer head I shot down in the basement next to my brother's and gave out a heavy breath and turned to me and said That's The Best It Will Be and I didn't see him again all night. Slowly my friends came over and they went downstairs where my brother was playing music from the different mix tapes he had been making all week long because he wanted to be in charge of the music and that was still probably the nicest thing he's done for me.

She'll hit me. With a car. That's how we'll meet. It'll be my first morning in the city and I'll be walking back to my place with a cup of coffee thinking about sitting on the roof in the sun when I won't even see it coming and apparently neither will she. Patricia will only be going 6 or 7 miles per hour after taking a left but it'll be enough to push me farther than my new city-sized bathroom and I'll land on my wrist breaking it and I'll yell out Sweet Jesus Dancing but I'll only know that from the police report quoting the witnesses because I'll also hit my head. Patricia will follow the ambulance to the hospital and stay all day with me there and tell everyone we're married so she can sign the release forms and when they finish with the cast she'll wheel me out

to her car and take me to fill my prescription and drive me home and make dinner for me while she unpacks my kitchen telling me how sorry she is and then stories about moving across the country and almost hitting a horse in the mountains of Colorado and sleeping in her U-Haul at rest stops it'll be so hot in the afternoons waking up with people staring at her and how it was only her 3rd day in the city and every 40 minutes like clockwork she'll take the ice-pack from my head and change it out the knot on my head growing to the size of a small shriveling peach. She'll tell me about the urban gardening business she'll be starting and I'll tell her that I can't stand bugs or spiders and she'll lean in real close to me adjusting my ice and say Don't Ever Worry About Another Bug Again and I won't know if it's the medication or the concussion but I'll be pretty happy and that's probably the nicest thing anyone'll ever say to me.

My dad said There's Gonna Be Some Big Bucks Around Here I Can Feel It so we sat behind some trees waiting not talking not even looking at each other's eyes we never saw or heard anything and every once in a while my dad would walk slowly all hunched over out to the trees and spray more estrus scent and I'd whisper over to him Can We Leave Now and he'd just point to the trees and say Pay Attention. We must've been out there for a good 9 hours bloated clouds holding the laughter in their soggy mouths blood easing its way through my legs and feet that they started tingling and I'd carefully stand up stretching everything out my dad looking at me with that look in his eye and it wasn't until the corners of the horizon darkened did we see a deer and my dad mouthed the words Thank You God. It was a doe and I looked over and my dad whispered Get This So We Can Go Home and she walked off at a distance about 70 meters. I crouched down and put my rifle to the side of some bushes and started taking aim my dad coming up right behind me I could feel his hot breath cutting the cooler air that had sat with us

all day and he whispered You Gotta Do This This One's Easy She Looks Good and she raised her head a little and I moved my aim down from her eyes to her neck to the top of her shoulders just like I was told. My finger touched the trigger and I thought about what I would have been doing right then if I wasn't doing that and even raking leaves sounded okay and as I aimed I said Should I Do It Now and then the doe looked up and started running towards the fence. My dad said Shit Keep An Eye On It Lift Your Gun Always Keep An Eye On It and so I stood and tracked it with the gun and as it got to the fence it jumped but instead of clearing it it hit its chest on the top post, its legs dangling over the other side like legs over a pool and it kept trying to jump but couldn't make it and my dad said Perfect and I pulled the trigger. The deer was pushed to the side by the bullet and didn't get back up again. The sound of that bullet echoed on and on through the small hills saying Oh Oh Oh.

In science class Mr. Petsch told us about sex and showed us slides about puberty and how when the boy goes through puberty he starts growing a lot of hair and the slide was an outline of a man with black patches showing where the hair grows and then there was a slide of a woman we knew it was a woman because the hips were bigger and there were small breasts tempting the borders of her chest and hair growing in almost all the same places and he said that when a man gets an erection the penis fills with blood and all the boys already knew that knew that for years now we didn't need any more information on that and then he showed a series of slides of an outline of a penis becoming erect and everyone started laughing.

After Hailey yells at me I'll realize she's right and I'll start going to therapy to get past everything I'll have been holding on to and the biggest part will be letting go of Patricia herself

because she'll be packed away in an urn in a box in my closet resting so close to me I won't be able to sleep for 15 years and after 3 years of therapy I'll realize where to spread her ashes because she and I will both have the same dream to vacation in Cuba and salsa all night in a small open-air club because she'll love Cuban music so much listening to it whenever she'll get depressed until she won't be able to keep her hips still anymore and a smile will rise over her entire face but since I won't be able to go to Cuba I'll take part of her ashes on a trip to Florida and walk along a beach and pull some of her out of my pockets with my feet in the ocean and just hope that some of her floats down there. After we'll get back to the city from our short and cheap honeymoon we'll start taking salsa lessons because we'll think that we'll go on our 5th wedding anniversary sneaking in through Mexico or something because that's what couples do they plan ahead like that because you'll always think that you'll have a 5th and 10th and 25th but we won't have any of those we'll just have a 2nd. She'll catch on real fast to the salsa beat because she'll always have been a good dancer anyway but I'm a man made of corners and when we'll practice in our living room she'll place her hands on my hips and yell out 1 2 3 and push hard to move them in the right direction and then she'll say It Won't Really Matter How Good You'll Be As Long As You Can Spin Me And Dip Me At The Right Times and so we'll practice those a lot and those two things I'll be real real good at.

My dad and I walked over to the fence where the doe was and he said You Know How High Deer Jump Son and I just shook my head my hand hurting my fingertips burning my heart pumping too much blood and my head throbbing so bad I could barely remember what we were doing in the woods. She Should Have Been Able To Clear That Fence Deer Can Jump That Fence and I just nodded my tongue so numb it flapped like a steak over my dry lips. My dad told

me about what hunters do in the woods they cut open the deer right there and eviscerate it burying everything that wasn't going to be eaten and my dad started taking out his knives and when we got to the deer he said Don't Feel Bad That It's A Doe It's Still A Nice Looking Animal and he told me to go pet the coat and feel how warm it still was and rolled my hands over its neck the hair not as soft as I wanted it to be. He looked for the bullet hole and didn't find it until he flipped it over and looked at the head and then he looked at me and said Shit What Happened. The bullet went through her head right under the eye and my dad let out a sigh and put his knife to the deer's throat and said It Should Have Been Here and that's where he started cutting. He said She Might Be Sick She's Got A Weird Body but kept cutting through finally pulling apart the two halves of the carcass and that's when he yelled out Oh Holy God. A small fetus slipped out of her body sticky and bright red. My dad said Turn Around Don't Watch This but I had already seen it seen it move just slightly I think. I backed up to a tree lakes behind my eyes forming and my dad said Jesus All That Time Waiting And We Get The First Fucking Deer To Mate This Season and he started viciously digging a hole and he grabbed the baby deer and placed it at the bottom and then all the insides and then the dirt I know all that because sometimes I'd turn around to look to see what was going on. Back in the truck my dad said Don't Tell Anyone About This and that was the last thing he said to me his hands still caked with blood and the only person I'll ever tell will be Patricia.

All my friends were packed into our basement my deer head placed next to my brothers some of the kids saying Why Does That One Look Stupid and I'd just look away. My mom standing in the corner serving punch and telling my friends how she made the cookies but never looking at them always keeping her eyes on how the kids were dancing because we were young and this

was new and everyone danced slow dances even to the rock music but when a slow song finally came on I hobbled over to Theresa my ankle still swollen and bruised and asked her to dance and put my arms around her and everyone else started to dance around us too and I saw my mom looking at me and I could feel Theresa's breath on my ear and her hair smelled like coconut and I could feel her stomach on mine expand with every breath and then I started getting an erection just like those slides. Theresa felt it and pulled back and yelled out Oh Gross and pointed down at my crotch and then Samantha Eagle said That's What He Did To Me Too and then I yelled out Fuck all embarrassed and my mom came over to me and slapped me slapped me hard in the face my cheek flowering ripening and she said Leave. Everyone was quiet and stunned and I limped upstairs slowly step by step each one slightly creaking before getting used to my weight and hobbled up the second set of stairs to my room where I leaned down in the dark laying my head next to the vent where I could hear the party start again the music playing and the soft words bubbling up from the voices of my friends.

Strange Bodies

It was the season of endless noise and if you listened carefully with any deep breath there came bubbling from deep inside your chest a creaking with cold. The winter of 1988 became a reference for all winters after that and people even now over 20 years later say The Ice Wasn't Really That Thick There Wasn't Really That Much Snow It Wasn't Really That Cold and even when the story is told again their eyes squint a little and then they say Wait The Ice Wasn't Really That Thick and those people will just never ever get it anyway. That winter was the season of my family the season the crows dropped right out of the sky that's true I was there it was the season of music and the season of prayers and the season of my mother the season she carried me, limp, burning, for two miles and it was the season of all the things I wanted to forget but never could, the season of my death.

I remember it started with a tickle in my throat a pain in my back muscles contracting constricting it started with a rash on my forearm just beyond my elbow it started as a faint outline of a circle almost red but not just yet just a mark of something different happening a stop sign with no words. I told my dad and he said I Don't See Anything Oh That That's Nothing Just Keep An Eye On It and that was right before the fever started before the circle deepened in color and filled in before that itchy blanket of disease spread around my body wrapping me tight. But that small circle always stayed it's still there on my skin fainter now and I don't even know how deep it goes but there it is and if I showed you you might think it was something else maybe a birthmark or something but it's not I see where it is I know what it is it's still right there.

I'll be the one to take care of my mom like she took care of us me and my brother when we were real real little feeding and cleaning and changing he'll be living way up north and I'll be the closest one so I'll do it but I won't really mind because I'll have been a nurse for almost a decade I'll be 59 and I'll take a couple years off because I'll know this is the end and she'll really need a lot of help after that first year going downhill fast once the dementia will start but I'll like that time with her making her comfortable and talking to her those times when she'll be totally lucid laughing and smiling before I'll move to the periphery of her memories but something will always be there she'll remember. She'll want to die in her home in her bed and I'll give her that wipe her lips and read to her her body disappearing slowly weight dripping off her the last couple months until she'll barely weigh a week's worth of groceries and soon after that nothing at all.

It's not like anyone ever really trusts what weathermen say but especially back then everyone took forecasts with a grain of salt and after the storm everyone wondered how they could get something so wrong and a couple days later even the weathermen said Well That Was A Surprise and only the few people who took the forecasts with a couple pounds of salt were ready pulling out extra blankets and sweaters and batteries finding candles and matches and flashlights noticing the day before that the clouds were laying low and heavy or maybe they noticed all the crows that migrated down that week more than usual not just hungry this year we always got crows around wintertime but never like that it seemed like thousands were all over our subdivision hundreds just behind our house behind my window looking out over the woods the jumbled skeletoned branches of bare trees with black leaves and all week I'd wake up at 5 in the

morning the crows all cawing to each other cawing to me saying Come Play or Ha Ha or Help Help. The forecasts called for temperatures to fall overnight with the precipitation turning to snow maybe 5 or 6 inches just another sunless winter day in Michigan but the clouds that came came heavy and stayed that way the temperature rising so much the couple inches we already had started melting and it was obvious the weathermen didn't have a clue.

There's plenty of dirt to dig in families and most of the time you don't have to do anything else but listen. It will be almost a year after I'll start taking care of my mom that she'll start losing the biggest pieces of herself and she'll start talking about all the things she'll have kept deep down inside and it won't even matter if I'll be there or not sometimes I'll hear mumbling from a couple rooms away she'll just need to talk and when I'll hear that I'll go in and see her and sit down and say Really And Then What and she'll keep going and going most of the time I won't even know about what. But sometimes she'll start talking about letters whispering at first like someone was with us talking about the letters she got over 60 years before letter from my dad when he was in Vietnam getting batches of 5 or 6 or 7 all at once writing her something every single day mailing them when he could sometimes on the back of the cardboard in his MREs sometimes only 3 or 4 words simply Holy Shit. Still Here. It didn't matter because every single thing he was thinking for over a year she held in her hands and then she'll say I Never Loved Your Father. Not Until He Wrote Those Letters. I Loved His Words.

I woke up shivering at 3 in the morning my face flush the sound of the roof getting pelted with rain the temperature falling fast and I just pulled the blankets up over my head I was so cold and tried to go back to sleep. My dad came in my room later and said Gotta Get Up The Power's Out

The Basement's Flooding and I just said What I was so confused every part of my body protesting my throat scratchy my hands sweaty Get Up And Go Get Some Wood Be Careful It's Slick Out There my room so cold his breath left a small cloud lingering over my dresser. I put on my clothes two pairs of socks and two shirts and two sweaters and sweatpants and pants and went downstairs my mom trying to light the stove with a match a whole loaf of bread on the rack ready to toast my dad and brother in the basement trying to scoop out as much water as possible with the sump pump not working. The screen door to the back patio was frozen shut and when I started kicking it my mom said What Are You Doing and I just looked at her for a second and kept kicking and pulling until it opened. The step down was covered in at least two inches of ice and I almost slipped one hand still on the handle and that's when I saw what happened. There was so much ice over everything even the biggest trees bent over like r's our clothesline weighted with so much ice on the lines the cement holding the posts down were pulled right out of the ground. I waded out to the stack of wood the new snow my only friction.

My mom kept all the letters she got wrapped up in paper in a box deep in a cabinet in the kitchen in their first apartment together the North Carolina days so hot and humid she just laid on her back in front of the open refrigerator her feet in the crisper 6 months pregnant with my brother What A Mistake Everything Turned Out To Be Rushed To The Courthouse Before I Showed I Never Knew What To Think Back Then Was Different His Parents Hated Me But Those Letters. Her eyes will be closed not looking at me not looking at anything just talking talking about those letters how there was so much she wanted to say, finally, to her husband when he got back writing responses to everything he sent wrapping it in his letter then wrapping them both together and placing them in the box different from the letters she sent back different from the

cheery support she always wrote but his letters started changing after his son was born the first time he questioned if he would ever make it back telling her some of the worst of what he was saw tired of it all And Whatever Was Changing Him Just Made Him More Quiet More Withdrawn More Angry and she'll slip on her words start mumbling and that's when I'll rub her arms starting from the shoulders down to the hands to the fingers repeating until the tears stop putting my arms under her one hand at the base of her neck to support her head one at the base of her spine and lift cradling her small frame a body light as paper and I'll carry her to the bathroom to bathe her in the barely warm water my hands passing over the scar on her stomach the place from where they pulled me when her body could no longer hold me now just a small faint line.

I pulled in as much wood as I could at least 60 pieces 4 trips my heart pounding harder and harder my head throbbing my chest sweating the chills starting the circle on my arm spreading. Everyone was still downstairs cleaning and bringing up water their angry wet feet stomping up the stairs cold toast on the counter. I went to my room and changed into dry clothes I could hear my dad telling my brother he wasn't doing it fast enough and pulled the blankets from my bed and sat in the closet the only quiet place I thought I could find and I sat there balled up with the blankets around my legs but I could hear my dad telling my mom she wasn't doing it fast enough my ears were throbbing with the sound of my own heart like hummingbird wings I felt dizzy my body no longer mine my shirts already soaked again and all I could think about were the crows the crows where could they go.

It's hard to see people you care about change because they're no longer really the people you cared about they're different they're acting different they're voice is different my mom will

sometimes say Get The Newspaper Please Go Get The Newspaper Get The Newspaper While You Walk The Dog and I'll tell her a hundred times to stop that there is no dog there is no newspaper why are these things the things that she'll remember until I stop trying to convince her and all I'll have to do is leave the room and come back and she'll say How Was Your Walk.

I ran to the bathroom and got some matches I ran downstairs and got the newspapers stacked by the door I ran to the garage and got the lighter fluid I could still here the sloshing of water in the basement tired voices surge up and I ran out the back to the middle of the woods my feet crunching down the snow finally freezing every footstep a note in a symphony running and running and there under one of the biggest trees were crows frozen solid by the ice storm some blocks had three or four crows all frozen together a murder in all its parts. I dug out as much snow as I could until I hit the hard ice beneath. I put a pile of newspaper down sweating furiously the chills still creeping over my skin the circle on my arm turning into shapes that don't have names. I sprayed the lighter fluid and lit a match and the fire burned for a couple minutes before the melted ice pooled putting the fire out then I put more newspaper down more lighter fluid and started another fire again and again until I hit dirt the muddied ground 2 feet down. I dug as much as I could and put the rest of the newspaper in and started the fire again, grabbing as many crows as I could their hard bodies lighter than I thought. I put them around the flames their eyes so dark I couldn't tell if they died awake or asleep.

For months my mom will be obsessed with her own face and I'll pull out a small mirror and hold it in front of her and she'll touch the wrinkles around her mouth smiling and stopping smiling and stopping looking at every part of her face sometimes saying Take Me To The Bathroom I

Want To See Everything and I'll pick her up and take her to the bathroom and hold her there in front of the mirror the entropy behind her eyes increasing and I'll stand there understanding that we're such a part of a each other and for a long time I wasn't really around but I'll be around then and that'll be all I'll be able to do. Some scientists believe that our entire universe is just a hologram and our actions take place on some distant 2-Dimensional plane and only correspond here that the here we feel isn't really here and it will be in front of the mirror that I'll start to understand this watching my mom wave to us and I won't even be able to feel her in my arms anymore looking back at myself separated by our very own universes but totally connected.

I remember all the shivering I remember the fire burning down again the crows all thawed out I remember picking one up huge birds bigger than my torso the wings sagging over my hand their bodies not moving the breathing not starting the eyes not blinking nothing, I remember dropping it the shivers subsiding I remember taking off my jacket taking off my hat I remember taking off my boots and then my pants I remember laying down but that's when my memory changes it's something different I know everything without ever being told about that day we never talked about it and I never heard anything about it until I started taking care of my mom 47 years later I don't know what to think when the people I tell say it was a miracle or that God saved me I just don't know how I know the things I shouldn't know like that I was dead for exactly 55 Mississippi. But all of a sudden I was above the trees watching myself laying there and I could hear my mom I saw her too on the porch of our house calling my name I watched her go across the street to the neighbor's house I heard her calling my name checking the cars in the driveway underneath the sky darkening fast the power still out I heard her calling my name I watched her

run to the back of the house I heard her calling my name I watched her spot some footsteps the tracks filling up in the snow I watched her run and run and run I heard her calling my name.

My mom sang in the church choir every Sunday for 40 years until the upper register of her voice starting giving out and then she just started singing a little softer in the pews and so sometimes while I'll be taking care of her sitting next to her reading one of the celebrity magazine she subscribed to she'll start singing Ave Maria or Gloria in excelsis Deo or On Eagle's Wings singing every word and in between the words singing the music but her favorite was always classical music anything by Mozart which she always sang while we were growing up singing the Requiem while doing the laundry or the dishes and she'll start singing part of the third movement with so much energy I'll have to try and quiet her down but it will never work singing the low bass voices almost as a whisper and then the high sopranos Confutatis. Maledictis. Flammis acribus addictis. Voca me cum benedictis. Oro supplex et acclinis. Cor contritum quasi cinis. Gere curam mei finis. At the very end she'll relax breathing hard and sweating and I'll wipe a warm wash cloth over her forehead her cheeks warm and clammy Your Dad Your Dad she'll say Is That The Garage Is He Home and I'll just say Not Yet Mom and rub her arms down to her hands and she'll start repeating I Never Should Have Let Him Do It I Never Should Have Let Him Do It.

Looking down I watched my mom small among the trees running erratically like tissue paper being blown running and slowing down crouching over making sure she was still following the tracks the snow still coming down filling every footstep still calling my name and I could see myself barely a breath in me the snow around me in a small circle absorbing the heat of my fever

melting the disease within me the rash on my arm blossoming with all its branches thick and red Scarlet Fever's ship navigating every corner of my body. I could see my mom lose her way she was close she stopped and looked for tracks but they were gone now the new snow covering everything she called my name over and over running in one direction before stopping and running in another until she stopped and fell to her knees grabbing at the snow. A single crow cawed again and again flying to different branches in different trees and she took a deep breath and looked out in front of her and saw something there saw a form in the flat snow. She put her coat on top of me scooped me up and walked me home.

Those Letters she'll say Those Letters. For Years I'll Cry In Bathrooms And At The Stove While Making Dinner Under Sheets And In My Dreams And Everywhere In Between and she'll reach down to the bed and raise her empty hand Here she'll say This Is The Only Letter I Saved The Only One and I'll pluck the thin air taking the invisible letter putting it in my pocket. When my dad first got home from Vietnam he went through the house pulled up cushions and pulled out towels and sheets pulled the clothes from the closet pulled out every book every dish until he found the box and put the letters in a pot and took her outside said This Is Something You Gotta Do. My mom knew what he wanted lit a match and threw it in. He walked up and squirted lighter fluid on it fire shooting up nothing to stop it watched it burn. She cried and cried but he didn't even touch her just crouched down and watched the flames until he said That's Enough and took the hose and put out the fire and she'll say I Remember How It Looked Small Pieces Of Paper Floating On Top Of The Water But It Was All Gone And We Never Talked About It Again Like Winter's Silence About Summer.

I watched her carry me all the way home and up the porch and into the house and up the stairs to the bathroom running the water until it was just almost warm and submerging me her tears mixing with my bath watched my dad run up and say Jesus What The Hell Happened and my mom said Make Sure He Doesn't Drown and called 911. Saw my dad grab me pull my soaking shirt off and put his hands under my shoulders in my armpits and hold my head above the water my heart rate slowed and slowed and my mom came back and paced in the bathroom it must have taken half an hour for the ambulance to arrive and I watched the paramedics run up the stairs watched them wrap me up and carry me down the rash exploding in every direction watched them load me into the ambulance place an oxygen mask on my face and start an IV.

I'll be obsessed with cleaning when I'll be taking care of my mom and as soon as she'll fall asleep I'll head to the kitchen making sure everything'll be spotless scrubbing away a decade's worth of oil stains from the stove cleaning the grout from the tiles I'll sweep and vacuum and scrub and dust sometimes spending 3 or 4 hours thinking that life is dirty life needs attention our bodies are systems all relying on each other without the things we're made of we're nothing without the stuff we put inside us without it we melt out of ourselves I'll try to believe we mean something life is exhausting and a good death is a long death without scalpels and tubes and gloved-hands on you so my mom will have a good death dying with my hand on hers.

The roads were all ice the snowplows didn't even make it out and the ambulance wound its way through its own tracks back to the hospital skidding around corners never making it over 10 miles per hour my mom in the front seat looking into the back and up above the ambulance I watched the paramedic hold my wrist counting the slowing beats until they stopped and that's

when the beeping started and the flatline and he set his hands on my chest carefully making sure they were right where they needed to be pushing down putting his weight on me cracking my sternum and pushing again and again holding my head back and blowing into my lungs. I watched my mom there. She never cried. She looked on and put her hands together and said Oh God Oh God That's My Son God 1 Mississippi 2 Mississippi 3 Mississippi Please God Please God 5 Mississippi 6. The ambulance made its way through intersections and stoplights and I watched my mom keep praying Hail Mary Full Of Grace 41 Mississippi 42 Mississippi 43 Holy Mary Mother Of God 48 Mississippi 49 Mississippi 50. And she pulled her hands tighter closed her eyes and started again Hail Mary Full Of Grace and I remember the sound the tires made over the ice I remember the chemical smell of the ambulance I remember the sudden beep of the machine come back and the steady rhythm return I remember opening my eyes and I remember the warmth retreating and the chills creep in from being back in my body and that aching pain set deep inside my bones.

That last week will be a hard week life slipping through the cracks she'll stop eating or drinking different parts of her failing her skin will dry out and her lips will chap she'll be in too much pain for me to move her so I'll do the best I can to clean her rolling her on each side gently wiping her her skin darkening from the blood slowly pooling she won't say much mumbling You're A Good Son Good Sons Your Dad Your Dad and almost all day long I'll just sit and watch her talk to her about her granddaughter tell her the stories I remember I'll never have talked so much in my life but I'll want her to keep some piece of the life she had here with her the time you took me to the symphony when I was 14 remember that 20 years after that I took you remember that driving 6

hours to see your favorite the only time you ever saw it remember that we barely made it and she'll turn to me and put out her hand and say Good Son Good Son It's Nice To Meet You.

Chiaroscuro

We looked to the sky and waited for change and waited for winter's flat gray carpet of cloud-cover to wear out and split its seams to finally let the sun rain down on our faces and start drying out the soggy ground because by the time March comes around everyone's tired of shoveling driveways and scraping ice off of windows and walking through muddy brown-snowed fields and lawns and not seeing the sky for weeks at a time but mostly we'll look up for answers because as we grow up we'll finally start to understand that no one has any answers about anything and it was that year a long time ago as a kid that I looked up and knew, just knew.

I'd sneak to the garage and check the pressure in my bike tires and fill them up if I needed to because every year I wanted to ride my bike faster around the block than the previous year and the year before that and the year before that all the way to the year I started timing myself which was I don't even remember when. All the parents yell at all us kids for no reason and all us kids then slam our lockers harder in school for no reason and just when we think it will never change that we're stuck that the sun forgot us that the earth hates us there will come a morning, a perfect bright morning, where the dense confluence of clouds thins out and breaks apart and we'll look up and see again that we're a part of something much bigger than our cold hard lives. Parents hugged their kids again. We made plans again. We believed in our futures again.

1989 was the first and last time I ever saw my dad cry and it was the first year I started taking pictures with my dad's old camera even though I only took pictures for a couple months before that camera almost got me killed and then I stashed it away for almost two decades forgetting

about it until my wife finds it in an old dusty box in the corner of our closet and then she'll fix it as a honeymoon present and dig out all the old negatives and prints I made and then I'll give it to my daughter when she turns 12 the age my dad gave it to me and it will be that moment, that moment when Hailey's small hands hold its full weight and she'll be uncomfortable with me standing in front of her staring down at her, handing her something so personal, and she'll be judging that moment and I'll be able to see it behind her eyes see how she'll be judging what this act means and what it should mean and then I'll think if history keeps repeating and the world keeps turning season after season and I keep living my life the same then who am I anyway.

We changed the clocks on the vernal equinox and then we all woke up earlier and it took a while to adjust to how dark the mornings were all of a sudden and sometimes I'd run through the lawn too excited to get to school and finish school and get back home and ride my bike with all the daylight left that I'd forget how wet the ground still was and then I'd have muddy shoes and then I'd run back to the house to change them and almost miss the bus and most of the times I did miss the bus and then even my mom yelled at me because she'd be late for work. But it was those mornings that I'd have my camera ready and I'd take pictures of the sun rising over the houses and when the pictures were developed you could barely see the houses because the light was so bright and the top half was all white and the bottom all black stuck in shadow and all I'll think is how funny, how funny that light can do that.

This was the season and the year that my parents stopped being just parents because I saw them differently then I saw them just like big dumb kids who didn't know a single thing more about the world than I did and do even now. On any clear weekend my dad would take off in his truck

and not come back until it got dark out and all day Sunday my mom usually wouldn't talk to him and sometimes she wouldn't even shake his hand during church when the priest told us all to Make Peace and my dad would just roll his eyes and me and my brother would start laughing and my dad would poke us in the ribs and say Stop Laughing and my mom would hug us and kiss us on the cheek and shake everyone's hand except his and hold her Missal and act like she was reading and waiting for the next song. If my mom loved anything more than songs and singing it was birds and as the ground started drying she'd put her boots on and take long walks through the woods behind our house and one day she came back with 3 birds whiter than what it's like when you stare at the sun. My brother's friends from high school would pick him up to do God knows what and I'd watch some movie on TV but then my mom said I Don't Want You Staying Here Alone Come Walk With Me and I'd say Let Me Get My Camera.

With all the light we got we knew darkness wasn't far behind because everything was warming up but we'd still get cold winds from shifting northern fronts swooping down into Michigan and we could always tell when the two systems were going to meet because at night it'd get really humid and we could smell the rain from some far off place like Lansing or Ann Arbor or even Waterford and in the morning we could see the thick roiling clouds boiling over the woods behind our house obscuring the pale orb in the sky now beyond our sight and then we'd know we were really in for something big.

This will always be Patricia's favorite and busiest season as a gardener leaving the house early even before our baby wakes up and those will be some of my favorite memories right before she'll die the memories of her slender darkened form moving through our room the cup of coffee

she'll place on the nightstand as she kisses my forehead and reminds me to feed Hailey and change her diaper and dress her in something cute but not too girly and take her to day care and all I'll think about those days is getting home after work and timing it just right as Patricia gets out of the shower and walks out of the bathroom with Hailey both of them naked in each other's arms twirling around the house singing Hailey's favorite children's songs.

If it's not storming then the days get warmer and the mix of light and water bring the first sparks of buds on the birches behind our house and I walked with my mom there through the woods listening to her hum and whistle from her favorite music from *Die Zauberflöte* and she turned to me and said *I Wish Your Father'd Walk With Me Sometimes* and I just shrugged my shoulders and pointed my camera up to the still bare limbs and that was when she started calling me her *Little Papageno* and she'll do that for decades even as I take care of her during her last days it will be one thing that she'll always remember saying *How's My Little Papa I Never Meant To Curse My Little Papa With That Nickname* but nothing will prevent Patricia from leaving the house that day not changing a silly nickname and especially not me.

My dad called me into his office one cloudy Sunday when the grass still froze like stubble and I sat across from him in the big leather chair and he walked over with a big box and sat in the chair next to me and said *I Want You To Have This This Used To Be Mine And It's Been All Over The World With Me* and he pulled out a matte black 35mm camera with shiny silver underneath all the scratches on the back and I turned it over in my hands and then my dad put the box on the ground and grabbed the camera and showed me how to take the lens cover off and how to focus and how to adjust the aperture and how to balance the light meter. I looked in the box while he

was still adjusting the camera and there were all these old pictures in there and I found some where my dad was wearing a helmet and muted green Army fatigues with a big black mustache and holding a gun across his chest smiling with some guy next to him and other pictures with him and my mom on a beach and in a bed but my dad looked really different, hunched over, skinnier than I was then, even as a kid.

There will be a time that I keep thinking about, a time just days before my wife died that I won't be able to get out my mind a time when we were at our happiest because at that time the three of us will just love being together and it was Patricia that brought so much energy and connection to our lives and something will be forever missing between Hailey and I without that link but I'll think about one night when we'll be on our bed playing Yahtzee with Hailey in Patricia's arms and for some reason no matter how Patricia rolled she just kept getting all 5 dice to match no matter what and every single time I'll yell out Yahtzee as loud as possible and then Hailey will start jumping on me trying to yell Yahtzee but it will really only sound like Assy and then we'll all start laughing and Hailey will be dancing around singing Assy Assy and Patricia won't be able to stop laughing and neither will I not for days.

That year was the first and last year Miss Jones the art teacher was allowed to have an afterschool photography club but there was only 5 of us anyways and at the first meeting I asked her what we should take pictures of and she said whatever was around us because anything could be art, it just depended on how we saw it. After school I'd get my camera and walk through the woods and take pictures of trees and dark veiny branches stretching across the sky and one day I

walked until dark and got to the next neighborhood where all the big houses were and I walked along the tree line of the yards watching families sit down to supper and I took some pictures.

My mom will call me every day after Patricia dies and she'll say Hey Little Papa You Gotta Be Big Papa Now For Hailey You Gotta Think About Hailey and she'll say that over and over because in the background she'll be able to hear Hailey crying and screaming and at two years old all she'll understand is that her mom was there one day and then she wasn't and night after night that's all I'll think about too. I'll read Patricia's name in the paper in an article about the accident she'll be in and the other 5 people who will die in that pile up on the slick freeway and I'll think about her there, gripping the wheel, foot pressing the brake through the floor of the car and all the machinery under her working in concert to counter her momentum because objects in motion stay in motion that's a law and nothing's changing that. The pressing of her foot will push all the possible brake fluid to travel to the brake caliper which pushes the pistons which cause the pads to press against the surface of the brake rotor and that's when the skid will start and the back of the truck will be the only thing that makes her stop.

I kept walking through the neighborhood and came to the biggest house at the end of the subdivision and saw a light turn off downstairs and then a light turn on upstairs and I crouched in the trees and put the camera to my eye and watched the window. I saw a woman moving back and forth between two rooms and I started taking pictures as fast as I could clicking and winding clicking and winding clicking and winding and then I saw her in the second room pulling her shirt off and soon she was naked and I kept clicking. Then I heard a man call out Scottie Where You Off To Boy and then a dog came running at me barking and then the man turned on the back

porch lights saw me and started yelling Who's Out There You Son Of A Bitch I'm Gonna Kick Your Ass and at first I just tried to hide by moving a little out of the light but the dog kept barking and trying to jump up on my legs and as I pushed the dog off he bit my hand and then I looked up and the man was standing right in front me reaching out to grab me and I started leaning back but he got one side of the camera strap that was around my neck and started pulling and he was winding up for a punch so I grabbed the other side of the strap and pulled and ducked while kicking as hard as I could and the man bent over screaming while I ran as fast as I could and all I heard was You Pervert You Prick I'll Kill You.

My mom will basically move in with me to help take care of Hailey and she'll bring me a book on origami and a bunch of Japanese paper and she'll say I Know It Sounds Silly Papa But Keeping Your Hands Busy And Your Mind Free But Focused Really Helps. It's What Helped Me When Your Father Died and she'll say There's A Legend About Paper Cranes I Learned From My Support Group And It Goes Like This: If You Fold A Thousand Paper Cranes You'll Please The Gods And Be Granted A Wish. I'll do what she says sitting at the window after work my mom and daughter already asleep folding sheet of paper after sheet of paper making alligators and deer and crows and then I'll start making people and houses and families to fill those houses and I'll fold thousands and thousands and thousands of sheets of paper long into the night of my life and with each sheet of paper I'll fold I'll know my wish will be coming true coming true with each crease I'll make my wish will be that time speeds up and when I stop and look up it'll be morning.

My dad will look down at the box of pictures and pull some out and say This Was My First Day In-Country Me And Private Chiaro We Were On The Same Flight Out Of Oakland And They Flew Us Out Just Before Sunrise So The Entire Flight To Vietnam Was In Total Darkness It Was Just Safer That Way. He took a long time looking at the picture. Yeah We Thought We Were Lucky To Be Stationed Together In Qui Nhon And I Was There For Two Years Part Of The First Log Command Or As We Called It The Leaning Shithouse and he laughed but I had no idea what he was talking about.

Six months before Patricia died she'll start having these dreams and she will not be able to sleep through the night that entire time waking up in sweats and pacing around the house and in the morning when I'll ask her about it she'll say that the dreams will be of different shades of black that will come up and swallow her and I'll ask if she'll be stressed at work and she'll look at me with the funniest expression and she'll say Who Gets Stressed Out Gardening. It will be around this time that Patricia will start reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead telling me about some of the strange details she'll find like that it's believe that someone's consciousness stays attached to the body for 3 days after death and that when someone dies a monk will sit with the body for that time guiding the spirit away from the body because the spirit can be confused and afraid after leaving the body and she'll say Isn't That So Funny I Kinda Like Buddhists and I'll just laugh but when I'll looking back was supposed to make a connection between her dreams and The Book and what will I be able to do anyways and then I'll think about Patricia in a morgue for her 3 days and by the time we'll have the viewing and the funeral it will be almost a week later and all I'll think is, where in the world is she, where's my wife.

Where Were These Taken I asked holding up a bunch of photos where my mom was on a beach and my dad was all skinny and he said On R And R I Met Your Mom In Hawaii And I Lost Something Like 45 Pounds In 6 Months Because Everyone On Base Pretty Much Had Dysentery There. And then I said Do You Still Talk To That Guy In The Picture and my dad said Bastard Went To The Showers One Day And Waited In A Stall Until Everyone Left And Then Pulled The Pin On A Grenade And Because We Were Friends I Had To Clean It All Up And We Had To Shit In The Jungle For A Month. He kept staring at that picture and then wiped at his eyes and said Goddam War.

I followed my mom through the woods and every once in a while she stopped and crouched and waved me over and I kneeled next to her and she said Look Up And Tell Me If You Notice Anything Interesting and I looked up and saw what I always saw branches and more branches crisscrossing the sky and then I saw something strange I saw round clumps and said What Are Those Things and my mom smiled and said Those Are Bird Nests From The Northern Mockingbird We're On The Edge Of His Territory So He Won't Strike At Us and then she said Watch. She started whistling the overture slowly and louder than I ever heard her before and I looked up and a gray bird poked its head out of the hole in the nest and started whistling back. She stood up and kept whistling and she pointed up to another tree where the mate fluttered to but I focused the camera on my mom as she was looking to the sky and took a picture, the sun behind her head like some bright and soon all three whistles were in unison and it was probably the most incredible thing I ever saw and heard and I was glad no one else was there just me, my mom and two mockingbirds whistling Mozart.

Patricia will always write ideas and notes on small scraps of paper and they'll make their way from her desk or the counter or the nightstand to be found all over the house in drawers and cupboards and boxes and closets and glove compartments and between couch cushions and sometimes they'll just say Plant More Hyssop or Need Soil For Chapmans but sometimes they'll say Buy Present For Hubby Just Cuz or Remember To Hold Hailey While She Falls Asleep And Remember To Remember That Moment Of Holding Her As She Falls Asleep. And while going through all her old gardening books that I'll leave in the bookshelf for 10 years I'll find a letter that Patricia will have started folded in the pages and the letter will have at the top, in her tall curling cursive, Dear Family. I'll always wonder what that letter would have said always wondering what she will have left unsaid and I'll frame that piece of paper and hang it on the wall and every time I pass it it will say something different, like Wish You Were Here or Why'd You Let Me Go or Talk To Hailey More It Can Be About Anything or sometimes Just Don't Do Anything Stupid Today.

The camera was a weight swinging around my neck like a loose noose as I ran through the front door hair matted with sweat and my hand throbbing my hand bleeding and I ran upstairs to the bathroom to look at it. My brother came in as I was running my hand under water What The Fuck Dude You Left A Trail Of Blood he said and I said It Hurts Am I Gonna Die Do I Have Rabies and he said Settle Down Lemme Look At It. He pulled my hand out of the water and there was a bright surging pain that shot up to my shoulder Does It Hurt When I Move Your Fingers Like This and I just looked at him with teary eyes and I looked at my hand with three holes in my palm and blood leaking out and I felt my knees go weak. Keep It Under The Water he said and left the room. He came back and pulled my hand into his and dried it off with a

towel and then poured hydrogen peroxide into my palm saying Quiet Down when I started whimpering and pulling my hand away but he held it tighter and dried it again, wrapped a small roll of gauze around it and I kept saying Please Don't Tell Mom And Dad Please Don't Tell Mom And Dad and then he said Shut Up Already I'm Not Gonna Say Anything But If You Start Foaming At The Mouth I'm Spilling My Guts. Now What Happened.

The hardest relationships are usually the ones closest to us and after Hailey's mom will die and after my mom will leave our small house after two years with us Hailey will start having night terrors waking up screaming every couple hours each night and when I run in to hold her or calm her she'll just yell Mommy Mommy or Grammy Grammy and push my arms away so most times I'll just have to stand in the doorway and watch her while she'll writhe in her bed crying and yelling and there will be nothing else for me to do but watch. Soon after all this will start I'll get a call from the school nurse asking me to come and pick her up because she'll be having stomach cramps and when I get her she'll kick me all the way to the doctor's office and the doctor won't find a single thing wrong with her and then she'll say Yes There Is Yes There Is I'm Dying I Know I'm Dying. Every week after that the nurse will call me with some other medical condition that Hailey will say she has like vertigo or irritable bowel or an aneurysm or strokes or heart attacks or kidney failure or liver cancer and it will only stop when I will be taking Hailey back to the doctor to see about encephalitis when I'll hit a dog that will change both of our lives.

I kept my hand in my pocket at home and started eating with my left hand at breakfast and dinner and my mom would ask What Are You Doing and I'd say I'm Practicing Using My Left Hand In Case My Right One Gets Chopped Off By Mexican Cartels and she'd just laugh and say I Don't

Know Where You Get These Things and I'd look at my brother and he'd have that look in his eye like he was going to follow me upstairs after dinner and close the door to my room and push me on the bed and jump on top of me and put my pillow over my head until I felt like I was going to die. That week I got bit I went to school and wore gloves all day and started developing and printing the film that I exposed that night and I saw in the darkroom the image that was made from the photons we learned about in science class that careened out of the sun and bounced and swirled all around our world until just the moment that they flew through that lens and then my eye to make these memories and imprint their forms on the film. And in the darkroom I controlled the light just right for a dark and grainy photo with one small rectangle of light in the corner with a figure in the middle and one girl saw it while I was drying it and she said Oh My God Is That a Naked Person Why Would You Take That and I just laughed and then Bobby Valentine gave my 5 bucks for it and then I made another one and then another kid gave me money so I just printed a bunch of them to sell. And afterwards the girl told on me and Miss Jones made me give the money back and then the principal found out and Miss Jones had to stop teaching photography.

Lazy mornings before Hailey's even born will be spent holding Patricia and I will look into each other's eyes and all I'll be worrying about how much time will be passing between the space between us wondering how much time it will take for the photons to move back and forth reflecting off our eyes and in to the others' and making that specific memory for both of us and then she'll smile and pull herself from the bed and say It's Time For Coffee and I'll say Don't Go Just Yet and I'll watch her rise and walk across the room and she'll say I'll Be Back Before You Can Say and then she'll start saying some really long strung together sentence out into the

kitchen which I won't be able to hear and I'll always laugh at that and after she dies I'll sometimes wake up and look at the door waiting for her return and wonder about all that time that was lost passing between our eyes with a million gazes a single second lost to the space between us.

After I hit the dog on the way to the doctor's I'll pull over and see if it's still alive and Hailey will run over to it and pull off her sweater and wrap it around the whining dog and she'll pick it up into her arms and walk back to me and say We Gotta Save Him and then I'll drive to the vet and in that whole process Hailey will have forgotten all about the fake medical conditions she'll think she'll have and it will be that day that moment that starts her unyielding passion to help every animal she'll ever come across and as she gets older sometimes we'll have 5, 6, 7, animals dogs and cats and birds and even a squirrel that she'll be taking care of all around our house and I'll think that I'll have missed out on taking care of my little girl for so many years, but that it's not too late, it will not be too late to take care of her or anyone else especially myself.

The weather was picking up the wind was blowing in and we could smell the rain in the sky and my dad walked over to me when I was shooting baskets on Saturday morning and said Get In The Truck We're Going For A Ride and I said But I'm Playing and he said Get In. We drove out of our neighborhood and past my school and even further to get to the highway and I could see the clouds darkening and it started sprinkling and I could feel the wind push the truck and saw my dad grip the wheel and then he said Does Your Mother Ever Talk About Me With You and I just shook my head because I didn't know what to say and he said I Know You Take Some Walks And She Never Says Anything About Me and then I said She Just Wishes You'd Walk

With Her Sometimes Instead Of Driving Off and then he said She'd Probably Never Understand Anyway But I Thought I'd Show You Where I Go And Maybe You Can Just Tell Her I Drive Around And That Everything's Fine. And then he took the exit for Downtown Detroit.

I'll work more and more hours at a small warehouse at night and then pick up a second job as a bank teller during the day in the years after Patricia dies and some days I won't even see Hailey and on the weekends I'll sometimes say Made Your Favorite Kiddo An Egg Scramble and she'll just look at me and say What The Hell's An Egg Scramble. Then there will be one day when Hailey will be 13 when we'll start fighting over an agreement I made to take her and a couple friends to a waterpark and I'll have completely forgotten and scheduled more time at the warehouse to take inventory and she'll scream at me over breakfast saying You Can't Remember Anything About My Life Or Do Anything Fun But Every Year You Remember The Exact Second Mom Died And Make Us Visit Her Stupid Grave and then I'll grab her arm and pull her hard towards me ready to slap her when I'll realize what just happened and I'll let her go and she'll go running to her room slamming her door and I'll stand there saying Please Hailey I Didn't Mean It I'll Call In Sick We'll Have Fun and she'll just yell back Go Away.

You Never Met Your Grandfather my dad said He Was On The Police Force And He Was A Real Son Of A Bitch You May Think I'm Tough But Say One Thing And His Belt Would Be Out And On Your Ass But I Guess It Worked Because Look How I Turned Out. I stared out the window while my dad drove past the Ren Cen and then Cobo Hall and then all of a sudden there was a bunch of people walking around on the sidewalks and that's when we passed Tiger Stadium. He pulled over and jumped out of the truck with the door still open and I watched him

run over to a guy and shake his hand and pay him and he came back with some bags of popcorn and peanuts with the shells and handed them to me and said I Like This Spot A Couple Blocks North Where I Can Park. He drove to a tree-lined neighborhood and pulled in to a driveway and parked and said You Can Lay Down In The Back There's Some Towels In The Bed There and then I watched him run up to the house and ring the doorbell and watched him talk to the old man who answered and then they hugged and both went inside. My dad came back out a couple minutes later with a beer for him and a Coke for me and he said Earl Used To Be My Dad's Best Friend And Your Mom Hates Him Because He's a Pretty Big Racist and then my dad turned the game on on the radio and we laid down in the back of the truck and when the announcers said It's A Deep Fly Ball we heard the crowd start roaring just down the street. This Is The Cheapest Fun We'll Ever Have my dad said and then he turned to me and said So Pal You Got A Girlfriend.

Two particles born from the spark of time and pressure are linked beyond any possible measure, created in the same instance forever together no matter where in the universe they are even if they're flying a billion light years away from each other when one particle is affected the other particle becomes affected in the opposite way completely balancing the other out instantaneously forever and ever, entangled, and that's the way I'll feel when Patricia dies leaving me with a 2 year old daughter and it will be like this part of me is totally gone to the other side of the universe or some other place who knows where and if Patricia will be happy wherever she'll be then that's why me and Hailey will be crying so much because we'll be in perfect and opposite states.

After the argument with Hailey I'll quit my job driving a forklift around the warehouse and enroll in nursing classes and then I'll also walk into the office of the therapist I'll have had for the 10 years after Patricia died and say I Think You Made Me Worse and just walk right back out and Hailey won't talk to me for almost a week and each morning I'll be there, finally, making her her favorite breakfast of one Belgian waffle and one egg sunny side up and lunches for school and each and every morning that week she'll ignore me and roll her eyes and I'll think then that the reason why we had such a hard time making a connection wasn't because I resented her for taking Patricia's place or being too much like Patricia but because Hailey will be too much like me. All I'll finally want is to change. I'll start seeing an Eastern-centered therapist and even in that first session she'll ask me what it is I keep thinking about, right now, so long after my wife will have died, and I'll say that after all the time that's passed what I'll keep thinking about is how I started praying the night of the funeral when my mom was watching Hailey when all I'll be able to do is pray and my prayer will simply be Please Please Please and the prayer will not have been to anyone or anything in particular it will just be Please. My new therapist will say that prayer is the perfect actualization of energetic thought and that it will never matter where goes because it goes everywhere in the whole universe and that even the tiniest ripple still makes movements and then she'll tell me about the Ho'oponopono prayer from Hawaii where you repeat 4 short lines over and over and those words I just won't ever stop saying not even when I'll be dying. I Love You, I'm Sorry, Please Forgive Me, Thank You, I Love You, I'm Sorry, Please Forgive Me, Thank You.