Endings and what's left: Lyric, segmented stories

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Endings and what’s left: Lyric, segmented stories

by

Ander Sannes Monson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Debra Marquart

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1999

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Ander Sannes Monson

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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For the Graduate College
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A PREFACE

These stories come in segments. They’re parcelled out in brief bursts and spurts. Sometimes in fragments. They dangle, resonate, and accumulate. In some ways, they’re modern horror stories—broken, split. Characters are isolated and rarely come into contact with each other. When they do, it’s often disastrous or telling. It leaves a stain.

The stories deal with emotional entropy, the natural pulling-apart of relationships. They push into the space that follows this inevitable sag and disintegration and begin—I think—to sound or sing.

Dis-integration is a fitting description for the central motion in many of these stories. They are retreats, (dulled) hopes for escape, if not escapes themselves. Only rarely do the characters find a way out of wherever they are.

Where they are—place and space—is important here. There is an acute awareness of landscape, environment, and their emotional and physical features. The action herein is often static, tied-down or bound; it’s often that of non-action with consequence. At the same time, the prose itself turns, becomes lyric, takes on significance.

While a few of the stories are more traditionally narrative, the fragmented and especially-segmented ones tend to move more lyrically. Some paragraphs are expansive—perhaps explosive—with lyric energy. These often occur at the boundaries, the ends of the stories or segments.

This is no accident. Endings are, more than anything else, isolations. Nothing follows an ending. White space. Negative space. Quiet. Resonance. An ending is the beginning of resonance—the freeing of accumulated detail, emotion, language that builds throughout the story. Endings in these stories are the key points. In Bathrooms, many of the segments end with
disjunctions—sometimes violent breaks from the motion of each piece. In *Safety Features*, segments work with or specifically against narrative action, cutting themselves loose from it. In *Isle Royale*, the narrator is stuck moving toward an ending without anywhere to move to or from. In *Daylight Savings*, the ending between the two characters is inevitable. *Angels Left in Snow* has a somewhat more dynamic endpoint, with the last paragraph (one long sentence) circling outwards and leaving traces in the space that follows. In *Losing Wisconsin*, the narrator is left stuck, static.

Endings are tiny deaths. The realization of absence. The shortness of the pieces and their segmented, punctuated nature is borne out in the thematic underpinnings—the concern with death and absence. In some ways, by the time they end, the stories become about the ending, the death, even the act of writing or creation. In *Constellations*, the story ends as well as everything else in the last, untitled segment.

The idea of death that moves through each of these stories, silent, like ice, or the water beneath it, is final, and finally the most important image/idea that the stories encounter and have to grapple with. These stories seem to suggest that the only answer, the one way left to cope with it—this final, necessary absence—is through resonance in language: bright, strange, solipsistic, compelling in its own force and possible transcendence.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following stories have been previously published:

BATHROOMS, in Catch
CONSTELLATIONS, in Pleiades
DAYLIGHT SAVINGS, in The Wolf Head Quarterly
ANGELS LEFT IN SNOW, in Catch
WHY WE PLAY CARDS

Grandma and me’ve been playing whist for hours and drinking hot circles of tea. It’s a Sunday in the beginning of the year. Snow is on the move outside, up in inches and feet from North Dakota, where my mother’s family is from, moving through Moorhead overnight. I’ve never seen this much snow in one place before, for such an extended burst. We have blizzards in Illinois but they come up and drop back down in a day at most; this has been shuffling its way across the city and into the East for close to a week.

The snap of cards on the table. We switch to gin. We stay in cause I’m not old enough to drive and I’m afraid of Grandma behind the wheel. She drives alternating the pedal with the brake. One time, we came around the pin of an S curve too hard. A thump. The car shook for a moment, churned its way through something. Grandma looked in the rear view, her hair glasslike and fibrous, swirling, a bit crazy; “Oh, I hit a dog.” A shrug. She hits the accelerator. A quick jerk forward. That’s how she drives—on the edge.

Grandma drops her knuckles to the table with gin again. Although her skin is almost luminescent, her eyes cataracted, nobody in my family beats her at cards. My brother Brian doesn’t play because he hates losing. I don’t mind; it’s an honor of sorts. I like her talk: her jobs when she was young, switchboard operator between the wars, her husband-to-be selling Heinz products in heavy briefcases door-to-door, stories about my mother. He died when I was eight. I remember most the machine he used in the last years of his life, emphysematic in the guest bunkhouse, with ridged hoses and dials. It was a monster; my brother & I wouldn’t touch it. She’s it, the only living grandparent I have left.

Her shoes are kept on rubber mats by the door, and the apartment is clean and smells of her. “Discard now, hon,” she says, and I do, not really
keeping track of the run I'm going for. She'll tell me about my mother next, before she met my dad, before anyone met my dad, which is strange to me. There are pictures on the walls of them young and moving, in short hair and stylish coats.

I'm here because of the trouble at home. Brian's been caught hoarding pornographic magazines and it's just after Christmas and we usually all come out to visit but this year dad sent just me on the plane, keeping him home as punishment. He's in for a beating, I know.

I had seen them in his closet, had rifflered through them a dozen times. I had seen dad's, too, hidden underneath the newspaper that smelled of alcohol in the cabinet at the foot of his bed. Brian showed them to me when dad was at work, before he came home tipsy and broke plates on the wall over our heads. I have a memory of the plates frozen on the wall above us, shattering for what seemed like a minute, then, with a strange release, raining down.

We sat on the bed, barely creasing the sheets, paging through copies of Penthouse and Hustler. I was weirded out. The inside-of-the-drawer scent—cologne, vodka, rich and glossy paper—filled the room and I left and couldn't breathe until I was outside.

I didn't know what they were for, not exactly, until I saw Brian doing it in his bedroom with a pillowcase and the Daffy Duck nightlight on. I couldn't exactly see but it was strange. Circular. He had a bottle of conditioner open, and poured it onto one hand.

Grandma doesn't know all this, or maybe she does; it's hard to tell what her age means. She has a way of looking at you with a certain impenetrable blandness. Dad must've told her something, why we weren't all coming this year. We come every year.

Presents for Brian, my dad, and myself are still stacked up by the
artificial tree, no pine needles dropped in rings at the base. This is the first year she’s had an artificial tree, and as though she doesn’t believe it, exactly, there’s still a square of plastic covering the ridged rug as if she wants to just be sure. I’m tempted but I’ve promised not to open the gifts until I go back, taking them with me, home.


I say no, thanks, and tell her I’ve got to take a walk to clear my head. She doesn’t think it’s a good idea; she disapproves. It’s hard but I’ve learned to disregard her when it’s time, and I say “be back in a while,” as if I didn’t hear her exactly. She heads after me out the door with a scarf and a chook, zigzag-knitted, like the patterns on the wall. Is she angry? My mom’s mom. I can’t tell and don’t know how much I care, sometimes.

There’s a certain point at which I need to get out from under her umbrella, though, and there’s a point at which I have to go back in, too. Now’s the time for out. I make the stairs down two at a time and watch my feet on the way out; I have the sense to head for the lighted Marathon station down the road. A car passes, horizontal, in a skid, maybe on its way into a ditch. I watch until it’s eaten up by the curls of snow. Disappeared. There is no sound; it must have straightened out and made its way home.

The station, I know, is just ahead, past the row of unlit soda and bait-vending machines, retired, rusty trucks, and the fallen telephone pole. This is the outskirts of town, by the new freeway, and hasn’t made its way into the rest of the world yet. It’s a new station; used to be a Freedom gas station where Brian and I would shoplift candy and fishing tackle from the display by the car stuff. Though it’s not anymore. We didn’t take the tackle for fishing but because it was shiny, hooked, and seemed to swim in the water.
I haven’t been here for a year. By the time the lighted sign has risen in front of me, out of the whirl, the snow creates a sort of halo around it. Elapsed time. It must refract the light, like I read in a book, because it’s created a tiny snowbow around itself—fragile, like the corona on the sun. The book said it’s light, but bent in a way. Enough slight alterations, a noticeable curve.

I slide underneath and jingle the bell on the door as I open it. The guy behind the counter looks my way and I’m not sure what to make of it. He’s old, not grandma-old, but mustache-old and balding-old. Spits into a bent up Tab can. Teeth receding into lips.

I sputter out a “hi” and make my way back to the news display. I get a slurpee and browse the porno rack, reaching up to the top, well-stocked shelf, a plastic-covered magazine called **Swank**. Hold it to my nose; it doesn’t smell like anything but there’s a bit of dust settled on the top that I inhale. Sneeze. Turn. The counter. I ask for cigarettes.

“What kind?”

“Um.”

I must’ve paused for too long because he reaches up and slaps a pack of Marlboros on the counter. I’m relieved, a bit. His underarm is tufted with hair. Dots of sweat. I put the magazine and the slurpee on the counter. My eyes catch his, keep them up.


On my way back to Grandma’s, I’m unsure what to do. I stuff the magazine and cigarettes into my pants, hoping she won’t notice, or maybe she will and will think me wiser for it. I almost trip several times but keep myself balanced. Light curves around her lighted window; it seems like something
else entirely. A tightness in my chest. My mother’s death four years ago, a
backpack filled with onions. This weight on my back and in the cushioned
front of my pants. I barely know what to do with anything, with either of my
purchases, but I’m sure that when I do I’ll have it all in hand.
There’s a joke that kids tell around here that goes like this: What happened to the Ranger? / It sunk. / What happened to the Ranger II? / It sunk. / What’ll happen to the Ranger III? / It’s gonna sink.

I never said it was a funny joke. I don’t know.

Tony and me’d go down to where the Ranger III was moored when it wasn’t making trips out to Isle Royale, the eye in the wolf’s head on the map that’s Lake Superior. The eye is the island, with its hiking trails and campgrounds and its pines and wolves and moose. People take the boat out there every year. That or else they take a seaplane. I never went. Neither’d Tony.

We’d go down to the docks, though, me and him, on some nights before he left for Michigan State ten hours away in Lansing, and we’d throw eggs off the docks, throw ‘em on the huge rusted hull that makes up the big boat. We’d come with a couple dozen and keep throwing—pong! pong! pong!—until somebody’d come and yell at us, then we’d take off and laugh. Sometimes nobody even noticed and we’d just get finished and ditch and leave the egg cartons on the concrete.

The boat is huge and blue. I’m here alone tonight, with eggs but just watching. A few years ago the seniors, super-seniors, and hangers-on used to sneak up on the Ranger III in the nights and spray paint stupid shit on the sides about who loves who and who sucks ass but nobody does that anymore. I don’t know why. It’s just dumb now.

When I was growing up, though, we’d always see Jesse + Tammy ‘84 or Bulldogs Suck sprayed on the side of the boat when it slid slowly through the canal on its way out there. They’d blow the sea-horn so they’d raise the bridge and stop the traffic, then me and my friends would sit on the side of the road
and watch it slowly skate through the gap. Two more blasts on the horn and the bridge would start to lower back down.

There were girls I knew who went out to Isle Royale with guys for the weekend. They’d grin about it all week long. I never got to go, see. Tony and me used to make plans to invite girls we knew out there with us or maybe we’d say all fuck that and go ourselves. Just spontaneous and shit. We’d bring some matches and a knife and maybe a couple garbage bags for a tarp that we could sleep under. Of course, this never panned out. I only went camping a couple of times and it pretty much sucked. However, there are cool things: dried fir trees—yellow, orange, and brown—sound like firecrackers when they burn. They flare up and bristle into the night.

Tony’s a frickin’ genius. He made the move downstate last year, working on his engineering degree. Most of us prefer to stay and go to Tech. Others stay and go directly to the bars. But Tony made the move out, downstate.

The night before he moved down, we egged Mr. Lickman’s place. He’s the old geometry teacher with a lisp. Always fun to get a rise out of him, but Tony had to leave early in the morning and the car still wasn’t packed, so we didn’t waste too much time before we got done. Covered the garage door, almost took out a window even though we weren’t aiming at it. Don’t know if he was even home, the fucker.

There’s not many ways out of here. Two hours in your dad’s car will get you to the state line, into Wisconsin. I tried that once. I made the border in good time—saw the sign and everything—but drove on and it kept bringing me back in Michigan. Welcome to Michigan. Welcome to Wisconsin. Welcome to Michigan.

It wasn’t much different for the few minutes I was in Wisconsin, though. It was pretty much the same. Drunks trolling the snowy streets.
Bars outnumbering churches. They have strip clubs there, though, if that’s your thing. And it’s an hour back of us. Eastern Time becomes Central Time, and back again. You lose an hour, then gain one, and back, and you don’t know what time it is really, don’t know which clock to trust.

You can take a car East and 6 hours and hit Canada. Tried that way, too. Tony and me were visiting his grandparents and taking out his grandma’s safe because she said she didn’t need it anymore, and we had it in the back of his rusted-ass Aerostar that we took out for a drive and decided since we were bored that we’d go from Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan to Sault Ste. Marie, Canada. There’s a long bridge. About five clean minutes over the lake to get there. And we got there and got stopped in Customs. We had the safe in the back and so they separated us and asked us where we were from, what our license plate # was, what was in the safe. It scared me. The safe was locked. We didn’t know the combination. There could’ve been anything inside.

They sent us back to the States. Which was probably the best that could’ve happened, considering they were prepared to call somebody to crack open the safe. Maybe Tony called his grandparents or something and they got us out of it. I don’t know.

Nobody’s out tonight. Festival Foods cashiers don’t even look at me funny anymore when I come in at one or two a.m. and buy a couple dozen eggs, a new ski mask because I like the fabric-smell and they get so dirty, and some smokes. I only brought one styrofoam carton of the Jilbert’s Dairy-ass eggs this time. I light up. The air’s cool. My fingers trace the outline of the carton, its indentations and weight.

The other way is by plane. They don’t come much through Houghton, but every other day the Mesaba propeller planes come through and touch down for minutes. Pick up a few folks, drop a few off. My stepmom was in one of those and the engine cut out and it dropped 4000 feet before regaining
control. They made an emergency landing in Grand Rapids. She took the bus back up. I’m not never going that way.

Every year, somebody takes the easy way and goes through the ice on a snowmobile. Sometimes it’s a few kids a year. Idiots. Of course, sometimes somebody makes it up to speed and spits across the water and comes back on ice unscathed. I wonder if you try it again.

Somebody set the record last year for going twelve miles over open water when he left the ice behind him on Lake Superior. He must’ve been going pretty damn fast. You gotta be going fast on one of those to hold yourself up over water. And if you go down, you’re gonna freeze. Nobody’s there to save your ass.

But every year somebody tries to snowmobile across the canal. Nobody learns shit. About January. The president of Michigan Tech’s son drowned that way, went through the ice. It was in the paper, like the others. I throw a couple eggs at the side of the boat and they hit and resonate. It’s like a song.

I heard the ice just gave out on him and he went through.

In the winter sometimes the icebreakers come through to clear the path for iron ore boats or the Ranger III on its way out to Isle Royale for the unusual trip, the winter campers I guess. The ice behind it gets cut in chunks and it bobs up and down in the cold cold water. In a couple hours it seals back up and it’s safe to go out there again. The seam’s still there though it’s frozen.

But that kid, he went out on a snappy clean January day when it was sub-zero and clear. Clear days are the coldest, you understand. He went out, maybe he was drunk or maybe he was just dumb. There wasn’t no excuse, no good reason for it. The Ranger was moored in its dock, not enough kids to give it reason to make a run. No icebreakers had been through in weeks. The ice should’ve been thick as an arm or two, but you never know. That’s what somebody thinks every year.
You go out drunk or not drunk, and contrary to what the hell you expected, you hear a sharp snap, maybe it’s the sound of a high ping, a shift, a fault opening up, maybe it’s nothing you hear at all but something you feel, and at a good speed, too, you’re going maybe forty or sixty miles an hour and at that speed, you can’t do nothing, can’t recover from something like that.
BATHROOMS

Chicken

The smell of chicken, spicy, maybe a quesadilla, disturbed Harvey in the bathroom. He wasn't sure where it was coming from; it seemed like it was emanating out of the air vent right above him. He sat in the last of the three stalls, right up against the wall with his pants around his chilly white ankles, as he always did. That way it was exactly half as likely that anyone would use the stall next to him. He liked bathrooms, but didn't like actually going to the bathroom with anyone in the same room, much less right next to him. It made him nervous.

This was his favorite stall, the one with its cream-paint-speckled black seat that didn't quite go all the way down, so when he sat on it, it would click down with a certain definiteness that he enjoyed. It reminded him that he was indeed sitting on a seat, and not on the grimy white below it. He didn't like the idea of tiny black curls of hair or god knows what else on the toilet that he used. Of course, he laid sixteen squares of toilet paper carefully down on the seat before he sat down. He had heard stories of diseases.

The toilet paper was the sort that just barely fit the definition. It smelled faintly of bleach and pickles as he held it up to his nose; it was anything but soft and fluffy, and it tore much too easily. He preferred a good strong toilet paper, none of that really puffy stuff, but something that wouldn't tear off too easily. The toilet paper dispenser was one of those two-roll types, made by Crane products, as the insignia read. He ran the pad of his index finger over the raised plastic, reading the letters through the space formed by their edges. Crane products were made in Alabama, probably using
semi-slave labor. It didn't bother him much. Alabama was a long way from Wisconsin. It was a whole different world down there.

The dispenser was designed so that the occupant of the stall would theoretically never run out of paper. This was funny because the primary roll was about a quarter inch from being out right now, probably thirty, maybe forty more sheets, enough for eight or nine wipes. The auxiliary roll was already empty. Someone was to blame. There was that chicken smell again, fried in fat or butter. This time it was wafting over from the empty stall on his left.

The outside door opened with a creak, and closed with a bang. His eyes switched to the locking mechanism on his stall. It was a wheel that he could turn from unlocked to locked, with a whole in-between area, where it wasn’t quite either one. Even when he thought he had it locked, Harvey couldn’t actually tell because there was a metal plate covering the crack in the door where the deadbolt would normally be visible. He was almost positive it was locked, but he couldn’t be sure. One could never be sure enough with important things. It was unthinkable that he would get up to check -- he couldn’t reach it from his seat -- but he wanted to know one way or the other. He wished for something simpler, binary, locked or not locked, not some state of in-between.

It was always obvious when anyone came in or out of this bathroom. Harvey smelled a touch of perfume, or maybe a particularly fruity cologne. The thought disturbed him. He never wore cologne, and god forbid he ever wore perfume. He froze at the thought that maybe a woman had just entered the wrong bathroom by mistake. After a second, he thought the presence of urinals should have given it away. Any self-respecting woman would have left by now.
Harvey couldn't see anything through the crack in the door, nothing but the tiled wall. He leaned as far as he could to the right to catch a glimpse, some clue as to what sort of person could be in the bathroom with him, but saw nothing. He thought briefly that the person might be trying to look through the crack at him through some weird angle. Queer. The smell still hovered around him, circling his head, waiting.

He made an audible rolling-toilet-paper sound, so the intruder would know that this stall was occupied. He cleared his throat and shifted his feet for good measure. The door to the closest stall opened. Someone was sitting down right next to him. What sort of person would use the stall closest to another person in an empty bathroom? He felt a chill run through him as he nervously traced the lines of graffiti etched into the paint above the toilet paper dispenser. The paint was an approximation of blue, but it was easy to see in places that it used to be a sea green. He ran his fingernail quietly along the lines of the F in "Faggots must die" as he held his breath.

Harvey breathed out quietly, but loud enough for the intruder to hear him, to recognize his continued existence and displeasure. He quietly lowered his head down to examine the calves, cold, hairless, white, of the person in the stall next to him, just above the shroud of the dropped slacks, but he couldn’t see any underwear. In his mind, he extended the walls of the stall downwards in an invisible line, isolating 10 columns of thirty tiles, 299 and 2/3 perfect porcelain squares, from the rest of the world. Two-thirds of a tile because the sixteenth one along the right wall from the door had been cracked, smashed apart, and was now filled with dark mildew and dirt. There was that fruit smell again. The tiles on the ground were blue, white, and a light blue. They were arranged in a seemingly random pattern, and there were only two routes to take to get to the wall if you wanted to stay entirely on one color.
He stared at the calves, then at the incomplete partition between the stalls, then back. He waited for the underwear, waited to hear something, and the fingers of chicken and perfume ran around his head like a rope of twisted licorice. His eyes quickly glanced up to the spot where a coat hook used to be, the sea green island in the blue paint where someone had unscrewed the silver hook and taken it home. Inconsiderate. His eyes swung back to the calves of the person next to him as he heard the shriek and rustle of toilet paper and dispenser.

He wished that this person would finish their business and just get up and go. The smell was theirs, the fruit or the chicken, and it rose up to permeate all the stalls.
Philip noted that there was plenty of toilet paper left in the roller. *Fuckin’ A.* He began to roll out the paper, wrapping his hand in the white grainy pulp. From a ways away, it would be white, but when he brought it up to his eye, it looked much more speckled, like an egg, mostly grayish, but with tiny dots and grains of presumably wood running through it. It was strange that you could wipe your ass with wood. Wood was such a solid material, hard and unbendable. And it was so splintery. Realistically, these wood grains were tiny splinters, threads of wood. Philip ran his finger along the paper, which felt smooth with tiny roughnesses in places. But smooth.

It wasn’t exactly soft, but it wasn’t outright unpleasant either, not the way you think wood ought to be, unless it was rotting and mossing over like a stump being overrun by an ant colony. In his childhood, Philip chopped down an old pine tree out in the woods behind his friend Jerry’s farm. It took them two days to bring it down with two old red-handled hatchets they stole from his dad’s toolshed. They hacked and hacked at the tall pine, and it finally crashed to the ground. They watched it fall in slow motion, wondering at the power, and it crashed down not in the way they expected at all, treetop first. The trunk slid off where they had chopped it to a sharp point, and came down four inches from Philip’s foot, digging into the ground. It balanced there for a second, suspended and motionless, and it looked like it might stay that way forever, but then it creaked and toppled, gathering momentum as it crashed downwards, snapping small branches with its heavy inertia, bridging the stream with a thud.

Two years later, when he and Jerry weren’t friends anymore, Philip remembered sneaking back out into the woods by himself and staring at what was left. It was darkening, the last remnants of summer, and the tree still
spanned the banks of the stream, now hardly a trickle in its baked bed. The pine was entirely dead, with all the needles dropped off and reabsorbed into the ground. He kicked the stump and saw how soft it was, like earth. He watched himself tear off a piece of soft rotting wood, and he wondered as the ants poured out, displaced and more confused than angry. There were thousands of them, snaking in paths back up the stump and trailing in circles on the packed ground.

Now Philip felt something coming up in his throat, and he coughed up a ball of phlegm, swirled it around in his mouth a little while, thinking how it was his, accepted when it was in his mouth. If he spit it out, it would become something alien and separate from him. Something unthinkable to put back in his mouth. He dabbed it out on his free hand and looked around for a place to wipe it.

It couldn’t be somewhere too obvious. He stretched his hand to the underside of the toilet bowl, towards the shadows in back where no one would notice. He ran his fingers along the metal skin, trying to get his wet fingers to catch on a rough spot. His fingertip tripped over a piece of gum and snagged. It was still soft, and a little wet. He recoiled and brought his fingers back out. It was disgusting that someone had just left their gum there, really depraved.

He thought how strange it was that you could sit in a car, not really moving yourself, but still with a sense of relative motion, watching the road open out behind you. And how strange it was that you could sit in a car for four and a half hours, not moving yourself, and end up in a place far away from where you were before. He had no clear conception of distances on a map, he realized. His hand felt heavy and rotten from its toilet paper wrapping. He couldn’t really imagine how he could be away from a place. He stopped
wrapping the toilet paper around his hand and tore off the sheet where he was now and rested it there, in his lap.
Teeth

His teeth felt like they were shattering again. He was washing his hands, running them under the warm water, letting the pink soap rinse away. With his hands now totally immersed in the liquid, he could picture his head crashing against the sink and his teeth smashing like glass, spreading into splinters and careening into the sides of his fleshy mouth. He watched his toothshards flying in slow motion, wheeling and turning like strange compasses, a sharp, expanding cloud of enamel and glass.

The splashing sound of water on the linoleum floor of the bathroom and the run of water down his leg kicked Timothy back into reality, and he quickly turned the two calcium-spotted chrome handles off. The entire sink was filled up with soapy water, not sudsy or foamy now but just translucent and runny. His hands were dripping water on his jeans, and he lowered himself to the exact level of the water. It came just above the lip of the sink, threatening to spill if jiggled, but for now, the surface tension was enough to keep it in place.

Timothy, however, couldn’t just leave a sink full of water in a public restroom. He couldn’t keep the door locked forever; people would want to come in sooner or later. He had to get the water level in the sink lowered, and the only way to do it was to pull out the bright green stopper in the bottom of the sink, which would involve having to plunge his skinny hand into the water and spilling more on the floor. He felt his insides turn ninety degrees at the thought; the sound of the splashing water, the feel of the liquid running down the sides, spreading into a pool at the base of the sink.

He knelt and considered the underside of the sink briefly, following the two copper pipes running down the base of the sink into the rectangular holes in the floor like hammered domestic snakes. He put his hand on the
left pipe, taking its temperature. It was chilly and he could feel the condensation between his fingertips when he drew them back. He lay down in the cool puddle on the striped linoleum and looked at the two thin white pipes running along the ceiling. They were smooth and round, labeled *Domestic water in, Domestic water out*, like arteries carrying dark blood to some churning white muscle. The artificial lighting did not speak to his heart.

He had a tooth pulled two weeks ago, tugged out by some dentist's tool, given to him in a pink envelope, not at all like he imagined it. It wasn't uniform and perfect white like he had pictured it, smooth and rounded. It was yellowish brown and more like a lump of soft luminescent coal, bumpy and amorphous. It seemed so foreign to him, like it didn't come from his mouth at all, but from someone else's. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of old laundry detergent. It reminded him of the beach, how even the earth itself was not solid, how his feet could be held up by tiny grains of sand. He thought of sitting on the beach, on the edge of the water, where the sand was wet and cold. The water would wash up over his knees, and if he sat there long enough, it would soon wash up to his neck, so only his head was above water, and his eyes would follow the lapping waves. He brought his hand up to eye level, and let the speckled powder spill over the sides and onto the floor like water over dikes.

His parents used to own a collection of tourist books, a comprehensive guide to Europe and the Middle East. He was too young to understand any of the English words or commonplace phrases in French or German, but he would stare at the covers splashed across with colorful flags of countries. When he
was nine and could understand some of the text, he read that, at any given time, half of the Netherlands was below sea level.
Weight

It always seemed to Charlie that the things in his life didn’t fit into neat moments, temporal ziploc bags. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a photograph of his mother, taken before she died. It was about an inch square. It was a picture taken in one of those photo booths at a mall that cost a dollar and a half. There were originally four in this series of photos, but he only had one left. His mother was wearing a grey corduroy coat in this picture. The edges of the picture were faded and curling inwards. He had wanted to get it laminated, but he had never gotten around to it.

His pants were around his chunky ankles. The walls of the bathroom stall were marble, though Charlie could see where there had been graffiti scrawled on the wall before. Someone had tried to clean it off, but the stain had sunk into the grain of the marble, becoming a part of it. He wore corduroy, also. He traced his fat fingers down the lines of his shirt sleeve. He brought his shirt up to his eyes, watching the ridges grow larger and larger as it got closer, and it eventually ceased to be his shirt at all, becoming a huge row of corduroy hedges. He imagined running through them, being chased by sharp white tigers, and falling down, sticking to the ground as if his toes were lead. He shuddered as he was overtaken, as the tigers covered him and licked him clean.

Charlie looked at his hairless, fat legs, running his fingers down and through the folds of flesh at the place where his legs met his body. He took one fold and rolled it between his fingers. Each had its own distinct weight, and there were many of them. He felt layered like a cake. He remembered when he was six and fat. He used to eat all he could because he feared being left behind in any one of the state parks they visited. Then his fatness would save his life. It would sustain him if he didn’t eat for weeks. Then he could
come home, thinner. Charlie finished going to the bathroom, and wiped neatly. He didn’t come clean with the first wipe, so he had to fold over six more sheets of toilet paper and try again.

This time the results were passable. Nothing that a good bath and some soap wouldn’t fix. Nothing noticeable, anyhow, or so he hoped. He stood up with some effort, balancing his fat body like a round, red-and-white bobber on his legs. He reached down to pull up his pants, almost losing his balance and toppling into the wooden door in the process. He got the belt buckled. It was a size forty-eight. When he was seven, he got his dad to buy him underwear two sizes too small so he could convince his parents that he had lost weight. No one was fooled.

Charlie had a collection of lead sinkers when he was young. His dad bought him a metallic blue tackle box with compartments into which he could put various flies, lures, and sinkers, classifying them by color and weight. He had three different weights of fishing line and dozens of brilliantly colored flies and lures, flashing and whirling. He had six packages of fake worms, only one of which he opened. He rolled the worms between his fingers over and over, feeling their greasy texture. They were meant to fool fish. He wasn’t sure how they worked because he never used them. He only fished once in his entire life. He never wanted to fish at all, just to collect and classify fishing supplies. He had hundreds of differently weighted and shaped sinkers, mostly lead teardrops.

His father woke Charlie out of bed one Sunday morning and told him to get dressed. They were going fishing. Even though he didn’t want to, he had no choice in the matter. His father was adamant. Charlie dressed and they drove out to Pilgrim’s River, a dark brown flushing stream that ran miles downstream from Torch Lake before emptying out into Portage Bay. They came upon a small beach area where his father said there would be good
fishing. Charlie watched as his father slid the gleaming white hook through the wriggling worm. He watched with fat eyelids slit open as droplets of liquid sprung up from the worm’s pierced skin. His father handed him the rod and reel. Charlie tried to refuse it, but his father pressed it into his doughy hands and made a cast for him. The bait and hook plopped into the water with a splash, and the ripples echoed outwards. He waited, watching with trepidation. They waited for over an hour. He caught nothing. His father didn’t speak another word to him the entire time. He never fished again. He could still feel the weight of the fishing line between his fingers.

Charlie turned around and flushed. He could hear the flushing mechanism turn over and water rush into the toilet bowl. But it did not drain. He hesitated a moment, trying to decide whether he cared if the toilet was clogged or not. He decided that he did. He looked reluctantly down into the toilet bowl, and saw a flash of orange. There was a goldfish swimming in the bowl. It flickered in and out of view among the toilet paper and the turds. He looked away, revolted. The sight of his own excrement disgusted him, even though it came from his own body. But why in God’s name was there a goldfish swimming in the toilet? He looked back in disbelief. He was answered by the color orange.

He looked closer; there was even something else blocking the toilet. Charlie couldn’t quite make out what it was, so he waited until the toilet paper floated out of the way, then squinted his eyes. What he could see of it was furry and about as big as his fist. He guessed that it was maybe a hamster or a guinea pig. When his hamster died, his father told him just to flush it down the toilet. But his hamster was not as large as this, so it flushed fairly easily. Charlie could remember watching it swirl down the toilet, and he remembered wondering where it went, where it would end up. Eventually, he gave up. His hamster’s name was Gabriel. His life had weighed less than
Charlie could ever have imagined. He felt like nothing at all, as if he had almost not existed. There were no pictures of Gabriel.

Charlie was feeling sick. He flushed again, depressing the weight of the cold lever, watching it go down and move back up. He heard the rush of the water and watched the contents of the toilet rise. It rippled inwards. He noted the spattering sound of water impacting the ground. He watched water run down the sides of the toilet, shimmering towards his feet. The turds and toilet paper were too heavy to make the transition from bowl to ground, but the goldfish flashed towards the edge of the bowl, and flopped onto the lip, thrashing now. Charlie watched, transfixed. The goldfish slid off the lip and dropped to the floor. It made almost no sound when it hit.
“Haffta pee!”

The father placed his gray, creased finger on Timothy’s lips. “Shhhhhh. We’re going pee now.” He hated this part. He opened the door to the bathroom, and the child hurried in with his pink hand clutching his crotch. The father led him by hand over the flat, dark gray cement. The father leaned down to check if anyone else was in the bathroom. No one was. There were fourteen stalls in the bathroom. He chose the closest one and pushed Timothy inside, sliding the door-bolt closed. Timothy’s face was bright red and wrenched against the drab olive background of the wallpaper. The father recognized the smell of wallpaper glue. Timothy began to emit a high pitched keening sound.

“Go ahead. You can pee now.” The father squinted his eyes and scratched his nose. Timothy’s face questioned in red. “Fine, goddamn it. You’re going to have to do it yourself soon.” He reached down and unzipped his son’s Rustler jeans. Timothy’s knees were clenched tightly together. The father slowly reached his hand into his son’s pants, pulling out his tiny penis. As the fingers aimed it towards the toilet, the father’s expression was as blank as his son’s. “Now.” The father could feel the vibrations begin from the stream of urine through his son’s flesh. The liquid arced into the toilet, lemon yellow against the dark background, as it passed fast into the smooth pond of water, creating a drizzling sound that echoed loudly through the bathroom. The father had to hold Timothy’s penis when he urinated or else it would spray all over. Every time he did this, it disgusted him more. He thought of London and sheets of rain. Why couldn’t the damn kid just learn how to do it on his own? The current faltered and the lights flickered overhead, dipping the shadow down across the father and son, dressed in
matching shades of charcoal-gray corduroy. The father bought these pants for Timothy two weeks ago, but hadn’t seen him wearing them until today. Timothy claimed that they made his legs itch.

When Timothy was very young, the father remembered buying him a coloring book from the St. Louis Science Center. Its pages were grainy, speckled manila and brown, like toilet paper. He also bought Timothy a 64-pack of Crayola crayons. Two days after he showed him how to use the colored sticks, he found Timothy happily chewing away on the wax crayons, his lips colored sea green and periwinkle. He had to take them away for a week. When he gave them back, he showed Timothy how he was supposed to stay within the lines and on the paper. Timothy wasn’t very good at it, but the father remembered watching him color pictures of DNA in with white centers and flesh tone around the edges.

He noticed how Timothy’s penis was shockingly pink against the background of his dark, faded fingers. He reached over to the toilet paper dispenser and pulled out a few squares, noting in annoyance how they were disconnected, separate sheets, not a continuous roll. He wiped the tip of his son’s penis and began counting the number of drab fleur de lis patterns on the wall. He dropped the sheets of toilet paper into the bowl and flushed. “Now, you zip up.” Timothy knew how to do this, so he closed himself up with a zip. The father patted him on the head, reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out a half-crushed matchbox car, a red-and-white-striped Datsun. Timothy’s hand opened like a lavender flower. The father placed the small car in the middle of Timothy’s starlike palm, and it slowly closed, obscuring the color.

The father bought Timothy more matchbox cars whenever he went to K-Mart. He remembered that Timothy always seemed to need more. Timothy
would take a whole fleet of cars and line them up end-to-end across the ridged goldenrod carpet, forming a line up to the two cinder blocks the father had set up, side-by-side, next to the fireplace in the family room. The father had set these up to hold a stack of wood, but Timothy had cleared the wood onto the carpet. While the father watched, he would take each car, one by one, between his small fingers, and place them in the exact center of the two cinder blocks, on the rough seam where they met. He would briefly consider each car, its own color and shape, in the midst of the uniform dark gray platform, then he would take the rubber-handled hammer and bring it down, smashing the car flat. The wheels were black, and would sometimes pop and roll off the flat cement.
Clowns

Henry pushed the flimsy door open, hoping that no one was standing on the other side, trying to get out. He would hate to have a confrontation with some trucker with door-bruised knuckles. Nobody was in there. The fluorescent lights were flickering softly, rocking between on and off. He stepped inside and let the door bang shut behind him. There was a strong odor of bargain-brand cigarettes in the bathroom, and the hand drier was still warm. He walked over to the left of the two urinals, the farthest one from the door, but cigarette butts were littered over the forest green plastic sieve covering the bottom. The remaining water was dingy and yellowish, with bits of tobacco floating around, stagnant. He watched them swirl for a moment in a slow, circular pattern.

Henry considered the other urinal, but it was equally bad, a rust-colored stain on the flushing handle, so he opted for his original choice. He was unzipping his pants when he heard the door and shuffling, dragging footsteps. He kept his head pointed directly downward, at the angle he assumed when preparing to urinate. He understood there was courtesy involved in public restrooms. His eyes twitched right, trying to push the envelope of that courtesy, to see what sort of person was in the bathroom with him, but he was still out of his angle of vision. As the footsteps came closer, Henry switched his eyes straight back down, as if the stranger could not only see his head, but could sense the direction of his pupils. There was a two-second lull in the sound, while nothing moved. He wanted to say something, but couldn’t.

“Shut the fuck up, okay?” At this, Henry looked up, and saw a clown standing there beside him, in a urination stance, red floppy shoes spread two feet apart. He was wearing a huge red nose that looked uncomfortably heavy
and big polka-dotted ballooning trousers held up by fat, red suspenders. His face was heavily made up. The white was beginning to flake off a little bit under his chin, and it looked like there was a streak running down his left cheek. They looked at each other, Henry and the clown.

“Does that pinch?” Henry asked.

“The nose?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck yes.” The clown reached up and pulled the red nose off with a snap. The skin under there was a mountain with a reversed color scheme, greasy white slopes on a hill capped with peach. He shook his head, and unclasped his left suspender. The huge pants drooped down, exposing an inch-patch of hairy white skin. He removed his right suspender, and his pants slacked down below his waist. Henry watched him. “What the fuck? You never see a guy takin’ a piss before?”

Henry turned his head back down towards the urinal. It had long thin cracks running up and down its length, like veins of dark, valuable ore. Henry unzipped his pants the rest of the way, slowly. The sound occupied the silence and seemed to vibrate above his left shoulder somewhere. He heard the rustle of fabric next to him. He wanted to look, but he kept his head straight down. He wondered how a pie in the face actually felt. He noticed a postage stamp on the top of the urinal. It was pasted to the porcelain. There was another one right next to it. He considered these pictures. One was of a hyacinth with one petal missing. The other was Nixon.

“What the hell are those?” The clown was speaking to him.

Henry shrugged his shoulders. “Stamps.”

“Postage stamps?”
Henry nodded. He began to urinate, directing the flow onto the sides of the urinal to make less noise. He wondered if the clown was looking at him, if he could see his penis poking out of his wine-colored corduroy pants.

"That's funny. Stamps. Funny." The clown gave a half-hearted laugh. Henry looked up. He could see the white makeup wedged in the folds of the clown's forehead. He wondered if the clown could get all that out every night, or if some got left behind, making his face a little whiter every time, until he began not to need makeup at all. He could feel the stream beginning to subside, the arc relaxing into a drip.

Henry swallowed. "Yeah. They're cancelled. One's Nixon." He looked at the watermark.

"What's the other one?"
"A flower." Henry couldn't hear the clown urinating at all.
"I can see that. What kind?"
"A hyacinth." He shook a few times and zipped up.

"Oh." The clown paused, and Henry rocked back on his heels. His hand reached for the flushing mechanism, greasy with fingerprints. He examined the metal closely. He could make out the smudges, but couldn't distinguish one set from the other. His digits rested on the cold metal. Henry imagined how it would taste, like dirty iron. He pictured himself kneeling down and taking the metal wand into his mouth. He thought how the metal would click against his teeth, cold and bright.

"You know, sometimes it's just not funny anymore." The clown turned his head back towards the ground. Henry depressed the flusher, and watched the metal lever spring back up as his fingers retreated. He stepped back and over to the sink. The sink was covered with thin strands of black hair. Henry recoiled slightly, then reached for the hot water handle. "Hey,
buddy, you smoke?” Henry thought for a second. His hand paused on the handle. A halfhearted stream of water trickled out of the spigot.

“No.” Henry tried the pink soap dispenser, then pushed his dry hands under the lukewarm liquid. “Sorry.” He rubbed them together, looking at the way they fit together, with hundreds of tiny skin ridges. His nails were dirty, with blackish stuff under them.

“No problem.”

Henry turned off the water, his hands not appreciably cleaner, and looked at the hand drier for a moment. He touched the top of the metal heat spout. It was still warm. He thought briefly, then pressed his hands on his corduroy pants, leaving wet imprints. As Henry opened the flimsy door, he could hear the beginning of a dribble.
Stephen pushed the door to the ladies' restroom open a crack, "Janitor. Anybody in there?" He counted off fifteen seconds, then pushed himself into the bathroom along with the mop bucket and his cardboard box of cleaning supplies. The dirtied black wheels on the metallic, ribbed bucket squeaked when they turned, clicking over the tiny squares of bathroom tile. The force of his arms pushed them forward. The light over the second bathroom mirror was out again. That was the second time this month. It would have to be replaced. That meant a trip to the janitors' closet at some point. He had no more light bulbs right now. He rubbed the pads of his thumb and index finger together.

The door swept closed behind him. He looked over the bathroom. The sinks appeared fairly solid, though they could probably use a once-over. The floors were as dirty as they usually were, which meant a good cleaning with the mop. He bent down to look under the stall dividers. There was a big pile of what looked to be wet toilet paper in the corner of the last stall. Ought to be fun. And there was a small cardboard box left under one of the toilets. Stephen opened the door and hung the yellow "Cleaning" sign on the outside door handle. The door swept closed. He looked at what was making the sweeping sound, and the door had a small rubber flap hanging down that rubbed against the ground. He bent down, looking closer at the rubber. It had a notch carved into it, right in the middle, in the shape of a half-star. He sat down and looked at the rubber soles of his shoes, starting to get worn thin by repeated use.

Stephen had carved stars, tiny replica constellations, into the rubber soles of his shoes with a pocket knife. He had done this one night about three weeks ago when his television had finally died. It was about eleven o'clock,
and the set just sparked out, leaving him in the darkened room with his Swiss Army knife. He reached behind the couch and plugged in his Daffy Duck night light. It hummed very softly, but it produced enough light to see. He picked it up and grabbed his shoe, and began carving. He carved for a long time that night, not really knowing what he was doing at first, just slicing hard rubber chips out of his heels, but then he suddenly had the idea, and he ran into the bedroom and grabbed a heavy box from under the bed. The bed had dark blue woolen sheets that rubbed against his skin and sometimes gave him red rashes. He brought the box back out to the couch, and removed the duct tape, then opened it up. It had sixty-eight Odyssey magazines that he saved. They had diagrams of constellations and stars, planets and nebulae. He reproduced these as well as he could on the soles of every pair of shoes he had. Now when he walked, he left starry footprints. He could see his stars in the thin mud that covered the tiles of the bathroom. It let him know where he had been.

Stephen stood up and walked over to the first stall, pushing the door inwards, appraising the state of the toilet. This one looked untouched. No one had even used this stall since he had cleaned it two days ago. The toilet paper roll was in the exact same position as he had left it. Good. He let the door swing closed, and it thumped into place, sticking. He dragged his left foot along the ground because he enjoyed listening to the sound of the friction. He pushed the next stall open. It looked to be in pretty good shape: no hair, dirt, or ugly liquids on the toilet itself. Probably just needed a wipedown for good measure. He licked his lips and bent down to inspect the cardboard box. It was folded closed. He picked it up and opened it. Inside there were fireworks. About two hundred Black Cat firecrackers, and two round-ball smoke bombs. There were no matches. Stephen contemplated this. It was October, well past the fourth of July.
He had grown up on a farm, and every year his dad would buy him thirty dollars of fireworks from an Indian Reservation, where they could sell the fun ones legally. He would mostly buy strings of firecrackers and put them in crisp paper bags. Stephen would open the bag on the way back and smell the explosive powder on the way back to the house. It smelled pungent and tasty like dusty power. Every year, on the fourth of July, they would go out in the field and his father would set up all the firecrackers in a string. Stephen would stand back and his father would pull the red and brown box of Diamond Strike Anywhere matches out of his jeans. His father would reach his hand down and pull back the flap covering his zipper, and would strike the match up his crotch. It would take him two tries to get it to light, and then he would touch the match to the long strands of wick.

The wick would resist at first, then quickly catch. Stephen would watch as it burned down to the firecrackers, watching his father hurrying back and smiling like nothing in the world could be funnier. There would be a moment when it seemed like nothing was going to happen, and then all of a sudden, the light of the explosions would rip into his eyes, followed quickly by the series of reports. He would watch as the whole bag of firecrackers turned into a chaotic burst of flying, exploding paper. He would turn to his father and watch his eyes open wide, focused on the tiny violent explosions, his hands clenched into fists. Afterwards, there would always be firecrackers left over, blown away from the rest of the pack, but still good. His father would run his rough fingers through Stephen’s soft hair twice, pulling at the knots, then rub his fingers together, as if measuring friction. When everyone left to go back to the house, Stephen would stay behind and collect the firecrackers, filling his pockets.

In the bathroom now, he lifted the strings of firecrackers out of the cardboard box and slipped them into his right pocket, looking at the warning
labels. He remembered when he had bought these things called Smoking Cap Sticks from Jim’s grocery, when he was nine and wanted fireworks of his own. He had seen them and bought a pack. They were thirty cents. They didn’t have wicks at all. The idea was that one half of the thing was smoke powder, and this was the half you’d light, and it would smoke for about 40 seconds, then it would blow up. They had no warning labels. The guy who was selling them in front of Jim’s didn’t know that they would blow up at all, just that they would smoke. They had more explosive than the firecrackers his dad had to buy at the reservation, so Stephen spent all his money one summer on smoking cap sticks. He never used them. He kept them in a shoebox at the bottom of his closet.

Stephen moved over to the last stall and pushed the door open, revealing the wet toilet paper heaped into the corner. He wondered what would possess someone to do this. His father used to chastise him for using too many sheets of toilet paper in the bathroom. This was hundreds of sheets, wet and translucent in the flickering fluorescent light, like paper rolls of jellyfish. He knelt down, sniffed, and ran his finger along the pile of wet toilet paper. It felt cold and slimy against his finger. It didn’t smell of anything really peculiar and unpleasant. Thank god, he thought. He slid his fingers into it, trying to pull it off the ground and into the toilet, but he only got a little bit of it. The toilet paper was slippery and heavier than he thought, obviously saturated with water. He reached down and got a little more of it. It felt like it was covered with vaseline. In the winter, his father would rub Stephen’s lips with vaseline, rough fingers against peeling red lips. He looked around, and saw that the walls of the stall were slick with the same substance. He ran his fingers over his lips, smoothing out the cracked surfaces, filling them in.
Stephen ran his fingers up the side of the stall, leaving little jellied ridges behind. He grew up on a farm with a broken down school bus and a barn caved in by the heavy snows. He used to pick through the wreckage of the barn, even though his dad forbade him from going in there. He would sneak in when he knew his father was elsewhere, and he would pick through all the bricks and rotting wood, looking for scraps of metal, railroad spikes, various gear-looking things, wheels with broken spokes. He collected those too. He had a small chest filled with various almost recognizable metal scraps, all rusted now. Every once in a while, he would take them out of the chest and scrape some of the rust flakes off with his fingernails. He was fascinated by the erosion of the metal, how something seemingly so hard could be eventually reduced to nothing. His fingertips were coated with a layer of the soft jelly. He rubbed them together. He felt less resistance.

Stephen backed out of the stall and walked over to the sink. He turned the faucet on with some difficulty, his slippery fingers not gripping the chilly metal well. He slid his fingers under the water, watching it run out. He rubbed his fingers together, still slippery, the water not having washed much of the substance off. He turned off the faucet, then turned to the hand drier. The nozzle had water spots dried onto it. He pushed the button and held his hands under the heat. He read the directions, *Rub hands lightly and rapidly under nozzle*. Stephen rubbed his hands together under the warm stream of heat, his hands slipping a little less now. The hand drier shut off with a click and a slowing whirr. He walked back into the vaseline stall, rubbing his hands hard on his pants.

Stephen reached into his pocket and set up the firecrackers in a long string around the toilet seat, tying the wicks together so they would fire continuously. He rubbed his hands together. They were slick in some places and rough, catching in others. He slipped his feet back and forth over the
tiles, enjoying the resistance. He flushed the toilet and watched the water swirl around and around, creating a space in the middle, the water high on the sides. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a red box of strike-anywhere matches. Stephen had coated their heads in melted wax to waterproof them, like his father had done. He pulled back the flap covering his zipper and struck the match. It lit on the second try.
CONSTELLATIONS

One: Constellations:

What do you do with the things you don't understand?

Timothy looked over his shoulder and wiped his nose with his fist, maybe. Memory was not completely reassuring. His eyes swiped from side to side, waiting for the gray cat with the white star pattern to appear. The way it moved, materialized, from out of the dark, he wasn't sure it actually existed, but it always snuck up on him anyway. It would appear from behind the collapsed barn and stutter-step towards the round tire with the lint nest. It slept there sometimes, and sometimes slept somewhere else. He didn't know where exactly, but he supposed that it lived in a bed of dark ferns which lacerated its body with continuous nighttime motion.

He listened for the reports of fireworks from the sky up above. He counted each one as it was fired towards the stars, and mentally checked it off as it exploded, probably throwing whirling fingers of light downwards to earth. He never watched them, because he was afraid of their fiery tails. So, technically, he was never absolutely sure they went off. But that was irrelevant. His mind whirred and shifted, then ground to an asthmatic halt. His father was at home, fingerling an empty inhaler, maybe wondering where he was, maybe not. For the last two weeks, Timothy had come out here any night he could and sat in the bus, with his pellet gun squeezed between his thighs or resting on the seat beside him, waiting for the cat.

Sometimes he would look up at the sky, thinking about astronomy and gas giants, and sometimes he would prop up empty paint cans on the rotted fence, and sometimes he would shoot them. When he shot them, they would totter and rim, then fall slowly to the ground. He felt that his mind
was a camera with cheap, slow film.

He didn’t always shoot the cans, though. He enjoyed watching the twilight absorb these sentinels, disbelieving their existence past the limits of his sight. When he returned, he was always surprised to find them still balancing on the fence, where he left them. Then he would probably shoot them, if he felt like it. If he shot them, he would find more to set up before going home.

Some nights, he would gaze at the sky and make up his own constellations. Constellations, he thought, were made up by someone originally, just pulled together out of essentially nothing. If you looked at the diagrams of constellations in old fat books and thin, bleached magazines, it was clear that they did not make much intrinsic sense. People at some point had just projected their own images onto the stars. The pictures pushed onto stars were sharp and alien, and didn’t smell natural to Timothy at all. He thought that maybe it was comforting to look at the dark wideaway blackness and see something familiar: patterns of stars; so he made his own. Asshole, he called one. This was a somewhat-perfect ring of stars in the middle of a wide open space, and the first thing that came to mind was exactly that, ye olde poop chute. Another one was Angelfish, because it resembled one to him, and Black Wrench, because this one was not really a constellation, but an absence of stars that looked like a wrench, more or less. “More or less,” he said sometimes, which didn’t make any real sense, but that’s what his dad said, “I’ll be home at eight, more or less.” “Oh, you’ll be fine—more or less.” “Quit your crying—you’re a fucking man, more or less.” To Timothy, more or less often meant just less.

The clearing in which the bus rested resembled an island. Timothy imagined the aerial view. From this perspective, the forest-sea would cut away into an oblong, elliptical, maybe even egglike clearing. The grass was
short and white in the summer, when it grew, as if affected by chemicals. It resembled an angel's razor-stubble; certainly not his dad's, dark and cutting on his skin. This white color made the contrast between the darkness of the foliage, the whiteness of the short grass, and the yellow-beige of the bus all the more distinct and resonant. It seemed to Timothy that, through the sun's constant pressure on the layers of yellow paint, the bus seemed to be assimilating quickly towards the bleached color of the grass. He would sit on this bus sometimes during hard nights, and that's where he sat now.

He felt his butt beginning to solidify and cramp. He moved, and it hurt. It felt like he was paralyzed, stuck to the hard, textured plastic, the kind they always have on buses. Green and useless, avocado and spit. He didn't move and instead cut holes in the back of the bus seats as he had other nights, holes in the shapes of stars and crescent moons and what he imagined comets to look like. Timothy had never seen a comet, but he was familiar with the popular conception of them, the pictures he saw in Time. He pulled out his knife and flipped out the longer of the two blades, and sunk it into the pea-green-colored seat backing. He felt some resistance at first, and then it slipped in deeper with a tiny rush, and hit the metal frame with a light dry click. He carved the shape of a star into the seat back, and tried to pull the piece out. Because it wouldn't come at first, he moved his head closer, so that he could feel the chill of the plastic on his cheek, and used his teeth. Gritting together his molars, he pulled hard and back. At the moment it finally gave, he felt a sense of weightlessness, a momentary surge of adrenaline and recognition, then he hit the back of his head on the window.

Timothy always sat in the back of the bus for some strange reason, a vague sense of alienation maybe, or perhaps because the back seat was longer than the others by an inch or two. He really didn't know, or give much thought to it. The bus had been here for as long as he could remember. He
was walking through the woods with his pellet gun, shooting at grouse and rabbits but not really hitting any, and he saw the yellow-bleached-beige of the bus in a clearing, surrounded by huge, water-filled tractor tires, where bugs lived on hot days. It was up on blocks in the front, and the back had a flat tire which hung limply around the hubcap, and oddly enough, one good tire on the back right. It was a Bluebird bus, with the huge mirror for the bus driver to watch the children, and two convex mirrors sticking out on the sides to watch the road. Those were the first things he broke, and then most of the other windows, except the windshield and rear window. He found flares in a metal compartment behind the driver’s seat, and he set them off for no articulable reason, other than to watch them burn. Timothy originally thought they might explode, like sticks of dynamite, but they didn’t—they just burned brightly for a while, then died. He was disappointed.

The bus was partly rusted on the outside, and in a few places, he could see the ground through the floor. Timothy avoided these spots because of the deck incident. His friend, Robert, had been pacing in circles on his wooden deck, and his foot came down on a rotted spot, a sinkhole in the wood, and instead of encountering the solid floor of the deck, it continued through, pulling his entire leg into a wooden netherworld. Timothy’s memory rewound and freeze-framed on the image of Robert’s face just as groin hit wood—it was a look of profound disbelief and confusion, an empty milk-cup shattering quietly on linoleum. He felt let down even thinking about it. Sometimes, now, Timothy dreamed of rotting wood, balconies and floorboards, and would wake up with a splitting pain in his leg, which, though it went away with examination, never really left him. He felt dark all over and covered with a sticky, oppressive haze.

The bus rested next to a collapsed barn. Or, at any rate, he assumed it was a barn from looking through its moss-sticky treasures: old wheels and
sheets of serrated metal, gears brown and paper-thin with rust, old chicken-wire and gray wooden hutches that creaked sometimes in the wind. There were plenty of objects, though, that he couldn’t fit into place in his mind. He imagined some of them might have been dangerous in some way, but now they were all decayed or tarnished, rusted or destroyed, some bent and some flat-out broken. He enjoyed ordering and stacking the gears he found in piles. There were far too many gears. This was not easily explainable with his farmhouse hypothesis. He spread out the gears sometimes into the shapes of his made-up constellations, or just symmetrical patterns on the ground. He would press them into the dirt and then remove them, examining their imprints. He tried to think of the difference between the originals and the imprints, but nothing clicked. He looked at the empty spaces formed by the teeth of the gears, and then he contemplated the gears themselves, but couldn’t reliably say what the difference was. It bothered him in some way, but he pushed it down and forgot.

He sat up and waited for the cat he had named Orion, waited for it to come so he could shoot it. When his breath began to freeze and the rear window of the bus became wet with moisture, he went home.
Two: *Televisions in Jacuzzis:*

*Somewhere along the line, the message gets lost.*

Timothy dreamt alone in a bed as wide open as the dry, cracked skin of the plains. His fingers, in this dream, were whirling in patterns, over and over. They would close in on his face, then veer out and skip over the flat, cold mattress. They moved with a sense of self-will, tracing letters in English and Greek. He dreamed himself cutting bright green ribbons in a world made up of tiny tiles. The tiles were not noticeable—they seemed part of something bigger—unless he pushed his eye up close to them. Then they would become obvious, discrete. He tried to poke holes in the tiled surfaces with his whirling fingers. He slowly built himself into a small room and found there was a jacuzzi there with a television blazing below the foaming, churning surface of the water. There were images on the television, but it was not distinguishable exactly what they were. There was a low moan of sound slowly emanating up from the bright set, but Timothy could not hear what it said. He had to interpolate from the hazy images he could see, turning them into the closest-fitting picture he had in his mind, pictures of bulldozers and frontloaders shoveling dirt into circles. The indistinguishable sound fit into this scheme as the consistent whine of their churning mechanical hearts. His father was in the corner now, finishing the wall with dark plaster and colored bricks.
Three: Maps and freckles: Can you show me the way home?

Timothy came back the next day with an old, red briefcase. He sat down quietly in the bus and pulled out a handful of maps. Some he had stolen from his dad’s National Geographic collection—the only reason his dad subscribed to the magazine was for these maps. His dad had plastered and indexed over 100 maps on the walls, ceiling, and floor of their living room. He had fit them together in such a way that the maps formed an almost continuous representation of the world, except in the inverse. Walking in there felt like entering a self-contained universe, complete with its own inverse latitudes, longitudes, poles. It was an incredible thought that the world could be mapped, that there was no spot left on the planet that did not have its shape recorded on paper. It pushed Timothy a little left of himself to even think of the concept of mapping anything at all. How did experience become translated into these bright colors and borders, topographically defining a common existence? It hurt to think too much about the idea. When things hurt too much to think about, Timothy would pull a blue ballpoint pen out of his loose shorts and begin connecting the whorls on his fingers. His father would shift his lips and disapprove, “Quit doing that, you little freak.”

Timothy had stolen the maps from his father’s collection, where he had doubles, and had brought them to the bus. He methodically licked the backs of each map and placed them, saliva-wet, on the walls of the bus, covering up the shattered windows. It took a good amount of spit, but they stayed, quasi-papier-mached onto the inside of the bus. The maps were of New Zealand and ancient Mesopotamia, the Dead Sea and the Arctic Circle, the Pacific Northwest states and Hawaii. They formed a discontinuous
representation of the world, but that was good enough for Timothy. He was fascinated with Yakutsk and Irkutsk, two divisions of land in Northeastern Asia where nothing seemed to be. He looked at his skin, so blank and white, hairless and unmapped. He wondered where his father was. He fingered the chilly metal of the pellet gun on the seat next to him.

His eyes unfocused on the gun and Timothy just looked at its shape, sort of a black and brown crescent, tried to map it in his mind without focusing in on it, imagined it as a piece of land somewhere in the Black Hills of North Dakota. Satellites had mapped it, certainly, but no one had ever really explored it, save the gawking, wheeling birds that skidded in the air currents over the slopes of its shiny black cliff faces and cold, rough brown hills.

His eyes focused again and he picked up the pistol and squinted in through the sight at each map, looking for population centers or mountain ranges. When he found one, he squeezed the trigger and popped a hole in the paper, letting in a tiny slanted pinprick of light. He shot holes in all of the maps and put the gun down, resting back and surveying the pattern that he had punctured in the topology. It was almost like stars in a way; he could form constellations from the holes. He traced the lines between points with his fingers and gingerly felt each hole, separately weighing each. What if, he thought, the holes were the stars, the defining points of the world, and everything in between was fiction?

Timothy remembered when he was eight and he had freckles. He had always had freckles, but that summer, they took on the appearance of something else. That was the summer they had left the glassless window that California was for him. His freckles had knotted themselves together in herds and congregations on his face. They were malignant, like clotting, swarming red blood cells on the surface of the skin. The doctor had said that
it was not dangerous, but that Timothy’s face needed to be kept clean and that he should stay out of the sun. He had to stay inside all summer, except during the twilight hours and the nights in which his father would sit up and point the constellations out to him. “See those three stars in a line? That’s Orion, the archer. That’s his belt.”

The freckles had receded from a connected, communal mass to discrete, lonely spots, but not quite gone away. Some nights, Timothy would sit up, looking at his own face in the mirror, or a piece of broken glass, and would connect the dots with a felt-tip pen. He could imagine the wet sliver tongue of the pen, sliding across the pores on his face, connecting the freckles in the shapes of mountains, fish, and triggers. A trigger looked very much like a static, upside-down wave on his forehead. He fashioned a set of lips on his right cheek, all made of connected freckles. He drew shapes over and over, superimposing them on top of one another, until no single shape could be made out, but a conglomeration of black ink coated his face and made it heavy. The smell would finally overwhelm his nostrils and he would try to wash it out. He could get most of it, but it was still noticeable sometimes in the bright daylight, though his father never seemed to see it.

Now, Timothy looked outside through the hole in Papua New Guinea and saw Orion moving slowly up to the huge tire. If the tire was an angry, hungry mouth, the white teeth would slowly rise from the rubber gums, and the black lips would snap closed on the cat as it jittered its way up the tongue. He watched for a while as Orion circled jerkily around the tire. The cat was innocent, bright, unaware. Timothy slowly moved his finger up to the map of New Zealand and widened one of the holes to make room for the barrel of the gun. His eyelashes quivered softly, like lips, and he held his breath as his shaking fingers mapped the handle of the gun.

He remembered reading fragments of a story from a National
Geographic about the mating habits of some aboriginal tribe in Australia. Most of the story had been lost, but he was able to pick up on the leftover bits: the blue paint they used to stripe their shins, the soft clucking sound the men made when approaching women, the spider-shaped bruises left on their arms. With these points of reference, he was able to reconstruct the story to his satisfaction. In a way, it was like reconstructing old fragmented poems, or like translating from one language to another, from a world of hard but sparse facts to a storytyscape of soft, fulfilling fictions.

Orion sat down and was twitching lazily. The white splash of star across its chest was facing Timothy, and the cat’s tail licked slowly from side to side across the grooved mouth of the tire. Timothy’s hand closed around the gun and he lifted it in a shaky motion towards the window. His other hand closed around his wrist and might have felt for his pulse. He steadied his own hand as he raised the pellet gun to the hole in the map. He let out his breath slowly. Orion was looking directly at him now, as if it could see something preordained in the backside of the colored papers covering the windows and the black barrel protruding quietly from the paper and shattered glass.

Timothy watched through the sight of the gun as he shot Orion, and the cat collapsed like the barn, lazily in a heap. Timothy saw the cat break like car glass, into discrete, square, connected pieces, there for him to piece together when he needed to. He inhaled quickly and thought of showing his father the constellations he had made with the stolen maps and the constellations he had made in the sky. He could imagine his excitement with his dad watching, sitting under streaking fireworks, falling and exploding on the Fourth of July. He may have exhaled, but he did not walk away.
Four:

Overhead, the stars began to slowly wink out.
DAYLIGHT SAVINGS

Tracks

The man and the boy walk slowly along the train tracks, one on each side. The tracks are warm with summer butter sun, and the rocks in-between sharp and bleached white. Every so often, the man stops and tries to pull out one of the railroad spikes. When successful, he gives them to the boy and wipes his big hands on his pants. They are dress slacks covered with spatters of white and beige paint. The boy turns the spike over and over in his nine-year-old hands, runs his fingers along the outline, feels the dullness of the point against his palm. The boy, Timothy, periodically tries to walk on the rail. He balances with his hands stretched towards the man, Henry, who pretends not to watch. Timothy counts the steps he can take on the rail before he loses his balance and has to step off. He has counted up to fourteen on his best try. Henry walks quietly alongside, enjoying their time, his hand in his pocket, jingling forty-odd cents in change. He has counted it with his fingers. He pulls his hand out, clutching several matchbooks and a dirty jack-knife. He moves to put the knife back in his pocket, but not before the boy has noticed.

"Can I see?"

Henry shakes his head and smiles. Timothy is all fingers.

"But I wanna."

Henry reaches out and hands him the knife, "Well be careful. It was your mother’s."

Timothy pauses, then trades the jack-knife for the railroad spike, and tries to get the larger of the two blades to come out. He uses his nails as best he can, and it opens half-way, but snaps back closed.
“That could’ve took your fingers off, you know? You gotta be careful, kid.”

Timothy starts at the man’s words, and looks quickly down at the knife. There are grains of sand stuck inside that make a grinding sound when he tries to open it. “It’s hard.”

“I know it’s hard. Here--”

Timothy places the knife back in his big, dry palm. Henry reaches down with his other hand and opens the knife with his fingers, then hands it back to Timothy, handle first, blade down. Timothy takes it and rolls the handle between his slow fingers, then stabs at something in the air. “Gotcha!” He stabs again twice. Henry watches him with his lips half-pulled up in a smile.

“Now you got it. Watch what you’re killin’.”

“Okay.” Timothy pushes his finger along the blade, seeing where it snaps shut.

“No,” Timothy stops at the sound of Henry’s voice, “It’s bad luck if you close it.”

“Huh?”

“Whoever opens the knife has to close it.”

Timothy looks at the knife quietly and shrugs. He hands it back to Henry. Henry closes the blade and Timothy’s hands drop to his sides. “Thanks.” They separate and walk in silence for a little while. Timothy is a short, blue flower. Henry is an old board with two rusted hinges, standing at an angle in a shed.
Timothy stands, propped against the wall in his grandfather’s shed. He may get a splinter from the graying, splitting boards that make up the wall. He can see where the sun streams in through many different cracks in the wood. The air has a distinctly old quality to it, and specks of dust whirl in and out of the light, existing one moment, and vanishing the next, slowly gliding to the ground with each breath. His eyes take in the hacksaws, hoes, and flathead screwdrivers, their handles all covered in different spats of paint. The paint overlaps and layers in spots, creating a genealogy of color. Taken from the outside in, each color corresponds to one year of Timothy’s grandfather painting the house.

Timothy’s gaze alights upon a small tackle box on the bottom shelf. He reaches out his hand. The box is stuck to the shelf, as are several flies. He drops his finger on the shelf and feels that it is still sticky. He pops the catch on the tackle box and looks inside. It is pumpkin-orange and metal. Inside there are lures and flies. He examines each fly closely, keeping the sharp tip away from the pink skin covering his fingertips. In the bottom of the tackle box, there is a small jack-knife. Timothy replaces the flies, reaches his fingers in, as if expecting the box to snap closed, and takes out the knife. He examines it closely. It is ivory-inlaid and has a thin coating of dirty brown grease. It is slippery in a heavy, thick way. Not like gasoline or oil at all.

His gaze drops to the floor, and there is a homemade clay pot on its side, dirt spilling out, and a tiny blue flower growing from the dirt. The flower angles up towards the light, heliotropic.
Henry sits on the floor in the same shed, looking at his knuckles. He squints his eye at the splinter in his ring finger, and grabs at it with his fingernails. It is dark gray and pushed in through the pad, painful. He can't quite get it. Timothy looks more like his mother every day. Henry has come in here looking for a bucket but instead got a splinter from the rough wood on the door. The basement is flooding again, and he thought there might be a good-sized pail in here.

Henry gives up on the splinter, and looks around at all the tools he doesn't know how to use. Timothy's father was good with tools. He built the garage from the foundation up. Henry, however, is not. He knows the basics: hammer, saw, screwdriver, pliers, wrench, but not how to use them and turn wood into doorframes and chests. He can't imagine the creation of a wall.

He watches the points of the tools hanging around him. There are ways to die here: the rake, the hacksaw, the pitchfork, the grooved chisel. They begin to spin around him like a sharp, violent wheel as he concentrates hard on his pain and the clay pot, sturdy in the center of the floor.

His stepson is in the house, still, waiting for him to bring in the bucket.
Water Damage

Henry and Timothy are buckets. They bail water out of the basement. Henry uses a large steel mixing bowl to scoop out the water because Timothy demanded the heavy wooden pail. It is slow going, but it has to be done. There is about six inches of water covering the concrete floor. They already saved the important things. Henry carried out the big things, like the stuffed recliner with the broken foot rest and the record player that always plays somewhere between 33 1/3 and 45 rpm. Timothy lifted out the smaller stuff, the watercolors and jigsaw puzzles, but still there are a lot of ruined board games and books lying underwater. Timothy looks quietly at The Little Engine that Could, so saturated with water that it won't float. Then he looks at his stepfather, and watches his own repeated actions in the back of the mixing bowl, bent in distorted motion. Timothy watches his loopy, tortured arms circle up towards the window with the bent bucket lagging just behind, then back again. They fill the bowl and pail with water and dump them out, over and over.
The Clarinet and the Bassoon

Henry approaches the dinner table with two green-and-brown-striped boxes in his hands. He puts them down next to the mixing bowl. He makes no noise. He flicks the catch on the smaller box and opens it. He pulls out a shiny black hollow of wood, then another. They are covered with threads and lily pads of silver metal. There are several pieces, buried in soft, red fabric--like the lining of coffins. He runs his index finger along the grain of the wood.

It takes him a minute before he assembles the clarinet. He is surprised he can remember how to. He wraps his fingers around it in what he remembers to be a playing position. There is no reed, but he improvises. A small piece of thin, almost sharp plastic fits nicely in the space. He fingers an A, then an E flat, his digits remembering the names for them before his mind does. Henry sits down and rocks back and forth, pressing and releasing the keys, making a soft clicking sound.

Timothy walks into the room from behind Henry, “What’s that?”
“A clarinet.”
“Oh.” He pauses. “I hearda those.”
“What do you do?”
Yeah.” Timothy reaches out and Henry deposits the sleek black tube in his hands. Timothy lifts it to his nose and smells. It smells like dust and old oranges. Henry imagines Timothy to be the clarinet, and himself to be the old air inside, just slowly leaking out with age.

Timothy puts his hands around it in entirely the wrong way. Henry is quiet and just watches. “What do you do?”
“I don’t remember.”
“Oh.”
Timothy pulls the bell off, and turns it around, then reattaches it backwards. Henry focuses in on the seams between the parts of the instrument, and how they don’t quite fit like Timothy wants them to.

“You’ve got it wrong. The keys don’t line up that way.”

“The keys?” He looks down at the clarinet in his hands.

“The keys.”

“Oh.” He gives it back to Henry, who puts it in his lap.

“What’s that?” Timothy points to the other, larger box.

“A bassoon.”

Timothy glides towards the other box and opens the two catches. His eyes narrow as it opens, and he sneezes at the old air, finally released.

“Bless you.” Henry watches as Timothy fingers the black, lacquered parts of the instrument. His small fingers trace the outlines of the fabric-covered styrofoam, and he removes a piece. This portion is more complex and covered in long metal strings that must line up exactly right. If the strings don’t line up perfectly, Henry remembers, the instrument won’t work. It won’t play the low B flat, Henry’s note. It was so low, it hardly had a recognizable pitch, just a vibration to remind you of its presence. He could feel it resonate in his fingers, his skull when he played.

“Cool.” Timothy seems infatuated with the black bassoon. He fingers the parts and tries experimentally to fit a few of them together. They don’t fit as well as he hopes, though, and he quickly gives up and puts them back on the coffin-lining. He makes a clicking noise with his mouth as he inspects the other parts of the bassoon.

“I used to play that, you know.” Henry watches for a response.

“Oh.” Timothy puts his fingers in his mouth. He tastes dust.

“I was pretty good.”

“Oh.”
Henry picks up the clarinet and fingers a note. He breathes hard into the mouthpiece and the makeshift reed. Nothing comes out.
Varnish

Timothy stands under the faucet, waiting. His hands are slick with old varnish. His nails are encrusted with dark grime from the can in his grandfather’s shed, last used long ago. It was so hard to open. Timothy had to improvise with a flathead screwdriver he found on the wall, then it finally creaked free. He awakened the liquid below the chemical skin with his fingers, and brought them to his face. His nose wrinkled in and he went to the house.

No water seems to come, so Timothy turns the handle back, leaving its whiteness sticky and rich. He looks at his hands slow-dripping thick, golden liquid onto the white of the bare sink basin. The liquid looks delicious, edible, like syrup, but he knows better. It collects on the fingertips mostly, welling up and careening in drops towards the sink. If he could accelerate time infinitely, it would harden in the air.
Henry and Timothy sit, stiff, in the warm air coming from the vent in the front seat of the old pink Delta 88. They lean against the padded seat back and watch tiny globes of colored light float closer on the horizon.

“What are they?” Timothy’s mouth is open wide.

Henry wants to crawl inside, “I don’t know.” He watches closely at the lights on the horizon as they rock back and forth, like distant lanterns. The lights loosely follow the power lines in the distance, trudging up and down the hills, sometimes getting closer and then disappearing below the horizon. Henry drops his jaw into the same expression as Timothy as one splits into two, and they turn green.

“It’s like Paul Revere.”

“Who?” Timothy doesn’t move his eyes.

“Never mind. They say the lights are ghosts of old miners, doomed to walk at night forever.”

“What do miners do?”

“They dig.”

“What do they dig?” Nothing moves for a moment, then Timothy squints, “They’re so far away.”

“They sometimes get closer.”

“How much closer?”

“Closer.”

“Oh.”

“Sometimes people chase after them.” Henry has the sudden urge to get out of the car, run down into the valley as fast as he can, not stopping for Timothy or ever returning.

Timothy turns his head towards Henry, “Do they find them?”
"No. You can’t see them up close."

"Why not?"

"I don’t know."

"Oh." Timothy is quiet now, watching the wrinkles on Henry’s face, counting the lines around his eyes.

"Want to get out and sit on the car?" It is October and still warm, though it cools as night deepens. The lights appear to get brighter.

"Yeah." They get out of the car. Timothy closes his door hard with a bang, Henry lightly with a click. They sit on top of the car, avoiding the rusted spots on the hood. Timothy picks at one like a metal scab.

"Don’t."

"Okay." Timothy moves his hands back in his lap. He smells his fingers. They smell rich, rusty. Quickly, he takes one in his mouth. He licks it, pauses, then spits, frowning.

"If we’re quiet, maybe they’ll come closer." They are quiet for a while, Timothy’s breath coming shallow and fast, two of his breaths to one of Henry’s. The lights continue to surface and move over the horizon, then disappear into the valley.

"I’m cold."

"Yeah."
Timothy and Henry stand outside in the snow, back to back, heads facing upwards. They are blinking snowflakes to water. The white burden accumulates on the ground beside them in heavy silence. Timothy tries to keep his eyes open, looking for snowflakes, but the big, wet crystals are too cold on his eyes. Henry blinks continually, not letting the cold affect him. He is taller than Timothy, and so he shields him somewhat. Timothy does not notice. His eyes are on the sky, watching as single snowflakes become discernible out of the opaque white mass. He tries to focus his eyes on only one as it falls down towards him.

Henry opens his mouth and sticks out his tongue, his hands fumbling inside his red plaid jacket. He blinks in time as the snow falls on his tongue, cold trills running up into his mouth and down his throat. He looks for the symmetry in the flakes he has been told is there. He feels Timothy’s small back pressed against his.

Snow accumulates around them, deepening.

“Every snowflake is unique, you know.”

“Really?”

“Really.”
They both watch as the toilet bowl upstairs, the tall, ornate one in the bathroom between the two empty bedrooms, overflows. They are seated on the linoleum floor. Henry already tried using the plunger, but couldn’t stop it. He has created a circle of towels around the toilet, three or four high, fabric dikes against the spreading circle of water. Henry looks at Timothy, then at his circle of towels getting slowly saturated, then back at the overflowing toilet.

"Can you stop it?" Timothy’s mouth is open.

"Maybe." Henry stands and takes the ceramic top off the back of the old toilet, and looks inside at the working mechanism of the toilet, the floating ball and the series of pipes and gears. He doesn’t understand how it works. Timothy stands up and looks into the tank on his tiptoes, but he doesn’t understand it either.

"There’s nothing I can do." Henry puts the top on the back of the toilet again.

"Oh." Timothy’s mouth closes.

They watch the toilet as the water begins to bubble up and things begin to unpack out of the hole in the bottom and expand towards the surface: red and white streamers, bubble gum wrappers, bottle caps for defunct brands, bread crusts. A marble appears in the bottom next to a watch, but fails to float towards the surface. It is a yellow cat’s eye. An empty Hershey’s Kiss wrapper follows, then a small, used brillo pad. These rise inevitably towards the surface, and collect against the white rim of the toilet.

"I never dreamed these things were down here."

"Me neither.”
Spring Forward, Fall Back

"Don't forget to set your watch forward."
"Huh?"
"It's daylight savings time tonight. We lose an hour. Spring forward, fall back."
"Huh?"
"You have to set your watch forward one hour."
"Why?"
"I don't know. You just do. We lose an hour."
"Where does it go?"
"We don't really lose an hour. It just seems like we do. When it's three o'clock, it's really two o'clock."
"Oh."

Timothy and Henry walk on the tracks for a little while in silence while Timothy winds his watch one hour forward.
"I don't understand."
"You don't have to."
"Oh." Timothy puts his watch back in his pocket. Henry stops, bends down, and works a loose railroad spike out of the wood. He straightens, looks at it for a moment, then hands it to the boy.

"Thanks." Timothy looks at it as if it was something entirely new, turning it over and over in his hands. A little ways ahead, the tracks merge with another set of similar tracks. There is a switch and a tower at the side, with a red signal flag. It is rusted down, stationary. No one uses these tracks anymore. The boy and the man, on their separate rails, converge until they are almost touching, then diverge into the former straight line. They both
look straight ahead. The tracks appear to converge on the horizon, but Henry knows better.
SAFETY FEATURES
Henrietta had lied to the man in seat 18A on the plane to Minneapolis. She had begun a story about her stalker ex-boyfriend in Dubuque, Iowa, but then the man had revealed he was from Des Moines, and had relatives in Dubuque, and things had gone downhill from there. Luckily he had fallen asleep after the in-flight Hugh Grant movie before trying to name names and establish their mutual connections in Iowa, so she had got quietly up—careful not to touch or even breathe on him—and moved to an empty seat closer to the back of the plane, where the hum was loud enough so conversation and embarrassment were impossible.

She was actually on her way to Minneapolis in hopes of finding a job and maybe getting into the Psychology Masters program at the U of M or getting a job as a night nurse at a psychiatric clinic or home, dispensing colorful pills to patients with sure, steady hands. She had a deaf friend in high school who had moved up there and who she had heard from mutual acquaintances had amazingly become an acoustic coffeehouse performer—playing congas for a band where it didn’t matter if he could hear or not as long as he could sense the rhythm with his hands and wrists. She had hopes of crashing at his place for a few days and trying to reorient herself to the colder weather before setting out on the inevitable job search that made her gut swirl with a generation’s inertial lack of desire for anything but leisure.

The hum here was strong, tickling the tiny bones of her inner ear, she realized—hammer, anvil, and what?—as she pressed her ear to the inside pane of Plexiglas that prevented idiotic passengers from doing stupid things. She could feel the tiny motion between her cheekbone and ear, like the squeal from a dentist’s tool which didn’t hurt, exactly, but you could hear it tearing
you apart. She had left the peanut shell remnants of a relationship behind in Detroit, a city where everything was run-down and slowly falling apart. There, she had felt nothing but a desire to sleep and never clean; she had felt encased in dirt, like in a warm brown egg. Here, in the air, she was above everything—part of nothing, with no real location at all. Here, things were defined only by their velocity and orientation. It was a lovely thought—she was part of a pure vector. Taking back her ear from the plastic, she opened the in-flight magazine, began reading an essay on one man’s amazing experience in Japan, and fell promptly into a bored, luxurious sleep.

“Stupid, stupid,” she said later when she woke up to the glossy cloud cover hanging over everything in the window. She had wanted to see the lights of the city spread along the horizon like a spilled two-liter bottle of light as the plane listed and dropped quickly towards landing, but instead it was getting darker by the minute, and as the plane passed through the short hills of cloud, she saw a kite emerge, tied to a red balloon—she never knew these things could go this high. They wheeled around each other in perfect time, an odd aerial waltz over the beginnings of urban St. Paul, these two odd creatures somehow tied together. Whose were they? Had some fifth-grader launched them as a peculiar twist on a science project? Did they have tags attached with names and contact information, that would become a red pin on a map of Minnesota and a trip to the Governor’s office? Henrietta watched them twirl and stop, then spin again, in and back out of the clouds.
A Strange Detroit

Randy walked past the shoe-shine guys in the airport briskly, looking at them without—he hoped—they knowing it. He wondered if they watched him, their heads like satellite dishes, slowly turning in tandem as he passed. He thought maybe they contemplated dropping him with a blow to the neck, then grabbing his black leather briefcase out of his clutched hand and disappearing into one of the hundred deserted hallways in the airport, as if they had never been there in the first place. Or maybe they worked in teams, one guy knocking him down and the other rumbling through the slacks pocket for a wallet they wouldn’t find cause Randy was ahead of them, had it stashed in his socks. Maybe, though, they’d check there, too and get everything.

Detroit Metro was strange this late at night. No one in the hallways except for the occasional flash flood of passengers disembarking from their international flights—the only ones that got in so late. All of a sudden, he would be surrounded by them, spinning, laughing, conversing about the great night weather in Michigan, making their way to payphones with their phone cards out, or grimly walking straight ahead, eyes on the floor. It was like a dream he routinely had about being ambushed by a thousand bicycles then released back into silence and free fall until he woke up.

He could hear his footsteps half-echoing in the hallway as he strode quickly down it, as if he might be sucked in to one of the quietly rotating air vents above.

He was coming back from D.C. to visit his father, whom he hadn’t seen for the last four years. He had brought several magazines in which his work appeared to give to the old man—old, he laughed, was becoming older as he steadily aged towards his father’s seemingly-unapproachable 40.
He dropped to a slide on his knees on the buffed airport ground and did a quick spin that would leave circular bruises later. Things in his life were beginning to get boring, mundane, and he tried to do things to shake it up sometimes. He hadn’t succeeded yet in any real sense, but because of this burn that was within him somewhere, he was convinced everything would change in one golden minute sometime in the next few years—one minute where everything in his life would become irrelevant to one bright, true purpose.

Sitting down, Randy briefly thought about just turning around, renting a car, and driving as far away as he possibly could, probably having to run up a small credit card bill in the meantime. Of course he wouldn’t do it—hadn’t so far—but it was good to think about these things, he thought. The hallways here were so empty, there wasn’t a thing for him left in the airport. There never had been. He passed a teenager sleeping uncomfortably, draped over the edge of a chair.

A brief mechanical announcement indicated that his plane was beginning to board the first-class rows and passengers who needed assistance. Randy took a sling out of his briefcase and fitted it around his neck and left elbow. Adjusting the comfort as he approached the gate, he got out his ticket in his good hand and handed it to the gate attendant. She wore a great deal of makeup but might have been attractive under the extra applied skin. Blue eyes like wells.

“...anything anyone’s given to you or asked you to carry on this plane?”

It was slowly beginning to snow outside. He could see himself reflected in the window enough to make it appear that he was being snowed upon in the terminal itself. Shaking his head, he proceeded down the slow ramp into the plane. It was much colder in here, he thought idly, as he descended into the mouth of the machine.
He had a piñata at his seventh birthday party, Tim remembers, sitting on the pot in the plane bathroom, which is not comfortable. He would cry if he wasn’t the one who finally smashed it open and let its candied guts rain down on the plastic tarp covering the living room carpet, so his parents eventually stopped letting others have their turns with the baseball bat. He remembers the exact feeling he had when swinging the bat the final time, his muscles having some prescient notion that this was it, the one to crack the donkey-shaped shell in half, and though he was blindfolded, he could still see out through the red handkerchief which hadn’t been folded over enough times, and he watched the bat connect and the animal’s back half cave in. There were cheers as everybody scrambled for candy and moans of disappointment as Tim covered it all with his body until everyone gave up and went home, mad, mad, mad.

The reason he’s thinking of piñatas now is unclear. He can feel the seat underneath him vibrating with every dip of the plane. There’s a knock on the door. “Occupied!” he says, half-loud, but he isn’t sure the person heard him, so he says it again, louder. He’s trying as hard as he can to make it quick, but it’s hard when you’re rushing through the air at 30,000 feet.

He gets done, pretends to wash his hands—runs the water a bit just in case someone’s listening—and feels the cool zip of air as the toilet flushes in its weird, vacuumy way. Getting out, there is a line outside which wasn’t there before. Must have been the chicken from dinner, he thinks. Did he just say that aloud? He isn’t sure, but no one says anything or laughs, so he figures not, and proceeds back down the aisle to his seat, but someone else is sitting in it.
With an "Um, excuse me!", he makes his point clear, but the man sitting there just ignores him and continues his attempt to pick up the girl sitting in the seat beside Tim, where Tim should be sitting.

"Hello? This is my seat."

The man seems annoyed, and gets up, as the girl is now ignoring him and trying to read an issue of Conde Nast. Tim sits back down and says "Wow, that guy was cheesy."

"Tell me about it," she spits back, putting down the magazine. She starts saying how she likes flirting with guys but not with old 30+ men with greasy hair and cowlicks, and how she’s got three boyfriends at home who she sees alternately, and who are not aware of the others’ existence.

He says his name’s Tim, and hers is...? "Sandy. Sandy. Nice to meet you. I’m glad you came back because that gross old guy reminded me of my father who used to beat me."

Tim is slowly figuring things out, realizing that she’s lying, maybe has been all along, lying to that strange man and everyone else in the airport and airplane. So he lies too, tells her about his crazed abusive stepfather who used to keep him and his two nonexistent brothers heads in the toilet if they came home late or with the wrong amount of change, and they get in this long conversation about abusive relationships, without either one of them really revealing anything true. They talk for the rest of the flight in energetic, high-pitched tones, each one feeling a little like trying to break their conversation down and say one true thing, letting it fall down to a real level, where things matter, but not getting really how to get over the blindfolds they’re both wearing, how to see through their red fabric, how to swing the bat in the right direction, at the right angle into the air to hit and pop it open, and watch everything sweet and wrapped inside fall out all over their carpets or protective, translucent plastic tarps.
Canada

Pepsi had hit a deer last night after it had already been hit by upwards of five cars and he had been annoyed that no one had bothered to move its remains out of the road, and so others would come along all night, running its body down into the road, slowly consuming it between their tires and the rough road, until it became a stain that stretched for a half mile on the asphalt and the next day everyone would wonder what that thing was, exactly, that had made that strange streak on the otherwise clear road.

He was reminded of this experience as he talked to the man in the seat next to him who had serious acne issues even though he was thirty. The man—Jonathan he said his name was—had horrific teeth, like the stained edges of a cave, and his breath was only slightly less impressive. In other words, their conversation had been short, but had left an impression in Pepsi's mind.

When Pepsi told anyone his name, it usually evoked a laugh, or a smirk, or a "Yeah, right." Then he had to explain that his parents had a twisted sense of humor, and that he was on the lam from their stretched arms, trying to keep himself in orbit around his hometown without decaying and crashing back into his high school past, like many of his friends had done before, and who now simply congregated at the bars every night, or hid forties in socks and watched reruns of Magnum, P.I. on USA, pretending they were badasses.

Pepsi was not amused by this man, and had considered just lying about his name, saying he was Anders from Sweden, looking desperately for his grandfather, who had moved to Michigan sometime in the last ten years, who had taken the family sausage maker, and who might be near death, needing a relative to pass this family tradition and heirloom to. He had used
this story before on people, and it always provoked interesting responses. But this time, he had told the truth, and the brief linguistic contact between him and the rancid man had flared and subsided, the conversational match burned down until it damaged both of their fingers and forced them to drop it and let it float to the floor where it hit with a swish.

He thought for a moment, as the plane hit some turbulence, that he perhaps ought to be frightened for his very life, but he was a six-figure frequent-flier, and had got used to this succession of sensations: fear, dropped in the face of amazement at actually being aloft, succeeded by a lingering fear when the plane left the crisp edge of reassuring land and stretched out over the dance floor of water. There was always a suspension of logic that went along with flying for him, stemming from the realization that he was 30,000 feet above most of the rest of the world, going 605 miles per hour in a hollowed-out metal shell weighing 210,000 pounds. There was certainly some sort of physics which would lend credence to this sensation, but he didn't know it and so it scared him, intellectually.

The country they just left behind was still visible, receding in the plane's window. He thought it looked like Canada, beautiful and remote. He had only been there once, on a circle tour of Lake Superior, where his dad had taken him. They had gone to amethyst mines where you could wander around the quarry and pick up huge crystals of amethyst and pay $2 Canadian a pound for it on the way out. He had a crystal that he got from those mines. He kept in his pocket, secretly called it dad. It was beautiful. When he looked at the sun through it, the world was encased in the color, so you couldn't get out from the gem, light refracted all around in wonderful ways.

All of a sudden, he wanted to be outside the plane, coasting alongside, watching its fuel stream out into the air behind, where it would remain in one long liquid string connecting the airspace between the States and Canada,
until it hit the ground and covered everything in sight—the deer, the cars, 
the family in the Volkswagen bus, the foxes in the woods with their bright 
eyes, and him in the middle of it all, suspended, with wet, flammable love.
Triples and Homers

Every time I see Dan Laanala in what passes for a mall in my home town, he recounts the exact same story about how in Little League I hit a triple with a softball bat and the opposing coach came up to me in the next inning and asked to inspect my bat, which was significantly larger than the regulation bat because it was designed for softball, not baseball, and then had my bat invalidated for the rest of the game and season while my coach in the dugout began to swear, fume, and turn red.

This happens every single time. I ran into him two weeks ago at the Crafts-in-the-Mall extravaganza between K-Mart and the Wooden Nickel arcade, and “Hey—do you remember that time when...” He’s like a clock. It’s become an internal joke.

Now he’s four rows in front of me on the commuter flight from Houghton out to Marquette—there’s only 14 rows or so in the whole plane, so he’s not far away—and I can see him moving his shaved head around, looking for people he knows. If he sees me, he will certainly come back here, so I keep my head buried in the Daily Mining Gazette during the 40-minute flight.

The plane jumps and scoots around cloud formations and pockets of turbulence, or so the flight attendants call them—though I have a hard time envisioning exactly what that means. My body has no such problem: my esophagus seems to compress and then drop back to full expansion with each pop-up and dive. I do not like flying and avoid it as a rule. I have a small book in which I add this rule. There are pages and pages of rules here. Most I no longer adhere to. “Never never never double-fist fourteen beers on New Year’s Eve” is one. My body shakes briefly. “Avoid keying nice cars while wearing sandals” is another which comes shortly after, and which I still hold.
The funny thing about the softball bat story is that my triple should have been a homer, but I was too fat to get around the bases in time. My dad offered me a Snickers bar if I were to hit a home run. I think we were probably losing, like usual, and he—more than I—wanted to win. I remember his voice cannoning out over the grey-dust infield with me at the plate, facing a tough righty from Chassell, “hit a homer and I’ll buy you a Snickers bar on the way home!” He offered me rewards for doing things he thought were good. He gave it to me anyhow.

The net pocket on the seat back in front of me is relaxed. It looks like it’s been pulled on for hours by kids, and just hangs loose now, the elastic shot. I loop my fingers around it, give it a tug. It’s still spongy, slight.

This one time, me and my friend Rich were bored and sleeping in my parents’ basement, so we snuck out of the house with a gallon of borrowed gasoline (I was the Quartermaster for my Boy Scout Troop, which meant little responsibility and access to handy supplies) and we headed out to Mill Hill, which is a road intersecting a few others—it’s not important which ones. So we first poured gasoline all over the road and watched it run down and branch out into little gas tributaries as it ran down the hill. Next we covered a stop sign with the remaining stuff. Because of this, gasoline’s smell has imprinted itself in my nostrils and sense-memory from this night. I always stop at gas stations, remember, and savor the scent until it makes my vision swim. Then I leave. So we lit the road and the stop sign on fire. Sitting back to enjoy the show—god we loved fire—a cop car came trolling around the corner at the top of the hill so we ditched and hid behind some trucks because we knew if we’d try to get away, he’d hear us. However, Rich left his crutches—his right leg was broken, in a cast—on the side of the road, and as we were hiding, Rich balancing on one leg with his hand on my back, the cop’s searchlight scanned across them laying in the wet green May grass. I was
behind the trucks, conspicuous as hell with the gas can in my hand, my other hand on a rust spot, and Rich’s hand on my back. We were crazy—laughing hard as hell but as quietly as we could. The cop put out the sign with a fire extinguisher he had in the back of his car, sent the light around a few more times, and just as we were positive he could hear the doubled tempo of our hearts thumping over the crickets in the background, got back in the car and drove off so fast he left a blur behind.

The searchlight passing over crutches in the wet grass, and the smell of gasoline moving up from my nose come back to me through the vent blowing medium-warm air above me in the plane. I see Dan’s head still swiveling and think maybe I should go say howdy. It’s been a couple weeks since I heard the story. It’s one of the only stories from my childhood which does not involve vandalism, pain, or potentially serious legal repercussions. The softball bat is still stuck in my mind. I saw the other coach a year ago at my dad’s funeral. He was wearing a very bad tie—poor taste, one of those fish ties. I don’t know what he was thinking. He had come to pay his respects, but I wasn’t in any shape to accept them. Dad died of a heart attack while he was fixing chicken parmesan. It came at home when I was away at school. It was quick for him. The chicken burned. The other coach told me it could have been worse, that it could have been slow like a stroke with him hanging on for a while before letting his life go like a rope and dropping out into what’s after: vacuum, free fall. I had a hard time with that. The other coach never apologized to me. I don’t think he had it in him.
The Roof King

Runyon’s climbing up on top of the Peoria International Airport Main Terminal. A ladder was attached to the side, and she was on her way out and just wanted to know what was on top. She pulls stories out of the air and turns them into pots. Hieroglyphics and tiny murals along the outside of her ceramics.

Though it’s bright, the air is cold, easy to see through. It’s colder than last November, when she was last down this way at her grandmother’s and had to get away. That time, she came out to the airport too, and wandered around inside the two terminals with their 20 gates, lack of newspaper stands or even places to eat. She remembers one bar that served very expensive drinks—their Long Island Ice Teas were really poor—and the dirty bathrooms with the condom dispensers on the wall. She wonders if they have those things in the men’s bathroom, too.

Up, rung by rung, she climbs, her hands getting tired. They smell of the metal, she is sure, which is still a touch wet from last night’s rain.

After a minute, she is up and clambers onto the roof. It is not like she expected. There are steam vents and pipes, lots of trash—pop cans, beer bottles, Taco Bell wrappers, a pair of discarded corduroy pants—and a few doors leading down into the airport. A plane banks in the sky, preparing for its final approach.

“It’s a postapocalyptic Mary Poppins up here. Welcome.” A voice comes cutting in from her right. There’s a man up here. He’s well-dressed and is sitting on what must be a strong briefcase, because he’s overweight—size 44 pants, she guesses, from her experience working in Mens’ department stores where she flirts with the customers shamelessly and
makes good money in commissions—and the briefcase is holding strong under the weight of his body.

"Well, hi." Runyon isn’t really surprised to see him up here—he seems so natural, as if he belongs here—but she is surprised to be talking with him all of a sudden, as if he shouldn’t be speaking, should be silent and stoic, secretive, or at least guarded, because who knows what kind of freaks come up on the roof like this?

"I bet you’re surprised to see someone up here."

"Aren’t you?"

"No."

"Well I’m not either."

"Oh. Usually those who come up here give me strange looks."

"Not me." Runyon felt at home somehow. This guy was weird. Her grandmother was probably at home cooking something gross, like she always seemed to be, or wanting to teach her crochet or pinochle. She despised cards and hated crafts. Her grandmother didn’t understand the difference between craft and art, she thought to herself, looking at the well-dressed roof king. Did he? "I’m a potter. A ceramic artist. I make pots and colorful bowls covered in stories and pictures. What do you do?," she asked.

"Me? I don’t do anything. I rule this place." He gestured grandly, and waited, expectant.

"Ah. So you do." Runyon wasn’t sure what to make of this. "Where are your subjects?"

"Oh, they come and go. The last one was up here yesterday. A young man. He paced back and forth and remonstrated loudly to himself. I pointed out that he would have to find a taller building to throw himself off, and he left, sulking. I’m afraid he wasn’t doing so well. Everyone who comes here
comes here for a reason. I didn’t ask him his, but he had one. What is yours?”

She contemplated blandly lying, but wasn’t sure why that was, or why she was here, exactly, so a lie might be difficult to come up with. “Really, I don’t know.” She had just felt the need to get above the ground, away from the milling crowd out front with the baggage-handlers calling loudly and the cars pulling in and honking, letting out their passengers with hugs and pecks on the cheek and good-byes. “I just saw the ladder and decided to get up.”

“Oh. How odd. I have been here for two weeks. One of the baggage-men below knows I’m here, and throws granola bars and Dr. Pepper cans up here once a day. It seems like a long time, but really it’s not. Stillness is something you can take for granted.”

“I have to get back. My grandmother’s expecting me, you know.”

“Yes, of course. Grandmothers must be obeyed.”

A pause. The air swirled. Runyon took in the landscape around her. The chimneys pushed up to the sky, and occasionally burped smoke clouds upwards. The plane that had been turning was now coming in for its landing after its last circle, and she could hear its slow roar laying down overhead. From the roof, it was so small in the air. The man was quoting Macbeth while Runyon looked all around, “Out! Out! Damned Spot!” She feared he would ask her to fence in a moment. The light was starting to fade a bit, and all of a sudden, she saw what he saw. This place was a strange wonderland. She doubted if anyone from below had any idea of the events transpiring above, here. They were glancing again at their watches, dropping them back with a harrumph or a cough in their pockets, fiddling with change, making sure their baggage had not still been stolen.

The trash circled along the ground with wind gusts, and the plane flattened out overhead. She watched its gears as they converged on the
ground, watched the space between them gradually get smaller and smaller until she couldn’t tell anything anymore, couldn’t tell them apart—they were just objects, cutting out and back around her, attaching themselves and blurring into one solid thing the only thing that still mattered to her and her grandmother, the roof king and the plane, the frightened people on the sidewalks below.
Two Kinds of Shipwrecks

Reading a book on famous Great Lakes Shipwrecks in the sparse light from above that doesn’t cover her reading area at all, Sheila looks out the window to the sinking sun over the ground which all looks blue. She stretches, blinks. Her mother has cancer and she’s taking the plane home to visit her in Hancock County Hospital. She hasn’t heard the details yet—it’s all very new, apparently—but that it is somewhere in her mother’s stomach, working its way either in or out.

She doesn’t really know much about cancer except the name itself often means death, from what she’s heard or read, though her friends have been reassuring her that it’s very often treatable, and her brother at home has said that he’s not worried. Though she knows better. He was elongating his vowels too much when they were talking—under all his “don’t worrys” and hilarious anecdotes, there was a well of calm nervousness that echoed his words—dark and so clear.

The magazines on this flight were all useless, so she asked the man sitting next to her for a book—any book—to read, since he had a stack. She said she was dyslexic. He was obliging. He had a mustache which needed trimming.

She’s read halfway through the shipwrecks book, though she can’t decide if it’s actually interesting or not. She suspects not, but keeps reading because it’s getting dark outside and she’s trying to avoid thinking about what she might find when she gets home—her mother hooked up to machines with floating needles and green electronic readout screens. Sheila’s seen these before and they’re almost scarier than the illness itself. Science has found ways to transform the body into data, she remembers thinking, seeing the EKG on her grandmother ping and ping again, and then, out of the room...
on the linoleum hallway floor, she was told it had finally dropped to nothing. There was a dullness in the air that felt like it had substance itself. Death, reported by computer, backed up by printouts. Her grandmother's collection of last moments stored on magnetic tape, hard disk, or optical media. Everything being fed into machines, blood circulating through filters and pneumatic pumps, and back into the body.

Exactly the kind of contemplation she's been trying to avoid, she says. Her voice surprises her. She gets back to reading about the wreck of the Three Brothers:

The Three Brothers met her fate on September 27th, 1911 while hauling $4200 worth of hardwood from Boyne City to Chicago. Just out of Boyne City, the vessel began to leak more than usual due to heavy weather and the water soon overwhelmed her pumps. The water quickly rose to a level of eight feet, flooding her hold and coal bunkers, which forced the firemen to fuel her with kerosene to keep her steam up. In this condition, Captain Sam Christopher chose to run her ashore on South Manitou Island. At full steam, the Three Brothers plowed ashore 200 yards east of the lifesaving station. Upon impact, she split her bow open and knocked her pilot house loose. However, her bow was still in 15 ft. of water, and she was in nearly 50 ft. of water aft. The waves began to scatter her deckload of lumber and she was soon spotted by Captain Kent and the crew of the lifesaving station who took off Captain Christopher and his 13 crewmen. The weather was such that the men chose to leave many of their personal effects on the ship. The crew lodged with the lifesavers until they were taken off by the wrecking tug Favorite. The Favorite was unable to dislodge the vessel from the beach and she was judged to be beyond salvage value. Some hardware was removed from the Three Brothers, but when salvagers returned for her boilers the next year she was already under water.

There are two kinds of shipwrecks, she thinks to herself, offers up one thought that spins like a coin on a hardwood floor: ones you leave, and ones
you don’t. As she passes over Traverse City and the land falls away behind her, yielding to the wide expanse of Lake Michigan, Sheila thinks of her mother and everything that lies ahead, looks up from the pages in front of her, stretches out, suspended above the choppy water that from up here looks solid as a table.
Dear Lucky Winner,

reads the boldface print through the plastic window on the letter in Sheila’s lap. She’s wearing corduroy with soft ridges and thinking whether she should open it and be disappointed, or tear it in half, or just toss it in the trash without thinking. She looks up and there is a man in a brown suit staring at her. When she raises her eyes, he darts his back down. They’re like fish, elusive, hard to hook and pull out of the water.

She lowers hers again, puts them back into their native liquid where they can giggle and slush around. She rubs her hands on her knees. Her skin is dry, and beginning to peel. It is winter and her skin is always dry in winter.

He asks, “Excuse me?” and she doesn’t respond, doesn’t know he’s talking to her, but he is, and she soon realizes and says “Yes?” He doesn’t say anything, and waits until she looks up at him again. The room begins to yawn. It’s plastic blue and everything’s layered, slatted, or covered in vinyl. This is Minneapolis. Snow falls outside without wind.

“Open it.”

“What?”

“The letter in your lap. You should.”

There’s almost no time for dialogue, I realize as I try to get all this down before they move on. Their eyes are talking while I type and it’s an impossible task. She’s stretching a bit and looking at a watch balanced in a palm like a split open onion. He’s asking “What time is it?”, and I wonder if he’s a pervert, trying to come on to her in the airport, his wife or girlfriend at home and unknowing—or maybe knowing and relishing the thought, or so angry she can’t speak—hell, he could be gay, call it a boyfriend—or if he’s innocent, just being friendly, like everyone else here.
She doesn't respond immediately, but I'd hoped she would, hoped there would be a story here someplace. I wonder where they are right now, I mean, where they are in their lives. They've come together here for some reason—one is here maybe on business, the other on her way to visit a friend in Washington, D.C., I've gathered from a guidebook I saw in her bag.

They're far enough away that I can hear them and type without being too obvious. I hope. Their voices drop a bit and I wonder if they're discussing me. I see their eyes jerk in my direction, and they've got my game, I think, but then I can make out "on my way to Phoenix" as if I've just cleared a hill in my old Toyota and the conversation has reformed in my FM receiver.

"Arizona?"
"Arizona."
"Wow."

There's something in the way that radio waves radiate from the antenna and bounce off the bottom of clouds and atmospheric layers in order to carpet the countryside that bothers me. The fact that there are satellites orbiting us right now. The fact that I've been here for hours trying to manufacture something without luck while they are still their own, moving onto their flights.

I had thought that all I had to do was capture convergence, be faithful, and it would be so clear. But this is dead. There's nothing left to be said here.

"...rather, no, but thanks." What was he refusing? A cigarette? I can't tell; she doesn't have anything in her hands. But she's smiling. What is it? Maybe the letter in her lap that's been sitting there for the last half-hour. I made up the part about Dear Lucky Winner, though, because I can't see. When I can't see, I lie. That's what I do, I think. My stomach aches with a hot dog I ate earlier—there's nothing good to eat in the airport, and I ran out of chips yesterday. She is saying something again but I can't quite make it
out—the radio has cut out again to the quiet of static and occasional country. God I’m terrible at this. I can’t do it. There are no stories.

A year ago, my mother sent me a package of candles scented like lilacs, pine, and vanilla. I bought matches and lit them, went to sleep by them every night, watching the light flicker and flicker like a moth trying to stay off the ground, drooping and just touching—just snuffing out—and then up again, up again. I stayed like this for over an hour, judging from the clock. I couldn’t bring myself to go to sleep without watching the candle burn down—I needed to capture its last and couldn’t sleep without it; it’s hard to explain. But these candles, they smelled nice and didn’t clean the air out of the room around me. I could still scent myself from grease and lack of shower. I wanted so badly to lean over and put them out, but I couldn’t do it. I said already it’s hard to explain. I couldn’t sleep that night until I found myself sleeping sometime later with no recollection of falling asleep or watching the candle die, and in my dreams it was crazy—I kept having candles all around me, kept buying them and setting them up, lighting them with blue-tip strike-anywhere matches, over and over until my arms ached and the room was lit so bright it could have been day, and my mother was there too, and her name is Sheila, too, and she is crooning, making strange noises, telling me it’s alright it’s alright, go to sleep go to sleep, these candles are made to burn and they will, whether you say it, believe it, or not.
Sealed, like in an envelope

Every time she flies into Des Moines, Harriet passes over three high towers that flash blue and white, and she wonders if they flash all night, on and off and on. They never seem immense from above, but she’s sure they must be huge from the ground, since the cars are crawling lighted beetles, moving in dotted and dashed lines along the highway.

They’re most noticeable when the plane shoots out the bottom of the clouds into clear, cool summer night, around 9:15 or so, depending on the weather conditions and which pilot they’ve been assigned. Most, she’s noticed, like to make the approach from the Northeast, wheeling over the sparkling city and touching down.

There are always a few minutes of silence for her on these flights when the attendants have to be seated during takeoff and landing, except for emergencies, like if someone spills her drink she’s brought on board with her and is shrieking, or if children sometimes have nosebleeds. During this time when the engines are blasting and everyone’s awestruck by the view out the windows, unless they’re scared and Harriet has to soothe their tempers, she likes to think of herself below the plane, soaring, feeling the air fly all around her, enclose and seal her in an rushing, whistling envelope. She likes to deepen her perception of the city and the things they can see out the window, either ascending or descending, the view from above is always instructive; it always contains secrets you wouldn’t see from the ground.

This is one reason she’s a flight attendant, for the time being. Really, she tells herself, she’s a poet, and the dislocation from one particular place, from the ground itself, feeds an analytical sense inside of her. Des Moines is where she lives, most of the time, when she’s not working, and it’s where her studio is—was, if it’s flooded, she realizes, having heard so much about the
floods on the radio and television, the weather channel efficiently delivering the information.

When they touch down, her plans are to spend the weekend on the ground, after herding the passengers out, and returning their left-behind items, helping the elderly off the plane if necessary, and cleaning up the coach and first class cabins behind them all. It’s a neat feeling, to watch all these temporary residents leave your space, and tidy up. She finds small things and throws them in her plastic Northwest-logo trash bag: hair clips, pens, a shard of what looks like amethyst, change, lint, gum tucked in wrappers, a sling someone left behind, cryptic post-it notes with phone numbers or cat’s games of tic-tac-toe. She puts all these away in the garbage, unless occasionally she finds an important thing, an earring with what looks like a real diamond, a heart-shaped ashtray made out of smoky glass with initials engraved in it, anything corduroy, a pamphlet on heart disease with blood pressure tracking information written in, an occasional note to a lover, or mother, or father, or child—all these things she keeps in boxes in her apartment.

Every couple of months, she sorts through them all, throws out the ones that form no attachment with her, holds onto those that seem odd or strange, or are stuck to the inside of the box. Her dad had come down to see her apartment just before he left the family for Pennsylvania and a young lawyer, and he had seen the boxes of junk she’d collected. He hadn’t asked, really, but she’d known he’d wanted to, but didn’t feel quite right, interrogating his daughter when he was leaving, when he was in the wrong. He said things wouldn’t change, you know, I’ll just be a little further away, but the crack in the corner of his smile gave him away, revealed the erosion between the two of them.

When he had left, she said to the wall that she’d spend some time away, in the air, just get off the ground for a while, get away from being fixed in one
spot with him moving away; she’d been brave right then, saying those things, she’d thought, but of course he was flying overhead, East.
I am here in the plane, nervously waiting for takeoff. I have my laptop, notebooks, peanuts in case the airline is cheap, and pens. There is a short stack of reference and modernist fiction works in my bag. My head swims as I overheat, until the air comes on from above with a decompression chamber hiss. Everyone to either side of me has their faces locked down on their folding tray tables, and one of the attendants is handing out hot towels because we’ve been on the ground so long. There is a backup in the air traffic or the lineup for who gets to take off. I think about asking but decide it would be useless.

I have my several stories like a bunch of string in one hand, beginning from a soup of chaos, coming together for a moment in my palm. I am convinced there is a heart here to find and unearth. The men in my family have had heart trouble—I know this to be true. I have been told it is often genetic or hereditary—I can never remember which. I know I should avoid salts, oils, and fats but can’t resist the honey-roasted peanuts. I am the diabetic in search of sugar cubes. I eat the peanuts with such abandon that the kid next to me offered me his just to watch me consume them in one mouthful. I consider this a minor victory.

Where am I going? Nowhere now, but I hope to be en route to someplace West of where I am. No place in particular—just West, like in the dreams I’ve been told about by my parents and my grandparents where everyone wants to move West, West, West. I’ve heard so much about the Rockies and the rugged terrain that I want to eat it, want to consume it with my laptop and spit it back out, reconfigured, fictionalized, new. It feels like there’s nothing behind me but plains where the sky seems so high that other worlds are conceivable—space is true there. But I want to leave it all behind

*Saved*
because everyone I’ve ever known is from there. And those who are from there stay there. And I know I can get out, even though I suspect I will eventually go back and stay until I die because somehow cricks and evergreens are coded in my genes, already written into my chromosomes like this ending buried in the first three pages of the story. The ending that I know I have to get back to even though general wisdom suggests maybe it’s to be avoided.

I am perched on the edge of my seat, balancing here, just arrogant enough to suspect that I can tie these things together and then let them fall—the other end of the string descending to spirals on the floor that cannot be adequately described by words or mathematics. Or let’s say fiber-optic cable if you prefer that metaphor. You might say it would carry the signal more clearly to the end without interference or outside infusion, but I’m not so sure—I remember speaking into cans tied together with string and hearing the voices clearly like through an aural magnifying glass. But this is always the trick. I type as fast as I can and try to shrink these lines down to just one, for a second at least.

The pilot announces the impending takeoff, says we’re officially cleared, and I hope to god we’re not going to clip the wing of another jet, altering our flight plan to include the ground. Hands clutch the armrests in unison as we lurch into motion together, our stomachs left a touch behind in the pooling intestinal mass. For a second, I feel I’m looking at everyone in the plane and we all have the same—the exact same—expression cut on our faces: two parts fear, one part daze, one part awe, and one part not entirely convinced. All our mouths are crooked up in the same shape, noses enhanced alike, eyes fixed; we scare me, and the sensation passes, like a succession of rising and falling action, like the surprise-of-course, like every generation has in the proverbial mist behind me, like I will from the midwest
into a land made rugged by glacier and plate tectonic activity, then back, like each and every narrative I've read has, like everything else seems to, into something that resonates with the pitch of the metal machine we're riding in, but strangely, does not move me at all.
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LOSING WISCONSIN

Me and Dan laugh our asses off at the fir tree outside covered in a thick layer of bright orange Cheetos bags. It’s got good strong branches, I say, and that’s why all the litter is piling up on the thick limbs instead of falling through to the cement below. Dan goes back to the kitchen, and I look out past the tree to the parking lot. It’s a lovely view; apartment lights wink on and off in the background over downtown. A pint of I-Can’t-Believe-It’s-Not-Butter is smeared over the windshield of an Oldsmobile. Broken glass covers the concrete in spots. It glitters under the streetlamp then vanishes in the darkness.

Neither one of us was willing to take out the bags of leaking trash we had stacked by the door to the apartment, so it began by dropping little things out: shoe polish, a tiny cracked jar of green model paint, a collection of old greasy combs, jars of old baby food left under the sink by the last tenant. It’s not our stuff, he said. It leaves stains on the carpet, the air, and our clothes; nothing we want the responsibility of hauling downstairs to the dumpster.

Looking down, I see our improvised compost pile—toilet paper, egg cartons, beer bottles, Slim-Fast, and past-date Frito Lay products. Inside the heap, these discarded products go back to what they once were—compressed, heated, and ultimately reborn by the mounting weight of the debris above.

I have a brief moment of sympathy for whoever has to clean all this up tomorrow morning—I’ve worked as a janitor before, cleaning caked shit out of bathroom stalls, picking up bags with my breath held in. This feeling passes with an understanding of our immunity—the last great thing I can think of about living in high-rise apartments—it’ll be impossible to tell where everything came from; us or anyone above us could’ve thrown it out.
“Move—,” he says, and I do, knowing something’s about to become airborne. I watch his forearms flex as he launches the happy cloud ottoman he bought at St. Vinnie’s out the window. It wings the frame and leaves a dent. Its painted smile stays for a second in my vision then seems to turn sour as it begins its descent. Dan’s chest is heaving, his eyes jiggling in place—he seems about to burst. We’re both laughing hard, our heads sticking out the window, facing down. The ottoman shrinks for two and a half seconds, then plunges through the tree and we hear it split apart with a soggy crack on the concrete below. A car slides out of the night into the parking lot, and I duck inside. There’s two full bags left by the door, and an hour and a half left of darkness.

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I’m sitting in front of an empty railroad crossing. The bells and lights flash and ring, but there’s no train. I take off my seatbelt and push my cheek against the windshield to see farther down the tracks. Dan’s waiting, probably sitting on the gum-sticky cement outside the bargain theater. I am supposed to be at East Towne Mall to pick him up.

Caving in, I get out to look, but just as I get my head out and can smell the exhaust swirling all around me, the lights die and the gates jerk upwards.

Cars begin to move, surging forward. I jump back in.

I count the cars I pass on Highway 151 and add them in my head, subtracting the few that get past me in the left lane. I get twenty-six before I pull into the mall parking lot. He’s waiting in dark pseudo-trendy Taco Bell colors, patiently absorbing the light of a blinding dead-summer sun overhead.
I feel bad because he’s dependent on me and my car this summer to get him to and from work so he can pay me back for his half of June’s rent. I’m in mid-apology when he opens the door, but he waves me off. “I just got out. Long day.”

I can see grease burn marks, uncolored spots, on his knuckles.

We stop for 99 cent Whoppers on the way home, and I fall for their marketing scheme and order a Rocky Road pie. I open it up and find that it has walnuts. I hate walnuts, so I offer it to Dan. “It looked better on the sign.”

He takes it. “For future reference, moron is spelled with an M.”

I am dumb, too, because our money’s so low that we eat Whoppers cause they’re a buck, and a break from ramen.

Dan rolls down the window halfway and lobs the pie on the windshield of a dirty black Trans Am. It smears downward into the windshield wiper, leaving a white and brown stripe behind it.

I accelerate quickly into the road. “Hope they didn’t see that.”

“Hope they did.”

I remark on the clouds for Dan’s benefit on the way home, because he mostly can’t see—never could as long as I’ve known him. His eyes just seem to get worse. I tell him to look up, that they’re gorgeous, cirrus-type, feathered, like furrows in a white, just-rototilled garden.

He tells me the story of when he was eight and his brother used to slam his head into the wall of his bedroom, then make him cover up the dents with posters of German cars so his parents wouldn’t find out.

I laugh, horrified. It’s in the way he tells it—his face factual, grinning with the memory. I’ve heard hundreds of his stories, mostly involving some kind of extreme physical pain, but he tells them all with a weird sense of stoicism or maybe even pride. I never quite understand, but it amazes me. I suspect
that he doesn’t resent his brother for this abuse, and in fact admires or even loves him for it.

I point towards the grease burns on his knuckles, “Do those hurt?”

He rubs a finger over them. “You get used to it.”

Six cars. Traffic’s backed up, so it’s hard to move.

***

Dan and I are driving in dark silence around Lake Monona. We do this to get away from our apartment sometimes, to make us feel a little more like we’re a part of something, as if by moving—driving around, passing cars—we are being active, alive. Minivans cluster around us like bees, filled with sticky-fingered families coming back from Dairy Queen, dads singing along to Merle Haggard in the front seat, everyone else ignoring him or laughing. We see a Plymouth Horizon; a man with his mouth gaping wide like an abandoned iron mine. I think I see Dan staring at him. We ride and don’t speak.

I’m trying to prove that there are beaches in Madison. He doesn’t think so, says he’s looked. But I’m sure I’ve heard people at work talking about a beach somewhere on the West side. I just want to see it, know that it’s there, feel the water on my hot feet. I want to be right.

Dashes of light flick off choppy water ahead.

“There it is,” I say, and slow down. We pull into what looks like a driveway.

Dan squints, says nothing.

I’d turn to look at him, but I need to watch where we’re going.

It’s only a roadside park. Horseflies circle in and out of the lamplight, around the stuffed circular mouths of black metal trash cans. I slow and stop the car to look at a street map. I’m unfolding it when Dan gets out.
“What’re you doing?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer, closes the door. It rattles a bit, not fully closed, caught on the seatbelt. I get out and shut my door, leaving the engine running. I follow him over to where the water laps against the concrete wall that separates us from it.

He lies down on his stomach and reaches over, swishing his hand in the fluid. It looks opaque in the darkness. “It’s warm. Feel it.”

I raise my eyes a bit and follow a quietly shaking reflection of lights across the lake to their source. A car comes zipping by and leaves. I slap a mosquito as it pierces the ridged skin on my kneecap and look at his body lying on the edge, his arm hanging down in the water. There’s something beautiful in the holes in the back of his shirt, the dirty back of his pant leg. “Feel it,” he says, turning his head up to me. The light reflects off the water and quietly illuminates his face like a hundred miniature, far-off candles. I can’t tell if he’s happy right now. I don’t think I am. He raises his arm out of the water and puts his hand around my ankle. He’s right—it is warm. It’s rare, I realize, that we touch. Strange. The only sensation I’m aware of for a moment is his skin on mine, warming from the initial chilly shock. I don’t understand—the moment isn’t clear at all; it shifts and the light flicks across it. Sometimes—in instants—I know exactly what my life is, but right now I don’t. The silence stretches and I struggle to see but just can’t.

A car turns in suddenly, illuminating us with two solid poles of artificial light. Dan turns his face to the lake and takes back his hand, leaving the hair on my leg chilly from the air. “It’s so warm.”

My skin is cold and I get a sick feeling in my gut. “I’m sure it is. Let’s go. The mosquitoes are pissing me off.”

He starts unlacing his black canvas shoes.

“You’re not going swimming.”
Dan takes off his left shoe and sets it beside him next to a chew-stain on the concrete.

"There's rocks down there, and broken glass, and shit."
"You haven't even looked."
"I'm not letting you get my car wet."
"I'll walk home."

I know he will, too. "Dan, just get in the car."

He hesitates. We look down. The moon is reflected in pieces on the black surface of the water. I feel bad for having to look out for him like this. His fingers shake as he slides the shoe back on over his foot.

***

Right after I quit my job at Frito-Lay, Dan and I take my car out into the country. By this time we're both pissed off at the summer—our loser jobs and high rent, seeing a little too much of each other, the deepening color of various forms of debt—and we both decide to get out, leave town and work off some energy tramping through the woods.

I'm wearing shorts but I've got jeans in the trunk. Dan's wearing long pants, like he always does. The fabric protects his legs and keeps them white and clean.

I sweat a lot if I don't wear shorts. I sweat a lot anyway.

As soon as we break out from the city and the last concrete viaduct, I feel a knot in my shoulders work itself out—a difficult physics problem somehow solved while sleeping, or a scene from a dream realized halfway through the day.

My chest loosens and I exhale. I scratch at my nose with my thumb.
Dan looks over at me and his eyes focus with surprise. I feel as if right now he is looking at me for the first time this summer. He laughs. We lose the sun under a row of tall trees, and a chill moves through me. I start laughing too. This is his first day with the new contacts. He says it's finally stopped hurting when he opens his eyes. He begins to punctuate the ride with steady narration of mileage markers and road signs.

“Road narrows. Baraboo in...twenty-two miles.” Dan grins. We pass a gray Toyota. He laughs suddenly. “My kid beat up your honor student.” I can’t believe anyone still finds this bumper sticker funny. Then I realize that he’s never seen it before, that I have no idea what it is to live without vision the way he does. “Can you read that billboard?”

“Give me a second—It’s a woman thing. Virginia Slims.”

“Nice.” We fly by it as the road widens and divides. “All right.” I speed up to 70. “Keep an eye out for the police.”

“Okay.”

We pass a small green sign on the right, and Dan reads it aloud, “Devil’s Lake.”

“I think every state has a Devil’s Lake,” I say, and look over at him, but he’s quiet, looking back over his shoulder.

“I think I’ve been here before.”

“Really? When?”

“When I was a kid. My mom and dad came up to some place called Devil’s Lake in Wisconsin with me and Scotty. It had this huge hill of rocks and a formation on the top called Devil’s Doorway.”

“I bet this isn’t it.”

“I think it is.”

“Are you sure?”
“Yeah.”

“Want to go back?”

“Yeah.”

I look over my shoulder, then cut through the median, which is just flat grass, and drive back to the road.

“I remember there being a huge lake and that big rock mountain. Me and Scotty climbed it.”

Scotty’s his younger brother. I think of this and wonder how he can still not hate his brothers after all the shit and pain, and then I’m remembering a trip to Castle Rock, a big hill for Upper Michigan, where my brother threatened to throw one of my prized, still-unbashed Hot Wheels off the edge and I split his lip and had to sit in the way-back the whole silent trip home. I was so angry, I could have thrown him off and watched him fall forever. He died two years later—leukemia. As it stands, he’s suspended in my memory like this, laughing, the object of my anger, hands frozen in the process of grabbing for me.

The car groans as we turn in and follow signs.

“Yeah, this looks familiar.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. Every little lake place looks like this.”

“No, this is it. I remember.”

“How can you be so sure? I didn’t think you could see.”

“I used to be able to.”

In a minute, we leave the trees and see the lake ahead, shining, hard as blue glass. The road swerves, and I can feel the sun moving over my face, in and out of the shadows. I close my eyes in the brightness for an instant on a straightaway and can feel the light alternating, red then dark, on my eyelids. I
open my eyes in time to make the 90 degree turn to the left. The car’s
suspension objects.

“Yeah, yeah. I remember that turn.”

I shake my head, but then the forest peels away from the road like skin
from well-cooked lake trout, and there’s this huge rock mountain in front of
us. “Damn.”

“Yeah.”

My ears pop as we go down further. I believe him now. There’s
something immense, unforgettable about that hill. I slow down as we get
closer, and bend my head to the side so I can see farther up.

We park on the side of a small, deserted highway, and he’s out of the
car and staring up at it. I join him and look up at the tip.

“It looks like it runs into the clouds.”

I say, “Yeah,” but don’t really think it does—it looks more like the
clouds are falling, pinching its rocky summit with their billowy fingers. I
close my door and throw the keys in my pocket.

“Want me to lock—?”

“Nah.”

He closes his door and energy passes between us. Without a word, we
head towards the rocky base.

It takes us a few minutes of wading through wet brown leaves, and over lots
of trashed bottles, broken glass, empty foil bags of chips, and the occasional
sun-bleached Mr. Pibb can. I keep my eyes on the tricky ground and hold my
hands in front of me to break spiderwebs, but Dan walks with his hands down
and his eyes up, occasionally stumbling but not wanting to lose sight of the
mountain. Maybe he thinks it might disappear if he looks away.
"Hold up a sec—I’m caught," I say, and remove a branch filled with burrs from the front of my shirt. I catch up to him. He doesn’t turn around at all. It looks like he just stopped for a minute, without even hearing me, motionless, facing up. "This looks awesome," I offer.

"Yeah."

We tilt our heads up. For a moment, the mountain seems so odd and manmade—built up out of four thousand huge rocks—it’s almost pathological, poisoning the whole sky around it.

We begin to climb together, moving up slowly, huge rock by huge rock. It is like a massive pile of stones, with eroding bluffs and evergreens up higher, tilting off the side. This isn’t that steep. I have to move a little faster to keep up because his legs and arms are longer, and he’s just in better shape.

We stop for the first time, and look down. We’re halfway up. I’m breathing hard. Dan looks like he’s still ready to go, but I ask him to hold on a second while I catch my breath. He sits down on a huge piece of red and black rock. I think it’s granite. I sit, too.

He looks out. "It’s beautiful."

I look out now, over the lake. "Damn straight." It feels like we can see everything from up here, halfway between the ground and the clouds. Have we gone up, or has the rest of everything come down? The granite under me is hard and smooth. I spit and run my hand over it, rubbing it thin, watching the color come out under the liquid’s influence then fade as it dries.

"Let’s go."

We’re off again. My pain seems to evaporate like hot water off skin in cold air. I detach myself from my body, and in what seems like minutes—but could have been much longer—we’re almost at the top of the rock line. I pull
ahead, and all of a sudden I realize Dan has stopped. I look back as he points
up to a rock formation, huge and archlike.

“Devil’s Doorway.”

“Guess you were right,” I say.

“Want to stop for a while?”

“No.”

“Yeah.”

The way up to the Doorway is steeper, an almost sheer rock face in
spots, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to make it—I’ve never been much good
at climbing, always a bit too fat and afraid of the sharp wire on top of fences
that tore open my brother’s hand when he was nine. I hesitate as his blood
flashes in my eyes.

“Come on.” The way is narrow, so we go one at a time, Dan first,
levering ourselves up the increasingly steep side of the rock. I watch him
climb with ease, his triceps churning, bulky, underneath his skin. I follow
close behind but get stuck in one spot, unsure of my ability to prop a foot in a
crack and push myself up. Dan has moved ahead a bit, so I give it a try, but
fall short, my fingers slipping from what looked to be a promising handhold.
I’m about to go back and find another way around, but I hear, “Give me your
hand.” So I push off hard, my legs stronger than I had imagined—carrying all
that weight must have built up my muscles—and I only need his arms to
guide me a bit, and I’m up on top of the ledge.

“Thanks.” My feet seem new to me.

Dan nods. He leads the way around the crown of the hill, and we come
out from the shrubs, and there’s Devil’s Doorway—about sixty feet in front of
us. “Shit, it even looks like a doorway.”

“Told you.”
I sit down on a large flat piece of what looks like sandstone. It is warm under me. My shirt is sweat-soaked and dark. I watch as Dan balances on a tricky path—his feet at cross-angles—up to the formation itself and stands there, the sun’s corona hanging just behind his head. His body is made to be here, framed by the rock jutting out from the hill on all sides.

I stand and approach along a slightly longer but safer path, and get up to its foot as Dan is climbing up on the huge stone balanced on top of the two side, supporting rocks. “Be careful. I heard some of the rocks moving down below.”

He ignores me and stands upright on what’s not the highest point on the hill, but is certainly the most impressive. I stand inside the Doorway and feel the sides. It’s clearly not moving anywhere. Wondering briefly how many people have been up here, have made it all the way up without falling or turning back, I see a black combat boot sail through my frame of air and my eyes follow it down to the rocks below. I laugh with my mouth cracked wide open—a new canyon—and watch another boot spin through the air for a long time before hitting somewhere below. “I hope you’re watching where those went.”

He’s still above. I can’t hear anything at all except the wind. I climb out to the side, on another big flat rock, level with the top of the Doorway, and look up. I feel suspended right now, free. Everything is stretched out before me and it’s a long way down. I pick up some loose stones and give one a hard baseball throw, leaving an ache behind, resonating in my shoulder. The rock arcs and dies, short of the woods.

Soon Dan and I are both throwing increasingly large rocks off the side and watching as they hit below—some explode into pieces, some don’t do anything but slam into a stone and kick down the side. I grab a twenty-foot-long, dead pine tree trunk. It’s lighter than I imagined, but I don’t want to get
hit by a back branch on the way down, so I hand it up to Dan, and he hefts it over his head and launches it, spear-style, down the hill. It doesn’t get too far out but seems like it stays in the air forever—surface area and air-resistance, I guess—framed by these two huge, low-flying fluffy clouds in the background, and as I look up to notice their gray underbellies, I hear the tree hit below, and drop my gaze as it—broken in half—jumps and spins down the rocky slope. I hope nobody’s down there, trying to move up. I yell “Echo!” and let my voice resonate in the air. He joins me in yelling as loud as we can. We don’t use words, just sounds.

Our voices are huge twins up here; they sweep down the mountain in tandem, expand, and follow the valley to the lake.

It begins to get dark, and we agree that we want to get back down while it’s still light, especially because Dan won’t be able to see for shit in twenty minutes. We head back down to find his boots, and the trip down turns out to be more demanding. The inertia is somehow against us this way, and once we get a little ways down, it becomes clear that finding the boots is going to be far more difficult, because, here, all the rocks look the same.

We spend five minutes searching for the boots, and the light begins to sink, turning the shadows into wide, opaque holes.

“Let’s go,” Dan says.

“And leave your boots? That’s your only pair.”

“Forget about them.”

“Are you stupid? Dan—” My mouth shuts as I watch him looking at me, silent, closed. “Are you sure?”

“Let’s go.”
I worry about his feet, cause the rocks are sharp, and there’s all that trash in those woods, and I’m too weak to carry him. But I don’t say anything else.

Looking for a way to move down the slope faster, I slide on a loose rock and get wedged between two big pieces of gray and white stone. My leg is caught most of the way in, tight but not painful.

I try to move, but can’t even wiggle my leg in this natural vise. I don’t know how it got so caught in there, it slid in so easily. I look around for Dan. “Dan, hold up—” But there’s no answer. I look down the slope but don’t see him anywhere. I feel something behind me, so I twist around and look up, and he’s right above me, holding a huge, head-sized stone. I can see his muscles slowly twitching. Everything is silent.

“Give me the keys.”

“What?”

“Give me the keys.”

“Shut up. Help me get my—”

“Give—me—the—keys.”

I look down. His toes are long and dirty. Strong. They seem to clutch the stones. Nails filled with dirt. “I don’t understa—”

“Give me the keys or I swear you’re going to be sorry.”

I stare at his feet, reach in my pocket; my hand feels alien, invasive. I clutch the ring of keys and pull it out.

“Good. Put them on that flat rock just above you.”

“Dan, I—”

“Shut up.” He raises the rock higher over his head. I can see his muscles clearly now. They’re standing out, not twitching at all. I lay the keys on the rock. His face is completely in the shadow as he brings the rock up
higher. I close my eyes. Wait. Can feel his strength and heavy movement. Silence. Gravity. In my heart, I need him to hit me, know I deserve it.

I sense the rock’s forgiving motion through the air above me. A tiny instant of weightlessness. Its parabolic drop and clatter far below. I keep my eyes closed, all the way shut, as hard as I can push them, until I see balls of not-light—brother’s-blood-red—on the inside of my eyelids. I hear the sound of the keys being taken up, and the sound of Dan moving down the mountain. The balls of not-light burn into my retinas, accuse me of a hundred things. I hear myself screaming—so angry, my voice careening down the side after him—and after that is carried away to the lake, I am left with the sound of someone moving down the rocks, into the forest, barefoot, alone.
ANGELS LEFT IN SNOW

Getting Rid of the Body

Christer parts the tall grass with his hands as he makes his way back through the field. The ground is slick with July rain and dark below the gold stalks of grass. He wades through the thick, sharp stuff, accumulating tiny cuts on his forearms until the Plymouth rises up fat and blue out of nowhere. Looking carefully at the door to the car, he sees that it is jammed shut, bent in, the handle lying hopelessly on the ground. When he picks it up and holds it close to his face, he can see rust spots fragmenting the metal into shapes of tiny, five-fingered stars. He drops it back on the ground, where it settles into its impression in the earth.

He kicks the door and it squeals open. A stack of twenty or so magazines slides out onto the wet grass. He looks closer. They have rotted out from the center and spots of mold cover them all.

Christer looks at the magazines. They are pornos, sure enough. He can see skin white with mold and rotted through; breasts falling apart at the sides and spilling splashes of garish color through from the pages below; pubic hair breaking off and merging with other patches of pubic hair. These are bodies in the process of decomposing and expanding towards a mass of posed, rotting limbs—the waiting room in a crematorium for mannequins.

His older brother drowned while snowmobiling across the canal in the middle of January. Though everyone knew the newspaper details, that fat Bernard had gone through a patch of thin ice and sunk to the bottom, Christer has always wanted to know the mechanics of the sinking: did the ice slowly crack and buckle, then finally give way, or was it quick—his big body dumped without warning? Was he thrown or did he ride it all the way
down, his fingers clutching the molded rubber grips of his Polaris Indy Classic, the ridges of his knuckles slowly sinking from flesh pink to white?

He has the newspaper article in his room, sealed in a Ziploc bag. He spent almost every night for a year looking at the newsprint close-up through a magnifying glass, trying to break down the words into the everyday truth of his brother’s absence buried in the weave and grain of the paper.

When he first heard, he walked out with no jacket to what he thought was the exact spot of his brother’s descent. He remembers looking down at the smooth, newly-clotted ice. In his mind, he can see the outline of the hole shining like a dull, wet star—pointed with five chubby cracks reaching out, and then finally vanishing, filled in by something darker, new.

Pastor Sam, who tried to talk to Christer after Bernard’s death, had said that miracles could sometimes happen, that a human body could sometimes be revived thirty minutes after it stops breathing if the water was cold enough. Christer didn’t know what to say, exactly, to that.

They recovered the machine—it was illegal to leave it down there because of pollution. Someone went through the ice every year on a snowmobile, and Christer could imagine the leftover, accumulating snowmobiles, tossing with the current, slowly gathering in metallic, junky clots.

Bernard’s snowmobile is still in the garage, covered with a fraying blue plastic tarp that blows off easily. Christer had tied it down with double overhand knots, but it had come loose one windy January day when someone had left the side door cracked open—you had to pull it shut and listen for the click, especially in the winter, when the metal contracted. The tarp had blown off in a gust of wind when his mom had come in to get chicken breasts out of the deep freeze. She has said that she cried out, dropping her knees hard to the cold concrete, bruising them purple. Christer imagines his mother there
in the garage, snow whirling fast in tight circles around her and the snowmobile, making it look as if they are both resting on thin, black ice.

When his mom and dad decided to have Bernard cremated, they left Christer at home. He had overheard them talking about it beforehand, and looked up the crematorium in the Yellow Pages. There was only one, so he decided to walk. When he finally got there, though, it didn't look at all as he expected: the driveway was plowed and grated down to sheer ice, and there was a silver mailbox planted like a stiff marigold at its end. A fence was mostly buried in snow, and the building itself was like a house, small and white with green trim. The windows were blocked up with black or dark green curtains, so he couldn't see inside; two huge chimneys towered up into the sky like circular, severed legs.

Christer couldn't bring himself to go in, so he wandered around outside, thinking of Bernard and Pastor Sam, making snow angels then disliking their shape, obscuring them with his feet. He imagined his brother's body being slowly fed into the flames while his parents watched. It was a Thursday. He took the mail and read it. There were electric bills and promotional fliers from Wal-Mart. They were beginning their seasonal sale.

Christer considers the pile of magazines collected at his feet, made up mostly of old copies of *Swank* and *Penthouse*, smelling like hospitals and bread. He wrinkles his nose and glances around him: peeling white birches, bark strips hanging down like striped, angry snakes. He turns his attention back to the magazines, and stands for a second, indecisive. He scratches one of the scabbed-over cuts on his forearm, then slowly licks the inside of his wrist, following the vein up into the palm with his tongue. Disentangling himself from the paper, he steps back, then watches the pile collapse in where his feet
have just been, loose and white in the sneakers--as if he had never been there, as if his presence had nothing to do with either discovery or decay.

He closes his eyes and then opens them slowly, teaching himself as Pastor Sam has said he must do every day to remember his brother's form.

Feeling suddenly unsteady, he sits down abruptly into the sloppy grass. His corduroys will be stained, he knows. He thinks he feels a wall of scratched Plexiglas just in front of him. His cheek presses cold against it; his mouth opens and closes on hard absence. He can see through it, but the tiny scratches and indents on the glass itself draw his attention away from what's on the other side, so much so that it is entirely eclipsed from his vision and the glass becomes completely opaque. When he closes and reopens his eyes, it is gone. Things like this often occur in the normal day-to-day functioning of his life, momentary hallucinations, flashbacks almost, except that there is nothing to flashback to. He thinks that maybe there are cracks in the world that open up for a moment, and then drop back into place like a curtain. The curtain is black and heavy, smelling of dust and paper.

Christer remembers when he saw his brother masturbating with a copy of *Hustler*. He watches Bernard shut the bedroom door and can hear it lock from the inside, and wonders why he would bother to lock it. In a sort of trance, he watches himself slowly turn the handle on the screen door and step outside to look in through the slatted blinds of Bernard's window. He remembers his brother as a rolled whale on top of a flat, yellow pillow, moving his fist under his belly in quiet circular motions, eyes fixed on the shiny pages inches in front of his face. He moves back, and watches himself watch his brother through the window. The slats in the blinds cut Bernard into twenty-two distinct layers of memory and file him away.

He moves around the car in a slow orbit. Bernard found this spot originally
the summer before he died and brought his brother here to show it off. Christer remembers watching as Bernard swung the rubber-handled hammer in repeated arcs at the windshield, giggling loudly and splitting the glass into hundreds of translucent blue squares. Christer has returned here once after Bernard's death, then again after Pastor Sam's, and has used the hammer to break the rear window and the glass along the passenger side, leaving the same arcs of motion behind him. The glass broke cleanly that time, shattering on the vinyl backseat and the ground. When he looked down, he could see himself reflected separately in each piece.

Here again, Christer can feel the residue of the hammer-motion somehow still present in the air around him. It resonates slowly and recycles, refusing to dissipate into the remaining world. Though he tries to remember the car as he first saw it, glass clean and unbroken, he cannot. The only intact parts of the car are the two headlights, which look entirely new and out of place. If he could somehow turn on the car, fit an old, clumsy key into the ignition, generate an electrical current, then Christer is sure they would shine and illuminate whatever they faced.

It's still daylight, and he looks at his arm, covered with tiny droplets of sweat, in each of which he is sure that, if he looks closely enough, he will see a slightly different replica of the world around him. He licks the underside of his wrist again to remind himself of how it feels—the vein a thin blue ridge pulsing slowly under the skin. He crawls closer into the pile, surrounding himself with the magazines like a castle wall, and begins to slowly flip through the pages.

Christer used to peep in windows on Sunday nights. He would slip out the back screen door, taking care not to let it bang shut, and he would track around the neighborhood, looking for lighted rooms and open curtains. He
liked to see what people were cooking for dinner, whether they prayed before eating, how they moved when they were alone. Once, there was an entire family sitting cross-legged on the floor, watching a test pattern on television. As he watched, it changed to snow. In his memory, the screen is reflected, minimized and distorted, in each set of eyes. There is a small angel statuette perched on the window. Christer moves it a few inches to the right and notices the ring it leaves behind in the dust.

He particularly liked watching elderly people with very young children. They held them more softly, watched them more carefully, seemed to see their lives reflected in their eyes. On slow Sunday nights, Mrs. Hambley would hold her grandson in her arms, rocking very slowly, just watching. Christer could feel a transference taking place.

In the years since his brother's death, Christer has collected Christmas trees. Just after the holiday, when people put their trees out on the street to be collected by the garbage men, he drags them off over his shoulder if they aren't too large, or tows them away, balanced on his wagon, pine needles dropping off behind him. He has a particular spot in the woods where he brings and suspend them, tied up by heavy twine, in oak trees. There is one old oak in the forest where sixteen desiccated pine trees dangle from its upper branches. He uses a makeshift pulley system to haul them up, and ties them in bowlines around the thick branches, close in to the trunk. These knots hold a special place in Christer's heart. They won't ever come loose, he has tied them so tightly--the trees will hang forever, until the oak trunk snaps under the weight of frozen water or whirling snow, or is blown apart by lightning.

He likes to stand under the oak sometimes, looking up at the trees--they're mostly bare now, but once men and women, families, brothers had
clustered around each of them, opening wrapped presents, gazing at blinking white or colored lights. He can see from below that there are still a few traces of tinsel that people have left behind. This always makes him think of Christmas Eve in his church: baskets of steaming, foil-wrapped food; huge, hanging coats on silver hooks; long chains of paper rings; heavy, shaking bags of glue and glitter.

The trunks swing back and forth, and creak quietly in the wind. He hears one tiny silver berry bell tinkling, buried forgotten and deep.

He has read that, farther south, people drag their Christmas trees to the lake where it hasn't yet frozen over, and slide them quietly into the water. Christer watches this happen over and over in his mind until the sequence of images leave footprints in his memory and dull red tracks on his retinas, so that he can see the outlines of their motion whenever he closes his eyes. Now in his dreams he watches the trees, slick with cold, pile up in the basin at the bottom of the lake. The needles drop off in clumps like hair, and the bark slowly peels off and floats to the surface, leaving behind piles of gleaming white, interlocking skeletons of bone.

But now he sits, looking through pages of dead and rotting paper. Nakedness is a belly on a pillow, a face submarining in icy water, a body slowly reduced to ashes. Christer watches the pages go by, and regards his fingers oddly as they turn over each new leaf, revealing more and more broken, decomposing flesh. He wills his fingers to stop their progress, and he puts the magazines down. He comes to his feet with a start.

A drop of rain slaps fatly in the direct center of his forehead. He looks up, waiting, but nothing comes. Just dry, white sky. There is a muted booming sound, and he watches as a single firework explodes, flowering out in flashing, golden petals. When the petals and the blast have faded out of
the sky, they are followed by a second, which illuminates the smoke trails of the first with its bright explosion as everything falls quietly to earth.
Kissing Bernard

Christer remembers being trapped, against the ridged brown carpet in the family room, under his brother's weight. He is on his back, trying to scream, but the noise from the three-speed fan swallows up his sounds with its open, humming mouth. Bernard is laughing and reaching to hike his shirt up over his huge belly.

"You're gonna kiss it."

Christer shakes his head and bites hard into the thumb-knuckle on his brother's hand. Bernard shakes the meaty paw free and slams it into Christer's cheek, leaving it warm and shocked.

"Kiss my tummy."

Christer is quiet now, underwater—not moving, only rasping. "I can't breathe."

"Kiss it and I'll let you up."

Christer lifts his head slightly and watches as the image of Bernard begins to blur and double, his two eyes merging into one huge blinking eye, his mouth becoming a thin strip of teeth and heavy, wet tongue, his big skin darkening. In this moment, Christer knows he hates his brother, then things begin to fade and he is suddenly aware of his hands opening and closing swiftly, reaching, then a strange wetness in his crotch, then nothing at all as his head drops back, burying itself into the surface of the ground.
A Waiting Room

Christer remembers when he was nine and Pastor Sam had a stroke. He watches himself hold his mother's hand as they visit the hospital, a place with curtains shrouding bodies and vast murals of white. He pauses his memory at the frame which holds a close-up of his fingers twined into his mother's, like roots of trees that grow close together and become indistinguishable. He remembers smelling bread, and his mother telling him no one is baking. He remembers the floor, not quite flat, but gently hilled along the edges, so a red and white top or a cat's eye marble would spin or roll to the exact center and stay there until kicked or crushed.

Christer wants to ask him about Bernard, but his mother says that Pastor Sam can't respond, though he can understand everything they say. He is not sure who his mother is talking to. Pastor Sam's head rests on a flat white pillow, and his fingers move in small circles when he tries to speak. His breathing stutters with each syllable, but he can't seem to produce any real sound. Pastor Sam can blink his left eye but not his right. The right eye is closed and quivers lightly but never opens more than halfway or closes completely. He remembers his mother making him kneel by the bedside and recite the Lord's prayer, with 'Debts' for Pastor Sam, not 'Trespasses' like he was taught. On his knees against the bed, Christer looks up at Pastor Sam's fingers, the knuckles big and cracking out of the skin, whirling and leaving halos behind in the air, and it is exactly now that he knows he is dying.

He imagines standing on a vinyl chair and watching Pastor Sam from above, watching a wet spot on his stomach expand. Christer has now begun to doubt the actual existence of this spot, but his memory shows it plain and anatomical: red soaking through just above the belly button and slowly permeating the sheet, spreading outwards in a circle until it drips off the edge,
and Christer stops the memory there: the droplet of blood in sudden transition from sheet to floor. He now doubts the fidelity of this memory because he later read in an encyclopedia with a heavy cover that strokes don't cause bleeding in the abdominal area. He starts his memory again: the droplet of blood resumes its fall and hits the floor, and that's when his mother says something about the indivisibility of God, and Pastor Sam moves his arm, and Christer falls to the floor and watches the ceiling rotate instead of the fan.
Boundaries and the Newly Deceased

Christer’s walking with Pastor Sam through a long and straight row of evergreens. Pastor Sam says they must’ve been planted like that, in straight lines and parallel rows, because nature doesn’t do that by itself.

Christer looks up—there are gaps through which the sun filters down in spots to the ground. Neither of them is talking about Bernard, but it hangs in the air. It’s a month after the drowning.

“The air’s cold, but these are my favorite woods,” says Pastor Sam. Christer’s freckles are sharp against the glistening white snow. “Want to know why?”

“Yeah, I guess,” says Christer, the gap in his teeth showing.

“Because it’s just so quiet here—it’s quieter than just quiet. I mean, if there was no air and no sound, it would be quiet, but here it’s different. Here it’s actively quiet.”

Christer doesn’t understand and says so.

“It’s like a blanket. It covers everything. Stop for a second—”. They do. Everything ceases and the quiet widens. Sam lets it go. “Can you hear that?”

“Yeah.”

“You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I think I get it.”

Christer thinks to himself as Pastor Sam lets the silence stretch again. It’s like the white space in a frame. It’s like milk in a bottle. Bounded. It has to be maintained to keep its shape.

Pastor Sam lets the silence drop and points. “See that wasp’s nest in the crook of that V-shape up there?”

“Yeah, I think so.” It looks like a tiny paper ball hanging from the
underside of a limb, like the fat flap from his brother’s arm.

“You almost never see wasp’s nests in trees. And never in pine trees.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t happen that way.” Sam wants to say something here, wants to get Christer talking. He needs to get it out; like gas, it’s flammable, a push that could become a burst, or a fire. “Do you miss your brother?”

There’s just a space now, bounded by the end of the question and the expected response. It’s a dip. Christer doesn’t know what to say. He’s not sure. “I’m sorry it all happened like that. That’s all I know.”

“I understand.” Sam thinks about saying something else but it doesn’t come. He’s never been good at this consoling, counseling. He touches Christer’s elbow lightly in what he hopes is a reassuring way. Something’s buried, needs to come up.
Digging up Treasure

Christer is looking at the map, searching for a bluff. He is holding two washed-out ice cream buckets in his right hand as his feet slide over the mossy path he knows will lead him to the two spruce trees which will, in turn, lead him to where Bernard's ashes are buried. He turns his head to the ground to see trillium and bloodroot passing by beneath him, leaving lines of white in his mind, to let his feet and hands lead him to where his head will not.

They do. He is past the spruces and is facing the bluff before Christer can lift his head again. There is a massive, overhanging Douglas fir, its roots covered with browning moss. The earth has eroded almost halfway beneath it, but it refuses to fall. It has been six years since he stole his brother's ashes from the mantelpiece in the family room, replacing them with a combination of normal wood ash, ceramic dust, and fine sand, and brought them out here in a coffee can. It has been six years of hanging Christmas trees since he buried his brother in the clay. Christer puts down the empty buckets and blinks his eyes once before going to his knees to dig up the coffee can which contains the remains of Bernard. His knuckles remember, and they direct the fingers to scrape away the inches of loose sand before they reach the wet, sloppy clay. He has brought a small knife with him to help him cut it out, but it is slow going. He cuts and peels the wet stuff off in layers. They get darker as he goes down. He piles them in heavy sheets next to the hole.

Christer nearly cuts himself when he hits the sheet of slate marking the spot, the blade deflecting off and just missing his other hand. He pries it up and touches his fingers quietly to the lid of the can below. He pushes it to see if it will move, but it won't. He thinks that maybe Bernard is not only inside the can, but maybe part of him has seeped out into the surrounding
clay. He cuts out the clay and collects it in the two buckets, then uses both hands to pull out the coffee can. It pops free and Christer falls back with the can in his lap, his arms around it in an unintentional hug. He looks at it for a moment, then places it down on the ground; then he leans back into the pile of fresh, wet clay, mashes his head and back into it, sliding his arms over the earth, leaving a sort of clay angel behind him.

He lays there, losing the warmth and color of his skin.

After a minute, he stands and picks up the two buckets of clay, along with the coffee can, and begins to walk back, leaving behind the hole and the angel, gaping together in the earth.
Sitting back, Christer looks up at his creation. It is a globe of shiny paper, car glass, and ashes wet with gasoline from home, cemented together with clay, saliva, and rubber cement. It is two feet in diameter, and hangs from a blue spruce tree, suspended with heavy twine six-and-a-half feet off the ground, tied with a simple square knot. He has disassembled the stack of pornos and balled some up, then wrapped others around, creating a spherical collage of nipples and belly buttons, freckles, noses, and patches of hair. He has pulled the broken, rubber-backed sheets of car glass out of the Plymouth and spread them over the ball like a blanket. He has covered the whole thing in clay, then taken some of the remaining pages of text from the magazines and wadded them up into continental shapes, until all that was left were the decaying covers, and so Christer has built an exact replica of the world.

He remembers reading how Odysseus escaped the Cyclops by strapping himself and his comrades under the bellies of sheep, so he lays down on the ground, in the slippery grass, below the porno and car glass globe, and watches the blades of grass magnify themselves like the pores of the torn models above him, expanding and beginning to suck him in, breasts waving, and suddenly he cannot breathe under the weight of the motion blazing like fireflies on slow film in the air around him; and as he has clipped out the newspaper article about his brother going through the ice and has held it under the magnifying glass for so long that the ink letters pixellate and blur out until he can't see his brother's face anymore or anything else, he then moves the magnifying glass back so that the light closes from a wonderful ring to a tiny point in the middle of the word 'memorial' and sets the whole thing on fire.