Defining and producing "good" fiction: The roles of the author, editor, and agent in the publication of "Refresh, Refresh"

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Defining and producing “good” fiction: The roles of the author, editor, and agent in the publication of “Refresh, Refresh”

by

Sarah LeeAnn Hay

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
David Roberts, Major Professor
David Russell
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2009

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First I would like to acknowledge all the help and information with which Ben Percy provided me for this thesis based on his story. I couldn’t have written this thesis without his friendly cooperation and willingness to meet with me and provide me with anything that might be pertinent to my thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge the help of Katherine Fausset, who responded to me so quickly when I asked to interview her, and provided such detailed and useful responses to all my questions. She truly seemed interested in helping me with my thesis.

Nathaniel Rich was generous enough to let me interview him by phone despite his busy schedule, and worked with me around my schedule and my fussy baby. He was so careful to provide me with detailed answers to all my questions.

Thank you to Steve Pett who originally came up with the idea for this unique, interesting thesis topic. Thank you for being willing to help me out during the summer during your vacation time to help me get back on track, even when you were no longer on my committee. I greatly appreciate your help and support!

Thank you also to David Roberts who spent so much time helping me figure out what exactly I wanted to write about, and editing my thesis so closely to make it the best it could be. All the time you spent with the first, frustrating version of my thesis is much appreciated. I also appreciate all the time you spent with the second version of my thesis.

Thank you to David Zimmerman and David Russell for acting as the other members of my committee and being willing and available to help whenever needed.
Lastly I would like to thank my family for all their help and moral support through this stressful time in my life. Thank you mom and dad for your willingness to watch Rowan so I could get work done on my thesis, even when I was good at putting my work off to play with Rowan instead. Thank you also to Kyle for listening to my complaints and putting up with me when I had a bad attitude about the work I still had to do on my thesis. Lastly I would like to thank Rowan for letting his mommy spend so much time on her thesis when I could have been spending time with you instead, which is what I really would have rather been doing!
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

What makes a piece of fiction “good” or “effective”? What are some criteria for good fiction? What makes a piece of fiction publishable, and why are some pieces published and others not? Most successful fiction writers agree that there are no strict rules or formulas, but they also agree there are certain things that one should do or avoid doing in order to be successful and have his or her stories published. In my thesis I will examine the publication process for one short story, “Refresh, Refresh” by Benjamin Percy. Through collaboration between Percy and his agent, and Percy and his editors at *The Paris Review*, the story was shaped into “good fiction” and was published in a prestigious literary journal. A lot of the story could already be considered “good fiction” before Percy’s agent and editors collaborated with him to edit the story, but without their help the story wouldn’t have been good enough to be published. My thesis will examine what successful authors have said makes good fiction, the process of editing “Refresh, Refresh,” and how the writing and editing of Percy’s short story fit with what authors say makes “good fiction.”

The second chapter of my thesis categorizes some descriptions of good fiction. The categories include character, angle, style and language, plot, and dialogue. Within these categories, I will describe what is considered advisable when writing fiction.

The third chapter of my thesis describes the publication process for “Refresh, Refresh,” published at the end of 2005 in *The Paris Review*. It describes the specific changes made to the story, and why these changes were made in order to improve the story and have it published. The process of creating this quality piece of fiction included self-editing by the
writer (Percy), editing by an agent (Katherine Fausset), and editing by the editors (Philip Gourevitch and Nathaniel Rich) at the source of publication for the piece.

The fourth chapter of my thesis will return to the categories developed in the second chapter, and show how each one was applied when the editing of “Refresh, Refresh” was taking place. I will show that this short story is an example of what can be called “good fiction,” and why.

**No Strict Rules**

No strict rules or formulas exist as to what makes a successful piece of fiction. In my research, almost every time an experienced writer laid out characteristics of good fiction, he or she included a disclaimer. For example, Jerome Stern, director of the writing program at Florida State University, included such a disclaimer in “Don’t Do This: A Short Guide to What Not to Do,” an essay published in *Crafting Fiction: in Theory, in Practice*. The disclaimer includes the heading: “Don’t Believe Any of the Don’ts Above,” which argues that “art is made out of broken rules,” and that if you are able, you should do the “don’ts” that he just finished describing (236).

Therefore, the descriptions of good fiction I am laying out are—as I said earlier—guidelines produced by successful authors or editors, and represent what most writers, especially beginning writers, need to start out with in order to succeed and get published. Plenty of examples exist of fiction that breaks the rules. Thus my thesis will be *descriptive* of good fiction, rather than *prescriptive*. *The Glimmer Train Guide to Writing Fiction* is an example of a guide that describes rather than prescribes. It includes differing thoughts from authors on various writing categories such as character development. The guide even places
authors with opposite or differing viewpoints together in the same chapter back-to-back to show the lack of consensus on what a writer should “always” do or should “always” avoid.

Most of my thesis will focus broadly on the writing of all fiction, but some advice specifically for short stories exists. Kit Reed, novelist and short story writer, states that a short story writer must “leave out everything that doesn’t belong” (213). Words chosen, ideas, and characters belong in a story only if they function in that story. A writer has to “resist the temptation” to digress. A writer should not “fall in love with his own voice” or follow an unimportant character for too long (213). Reed specifies that the following should be left out of a short story: (1) what characters do between scenes, (2) unnecessary dialogue, (3) time elapsed from one important scene to another, (4) most explanations, and (5) loving, non-functional descriptions (214–218).

The very successful and famous writer Flannery O’Connor’s Mystery and Manners focuses mostly on short story writing. O’Connor is a proponent of the idea that writing takes some God-given talent, and that there are no strict formulas for writing quality fiction. “Technique in the minds of many is something rigid, something like a formula that you impose on the material; but in the best stories it is something organic, something that grows out of the material…it is different for every story of any account that has ever been written” (67).

No strict rules or formulas exist as to what always works for a fiction writer; otherwise it would be easier for more people to be published. Flannery O’Connor claims that writing requires a gift. “There is no excuse for anyone to write fiction for public consumption unless he has been called to do so by the presence of a gift” (81). She claims that writers need certain qualities in order to be successful; not everything can be learned. According to O’
Connor, a writer needs to have “a mind cleared of false emotion and false sentiment and egocentricity” (84). What a writer needs is not simply competence at writing, says O’Connor, but also “vision to go with it,” which one cannot get from a writing class (86). Additionally, O’Connor claims that “no amount of sensitivity can make a story-writer out of you if you just plain don’t have a gift for telling a story” (77).

In addition, O’Connor states that a writer needs to continually be learning how to write. As soon as a writer “learns how to write,” he or she is finished, says O’Connor (83). “If a writer is any good, what he makes will have its source in a realm much larger than that which his conscious mind can encompass and will always be a greater surprise to him than it can ever be to his reader” (83).

O’Connor has many thoughts on what makes good fiction and a good fiction writer. She states that some writers want to only put “unfleshed ideas and emotions” into their stories (67), but that fiction is about “everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn’t try to write fiction. It’s not grand enough for you” (68). Fiction writing is not about writing sentence after sentence filled with grand emotions and ideas; it is about getting down to the nitty-gritty and everyday details about being human. A fiction writer also has to have respect for the truth, states O’Connor, and convey that truth in his or her stories (83).

O’Connor believes that fiction deals with reality, and that it operates through the senses (91). This has to be learned not just in the head, but in habits, she argues (92). A fiction writer has to habitually look at the world in a different way, being aware of the sensory details around him or her (91–92). A story that is any good, O’Connor says, “can’t be reduced, it can only be expanded” (102). Both the writer and a reader will continue to see
more and more in a good story, and the story will continue to escape the writer and reader (102). Also in a good story, you “ought to be able to discover something” (106). If as a writer you are unable to discover something in your own work, then “probably nobody else will,” states O’Connor (106).

Textbook author and *Esquire* fiction editor Rust Hills has also provided some general advice about fiction writing. As a fiction editor, Hills claims he saw too many stories filled with “daytime fantasying” at the heart of “slick, trick, sexy, sadistic, self-pitying, snappy-dialogued, romanticized, glamorized, hard-boiled, or sentimentalized” stories that he received (32–33). These daytime fantasy stories should not be written and are very rarely published, he claims (33). Daytime fantasy stories in some way fulfill the fantasies of the author. A successful story needs to be more than just a fulfillment of fantasy and have an actual intention which must be “bedded in all other aspects of the story” such as the plot, the characterizations, the mood, the style, etc. (34).

Simply from this short summary of professional opinions, it can be seen that no strict rules exist for a fiction writer. Writers and editors have provided much advice for writers on what to do or not to do, but their advice often varies and can’t be summarized in a list of what should a writer do and what should a writer not do in order to be a success. Writing also takes some natural talent; not everything can be learned.

**Ben Percy’s “Refresh, Refresh”**

Since my thesis will be focused on Ben Percy’s short story “Refresh, Refresh” and the changes that were made in different versions of the story, it will be helpful to include a description and background of the piece. The author is a native of Oregon and has published
a novel, *The Wilding*, as well as two collections of short stories: *Refresh, Refresh*, and *The Language of Elk*. His fiction and nonfiction have been read on National Public Radio, performed at Symphony Space, and published by *Esquire*, *Men's Journal*, *The Paris Review*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Glimmer Train*, and many other venues (*Benjamin Percy*). Percy teaches creative writing in the MFA program at Iowa State University.

**Publication Process**

Percy began working on the first draft of his story (Appendix A) in the early fall of 2005. Two weeks later he finished the draft (Appendix B) and sent it to his agent, Katherine Fausset. Fausset and Percy collaborated on the draft for a few days until they were both satisfied with the results, and then Fausset sent this version of the story (Appendix C) to *The Paris Review*. This prestigious literary journal was the only place to which Fausset submitted the story, which Percy attributed to the fact that when an agent (rather than a writer) submits a piece, the agent usually hears back pretty quickly about whether or not the piece will be accepted. Fausset and Percy were waiting to hear back from *The Paris Review* before sending it on to other magazines in order to keep from angering editors who may have wanted to publish the story only to find it had been accepted elsewhere. Agents avoid sending a manuscript to several publications at the same time because it can create problems if more than one publisher has strong interest in the story.

Fausset chose *The Paris Review* because, as Percy said, “It’s the best, so it’s logical to begin there, at the top of the heap.” He also cited the fact that after Philip Gourevitch took over the journal, the *Review* developed a very political vision. *The Paris Review* was founded in 1953 in Paris and year after year has introduced many important writers such as Adrienne
Rich who was first published in the *Review*. The magazine was also one of the first to recognize the work of Jack Kerouac. Some contemporary short stories that have appeared in the magazine include Jim Carroll’s *Basketball Diaries*, and Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Virgin Suicides*.

When Fausset called Percy to tell him that his story had been accepted, she said, “This is a game changer.” Publication in *The Paris Review* was a boost to Percy’s career. Fausset also said that the editors had some changes in mind and would be contacting him soon to discuss them. These changes will be discussed in detail later in the thesis. The two editors (Philip Gourevitch and Nathaniel Rich) worked with Percy for about two weeks before everyone was pleased with the final version, which was published in December 2005 as part of the Winter 2005 issue. *The Paris Review* is a quarterly journal.

When asked what inspired his story, Percy discussed reading about and watching news reports on the Iraq war. He set out with the purpose of “engaging with the war,” but he knew he could not write about what was happening over there with credibility since he had not experienced it himself. Therefore he set the story in Oregon to “concentrate on the battleground at home.” He had also read about a small town in Ohio that overnight lost a dozen of its male inhabitants in Iraq, so he “transported the grief into [his] own backyard.”

“Refresh, Refresh” focuses on the lives of two high school students in the small town of Crow, Oregon who are impacted by the fact that many of the men in the town (and specifically the fathers of these two boys) have been deployed to Iraq. The tension-filled and sometimes violent story shows the effect the absence of the fathers has on the town and the boys specifically. It is narrated in the first-person by one of the boys (Josh), and the story is centered on him and his response to the life he is living without his father, whose absence
leaves a large void which is palpable throughout the taut story. The final version of the story can be found in Appendix D.

Reviews

Together with the positive reviews “Refresh, Refresh” received and publication in the prestigious Paris Review, it is clear that Percy’s story is an example of the “good fiction” I am seeking to define. The story won The Paris Review’s Plimpton Prize and the 2006 Pushcart prize in fiction and was anthologized in The Best American Short Stories 2006. That year’s guest editor, Ann Patchett, called it “the story of 2006.” In the Boston Globe, one reviewer called it “surprising, but utterly convincing.” In the Chicago Tribune, the reviewer stated that Percy gives us “just enough and no more.” A NewWest.net reviewer described the story as containing “searing authenticity, brutal energy, and pitch-perfect dramatization of the Iraq war on communities that are losing their fathers to combat.” These are just a few of the positive reviews the story received, making it a useful example of the publication process for a piece of “good fiction.”
CHAPTER 2. ELEMENTS OF GOOD FICTION

No strict rules or formulas exist as to what always works for a fiction writer, otherwise it would be easier for more people to be published. Writing takes talent, a continual openness to learning, an awareness of the following categories (characters, angle, style and language, plot, and dialogue) to consider during and before writing, and knowledge of what successful writers have said makes good fiction.

Characters

Characters are a critical part of any story. Most successful authors have a lot to say about the creation and development of characters.

Flat vs. Round

E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel* divides characters into two types: “flat” and “round” (103). He discusses advantages to both types of characters. Flat characters are “constructed round a single idea or quality” (104). The test of a round character is “whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat,” says Forster; “if it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round” (118). Two examples of round characters include Madame Bovary who is free to “expand and secrete unchecked” throughout her book, surprising the reader along the way, and Moll Flanders, who also changes and surprises the reader throughout the novel that is named for her (118).

Flat characters are sometimes called “types” and sometimes “caricatures,” states Forster (103). They can often be constructed around a single idea or quality (103). Such characters never surprise, and are always dependable. Forster gives an example of a flat
character from Proust, the Princess of Parma, who can be expressed in one sentence: “I must be particularly careful to be kind.” The only thing she does throughout the whole story is be careful (105).

**Bringing Characters to Life**

David Huddle, teacher, poet, and essay writer, states that there are six ways to bring a character to life in a story: (1) information, (2) physical appearance, (3) thoughts and feelings, (4) actions, (5) sensory experience, and (6) speech (203–204). Information includes what we know about the character. Physical appearance is best if done in a “less obvious and craftier” way where detail also tells the personality of a character. A writer also needs to use a character’s “physical presence” throughout the story rather than just describing it at the beginning (203). In regard to thoughts and feelings, Huddle states that “when a character is fully realized,” the reader knows what a character will be thinking and feeling in any situation. If the reader does not know, the character is not “all there” (204). About actions, Huddle says that a character’s actions do not have to be “strange or crazy” to hold a reader’s attention, they just have to be true to the character and come directly out of the character’s personality (204). I will have more to say about action in the following subsection. It is also important, Huddle states, for a writer to let the reader know what a character is smelling, hearing, touching, tasting, and seeing in a certain scene (205). Finally, regarding speech, Huddle states that fiction writers who are strong on character need to think that individual people are extremely interesting and the writers have to discover and show what about people is interesting (206).
A last piece of advice Huddle has in regard to characters is to be open to experiences other than your own as a writer. Huddle characterizes the writer who is open to new experiences as a “transformed writer” who will not “condemn a character or a type of character…condescend, or write down, to his characters…will avoid simplifying his characters in order to make some abstract point, will ignore the boring limitations of stereotype…will be more likely to choose characters who are at least his or her equal” (212).

Action

Ben Nyberg, professor, writer, and editor, agrees with Huddle about so-called “transformed” writers when he says that a writer should not force his or her characters to act unnaturally to prove a point. A character should not be flat; readers need to be able to relate to characters (225). A writer should not make a stereotypical character simply to get up on his or her soapbox. In regard to characters, Nyberg also argues that characters always need to have a reason for what they do or say, which is another argument against the use of flat characters, which Forster actually defended in some instances. “People in fiction must have intelligible, supportable reasons for what they do and say, which is possible only if their behavior is motivated by factors a reader can understand and verify from evidence in the story” (226).

Elizabeth Bowen, writer, has advice for other writers about characters and action. When action takes place within a story, the reader must see the alternative courses that a character could take. “It is in being seen to be capable of alternatives that the character becomes, for their readers, valid,” states Bowen. She also argues that the action of a character should be “unpredictable before it has been shown, inevitable when it has been shown” (144).
In regard to characters and action, Flannery O’Connor states that a story is a “complete dramatic action—and in good stories, the characters are shown through the action and the action is controlled through the characters, and the result of this is meaning that derives from the whole presented experience” (90). O’Connor says that in good stories the character’s personality creates the action. O’Connor believes that in unsuccessful stories the writer has thought of some action and then “scrounged up a character to perform it” (105). A writer needs to start with a personality, and then an action will follow: “something is bound to happen” (106).

**Angle**

Angle has two senses, states Elizabeth Bowen, the visual angle (point of view) and the moral angle (148). Bowen states that her advice is for novels, but it can also apply to short stories. The best choices for the visual angle, or point of view, according to Bowen, include the following:

1. **First-person,** when the point of view comes from one character and the narrator can enter only that character’s mind; Bowen states that with this point of view, the narrator has to spend many pages trying to speculate on anything that the specific character does not know. Bowen states that these passages are often “long” and “cumbrous” (148).

2. **The point of view can reside in the head of many characters,** which Bowen states is a “better” choice for point of view. The author must make the choice as to which characters’ heads he or she will enter. The characters’ heads that
are not entered will be more “romantic, fatal-seeming, sinister,” states Bowen (148).

3. A third option is the use of an omniscient story-teller. Bowen states that this is the best choice for an author to use. For this point of view, the writer is able to enter any of the characters. Bowen also states that some characters should still remain un-entered, as in the second point of view option (148).

Another consideration in regard to angle is the moral angle of the piece of fiction. The moral angle has to do with a writer’s pre-assumptions such as social, political, sexual, national, and aesthetic. Bowen argues that these pre-assumptions are bad and that they “limit the novel to a given circle of readers” (148). “Great novelists write without pre-assumption,” argues Bowen. Great authors write outside their nationality, sex, and class (149).

**Booth’s Theories on Visual Angle**

Wayne C. Booth, teacher, theorist, writer, and editor, lays out his own precise (and at times complicated) organization of the available choices for a piece of fiction’s visual angle or point of view in a chapter titled “Types of Narration” from his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. He argues that the distinction between first- or third-person really tells us nothing of importance unless we “describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects” (154). He agrees with Bowen that first-person is often limiting. Booth’s distinctions in angle that follow can apply to both first- and third-person narration.
Dramatized and Undramatized Narrators

An important factor in fiction has to do with whether the narrator is *dramatized* and whether his or her “beliefs and characteristics are shared by the author” (154). One distinction is the implied author, where the narrator is not dramatized but acts as the author’s “second self.” Often an inexperienced reader may think the story by a “second self” narrator is unmediated (155). An example of the “second self” narrator would be an omniscient narrator who is not a character in the story, but can enter the heads of many characters. When an *undramatized* narrator is placed into a story by the use of “I,” the reader will know that a mediator does exist, even if he or she is given no personal characteristics whatsoever (155).

Many writers dramatize their narrators fully so that they are developed characters, such as the multiple narrators in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Booth states that the most important unacknowledged narrators are the third-person “centers of consciousness” through whom authors have “filtered their narratives” (155). An example of this type of narrator includes Gabriel in James Joyce’s “The Dead.” Booth appreciates this point of view because of its “naturalness and vividness” (156) but asserts that it still has its flaws such as cumbersomeness (156). For this point of view, “he” or “she” is used, and the story is filtered through that person.

Observers and Narrator-Agents

Among dramatized narrators are observers and narrator-agents who have some effect on the events of a story (156). Mere observers include the “I” of *Tom Jones*; narrator-agents include Nick in *The Great Gatsby*, who had minor involvement in the course of events, and
characters/narrator-agents with greater involvement in the course of events, such as Moll Flanders and Huckleberry Finn (156).

**Scene and Summary**

Narrators can tell their story through scenes or through summary or through a combination of the two (156). The contrast is between showing and telling. An example of showing includes a scene in the final version of “Refresh, Refresh” when Josh and Gordon are fighting in the yard (144); telling includes a re-telling of events in the narrator’s own words, without the scene actually being portrayed in the story; the reader has only the narrator to rely on to find out what happened.

**Self-Conscious Narrators**

Self-conscious narrators are aware of themselves as writers; other narrators rarely discuss their writing choices or seem “unaware that they are writing, thinking, speaking or reflecting a literary work” (157). Josh is an example of a narrator who is not self-conscious. An example of a self-conscious narrator includes Holden Caulfield from *A Catcher in the Rye*, who realizes he is narrating his own story.

**Variations of Distance**

Booth states that narrators differ according to the “degree and kind of distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story” (157). The narrator may be distant from the implied author, and the distance could be moral, intellectual, physical, or temporal (157). The implied author may be distant from the reader (158); the implied author may be distant from other characters (159).
Variations in Support or Correction

Both reliable and unreliable narrators “can be unsupported or uncorrected by other narrators…or supported or corrected” (160). The narrators in The Sound and the Fury were corrected or supported by each others’ stories. Benjy needed support as a narrator; otherwise the reader would have little idea of what actually happened through Benjy’s convoluted, chaotic, unreliable narration.

Privilege

Narrators can be either “privileged to know what could not be learned by strictly natural means or limited to realistic vision and inference” (160). Complete privilege is often called omniscience. Many kinds of privilege exist, and very few “omniscient” narrators know as much as the authors (160). Ishmael in Moby Dick, for instance, generally had a limited point of view but at times became omniscient. Some narrators, such as Josh, are confined to what they could realistically know, as was Huck Finn.

Inside Views

Narrators who provide inside views into characters differ in the “depth and the axis of their plunge” (162). Booth gave the example of Jane Austen, who goes deep into her characters morally, but barely “skims the surface” psychologically (162). Authors of stream-of-consciousness works try to go deep psychologically, such as in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, but do not go deep into the moral dimension. Booth reminds us that any sustained inside view turns the character who is being examined into the narrator (162). He also argues
that the deeper the narrator goes into the character, the “more unreliability we will accept
without loss of sympathy” (162).

**The Individual Piece**

Booth ends his chapter on types of narration by stating that the author always has to deal with
the individual work: Which character should tell this story or part of the story, how reliable
should he or she be, how much privilege and freedom to comment should he or she have.
(163). Booth emphasizes my point that you cannot take one author’s advice that the
omniscient angle is best, for instance. What is best depends on the particular story;
generalizations about which angle is most useful are not very helpful to the author, argues
Booth (163). “The novelist discovers his narrative technique as he tries to achieve for his
readers the potentialities of his developing idea” (163). No strict rules exist as to what angle
is the best for each type of story.

Booth also argues that the author’s choices are mostly of degree, not kind. Deciding
that a narrator should be omniscient is just one part of an author’s job. Just how omniscient
should the narrator be? Booth ends with the thought that questions an author has about
degree can only be answered by “reference to the potentialities and necessities of particular
works, not be reference to fiction in general, or the novel, or rules about point of view” (163).

**Style and Language**

An effective writing style makes the reader feel like the fiction is unfolding around him or
her. It is “presented not represented,” states Flannery O’Connor (73).
**Purposeful Language**

Further advice from O’Connor includes the idea that a writer should select each and every word for a reason (75), and even though the writer may not have anything new to say, he or she has to find a new way to say it (76). The writer should also show things, rather than just say things. Details included must be essential and must work to show something and also “create movement” within the story (93). This movement must be toward the story’s overall purpose. Details must be controlled by a purpose (93), and not just thrown in because the author likes the sound of the words he or she has chosen to describe something.

**Theme**

The way in which meaning can be found in a story is also an element of a writer’s style. O’Connor argues that if you can easily state the theme of a story, “you can be sure the story is not a very good one.” In contrast, “the meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it” (96). She argues that if someone asks what a story is about, the only appropriate thing to tell that person is to read the story because the meaning of fiction is not abstract, it is experienced (96).

**Mystery of Life**

O’Connor argues that a short-story writer has to “make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible” (98). When showing, the writer needs to show the concrete (98). O’Connor uses an example from her story, “Good Country People,” which includes the theft of a wooden leg by a Bible salesman. The wooden leg is a concrete detail
and symbol that begins to stand for something within the story, and together with the theft as an action and a symbol, it describes a little bit of the mystery of existence (98–101).

**Memorable Language**

O’Connor writes about the use of language in several unsuccessful short stories where the language made it “difficult to distinguish one story from another.” The writers used clichés, but no memorable language, images, or metaphors. None of the images used were effective enough to “take away with you” (103). She did not provide any examples of these ineffective images, perhaps because she did not remember them.

**Local Flavor**

Another unsuccessful part of several short stories to which O’Connor refers is that the writers made no use of any local idiom (103). She states that the characters in the stories spoke as if they “had never heard any kind of language except what came out of the television set” (103). A character’s speech reveals his or her personality, and characters need to have “distinctive speech to reveal themselves with.” Sometimes characters in unsuccessful stories have no distinctive features (103).

In contrast to the other authors I researched who did not attempt to pin down specific tenets of good fiction, O’Connor says that there are two qualities that make good fiction: one is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners (103). Manners emerge from your location and the “texture of existence that surrounds you” (103). O’Connor says it is important to acknowledge the location of your story, but not to “wallow” in the locale (104). Use the local idiom, she says, because it “characterizes a society.” “You can’t cut characters off from their society and say much about them as individuals,” she argues (104). “You can’t
say anything meaningful about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a believable and significant social context” (104). This can be achieved through a character’s language. O’Connor uses the example of an old lady in one of Andrew Lytle’s stories who says that “she has a mule that is older than Birmingham” (104–105). O’Connor claims that in this sentence the reader gets a sense of a society and its history. She also quotes a sentence from one of Eudora Welty’s stories where a character says, “Where I come from, we use fox for yard dogs and owls for chickens, but we sing true” (105). “There is a whole book in that one sentence,” states O’Connor (105).

**Plot**

E. M. Forster defines plot as a “narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality.” For instance, “the king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot (130). According to Forster, a plot “demands intelligence and memory” (131). When constructing a plot, every action or word should count; it should be “economical and spare,” and even when it is complicated, it should be “free of dead matter” (133). Forster believes this is important because a reader needs to remember the important parts of the plot and not be bogged down by extra, “dead matter” (133). For instance, if by the time the queen dies the reader has forgotten the existence of the king, he or she will never figure out what killed her (133).

**Characters within Plot**

Bowen says that plot is story (142). She says that characters exist to provide action in a story. Each character must only be created, she says, to give his or her action verisimilitude (142). In relation to the purpose of the character within the plot, R.V. Cassill, author and professor,
says that a character needs to have reasonable characteristics in order to perform an action. Characters must not be “mutilated to fit plot requirements” (184). For instance, if the plot requires a woman to cheat on her husband with a stuck-up ladies’ man, it should be obvious that the woman can’t have the characteristics of obedience, good sense, or tranquility. This character has to “emerge as the composite of those characteristics that would make such an action seem probable, and only those” (184).

**Poetic Truth**

Bowen argues that the purpose of a plot is to further the piece of fiction toward its object, which should be “the non-poetic statement of a poetic truth” (142). Bowen’s poetic truth is what others label “theme.” At the end of a piece of fiction the reader should be able to glean some sort of truth, point, or overall purpose from the story. The plot will move the reader toward this truth.

**Dialogue**

Dialogue must have a purpose; otherwise it should not be included in a story. Bowen states that dialogue must both further plot and express character (146).

**Avoid Illustrative Dialogue**

Illustrative dialogue, which can become “static, a dead weight” and halt the movement of the plot should be avoided (147). An example of illustrative dialogue includes a conversation between two characters included only so the author could illustrate the point that a certain character is selfish, for instance. This dialogue may not help to advance the plot at all, but is simply thrown in for the author to make a point that could be made in another way—by
showing the character’s actions, for instance. The amusing for its own sake as well as infatuation with any idiom should also be left out.

**Intention vs. Actuality**

On the whole, characters should speak less rather than more. “What they intend to say should be more evident, more striking…than what they arrive at saying” (147). An instance of this could be illustrated by the scene in “Refresh, Refresh” that includes the father’s email. The email doesn’t contain anything very personal, just brief facts that are enough to let Josh know his father is still alive, but probably do not satisfy him fully since the message does not include information about the fighting his father is experiencing, or any emotions such as “I love you and miss you” (Appendix D 148). Josh’s father perhaps intended to include this type of message, but for some reason held back, maybe because it was hard for him to vocalize those types of feelings to his son, even though he felt them. What Josh’s father most likely intended to say but didn’t is more striking to the reader than what he actually ended up saying.

**Crystallizing Relationships**

Dialogue is the means by which the writer shows what is between the characters; it “crystallizes relationships” (147). Dialogue should work so that analysis or explanation of relationships is unnecessary. Every sentence a character speaks should be descriptive of that character. In each sentence, Bowen argues, two things must be present: (1) calculation, or (2) involuntary self-revelation of the character (147).
Summary

As can be seen in this chapter, much has been written on how to write good fiction. Within each category, each author’s advice differs slightly; each author seems to include what he or she thinks is most important in regard to each category. The advice included on what makes good fiction makes sense, since all of us have read both good and bad fiction. Overall there are no hard and fast rules or an easy-to-follow guide to writing good fiction, as many of my sources point out. Often what is advisable in one story is inadvisable in another. In regard to character, angle, style and language, plot, and dialogue, different techniques work for different stories. Successful writing depends upon an author’s goal for his or her story, the point of the story, and what the author hopes to accomplish.

In chapter three, I will examine the writing and editing process for the short story “Refresh, Refresh.” I will focus on what changes were made and why, in order to focus in chapter four on how these changes worked to make the story into what I have just shown in chapter two to be “good fiction.”
In this chapter I will examine the changes made to “Refresh, Refresh.” The editing process for “Refresh, Refresh” took a little over two weeks after Percy sent his second draft to his agent (Fausset). The process included collaboration between the author and agent and between the author and editors to make a piece of fiction worthy of being published in a prestigious literary magazine. For the purpose of clarity, I will refer to version 1 (Percy’s first draft); version 2 (the draft that Percy sent to his agent Fausset); version 3 (the story that Fausset submitted to The Paris Review); and version 4 (the story as published after collaboration with the Review’s editors). All four versions of the story are located in the appendices. Page numbers cited in this chapter for specific passages from the different story drafts refer to the pages on which those passages exist in the appendices.

While looking at specific changes made, I will also examine why they were made, and how they were suggested. Acknowledgment of the categories fiction writers must consider will be seen through the changes made by the writer, agent, and editors.

Author Revisions

First I will examine the changes Percy made to the first draft of his story before he sent the second version to his agent.

Version 1

The first draft (Appendix A) took Percy two weeks to write. Percy did not make too many changes, and most were minimal. He made some modest language changes, such as removing “at that moment” from the beginning of a paragraph because at the end of the
paragraph Percy had the phrase “just a moment,” and realized that the two phrases in the same paragraph were repetitious (81). The Word document for this draft includes a final page with several parts not included in the draft. Percy called these parts his “graveyard” of unused material (82–83). One large passage not included was a “magical realist” passage (which will be discussed shortly) that Percy’s agent suggested he remove. About this version overall, Percy said there were too many “for a minutes,” “after awhiles,” and other similar phrases that just added clutter to his story.

**Version 2**

The second version (Appendix B) of Percy’s story is the one he sent to his agent. I would like to examine the few revisions Percy made to this draft. One change was to add some additional descriptions of Dave Lightener, the recruitment officer. He added the fact that sometimes the boys saw Dave’s Vespa scooter parked “outside the homes of young women whose husbands had gone to war” (91). Percy also added this phrase about Lightener: “because he slept with the lonely wives of soldiers” (92). Percy made this addition because he wanted Lightener’s added presence in the town; he wanted the character to be more thoroughly rooted in the town and the description adds an extra dimension to make the reader despise him. The description shows Lightener as not just a recruiter but as a poacher as well. It makes him a very unlikable character.

Percy also added an additional phrase in one sentence as a stylistic/language change. The sentence changed from “A US warplane dropped it and the sand camouflaged it and it tore him into many meaty pieces” to “A US warplane dropped it and the sand camouflaged it and he stepped on it and it tore him into many meaty pieces” (106). Percy added “and he
stepped on it” in order to be clearer, to add a rhythm with the “ands,” and to delay the death and stretch out the tragedy.

Percy added the phrase “with a sudden lurch” as another stylistic/language change to his last paragraph to describe Dave’s movements (113). Percy did this to create suspense, drama, and delay. He also changed the pronoun “we” in the very last sentence of the story to “I”: “so fast I imagined him catching fire, burning up with a flash, howling as his heat consumed him.” Percy changed “we” to “I” to separate the main character from his gang. He wanted to distinguish the narrator from the unit. Using “I” gives Josh responsibility for the action; according to Percy, the main character has been affected by his friends’ violence. “Violence is learned,” states Percy. The main character inherited the violence from his father, who inherited it from his father.

Through the different drafts of his story, Percy continually changed more of the I’s to we’s. In many cases, “we” was meant to represent the entire town rather than just the boys. Percy wanted the reader to feel the collective emotions of the town. Doing this helps the reader get into the minds of the townspeople. The story becomes more “widely representational, and captures how our society takes in violence as entertainment.” He chose to use the communal voice as a “grammatical/rhetorical challenge” (Percy).

**Edits in Collaboration with His Agent**

In this section I will discuss version 3 of the story (Appendix C), which incorporates changes suggested by Fausset and implemented by Percy before the story was sent to *The Paris Review*. Fausset stated that she enjoys working with Percy because of how open he is to ideas about how to make his work better. Of course, she says, he does not accept everything she
says, and he shouldn’t, but he always makes a point of expressing appreciation for feedback.
Fausset said that she is always nervous about sending off an e-mail to an author with “big
edit” suggestions in it, so it is very nice that Percy takes the time to express appreciation for
her thoughts and ideas.

When I asked Fausset if it was easy to persuade Percy to make changes, she recalled
that it took her some time to determine what is was about the piece that was not working and
to “relay it in a way that [she] thought could be constructive.” She was sure that they
discussed the changes, but she does not remember much of the discussion, so it must not
have been too difficult to persuade Percy once Fausset realized how to suggest changes
constructively. Compared to some other authors that Fausset represents, Percy is enjoyable to
work with because of his easy-going nature and openness to constructive comments.

**Supernatural Elements**

Many of the changes Fausset suggested concern the “magical realism” element that Percy’s
story originally contained before his agent convinced him to remove it. These elements
include the boys and the people of the town literally growing older as the story progresses.
Fausset suggested these elements be cut because she said the idea of the boys growing old
was already there, it did not need to be so obvious. Also, making the boys literally age made
the audience feel like the message was handed to them too obviously; it is already implied
and understood that the town is coming apart.

Removing this magical realism from the story was a big change from Percy’s original
two versions. Fausset called the supernatural element “heavy-handed.” At first, Percy said, he
was hesitant to take out the supernatural elements because he had been reading work by
authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and he “wanted very badly to write a magical realist piece.” He said it was one of the reasons he wrote the story in the first place; but after thinking about it for a day he saw the logic of Fausset’s suggestions and decided that since the metaphor of premature aging was already in the story, it did not need to be so obvious.

The Ending

Another major change to the story was one made to the ending. Fausset argued that with the ending, Percy had gone too far. She claimed it was “too much” and “the wrong ending.” Percy told me that Fausset considers his work an easy edit because he often simply goes too far. Percy’s ending included the three boys pushing Dave Lightener into Hole in the Ground. Fausset suggested having the boys leave Dave at the edge of the hole and go to the Armed Forces Recruiting Office to sign up to serve (143). Both Percy and Fausset agreed this would be better because the moment captures the push and pull of the war. Bringing Dave to the edge but not pushing him over captures the feeling in one gesture.

When I asked Fausset about the ending, she said that it was “too simple.” It was “an unsatisfying note on which to end this emotionally-complicated piece.” The vengeance against Dave was satisfying, she said, but it still did not feel right. Fausset also described pushing Dave into the crater as an excess and an abundance of carnage that deadens the nerves. Instead of being pushed into the crater, he was left whimpering and vulnerable at the edge of the crater, which is a more powerful image, claims Fausset. Such an image is easier to savor than the image of Dave sledding to his death in the crater. She also thought it made more sense both narratively and according to the boys’ characters. In version 3 the final moment is metaphoric. It is a summit. Percy described the moment as embodying the push-
pull of how the boys feel about the war. Fausset also liked the inclusion of the scene where the boys sign up at the recruitment office. It gives the story a “cyclical effect” since the story spends much time exploring the relationship between fathers and sons without being too heavy-handed.

“Exit Signs”

Some smaller, stylistic/language edits suggested by Fausset included changes to words that Percy categorized as functioning like exit signs on the interstate. He said that Fausset does not like it when he states what is already obvious. In other words, he needs simply to take the reader there and does not need to explain beforehand what is going to happen. Thus Percy removed parts from version 2 such as, “This didn’t happen all at once. But it happened” because it was obvious (104). Fausset also had Percy remove “And I wasn’t alone” from the beginning of one paragraph because it was like an exit sign that was unnecessary (104).

Excessive Violence

Percy originally had a section in version 2 where one of the unlikable characters in the story, a “no-neck linebacker” named Seth Johnson, was killed when he collided with a semi in his Bronco and plummeted over a guardrail on the highway (109). Seth also happened to be in a state of rigor mortis when he was found. The detail about the rigor mortis could have been left out and the death of Seth left in, but Fausset also wanted the part about Seth’s death left out because she said there was already too much death in the story, too much carnage; and this additional death makes the others that occur seem diluted.
**Wording and Phrasing**

Fausset convinced Percy to make some changes to improve word choices in his story. Instead of saying “dirt rose in tiny clouds and stuck to our bare bellies,” the wording became “dirt rose in little puffs like distress signals” (118). Percy stated that “bare bellies” seemed a little silly, like something from a children’s book, and distress signals adds more detail; the words act as similes and actually do something for the story.

Fausset also suggested changes that added rhythm to the story, such as the inclusion of two sentences in a row beginning with “we fought” (134). These sentences create rising rhythm and sound like a chorus line, stated Percy. The first sentence beginning with “we fought” was also changed to include details that it was winter now in Tumalo; it shows the passage of time, which is important to advance the plot and help the reader better picture the scene.

As mentioned earlier, many of the I’s from the previous draft were also changed to “we” or “our” in order to show communal pain. The pain changes from simply the narrator’s pain to the pain of the entire town. The story includes “the sons and daughters and wives of Tumalo” in the pain and aging (134).

In the same passage where the pain is changed from personal to communal, Fausset had Percy add a phrase: “we saw our fathers even in the mirror” to tell what the boys saw when they looked in the mirror and saw thicker bodies and patchy beards (134). Percy described this addition as creating sentences where the reader’s eyes are drawn to a certain place; it is like a camera tracks around the house to a picture. It is more physical, and it leads the gaze and adds realism, says Percy.
Percy also stated that his goal was to re-work common phrasing, such as the words “flesh-colored” Percy initially used to describe Josh’s grandfather’s prosthesis (138). In the draft sent to *The Paris Review*, the words were changed to “flesh-toned.” Percy described his replacement of the often used phrase “flesh-colored” as similar to replacing “knee-deep” with “calf-deep.” He said the change has something to do with sound and beats in a sentence; something that Percy said cannot be taught and is hard to describe.

Later in the story, Percy added the sentence “mid-afternoon and it was already full dark” to remind the reader of the season, and add a metaphorical moment like the dark was descending (140). It also gives the story a colloquial flavor; Percy described the phrase “already full dark” as having “hickish flair.” “Mid-afternoon and it was already full dark” introduces the last part of the story and the most suspenseful and powerful section.

Another change from the previous version was from having the boys returning from the bar The Weary Traveler to having them stop at Josh’s house before heading to the bar. Fausset noticed that it would not make sense for the new ending where the boys head to the recruitment office. It would be too late in the evening if they were returning from the bar, and the office would not be open. Thus the boys are now on their way to the bar when they discover Dave on the front steps of Josh’s house with the bad news about Josh’s father.

Another area of the second draft where inconsistency was a problem was the details included that the boys were freshmen. It does not make sense that the boys would be able to get into bars and go to the recruitment office if they were only freshmen so Percy changed the boys to seniors.
Editors’ Changes

The editors at The Paris Review wanted some drastic and some minor changes made to “Refresh, Refresh” before they would publish it. The two editors who worked with Percy were Philip Gourevitch and Nathaniel Rich.

Title Change

One critical change to the story made by the editors was the title. The original title was “The Quickening.” Another title Percy suggested was “Hole in the Ground,” which he said would also act as a metaphor of the hole created by the war. Eventually the title was changed to “Refresh, Refresh.” Nathaniel Rich stated that he was not happy with “The Quickening” because he didn’t know what it meant. “Refresh, Refresh” worked as a pun on “refreshing” troops in Iraq with reinforcements and hitting the “refresh” button on the computer. Rich stated that the new title captured the “central, dramatic point in the narrative.” Percy stated that the title suggests generational inheritance from fathers; the grandfather’s war becomes the son’s war, becomes the grandson’s war.

Character Deletion

The first three versions of the story had three main characters. Percy did this because of the Marine’s rule of three. The editors suggested condensing the three characters into two. So Gordon and Cody become one character: Gordon. The editors suggested the change because of economy. There was no reason to have three main characters when there could be two. With three characters, sometimes it is hard to keep track of who’s who in a given scene, stated Percy. Rich stated that he was originally confused about which character was which.
and that they were not that different from one another. He said it did not serve a purpose to have a second best friend; the relationship would be stronger and easier to follow with just one best friend. Also the “emotional arc would be stronger and the stakes would be higher.”

Another character that was deleted was named Floyd Pitts, whom Percy used as a Greek chorus in the story. Pitts originally appeared three times in the story and the songs included along with Pitts’ appearance match what is happening in the story. Pitts, along with the narrator’s grandfather (whom I will discuss shortly), were considered good characters by Rich, but narratively did not add anything to the story. The reader could already understand what the lives of the characters and the town were like; these two characters seemed to block the narrative and they did not have any narrative arc in themselves. They would work well in another story, Rich said, but not in this story.

The narrator’s grandfather was actually used by Percy in another short story. The editors argued that he was too polemical for this story, Percy said. Percy’s other editor, Philip Gourevitch, stated that “Refresh, Refresh” originally felt like three stories rather than just one, and deleting or scaling down those three characters improved the story. Percy also recalled the editors had said these characters were just “window-dressing.”

**Fact Checking**

Rich stated that *The Paris Review* has a very high standard and takes fact checking very seriously. Originally the name of the town in which the story was set was Tumalo, which is an actual town in Oregon. The editors had Percy change the town name to Crow because the Hole in the Ground, which actually does exist, is too far away from Tumalo for the boys to continually go out there. Also, other facts and details Percy included about the town are
inaccurate. Rich stated that they wanted to keep everything on a “consistent level of reality.” If you are made to believe it is a real town, and then the story describes something as near the town that really isn’t, it “messes with the level of reality in the story” and forces the reader to doubt other things and question whether or not the writer knows he or she made a mistake. The story was supposed to be realistic, so everything needs to be realistic, stated Rich. Some things such as the location of the Hole in the Ground were “off” for no reason, he said.

**Length and Scene Cutting**

When I asked Rich about problems with “Refresh, Refresh,” the first topic that came up was length. He stated that the story as submitted (version 3) was very long. He saw things in the story that did not seem to belong (such as extra characters); he said the story needed to be reduced to make it “stronger, tighter, and more engaging.” The first suggestion Rich made was to take out certain sections that contained ideas that were already reinforced in other sections or in other ways. He said that if you can remove something from a story and not realize it is missing, then it wasn’t needed in the first place. “The challenge with short stories is compression,” he argued. Short stories are about compressing down to a “single, pure thing.”

Some sections that were cut from the story include a section from pages 117 and 118 in Appendix C of version 3 describing Josh’s thoughts about meteorites and what it was like to be near one when it struck earth. Percy recalled the editors stating that this section was simply excessive, useless description. The scene was a static moment with Josh just sitting there, and the editors wanted the story to be driven by action.
The editors also deleted what Percy called “philosophical musings” on page six of the third draft about why the boys were fighting. He recalled that these moments allowed the reader to linger in a certain state of consciousness for too long. This change also goes back to the issue of compressing a story to make it tighter.

Another overly philosophical moment from version 3 comes on page 119 in Appendix C when Percy describes the boys’ fighting as “reverse vampirism.” This moment Percy described as “obvious ham-fistedness” that was already implied, so the description was unnecessary. He also described the moment as something a reviewer might say about the story, so it shouldn’t actually be said by the author of the story.

Another part deleted from draft three included a scene describing the boys weight-lifting in Josh’s grandfather’s basement (125). The editors felt able to cut this scene because it was “redundant” (Percy). Nothing new was accomplished with the scene. Percy recalled the editors stating that the scene doesn’t have causality or lead to anything else, so it was easy to cut. Similar reasoning was used to cut one of the fight scenes originally included in version 3; too many fight scenes were included overall and what Percy was trying to convey in the scene already came across to the reader.

Two additional parts that were cut from version 3 include a detail that the boys stopped going to school, which was cut because it wasn’t believable (137), and a scene at Dairy Queen with Floyd Pitts (137–138), which was removed because the character of Floyd was removed.
**Wording and Phrasing**

Gourevitch stated that on the level of the prose, there were a lot of “ta-da” sentences, or paragraphs that were just a single sentence. The story included a lot of beats, like punch lines: “no longer,” “just like that,” “except for this.” The story seemed too jumpy and these phrases were unnecessary. Rich stated that these phrases and sentences heightened the drama and tension of a certain moment, but detracted from the overall tension building in the story. Rich argued that Percy was not trusting the drama of the story on its own, so he added all the paragraph breaks that put undue emphasis on events that were already dramatic without having to “offset them typographically” (Rich). Gourevitch did a lot of work combining sentences into longer paragraphs. This required Percy to “trust his prose more than he might have” (Rich). The prose was already engaging and beautiful, said Rich, and didn’t need this “trickery” of the reader.

**Violence and the Ending**

In general the violence in the story was toned down. Rich stated that there was a lot of beating and blood. Those extra kicks and punches were unnecessary. They made the story too cartoonish and violent. He said that most readers find the final version extremely violent, and without the edits made, the final version would have been overwhelmingly violent for the reader.

Rich was in agreement with Fausset about the change for the ending that he found out was made by Percy and Fausset. He stated that the first ending was simply murder and made the boys unsympathetic. It was also excessive and did not accomplish anything. If the boys killed Dave, it “opened up a whole new can of worms” that would deflect the reader from the
scope of the story, said Rich. It makes the reader wonder what will happen to the boys for murdering someone, when that is not the intent Percy had for his story.

**Summary**

The four people involved with the editing and publication of “Refresh, Refresh” worked in collaboration to produce a story that readers would appreciate and find affecting. In their changes we can see their acknowledgement of the categories that can be used to describe good writing technique. The next chapter will bring together chapters two and three by discussing the changes made to the story in terms of the categories from chapter two.
CHAPTER 4. CREATING GOOD FICTION WHILE WRITING AND EDITING

In chapter one I introduced the idea that no strict rules exist for fiction writers, but that many successful writers have given advice on how to write good fiction. In chapter two I laid out categories that fiction writers should consider if they want to be successful. Within the categories, I described what successful fiction writers advise other writers to do or not do. Chapter three addressed specific changes made in one piece of short fiction, and why these changes were made. In this chapter I will show how the editorial changes made by the writer, agent, and editors of “Refresh, Refresh” align with the categories for successful fiction that I discussed in chapter two. I hope to find some correspondence between expectations for “good fiction” and the collaborative efforts that got Ben Percy’s story published in a prestigious literary journal.

Of course, much of Percy’s story could already be considered “good fiction” before any of the editing took place, and I will discuss those aspects as well. Even though Percy’s story already had many elements of “good fiction” before he showed it to his agent and editors, those individuals ended up suggesting significant changes for his story, such as the change to the ending; without those collaborative changes, his story would not have been published in The Paris Review.

Characters

Drastic character changes were made within the various drafts of “Refresh, Refresh.” For example, Josh’s friend Cody was eliminated, as was Floyd Pitts. The role of Josh’s
grandfather was greatly reduced. Back in chapter one, I paraphrased Kit Reed, who said that everything that doesn’t belong should be left out of a short story, and that only what is necessary should remain. These characters were deleted or their roles abbreviated in order to make the short story into one story instead of three, as the editor Gourevitch first argued it was.

**Flat vs. Round**

In chapter two I discussed E. M. Forster’s ideas about fictional characters and his claim that both flat and round characters are useful in a story. Ben Nyberg disagrees, and says that characters always need a reason for what they do or say (226). A flat character’s actions are predictable, but the reader does not know the reasoning behind the actions. Josh and Gordon are clearly round characters since they both are capable of surprising the reader. We can see this when at the end they have mercy on Dave Lightener and then sign up at the recruiting office, which is a surprise based on the previous parts of the story. They clearly change in a surprising, yet convincing way. The initial ending where the boys push Dave into the hole is not as effective because it is shocking—but not convincing—that the boys would murder Dave. Fausset’s suggested change to Percy with regard to the ending helps make the characters of Josh and Gordon round.

Percy’s story also contains flat characters, such as Seth Johnson, who is typecast as the stereotypical dumb, heartless jock. Seth never surprises the reader, so according to Forster’s criteria he is flat. Nevertheless, Seth is useful in the story to show the kind of fighting Josh and Gordon have to do on the home front, just as their fathers have to fight in Iraq.
Bringing Characters to Life

David Huddle’s advice from chapter two on the six ways to bring a character to life (through information, physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, actions, sensory experience, and speech) is taken by Percy. We are given information about Josh’s background through information about his grandfather and father, his appearance (short and stocky), how he feels about his father (he respects him and wants to be like him) and the war (through his meeting with Dave in front of the mall, and through signing up at the recruitment station), his actions (fighting with Gordon, riding his bike alone to the Hole in the Ground, helping Gordon get revenge on Seth Johnson), his sensory experiences, especially during the fights and on the hunting excursion, and a few moments of Josh’s speech (in front of the mall, and on the camping trip). All of this character detail was included by Percy in the first draft of his story. It’s interesting that none of the changes suggested by Percy’s agent or editors involved adding more detail about Josh.

Action

Elizabeth Bowen’s advice about character includes that notion that the reader must be able to see alternatives to the course of action a character takes. Clearly in the last scene of “Refresh, Refresh,” we see that the boys could push Dave down Hole in the Ground, but they choose not to; instead they follow their fathers’ paths by going to the recruiting station. This change to the ending was suggested by Fausset, and Percy agreed it would be for the best. Bowen also states that the action of a character should be unpredictable before it is shown and inevitable after. The reader does feel like what will happen in the last scene is unpredictable,
but after the boys show restraint, the reader sees that is the inevitable choice unless they wish
to go to jail for the rest of their lives.

Flannery O’Connor says that a character should be clearly in charge of his or her
actions, and that the character should not just exist to make an action possible. In “Refresh,
Refresh,” the characters are clearly in charge of their actions, and are not there just to follow
a certain plot line. If the boys had pushed Dave into the hole, it would seem like they are not
in control of their actions, and that the writer simply wanted that event to happen, even if the
action did not fit the character’s personalities, which is what Fausset argued.

**Angle**

The point of view from which “Refresh, Refresh” is told remained the same from Percy’s
first draft to his last. Neither Fausset nor Rich and Gourevitch suggested changes to the angle
of the story, so Percy succeeded on that aspect of good fiction from the start. According to
Wayne Booth’s theories of narration, whether a point of view is first- or third-person is
inconsequential, but Bowen considered the differentiation important. Josh acts as the first-
person narrator of the story. “I” and “we” are used often which connotes first-person.
The following is a brief analysis of exactly how Josh fits into Booth’s theories of narration:

- Josh is a fully dramatized narrator since he is a character in the story. He also acts as
  a narrator-agent within the story, rather than simply an observer. Josh is dramatized
  as the main character in the story, and as that main character he asserts his agency
  throughout the story, having an important effect on the story’s plot.
• Josh uses both scene and summary to get his story across. He shows the reader scenes from the camping trip, but also summarizes, such as describing, but not showing, Gordon’s run-in with Seth Johnson.
• Josh is not a self-conscious narrator; he does not realize he is narrating a story.
• We are unaware of the distance between Josh and the author of the story, which is positive, as many authors have said it is best that a writer does not use a story to get on his or her soapbox. The reader gets the feeling that all opinions come from the fictional character Josh, not from Percy.
• The narrator Josh is not distant from other characters since he is one of them. He is not distant from the reader, as he seems to be a relatable character, especially to readers who might have family members fighting overseas.
• Josh’s point of view is limited to realistic vision and inference; he is not omniscient, so he does not have complete privilege.
• Booth’s notion of “inside views” is not applicable to Josh since he is not omniscient. Josh does not have an inside view into other characters.
• Josh also seems like a reliable narrator; the reader is given no reason to mistrust him because he seems open and honest.

One of Booth’s point-of-view categories I addressed in chapter two was “distance.” In chapter three I wrote about Percy’s self-edits to include “we” rather than “I” so the story represents the town as well as the narrator. He also changed some “we’s” to “I’s” in order to separate Josh from his friends. These changes make Josh both less distant from other characters in the story and more distant from them. They both have significant effects on the reader in the way the town and Josh are perceived. The reader learns to see Josh both as an
individual who can stand alone in a difficult situation without the help of his friends, but also as a part of the town so the reader can see how the war can affect not just individuals but also entire towns.

**Style and Language**

Many of the changes made to “Refresh, Refresh” concern changes to the language of the piece; some of these changes affect the style of the piece.

**Purposeful Language**

Many of the changes suggested by the agent and editors concerned paring down the language to only include what is necessary. For instance, Fausset recommended that Percy cut down on unnecessary “exit signs” within his work. Rich remembered suggesting the removal of what Percy called “philosophical musings” that added nothing to the story. Flannery O’Connor said about language that the writer should select each and every word for a reason (75). The writer should also show things, rather than just say them. Percy’s editors helped to make sure that any unnecessary language was cut from the story so that most parts of the story include different scenes, rather than long reflections by the narrator.

**Theme**

O’Connor also had opinions on the theme of a story. She said that if you can easily state the theme of a story, the story is not very good (96). The meaning of a story must be embodied in it, she argues (96). The author should not hit the reader over the head with a theme. Percy’s story does not have an obvious theme that can be readily stated, but it does have a theme. It is obvious that the story has meaning, but it really only becomes clear when the reader finishes
the story and sees that the boys have followed in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers in a continuing cycle of violence and fighting, but Percy does not hit the reader over the head with this theme. If Fausset had not suggested the change to the ending of the story with the boys going to the recruiting station, the meaning of the story in terms of the cycle of violence and fighting would not be present.

**Mystery of Life**

O’Connor also argues that a story has to explain as much of the mystery of life as possible and that the author should do this by showing, not telling or making a statement (98). Percy’s story is not preachy or obviously anti-war, but it is clear throughout the story what impact the war does have on many American towns and families; it reveals the mystery of the lives of those whose fathers have gone off to war without making a strong anti-war statement. Percy succeeded at showing the mystery of life for these families on his own, without collaborative help from his agent or editors for this part of his story, although collaboration was a necessary part of his story as a finished product.

**Memorable Language**

Percy stated about his writing that he likes to re-word popular phrases such as turning “knee-deep” into “calf-deep.” O’Connor also argues that writers should use unique language, images, and metaphors, rather than overused clichés (103). A writer’s characters should be made distinct through language. One of the reasons the editors chose to delete one of Josh’s friends was that the two friends were indistinct; their language was not unique enough to warrant two characters rather than just one.
Local Flavor

O’Connor also emphasizes the use of the local idiom and local culture within a story (104). The location of a story must be acknowledged, but not wallowed in. Percy gives the reader a definite feel for rural Oregon and people of a lower to middle socio-economic class, especially when he characterizes the fathers as wearing Wrangler jeans and as “Coors-drinking, baseball-throwing, crotch-scratching, Aqua Velva-smelling fathers” (Appendix D 145).

Plot

E. M. Forster states that when creating plot, every action or word should count, and that it should be “economical and spare” and “free of dead matter” (133). Percy’s editors made sure that his plot was free of dead matter. Rich said that some sections in Percy’s story that contained ideas that were already reinforced in other sections of the story in other ways could be removed. Short stories need to be compressed, he said, to a “single, pure thing.” Compression of Percy’s story featured the deletion of introspective scenes with Josh, as well as a fighting scene that was unnecessary to advance the plot, since the story already contained another fighting scene. A scene involving weight lifting in Josh’s grandfather’s basement was also cut, as it did not really add anything new to the plot—it simply seemed thrown in.

Characters within Plot

R.V. Cassill said that characters should not be “mutilated to fit plot requirements” (184). Characters need always to act in a way that fits with their personality and values and not with
what the author wants to happen in the story. One of the reasons Fausset disliked Percy’s original ending was that killing Dave Lightener did not fit with the boys’ characters. The ending was changed and Lightener was saved, which gave the boys’ actions verisimilitude.

**Poetic Truth**

Bowen also states that the purpose of a plot is to move the piece of fiction toward the “non-poetic statement of a poetic truth” (142). The poetic truth is the same as theme. Part of the truth of Percy’s story is that violence is cyclical and is passed down from generation to generation. A son inherits a father’s violence, and in this case the new ending where the boys go to sign up at the recruitment office leads the reader to the poetic truth Percy is attempting to reach in his story.

**Dialogue**

“Refresh, Refresh” does not contain a lot of dialogue. Many of the authors who provide advice on dialogue warn against using too much of it. Bowen states that characters should speak less rather than more and what they intend to say should be more striking than what they actually say (147).

**Avoid Illustrative Dialogue**

Bowen argues strongly that dialogue must always have a purpose. Dialogue used simply to illustrate a point is unnecessary. Percy seems to use dialogue only when absolutely necessary. Otherwise the narrator fills the reader in with vivid details that paint a picture of the town, the missing fathers, and his life and experiences in a way that is more real to the reader than if Josh and Gordon spent time talking to each other about their feelings and their
missing fathers. It would also be unrealistic for two teenage boys—who are usually reticent about their feelings—to have a lot of dialogue, and such dialogue would be untrue to the characters anyway. For instance, Percy doesn’t include what the boys chat about on their camping trip, but does include their actions which drive the plot and give us a good picture of the characters.

**Intention vs. Actuality**

The first piece of dialogue in the story (besides “Damn” from Gordon [Appendix D 147]) does not occur for several pages: “Hi Josh. I’m OK. Don’t worry. Do your homework. Love, Dad” (Appendix D 148). These words are important because they exemplify the lack of meaningful dialogue occurring between father and son, and the distance between them. The rest of the story focuses on the communal nature of the pain felt by those in the town because of the missing men, but these sentences show a lack of community and interaction between father and son. The message is purposeful, yet brief, which is what Bowen argues dialogue should be. As described in chapter two, this email is also an example of what characters intend to say being more striking than what they actually end up saying. What Josh’s father most likely intended to say but didn’t is more striking to the reader than what he actually ended up saying.

**Crystallizing Relationships**

Bowen states about dialogue that it should crystallize relationships between characters so that analysis or explanation of relationships is unnecessary (147). Dialogue should also reveal the character of the individual. The dialogue that occurs among Dave Lightener, Josh, and Gordon in front of the mall reveals the character and feelings of Gordon and Josh. Their
sarcastic responses to Dave’s prodding and their teaming together against Dave show their
friendship, their stick-together mentality, and their feelings toward the war and combat in
general (Appendix D 149–150).

**Implications**

In this thesis I have argued that there are no widely agreed-upon tenets of good fiction. Most
writers have different ideas about what makes good fiction, and if they are asked how to
make a good character, or what is important about writing dialogue, their advice will vary.
Nevertheless, much useful advice can be gleaned from experienced authors who have been
published or have been editors, and know good fiction when they see it. What all of these
authors seem to agree on is that the techniques that will work for your story depend on your
goals for the story, your intentions, your point, the “poetic truth” at which you wish to arrive.

Good writing takes natural ability, as Flannery O’Connor so often reminds her
readers. The gift for story-telling simply cannot be taught, and Ben Percy agreed that some
other aspects of writing cannot be taught. For those who *do* have the gift for story-telling,
hope for publication exists. If the writer starts out by following the advice that seems the
most useful, in regard to the important aspects of fiction writing such as characters, angle,
style and language, plot, and dialogue, and then finds himself or herself a good agent such as
Percy’s Fausset who will help further mold his or her work into a piece of good fiction, that
individual may have a chance of being published. Editors such as Rich and Gourevitch with
knowledge of what makes good fiction are also an essential part of the publication process
for a story. Percy’s story did have many qualities of good fiction before he submitted it to his
agent and editors, but without the agent and editors many substantial changes such as a
change to the ending would not have been made, and the story would not have been published

Most authors offering advice will at the same time offer the caveat that sometimes rules can be broken. This caveat may provide hope for many writers who do not wish to follow a set of strict rules or tenets while producing their fiction but who enjoy the truly creative side of fiction writing, and simply wish to produce a piece that will endure.

Individuals who believe that authors stand on their own in order to produce a piece of fiction have not examined the publication process. A good writer starts out with good material, but nevertheless needs to collaborate with other experienced individuals to further shape the piece into a publishable form. Thus, like Ben Percy, a writer needs to be open to suggestions from others on how to shape his or her piece of fiction, including suggestions from other successful, more experienced writers. Collaboration is a necessary element of creating good fiction.
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APPENDIX A. FIRST DRAFT OF “REFRESH, REFRESH”

Quickening

When school let out the three of us went to my backyard, as we sometimes did, to fight. We were in ninth grade—Gordon and Cody and I—and we were trying to make each other tougher.

So in the grass, in the shade of the pines and junipers, we slung off our backpacks and laid down a pale green garden hose, tip to tip, making a ring. And then we stripped off our shirts and put on our gold-colored boxing gloves. And fought.

Every round went two minutes. If you stepped out of the ring, you lost. If you cried, you lost. If you got knocked out, or if you yelled, “Stop!” you lost.

Afterwards we always drank Coca-Colas and smoked Marlboros, our chests heaving, our faces all different shades of blacks and reds and yellows.

This started after Freshman Kill Day, when Seth Johnson—a no-neck linebacker with teeth like corn kernels and hands like T-bone steaks—beat Gordon until his face swelled and split open and purpled around the edges. Seth did this to Gordon because Gordon was a freshman and because Gordon was fat.

Eventually he healed, the rough husks of scabs peeling away to reveal a different face than the one I remembered, older, squarer, fiercer, his left eyebrow separated by a gummy white scar.

It was his idea, fighting each other. He wanted to be ready. He wanted to hurt back those who hurt him. And if he went down, he would go down swinging, as his father would have wanted.
And this is what we all wanted, to please our fathers, to make them proud, even though they had left us. Even though they were a million miles away.

This happened in Tumalo, Oregon—population 1,500—a high desert town situated among the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. We have a Dairy Queen and a BP gas station, a Food-4-Less, a meat-packing plant, a bright green football field irrigated by canal water, your standard assortment of taverns and churches—and in this way nothing distinguishes us from Bend or Redmond or La Pine or any of the other nowhere towns off 97, except for this:

We are home to the 2nd Battalion, 34th Marines.

The 50-acre base, just five minutes away, is a collection of one-story cinder-block buildings interrupted by cheat grass and sagebrush. It was built in the eighties. Apparently conditions here match very closely those of the Middle East, particularly the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan, of Northern Iraq.

All throughout my childhood, crowding the sidewalks and bleachers and grocery store aisles, I could find ranchers in Wrangler jeans alongside sergeants in desert fatigues. I could hear, if I cupped a hand to my ear, the lowing of bulls, the bleating of sheep, the report of assault rifles shouting from the hilltops.

No longer.

Our fathers were like all the fathers in Tumalo. All of them, just about, had enlisted as part-time soldiers, as reservists, for drill pay. Beer pay, they called it. For two weeks every year, and for one weekend every month, they trained. They threw on their cammies and filled
their rucksacks and kissed us goodbye, and the gates of the 2nd Battalion drew closed behind them like teeth.

For this they earned several thousand as a private and several thousand more as a sergeant. And so once a month they would vanish into the pine-studded hills, returning to us Sunday night with their faces reddened from weather, with their biceps trembling from fatigue and their hands smelling of rifle grease. They would use terms like ECP and PRP and MEU and WMD and they would do push-ups in the middle of the living room and they would call six o’clock eighteen-hundred hours and they would high five and yell “Semper Fi!” and then a few days would pass and they would go back to the way they were, to the men we knew: Coors-drinking, baseball-throwing, crotch-scratching, Aqua Velva-smelling fathers.

Then, in January, the battalion was activated—and in March they shipped off for Iraq—and our fathers—our coaches, our teachers, our barbers, our cooks, our gas-station attendants and UPS deliverymen and deputies and firemen and mechanics—our fathers—so many of them—they climbed onto the olive-green school buses and pressed their palms to the windows and gave us the bravest, most hopeful smiles you can imagine, and vanished. Just like that.

Nights, I sometimes got on my Honda dirt bike and rode through the hills and canyons of Deschutes County. Beneath me the engine growled and shuddered while all around me the wind, like something alive, bullied me, tried to drag me from my bike. And a dark world slipped past as I downshifted, leaning into a turn—as I accelerated on a
straightaway to 70, to 80, concentrating only on the twenty yards of road glowing ahead of me.

I liked the way the bike made me feel. Like I could just leave Tumalo behind me, shrug it off like a second skin. On this bike I could ride and ride and ride, away from here, up and over the Cascades, through the Willamette Valley, until I reached the ocean, where the broad black backs of whales regularly broke the surface of the water, and even further—and further still—until I finally caught up with the horizon, where my father would be waiting.

Inevitably I ended up at Hole in the Ground.

Fifty years ago a meteor came screeching down from space and left behind a crater 5,000 feet wide and 300 feet deep. This is Hole in the Ground and it is regularly frequented during the winter by the daredevil sledders among us, and during the summer by bearded geologists from OSU interested in the metal fragments strewn across its bottom.

Here, I dangled my feet over the edge of the crater and leaned back on my elbows and took in the sky, just a little lighter black than a crow, with only stars in it, no moon. Every few minutes a star seemed to come unstuck, streaking through the night in a bright flash that hissed greenly into nothingness.

I wondered how many meteorites actually touched down and opened up the earth. And when I peered into the crater, the black cavity of it, I wondered what the impact sounded like, looked like. Like the greatest kind of thunder you can imagine, I bet, accompanied by a crown of dirt rising skyward.

In the near distance the grayish green glow of Tumalo dampened the sky and it didn’t take much imagination to realize how close we came, fifty years ago, to oblivion. A chunk of space ice or a solar wind could have come along at just the right moment, jogging the meteor
sideways, and rather than landing here, it could have landed there, at the intersection of Main and Farwell. *Wham*—just like that—no Dairy Queen, no Tumalo High, no 2nd Battalion.

Amazing how something can drop out the sky and change everything.

Just like that.

And this was October, when Cody and I circled each other. We wore our golden boxing gloves, both sets cracked with age and letting off dust when we pounded them together. Brownd grass crunched beneath our sneakers. Dust rose in tiny clouds and stuck to our bare bellies.

Cody was thin to the point of being scrawny. His collarbone poked against his skin like a swallowed coat hanger. His head was too big for his body and his eyes were too big for his head and the football players—Seth Johnson among them—regularly tossed him into garbage cans and called him ET.

He had had a bad day. And I could tell from the look on his face—the watery eyes, the trembling lips that revealed, in quick flashes, his buckteeth—that he wanted, he *needed*, to hit me. So I let him. I raised my gloves to my face and pulled my elbows against my ribs and Cody lunged forward, his arms snapping like rubber bands. I stood still, allowing his fists to work up and down my body, allowing him to throw the weight of his anger on me, until eventually he grew too tired to hit anymore and I opened up my stance and floored him with a right cross to the temple. He lay there, sprawled out in the grass with a small smile on his ET face. “Damn,” he said in a dreamy voice. A drop of blood gathered along the corner of his eye and streaked down his temple into his hair.
I don’t know that we knew what we were fighting for. It was more of an instinctual thing. Maybe by beating at each other, by feeling sparks of pain, we were reminding ourselves we were alive. Or maybe we were striking out at the seeming unfairness of it all. Or maybe we weren’t just hitting each other—in a really weird way maybe we were helping each other—we were trying to save our lives.

Or maybe D) all of the above.

When I helped Cody up, Gordon clapped and howled from the sidelines, the hole of his mouth as dark as the bruises rising from our skin.

My father looked like someone you might see shopping for motor oil at Bi-Mart. He wore steel-toed boots, Carhartt jeans, a T-shirt advertising some place he had traveled, maybe Yellowstone or Seattle. To hide his receding hairline he wore a John Deere ball cap and it laid a shadow across his face, his brown eyes blinking above a considerable nose underlined by a gray mustache. Like me, my father was short and squat, with the build of a bulldog. His belly was a swollen bag and his shoulders were broad and good for carrying me during parades, fairs, when I was younger. He laughed a lot. He liked game shows. He drank too much beer and smoked too many cigarettes and spent too much time with his buddies, fishing, hunting, bullshitting, which probably had something to do with why my mother divorced him and moved to Boise with a hairdresser/tri-athlete named Chuck.

When my father first left, like all of the other fathers, he would email whenever he could. He would tell me about the heat, the gallons of water he drank everyday, the sand that got into everything, the baths he took with baby wipes. He would tell me how safe he was, how very safe. This was when he was stationed in Turkey. Then the 2nd Battalion shipped off
for Kirkuk, where attacks and sandstorms came roaring in on an almost daily basis. His
emails came less and less frequently, with weeks of silence between them.

    Sometimes, on the computer, I would hit refresh, refresh, refresh, hoping.

    And then, in October, I received an email that read, “Hi Josh. I’m OK. Don’t worry.
Do your homework. Love, Dad.”

    I printed it up and hung it on my door with a piece of Scotch Tape.

    Our fathers had left us. But men remained in Tumalo.

    There were old men, like my grandfather, who had paid their dues, who had worked
their jobs and fought their wars, and now spent their days at the gas station, drinking bad
coffee from Styrofoam cups, complaining about the weather, arguing about the best months
to reap alfalfa.

    There were incapable men. Men who rarely shaved and watched daytime
television in their once white underpants. Men who lived in trailers and filled their shopping
carts with Busch Light, summer sausage, Oreo cookies. Men like Floyd Pitts. Everyone
called Floyd special and I suppose that’s as good a word as any. He had a faraway look to his
eyes and a twisted his face into weird expressions and every night for the past ten years, rain
or snow or shine, set up his karaoke machine before the Dairy Queen and sang, in a
trembling alto, oldies songs.

    And then there were the men who scavenged whatever our fathers had left
behind. Vulturous men. Men like Dave Lightener.

    Dave Lightener worked as a recruitment officer. I’m guessing he was the only
recruitment officer in world history who drove a Vespa scooter with a Support Our Troops
ribbon magneted to its rear. He had big ears and small eyes and wore his hair in your standard-issue high-and-tight buzz. He often spoke in a too loud voice about all the insurgents he gunned down when working a Fullujah patrol unit. He lived with his mother in Tumalo, but spent his days in Bend and Redmond, trolling the parking lots of Best Buy, ShopKo, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Mountain View Mall. He was looking for people who were angry and dissatisfied and poor.

People like us.

But he knew better than to bother us. On duty he stayed away from Tumalo entirely. Recruiting there would be too much like poaching the burned section of forest where deer, rib-slatted and wobbly legged, nosed through the ash, seeking something green.

One time my grandfather dropped Gordon and I off at Mountain View Mall and there, near the glass-doored entrance, stood Dave Lightener. He wore his creased khaki uniform and spoke with a group of Mexican teenagers. They were laughing, shaking their heads and walking away from him as we walked toward. We had our hats pulled low and he didn’t recognize us.

“Question for you, gentlemen,” he said in the voice of telemarketers and door-to-door Jehovah’s Witnesses. “What do you plan on doing with your lives?”

Gordon pulled off his hat with a flourish, as if he were part of some ta-da! magic act and his face was the trick. “I plan on killing some crazy-ass Muslims,” he said and forced a smile and turned to me. “How about you, Josh?”

“Yeah, killing some people and then getting myself killed,” I said, grimacing even as I played along. “That sounds like a good plan.”
Dave Lightener tightened his lips into a thin line and straightened his posture and asked us what we thought our fathers would think, hearing us right now. “They’re out there risking their lives, defending our freedom, and you’re cracking sick jokes,” he said. “I think that’s sick.”

We hated him for his soft hands and clean uniform. We hated him because he sent people like us off to die. Because at twenty-three he had attained a higher rank than our fathers. And now we hated him even more for making us feel ashamed.

I wanted to say something sarcastic but the words caught in my throat like a bunch of bones. So I fell back on my I-could-give-a-shit posture, my hips cocked, my lips slightly turned up at the edges—even as I felt my eyes tighten with shame.

But Gordon only hesitated a moment. No way would he permit a prick like Dave Lightener to preach at him. So he dug into his mental toolbox of snappily inappropriate comebacks and said, “Here’s your maple syrup,” holding out his hand, his fingers gripping an imaginary bottle.

And when Dave said, “And what is that for?” Gordon said, “To eat my ass with.”

Right then a twenty-something skateboarder-type with green hair and a nose-ring walked from the mall, a bagful of DVDs swinging from his fist. Dave turned to him, and after giving us a smarmy little smile and a snappy little salute, said, “Hey, friend. Let me ask you something. Do you like war movies?”

When we fought we painted our face—black and green and brown—with the camo-grease our fathers left behind. It made our eyes and teeth appear startlingly white. And it smeared away against our gloves just as the grass smeared away beneath our sneakers—
and the ring became a circle of dirt, the dirt a reddish color that looked a lot like scabbed flesh.

One time Gordon hammered my shoulder so hard I couldn’t lift my arm for a week. Another time I elbowed Cody in the kidneys and he peed blood. We struck each other with such force and frequency the golden gloves crumbled and our knuckles showed through the sweat-soaked blood-soaked foam like teeth through a busted lip. And so we bought another set of gloves. And the air grew steadily colder and we fought with steam blasting from our mouths.

When we grew tired we would clutch each other’s bodies, awkwardly, passionately, trying to find our breath. And when we found our breath we would break apart and punch and get punched and feel wonderful. There was a sort of reverse vampirism at work. In order to drain ourselves of emotion, we forced it upon each other with fists, spellbound by the impressions we could make on skin.

Quite a sensation.

When we fought, all of a sudden the world came into focus and we could see in each other every follicle of hair—the pores of Gordon’s nose, the burst capillary in Cody’s eye that reminded me of Mars. Our vision became near-sighted and the rest of the world fell out of focus and in a way that was the whole fucking point.

For twenty years my father worked at Noseler, Inc.—the bullet manufacturer based out of Bend—and the Marines correspondingly trained him as an ammunition technician. Gordon’s father, an electrician, became a technician as well, specializing in ground electronic repair. Cody liked to say his father was a Gunnery Sergeant, and he was, but we all knew he
was also the battalion mess manager, a cook, which was how he made his living in Tumalo, tending the grill at Hamburger Patty’s.

We knew their titles but we didn’t know, not really, what their titles meant, what our fathers did over there. We imagined them doing heroic things. Rescuing Iraqi babies from burning huts. Sniping suicide bombers before they could detonate on a crowded city street. We drew on Hollywood and CNN to develop elaborate scenarios, where maybe, possibly, at twilight, during a trek through the mountains of Northern Iraq, bearded insurgents ambushed our fathers with rocket-launchers. We imagined our fathers leaping from their Humvees just in the nick of time. We imagined them silhouetted by a fiery explosion. We imagined them burrowing into the sand like lizards and firing their M-16s, their bullets streaking through the darkness like the meteorites I observed on sleepless nights.

They were the last of the John Waynes, we imagined, only tougher.

We didn’t fully understand the reason they fought. We only understood that they had to fight. The necessity of fighting made the reason for it irrelevant. And so we didn’t waste a lot of time whining, editorializing. No one in Tumalo did. Maybe my grandfather said it best when he said, “It’s all part of the game. It’s just the way it is.”

They were gone and that was the way it was. So we could only cross our fingers and wish on stars and hit refresh, refresh, hoping they would return to us, praying we would never find Dave Lightener on our porch uttering the words, “I regret to inform you…”

Gordon was too fat and I was too short and Cody was too skinny. All of us were too much, or too little, of something. But as October gave way to November we were getting stronger, slowly.
I lived with my grandfather and long ago my grandfather—a retired Naval officer—had converted his basement into a gym. I’m talking matted floors, adjustable steel chairs, weight racks, dumbbells, curl bars, medicine balls, an exercise bike, a bench press, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, the works. He no longer used it—his muscles had been reduced by age to withered slabs that slid loosely beneath his skin—so we took it over.

We slid plate after plate after plate onto the bench until the weight was impossible to bear, until our faces went tomato-red face and our veins rose jaggedly from our foreheads. When we lifted, our breath went rip-rip-rip and the weights rattled with each rep, sounding like a teacup set hastily on its saucer.

We smoked between sets and the basement took on a hazy dreamlike quality.

We did flat bench, incline, decline, and military-press. We did squats and lunges and calf-raises and lat pull-downs and tossed a medicine ball back and forth until we thought our arms would fall off. We did triceps extensions followed by preacher curls, done in a stooped-over position that made Gordon’s belly full of rolls that matched the four small bulges coming out the back of his neck. After awhile—several months—his muscles began to creep out from behind his fat and the four bulges became two bulges became no bulges.

His body, like all of our bodies, changed. Not only did our voices begin to bottom out. Not only did hair begin to grow thickly on our cheeks and chests. But we began to look like men. Fifteen years old, no kidding, and we looked like men. It was kind of spooky.

I would stand in front of the mirror at night, naked, pleasuring in the way my body rippled when I moved it. Cody’s scrawny frame developed so that his muscles looked like knots in ropes. But it was Gordon who changed the most severely. Before, his face pillowed around his cheeks and below his jaw. Now it tightened into a sharp-cornered block that
showed off his veins and dimples, his skin so taut it looked as if it were made for someone half his size.

His stomach still stuck out but now it was armored with little square muscles, looking like a turtle-shell, only there was nothing slow about Gordon: he moved nearly as fast as he talked, the muscles in his legs and arms jerking even when he sat still.

“You know what I wish? I wish somebody would start something with me,” he would say, bringing his fist into his open palm. “I wish.”

He got his wish when we drove our dirt bikes deep into the woods to hunt.

Sunlight cut through the branches and dappled the ground with sun puddles and we growled along the winding logging roads that led past tall pines and thin clusters of birch, past hillsides packed with huckleberries, past moraines that coyotes scurried across, trying to flee us, only to slip, causing a tiny avalanche of loose rock. Every root and rock we ran over jarred our bikes as deeper and deeper into the woods we went, until the road we followed petered out into nothing.

It hadn’t rained in nearly a month, so the crab grass and the cheat grass and the pine needles had lost their color, dry and blond as cornhusks, crackling beneath my boots when I stepped off my bike. With everything so waterless, you could hear every chipmunk within a square acre, rustling for pine nuts, and when the breeze rose into a cold wind the forest became a giant whisper.

We dumped our tent, our sleeping bags, near a basalt grotto with a spring bubbling from it, and Gordon said, “Let’s go, troops,” holding his rifle before his chest diagonally, as a
soldier would. And he dressed as a soldier would, wearing a too big pair of his father’s
cammies rather than the mandatory blaze-orange gear.

Fifty feet apart we worked our way downhill, through the forest, through a
huckleberry thicket, through a clear-cut crowded with stumps, taking care not to make much
noise or slip on the pine needles carpeting the ground.

Buzzards circled overhead. Lizards scurried underfoot. A woodpecker banged away
at a dead tree. And a chipmunk worrying at a pinecone screeched its astonishment when a
peregrine falcon swooped down and seized it, carrying it off between the trees to some secret
place. Its wings made no sound. And neither did the blaze-orange hunter when he appeared
in a clearing several hundred yards below us.

Gordon made some sort of SWAT team gesture that, I think, asked us to stay low and
carefully make our way toward him. We did and once huddled together behind a boulder, we
peered through our scopes at the hunter, tracking him with the lines of our rifles. “It’s that
cocksucker,” Gordon said in a harsh whisper. By this he meant Seth Johnson.

Seth Johnson weighed over 250 pounds and in his blaze-orange vest and an ear-
flapped hat looked like some kind of muscular pumpkin. His rifle was strapped to his back.
His mouth was moving. He was talking to someone, we realized. He was approaching a
campsite at the corner of the meadow. There, four members of the varsity football squad sat
on logs around a smoldering campfire, their arms bobbing like oilrigs as they brought their
beers to their mouths.

I took my eye from my scope and noticed Gordon fingering the trigger of his thirty-
aught. I told him to quit fooling around and he pulled his hand suddenly away from the stock
and smiled guiltily and said he just wanted to know what it felt like, having that power over someone.

Then his finger, his trigger finger, rose up and touched the gummy white scar that split his eyebrow, remembering. “I say we fuck with them a little.”

I looked at Cody and Cody looked at me and both of us shook our heads, no.

Gordon said, “Just to scare them a little,” and I said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to scare somebody when somebody has a gun.”

“So we’ll wait till he doesn’t have a gun. We’ll come back tonight.”

With that he slid away from the boulder and retreated up the hillside and we followed him and later that day, after an early dinner of beef jerky and trail mix and Gatorade, I happened upon a four-point stag nibbling on some bear grass and shot it with my rifle resting on a stump and it stumbled backwards and collapsed with a rose blooming from behind its shoulder, where the heart was hidden. The wind made a soft hissing sound.

Gordon and Cody came running and we stood around the deer and smoked a few cigarettes while watching the thick arterial blood run from its mouth, pooling around its head. Then we took out our knives and got to work. I cut around the anus, cutting away the penis and testes, and then ran the knife along the belly, unzipping the hide to reveal the delicate pink flesh and greenish vessels into which our hands disappeared.

Blood steamed in the cold mountain air.

When we finished—when we skinned the deer and hacked at its joints and cut out its back strap and boned out its shoulders and hips, its neck and ribs, making chops, roasts, steaks, quartering the meat so we could bundle it into our insulated saddlebags—I said, “Should we pack it home?”
“No,” Gordon said and picked up the deer head by the antlers and held it before his own. Blood spilled from its neck and made a pattering sound on the ground. In the half-light of early evening he began to do a little dance, bending his knees and stomping his feet, weaving between us. “I think I’ve got a better idea,” he said in the deepest voice he could manage.

“I don’t know,” Cody said and Gordon pretended to rake at him with the antlers and said, still using the Darth-Vaderish voice, “Don’t pussy out on me, Cody.” And then he let the head fall, dangling it from one hand, and told us the rule of three. The rule his father had told him about it. This was the rule: every Marine had three things to worry about. There were three men to a rifle squad. Three rifle squads to a platoon. Three platoons to a company. Three companies to a battalion. “Three, Cody. The Marines operate in threes.”

Cody looked to me for help, and though I was exhausted and reeked of gore, I could appreciate the need for revenge, the need to strike out at something that had caused you pain. “Just to scare them, right, Gordo?” I said.

“Right.”

Cody let his bony shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. “Fine,” he said.

So we filled our cooler packs with meat and lugged them back to the campsite and partially submerged them in the icy spring. And then Gordon took the deer hide and slit a hole in its middle and poked his head through the hole so the hide hung off him loosely like a hairy sack. And we helped him smear mud and blood across his face and then, with his Leatherman belt-tool, he sawed off the antlers and held them in each hand and slashed at the air as if they were claws.

In a cheery voice unbefitting his nightmarish appearance he said, “Ready?”
By this time night had come on in full and the moon hung over the Cascades and grayly lit our way as we crept through the forest, imagining ourselves in enemy territory, with trip-wires and guard towers and snarling dogs around every corner.

We stationed ourselves once again behind the boulder that overlooked their campsite and we observed them as they swapped hunting stories and joked about Jessica Robertson’s big ass titties and passed around a bottle of whiskey and drank to excess and finally pissed on the fire to extinguish it. And then each of them drunkenly retired to their tents.

We waited an hour before making our way down the hill. And we descended with such care it took us another hour still before we were upon them. In the far distance an owl hooted, its noise barely noticeable over the chorus of snores that rose from their tents. Seth had parked his Bronco on a nearby haul road. The license plate read SMAN and all their rifles lay in its cab. Cody collected them, slinging them over his shoulder with a clatter that made us say *Shh*. And then I took my knife and slowly eased it into each tire and the air escaped from them at a slow hiss.

We returned to the campsite then and Cody continued on past it, starting up the hillside with the rifles, just in case. Gordon and I stood outside Seth’s tent. I had my knife ready, glinting in the moonlight, but Gordon held up his hand, telling me to wait. And so we waited a few moments until a cloud scudded over the moon and made the meadow fully dark.

Then Gordon held out his arms and took a few practice slashes with the antlers. He showed his teeth in a snarl that against his blackened face seemed to emit a light of its own. I put my knife to the tent and in one quick jerk opened up a slit that Gordon rushed through, staining the flaps of nylon with blood in his passing. I could see nothing but shadows but I could immediately hear Seth scream the scream of a little girl as Gordon raked at him with
the antlers and hissed and howled at him like some cave-creature hungry for man-flesh and then the tents around us came alive with confused voices and Gordon reemerged with a horrible smile on his face and I followed him up the hillside, crashing through the undergrowth, leaving Seth to make sense of the nightmare that had descended upon him without warning.

Then it was November, and in Tumalo we hate November. The ice-tinged taste of it. The bare-branched, cement-skied look of it. It’s a time of waiting. It’s an in-between time, right before winter comes on in earnest, howling down from the mountains like some shaggy white beast. All you can do in November is zip up your jacket and rub udder cream into your cracked skin and drink that second mug of coffee and twist up your face in a scowl, and wait.

So it was November and I was sitting in third-period Geometry when I felt a pinprick sort of pain at the back of my head. I put my hand there and turned around in my desk and found Cody grinning at me, a gray hair pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “You’re getting old,” he said and handed me the hair like a clover of bad fortune.

And he was right. I didn’t know it at the time but he was exactly right.

Snow fell. And we threw on our coveralls and wrenched on our studded tires and drove our dirt bikes to Hole in the Ground, dragging our sleds behind us with towropes. On the way there our engines filled up the white silence of the afternoon. And our back tires kicked up plumes of powder and on sharp turns slipped out beneath us and we lay there, in the middle of the road, bleeding, laughing, unafraid.
Earlier, for lunch, we had cooked a pound of bacon with a stick of butter. The grease, which hardened into a white waxy pool, we used as polish, buffing it into the bottoms of our sleds. Speed was what we wanted, was why we traveled to Hole in the Ground. We wanted the wind, blasting into our open mouths, to give us an ice-cream headache. We wanted the world to blur. We wanted to approach the edge and leap into nothingness and feel brave for doing so.

We found the steepest section of the crater we could and one by one we descended into its heart, 300 feet below us. We followed each other to iron down the snow and create a chute, blue-hued and frictionless, that would allow us to travel at a speed equivalent to freefalling. Our eyeballs glazed over with frost, our ears roared with wind, our stomachs rose into our throats, as we rocketed down the crater and felt five—and then we began the slow climb back the way we came and felt fifty.

We wore crampons and ascended in a zigzagging series of switchbacks that took us nearly an hour. By this time the air had begun to purple with evening. We all stood around for a while, taking in the view, sweating in our coveralls, watching our breath fog from our mouths, and then Gordon packed a snowball.

Cody said, “You better not hit me with that,” and Gordon cocked his arm threateningly and smiled—like: don’t be such a pussy—before he dropped to his knees and began to roll the snowball, to build it into something bigger, until eventually it grew to the size of a large man curled into the fetal position.

He went to his bike and dragged it over to where we stood and from the back of it he removed a short garden hose—the hose he used to siphon gas from fancy foreign cars—and then he unscrewed the tank and dipped the hose into it and sucked at its end until
gas flowed. He doused the giant snowball as if he hoped it would sprout. It did not melt, like maybe you’d expect—he had packed it tight enough—but it puckered slightly and appeared leaden, as when blue-coconut flavoring dribbles onto shaved-ice.

Then he withdrew his Zippo from his pocket and sparked it and brought it toward the ball and the fumes caught flame and the whole thing erupted with a noise like gasping that sent us staggering back a few steps.

And then Gordon rushed forward and kicked it and the ball of fire rolled forward and went tumbling down the crater, down our chute. Like a meteor. In a flash. And the snow beneath it instantly melted, only to freeze again a moment later, making a slick blue ribbon.

When we sledded it, we went so fast our minds emptied and we felt as if we had shrugged away time and physics and emotion, the limits of this world—a sensation at once like flying and falling.

On the news Iraqi insurgents fired their assault rifles skyward. On the news a reporter stationed in Baghdad reported the gruesome deaths of seven American soldiers when a car bomb detonated at a traffic checkpoint. On the news President Bush said he did not think it was wise to provide a time frame for troop withdrawal.

I checked my email before I ate breakfast and found nothing but spam that promised great mortgage rates, cheap painkillers, and increased erectile performance.

And soon enough one gray hair became ten gray hairs became thirty gray hairs, most of them clustered around my temples.
Whereas before, after a fight or after a hard hour of lifting, I would take a cold shower and pop a few Advil and feel fine, my body now began to complain. My wounds wouldn’t heal as fast and my face took on a permanent decayed-fruit look. My wrists felt swollen, my knees ached, all my joints feeling full of tiny dry wasps.

This didn’t happen all at once. But it happened.

And I wasn’t alone. Cody began to go bald, his hairline creeping back into a horseshoe shape. Gordon developed a serpentine varicose vein behind his knee and one night called me, weeping, after he passed a kidney stone the size of a Rice Krispie.

There were others, too. Sons and daughters and wives. You could see it in their stooped shoulders, the black bags beneath their eyes, the wrinkles framing their mouths like a set of parentheses. They were getting older. We were getting older.

And our fathers haunted us. They were everywhere. In the grocery store when we spotted a 30-pack of Coors on sale for ten bucks. On the highway when we passed a jacked-up Dodge with a dozen hay bales stacked in its bed. In the sky when a jet roared by, reminding us of faraway places. And now we saw our fathers even in the mirror. We began to look like them. Our fathers, who had been taken from us, were everywhere, at every turn, imprisoning us.

Let me tell you about my grandfather, my father’s father. He was the retired captain of a Nevada-class battleship stationed in the South Pacific during WWII. From the walls of his house, our house, hung exotic swords, paintings of ships, his glass-framed purple heart. You might wonder what a naval captain was doing in the middle of the desert, and when I asked him this, he said, “I’ve seen plenty more than enough of the goddamned sea.”
He talked like that. Like a rock cracked open and his voice fell out. His craggy features conveyed a disappointed nobility. He spent most of his days at the gas station, along with the rest of the old timers, playing cards and drinking coffee and trading scar stories.

My grandfather had the greatest scar of any. He was locally famous for it—for his foot, his right foot. He lost it during the war but he wouldn’t say how he lost it. Or maybe lost is the wrong word because he actually kept the severed foot in a sealed bucket of formaldehyde. When people asked him why, he said, “I wanted it. It’s me, you know. It’s mine. It’s not like a nail clipping or a clump of hair. It’s my foot, goddamn it.”

He gave away the toes to his closest friends.

“Long after I’m gone,” he would joke, “I will remain afoot.”

It was his way of never growing old, of living forever, suspending his foot in formaldehyde like a bee trapped in amber.

I had seen the foot on many occasions, usually around the holidays, when he drank too much wine and dragged it from the closet to show off. He would peel away the lid and we would peer into its pungent waters and see the foot, hairless, maggot-white, floating there with a bit of bone poking from its ankle. I remember one time he tossed an empty beer can in with it and when I asked why, he said, “It’s evolving. Stuff will go in, stuff will come out. It will be representative.” Like some kind of art.

The last I saw he had tossed in a photo of my father.

Seth Johnson’s father was a staff sergeant. Like his son, he was a big man—but not big enough. Just before Christmas he stepped on a cluster bomb. A US warplane dropped it and the sand camouflaged it. And it tore him into many meaty pieces.
When Dave Lightener climbed up the front porch with a black armband and a somber expression, Mrs. Johnson, who was cooking a honeyed ham at the time, collapsed on the kitchen floor and Seth pushed his way out the door and punched Dave in the face, breaking his nose before he could utter the words, “I regret to inform you…”

Hearing about this, we felt bad for all of ten seconds. And then we felt good because it was his father and not ours. And then we once again felt bad and on Christmas Eve we drove to Seth’s house and laid down on his porch the rifles we had stolen, along with a six-pack of Coors, and then, just as we were about to leave, Gordon dug in his back pocket and removed his wallet and placed under the six-pack all the money he had, a few fives, some ones.

“Fucking Christmas,” he said.

I began to walk with a limp until mid-morning. My testicles seemed droopy. When I masturbated I stopped thinking about Jessica Robertson and began thinking about her mother. My veins wormed their way from beneath my skin in gray networks. Occasionally, just waking up made me feel a little defeated, until I had my coffee, several cups of it.

We stopped fighting—it hurt too much to fight—and took up drinking instead.

Weekends, we drove our dirt bikes to Bend, twenty miles away, and bought beer and took it to Hole in the Ground and drank there until a bright line of sunlight appeared on the horizon and illuminated the snow-blanketed desert. Nobody ever asked for our ID and when we held up our empty bottles and stared at our reflections in the glass, warped and ghostly, we knew why.
After awhile we got braver and went to the bars—The Golden Nugget, The Weary Traveler, The Pine Tavern—where we square-danced with older women wearing purple eye shadow and sparkly dream-catcher earrings and push-up bras and clattery high heels. We told them we were Marines back from a six-month deployment and they said, “Really?” and we said, “Yes, ma’am,” and when they asked for our names we gave them the names of our fathers. And then we bought them drinks and they drank them in a gulping way and breathed hotly in faces and we brought our mouths against theirs and they tasted like menthol cigarettes, like burnt urinal pucks. And then we went home with them, to their trailers, to their waterbeds, where among their stuffed animals we fucked them.

The grayness began along the backs and sides of our heads and then began its slow creep upward. By New Years I was nearly as white-headed as the mountains. At this time two months had passed since I last heard from my father.

We stopped going to school. “Fuck school,” we said. “Who fucking needs it?”

Nobody seemed to notice, to care, when we spent all day in the basement, smoking, drinking, throwing weights around and pawing through the same crumpled copies of *Penthouse*.

One evening we emerged from our cave and went to Dairy Queen. It was ten degrees but we were drunk and crazy with cabin fever and by God a Butterfinger Blizzard sounded like the most delicious thing.

Floyd Pitts was there—he was always there—from six to nine every evening. He had his karaoke machine set up near the entrance, an orange extension cord running inside. Snow stuck to his narrow shoulders and his gray hair as he stood on the sidewalk, shifting his
weight from foot to foot, singing his oldies songs to no one, to everyone, each song interrupted by a whispery broadcast from his imaginary radio station, 97.5 OINK.

We got our Butterfinger Blizzards and took them outside and cleared the snow off one of the picnic tables and cheered and clapped for Floyd as he warbled out, “Unchained Melody” and “House of the Rising Sun.” He was at once a child and an old man and we felt a strange love for him.

“You fucking rule, Floyd,” Gordon said and Floyd said, “Okay. Thank you.”

“We want to hear ‘Help Me, Rhonda,” Cody said and Floyd said, “Okay. That’s what we’re going to sing in just a minute. In just a minute, after this commercial break.”

He stood there a moment, staring off into the darkness, and then a little too loudly began to sing, “Help me, Wanda. Help, help me, Wanda,” and Cody shrugged and took a spoonful of Blizzard and said, “Close enough.”

But Floyd only knew the chorus and his voice soon mellowed and his body went still and without transition the brightly tuned innocence of the Beach Boys gave way to a gruff and haunting rendition of “Little Soldier Boy” by the Yardbirds.

I’ll be honest with you here: I completely lost it. Right then something came loose inside of me and I began to cry in the open way men generally avoid.

I don’t know what it was—whether it was the beer, the raw emptiness of Tumalo, or the somber timbre of Floyd’s voice—but I couldn’t help it. I cried as I had never cried before. I cried over everything and nothing and Gordon and Cody put their hands on me and said, “Don’t cry.” And then, “Fine. Cry then.”
Sleet fell and the world glazed over with a blueness as slick as the bottoms of our sleds. Highway 97 looked like a polished vein of obsidian. There were many car accidents. Trucks turned over in the ditches. Cars veered uncontrollably across the meridian as if dragged there by invisible wires. When Seth Johnson collided head-on with a semi, which knocked his Bronco over the guardrail, crumpling it into a little white ball, like a discarded piece of paper, we weren’t surprised to hear he had died.

Here is what surprised us.

He was in a state of rigor mortis. Meaning he had been dead for a long time—for at least three days, the autopsy later determined.

After Cody dropped a forty-pound dumbbell on his big toe and split open the nail like the shell of a peanut, we all ended up in the living room watching television with my grandfather. Cody had an icepack on his foot and every few minutes he took it off and checked his toe, which by this time had turned a purply shade of black with a red line running down its middle.

“You think that’s bad,” my grandfather said. “You should see my foot.” He was sitting in his Lay-Z-Boy recliner and he rocked forward with a groan and reached down and pulled up his pant leg to reveal the flesh-colored shaft that fit his prosthesis onto his leg. He knocked on it and it made a hollow noise that made him grin a grin that was more gum than tooth. “Josh, go get me my foot. I want to show it to your friends.”

All of us had seen the foot, had seen it many times, but we never tired of it—in the same way we never tired of reading over and over the same issues of *Penthouse*, the golden showers, the suggestively placed Popsicles, a grotesque pleasure. I went to his bedroom
closet and brought the sloshing bucket back to the living room and my grandfather peeled off the lid and our eyes watered from the ammoniac smell. And there it was, there was his severed foot, and alongside it, the remains of the picture. The formaldehyde had leached my father from the photo paper and flecks of him hung along the top of the bucket and maybe in one fleck I saw his eye, watching us.

“Yes,” my grandfather said. “There it is. My foot.” As if it were a childhood photograph we couldn’t quite match to his present likeness.

We always asked him how he lost it and he always said, “I don’t want to talk about it.” But this time, for the first time, he clicked off the television and made a point of looking us each in the eye and said, “I’ll only tell you on two conditions.” He held up his hand and lifted a finger for each. “One: when I begin, nobody says nothing. No interruptions. You just sit there and you listen. Two: after I finish, nobody says nothing. No questions. I hate questions. Questions ruin stories. Okay?”

We nodded and he began to speak, his voice low, growly.

In Manilla he bought a kitty cat off an old Filipino man. That’s what my big tough grandfather called it: a kitty cat. It was black and he called it Pussy. “I joked I was the only man on board with a pussy in my cabin,” he said and told us, chuckling a little, about how the kitty cat liked to chase around a button he dangled from a string.

Then his face went slack with seriousness. “One night we ran aground a coral reef. From the feel of it, the sharp lurch of the ship, I thought we had taken a torpedo and I jumped out of bed and stepped on Pussy and broke her back. She bit my foot. I don’t blame her for it. I would have bit my foot, too. So she bit my foot and the bite got infected. Every fucking thing over there gets infected. It’s the humidity does it.
“I tried to be a man. By that I mean I had this idea of what it meant to be a man that was foolish. So I didn’t get it treated. Didn’t get help. Here my men were taking bullets to the stomach and going yellow from malaria. We were at war. I mean, more often than not the walls of the ship were shaking from artillery shells exploding in the distance. I couldn’t complain about a stupid bite from a kitty cat. But the next thing you know I’ve got blackness in my veins and a fever of a hundred and ten. My foot looked like the foot of a corpse and the rest of me was catching up. So they sawed it right off me.” Here he made a cutting motion with hand. “Like a cancer. Before it took me over.”

He put the lid back on the bucket and leaned back in his chair and we sat there, not knowing what to say. Finally Gordon said, “Is that true?”

My grandfather’s eyes were closed. His body was still. He might have been asleep but for the look of secret knowledge playing on his lips. “Of course it’s true,” he said. “Everything I tell you is true. Even the stuff I make up. And I told you before—weren’t you listening?—no goddamn questions.”

Yesterday, after happy hour, we drove our dirt bikes home from the Weary Traveler to find Dave Lightener waiting for us. He must have just gotten there—he was halfway up the porch steps—when our headlights cast an anemic glow over him and he turned to face us with a scrunched-up expression, as if trying to figure out who we were. He wore around his arm a black band and he wore over his nose a white-bandaged splint. We did not turn off our engines. Instead we sat there, idling, the exhaust from our bikes and the breath from our mouths clouding the air a ghostly shade of gray. Above us a star hissed across the moonlit
sky, vaguely bright, like a light turned on in a daylit room. And then Dave began down the steps and we leapt off our bikes to meet him.

Before he could speak I brought my fist to his diaphragm, knocking the breath black from his body. Right then he looked like a gunshot actor in a western, clutching his belly with both hands, doubled over, his face making a nice target for Gordon’s knee. A snap sound preceded Dave falling back on his back with blood sliding from his already broken nose.

He put up his hands and we hit our way through them. I sucker-punched him once, twice, in the ribs while Cody and Gordon kicked him in the spine and stomach and then we stood around gulping for air and allowed him to struggle to his feet. When he righted himself, he wiped his face with his hand and blood dripped from his fingers. I moved in and roundhoused with my right and then my left, my fists knocking his head loose off its hinges. Again he collapsed, a bag of bones, a bloody heap of a man, his eyes walled and turned up, trying to see the bodies looming over him, trying to discern the look of animal hatred on our faces.

He opened his mouth to speak and I pointed a finger at him and said, with enough hatred in my voice to break a back, “Dave, I’m only going to tell you this once: Don’t say a word. Don’t you dare. Not one word.”

He closed his mouth and tried to crawl away and I brought a boot down on the back of his head and left it there a moment, grinding his face into the ground so that when he lifted his head the blood had melted the snow into a red impression of his face.

Gordon went inside and returned a moment later with a roll of duct tape and we held Dave down and bound his wrists and ankles and threw him on a sled and taped him to it and
tied the sled to the back of Gordon’s bike and drove at a perilous speed to Hole in the Ground.

The moon shined down and the snow glowed with pale blue light as we stood there, looking down into the crater, with Dave at our feet.

At that moment there was something childish about the way our breath puffed from our mouths in tiny clouds. It was as if we were imitating choo-choo trains. And for a moment, just a moment, we were kids again. Just a bunch of stupid kids.

Recalling that innocent time, so long ago, Cody said, “My mom wouldn’t even let me play with toy guns when I was little.” And he sighed heavily as if he couldn’t understand how he, how we, had ended up here.

And then Davey began struggling and yelling at us in a slurred voice and our faces hardened with age and anger and together we put our hands on him and shoved him forward and he descended into the darkness of the crater, going so fast—so fast we imagined him catching fire, burning up with a flash, howling as his heat consumed him.
My hands get so dry that when I open and close them quickly for thirty seconds they will crack open and bleed. But when I pull them from the boxing gloves they are moist and pale and soft, like something drawn from a shell.

“That’s about as useful as a fifth penis.”

For us there was no present, only the unfair past and a hopeful future that would never come to pass.

I heard many explanations.

Cody drew from the science fiction novels he loved so dearly when he said, “Have you ever noticed how some things—like hummingbirds, spiders, yellow jackets—can move so fast? Have you ever thought about the possibility of a parallel time dimension? Like, what if an hour for them was like a day for us? Like, what if we slipped into that dimension? What if things are speeding up?”

Gordon took a more practical approach when he said, “I think we’re just tired.”

And this made about as much sense to me as anything else I heard.

Don’t ask me how I knew he would fake with his left and follow through with a right cross. Over the past few months I had developed a sense about things, that’s all. An ability to fall into what athletes refer to as the zone, when reflex and a stop-action sense of timing in this case helped me anticipate his fist as a batter might anticipate a curve ball spinning whitely toward him at ninety mph. I noticed the flexing of his shoulders, the pivoting of his
waist, and before he could transfer his weight from his back foot to his front in a controlled
lunge, I had dodged forward and brought my elbow sharply to his temple, dropping him cold.
Quickening

When school let out the three of us went to my backyard, as we sometimes did, to fight. We were in ninth grade—Gordon and Cody and I—and we were trying to make each other tougher.

So in the grass, in the shade of the pines and junipers, we slung off our backpacks and laid down a pale green garden hose, tip to tip, making a ring. And then we stripped off our shirts and put on our gold-colored boxing gloves. And fought.

Every round went two minutes. If you stepped out of the ring, you lost. If you cried, you lost. If you got knocked out, or if you yelled, “Stop!” you lost.

Afterwards we always drank Coca-Colas and smoked Marlboros, our chests heaving, our faces all different shades of blacks and reds and yellows.

This started after Freshman Kill Day, when Seth Johnson—a no-neck linebacker with teeth like corn kernels and hands like T-bone steaks—beat Gordon until his face swelled and split open and purpled around the edges. Seth did this to Gordon because Gordon was a freshman and because Gordon was fat.

Eventually he healed, the rough husks of scabs peeling away to reveal a different face than the one I remembered, older, squarer, fiercer, his left eyebrow separated by a gummy white scar.
It was his idea, fighting each other. He wanted to be ready. He wanted to hurt back those who hurt him. And if he went down, he would go down swinging, as his father would have wanted.

And this is what we all wanted, to please our fathers, to make them proud, even though they had left us. Even though they were a million miles away.

This happened in Tumalo, Oregon—population 1,500—a high desert town situated among the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. We have a Dairy Queen and a BP gas station, a Food-4-Less, a meat-packing plant, a bright green football field irrigated by canal water, your standard assortment of taverns and churches—and in this way nothing distinguishes us from Bend or Redmond or La Pine or any of the other nowhere towns off 97, except for this:

We are home to the 2nd Battalion, 34th Marines.

The 50-acre base, just five minutes away, is a collection of one-story cinder-block buildings interrupted by cheat grass and sagebrush. It was built in the eighties. Apparently conditions here match very closely those of the Middle East, particularly the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan, of Northern Iraq.

All throughout my childhood, crowding the sidewalks and bleachers and grocery store aisles, I could find ranchers in Wrangler jeans alongside sergeants in desert fatigues. I could hear, if I cupped a hand to my ear, the lowing of bulls, the bleating of sheep, the report of assault rifles shouting from the hilltops.

No longer.
Our fathers were like all the fathers in Tumalo. All of them, just about, had enlisted as part-time soldiers, as reservists, for drill pay. Beer pay, they called it. For two weeks every year, and for one weekend every month, they trained. They threw on their cammies and filled their rucksacks and kissed us goodbye, and the gates of the 2nd Battalion drew closed behind them like teeth.

For this they earned several thousand as a private and several thousand more as a sergeant. And so once a month they would vanish into the pine-studded hills, returning to us Sunday night with their faces reddened from weather, with their biceps trembling from fatigue and their hands smelling of rifle grease. They would use terms like ECP and PRP and MEU and WMD and they would do push-ups in the middle of the living room and they would call six o’clock *eighteen-hundred hours* and they would high five and yell “Semper Fi!” and then a few days would pass and they would go back to the way they were, to the men we knew: Coors-drinking, baseball-throwing, crotch-scratching, Aqua Velva-smelling fathers.

Then, in January, the battalion was activated—and in March they shipped off for Iraq—and our fathers—our coaches, our teachers, our barbers, our cooks, our gas-station attendants and UPS deliverymen and deputies and firemen and mechanics—our fathers—so many of them—they climbed onto the olive-green school buses and pressed their palms to the windows and gave us the bravest, most hopeful smiles you can imagine, and vanished. Just like that.

Nights, I sometimes got on my Honda dirt bike and rode through the hills and canyons of Deschutes County. Beneath me the engine growled and shuddered while all
around me the wind, like something alive, bullied me, tried to drag me from my bike. And a
dark world slipped past as I downshifted, leaning into a turn—as I accelerated on a
straightaway to 70, to 80, concentrating only on the twenty yards of road glowing ahead of me.

I liked the way the bike made me feel. Like I could just leave Tumalo behind me,
shrug it off like a second skin. On this bike I could ride and ride and ride, away from here, up
and over the Cascades, through the Willamette Valley, until I reached the ocean, where the
broad black backs of whales regularly broke the surface of the water, and even further—and
further still—until I finally caught up with the horizon, where my father would be waiting.

Inevitably I ended up at Hole in the Ground.

Fifty years ago a meteor came screeching down from space and left behind a crater
5,000 feet wide and 300 feet deep. This is Hole in the Ground and it is regularly frequented
during the winter by the daredevil sledders among us, and during the summer by bearded
geologists from OSU interested in the metal fragments strewn across its bottom.

Here, I dangled my feet over the edge of the crater and leaned back on my elbows and
took in the sky, just a little lighter black than a crow, with only stars in it, no moon. Every
dio minutes a star seemed to come unstuck, streaking through the night in a bright flash that
hissted greenly into nothingness.

I wondered how many meteorites actually touched down and opened up the earth.
And when I peered into the crater, the black cavity of it, I wondered what the impact sounded
like, looked like. Like the greatest kind of thunder you can imagine, I bet, accompanied by a
crown of dirt rising skyward.
In the near distance the grayish green glow of Tumalo dampened the sky and it didn’t take much imagination to realize how close we came, fifty years ago, to oblivion. A chunk of space ice or a solar wind could have come along at just the right moment, jogging the meteor sideways, and rather than landing here, it could have landed there, at the intersection of Main and Farwell. *Wham*—just like that—no Dairy Queen, no Tumalo High, no 2nd Battalion.

Amazing how something can drop out the sky and change everything.

Just like that.

And this was October, when Cody and I circled each other. We wore our golden boxing gloves, both sets cracked with age and letting off dust when we pounded them together. Brownded grass crunched beneath our sneakers and dirt rose in tiny clouds and stuck to our bare bellies.

Cody was thin to the point of being scrawny. His collarbone poked against his skin like a swallowed coat hanger. His head was too big for his body and his eyes were too big for his head and the football players—Seth Johnson among them—regularly tossed him into garbage cans and called him ET.

He had had a bad day. And I could tell from the look on his face—the watery eyes, the trembling lips that revealed, in quick flashes, his buckteeth—that he wanted, he *needed*, to hit me. So I let him. I raised my gloves to my face and pulled my elbows against my ribs and Cody lunged forward, his arms snapping like rubber bands. I stood still, allowing his fists to work up and down my body, allowing him to throw the weight of his anger on me, until eventually he grew too tired to hit anymore and I opened up my stance and floored him with a right cross to the temple. He lay there, sprawled out in the grass with a small smile on his
ET face. “Damn,” he said in a dreamy voice. A drop of blood gathered along the corner of his eye and streaked down his temple into his hair.

I don’t know that we knew what we were fighting for. It was more of an instinctual thing. Maybe by beating at each other, by feeling sparks of pain, we were reminding ourselves we were alive. Or maybe we were striking out at the seeming unfairness of it all. Or maybe we weren’t just hitting each other—in a really weird way maybe we were helping each other—we were trying to save our lives.

Or maybe D) all of the above.

When I helped Cody up, Gordon clapped and howled from the sidelines, the hole of his mouth as dark as the bruises rising from our skin.

My father looked like someone you might see shopping for motor oil at Bi-Mart. He wore steel-toed boots, Carhartt jeans, a T-shirt advertising some place he had traveled, maybe Yellowstone or Seattle. To hide his receding hairline he wore a John Deere ball cap and it laid a shadow across his face, his brown eyes blinking above a considerable nose underlined by a gray mustache. Like me, my father was short and squat, with the build of a bulldog. His belly was a swollen bag and his shoulders were broad and good for carrying me during parades, fairs, when I was younger. He laughed a lot. He liked game shows. He drank too much beer and smoked too many cigarettes and spent too much time with his buddies, fishing, hunting, bullshitting, which probably had something to do with why my mother divorced him and moved to Boise with a hairdresser/tri-athlete named Chuck.

When my father first left, like all of the other fathers, he would email whenever he could. He would tell me about the heat, the gallons of water he drank everyday, the sand that
got into everything, the baths he took with baby wipes. He would tell me how safe he was, how very safe. This was when he was stationed in Turkey. Then the 2nd Battalion shipped off for Kirkuk, where attacks and sandstorms came roaring in on an almost daily basis. His emails came less and less frequently, with weeks of silence between them.

Sometimes, on the computer, I would hit refresh, refresh, refresh, hoping.

And then, in October, I received an email that read, “Hi Josh. I’m OK. Don’t worry. Do your homework. Love, Dad.”

I printed it up and hung it on my door with a piece of Scotch Tape.

Our fathers had left us. But men remained in Tumalo.

There were old men, like my grandfather, who had paid their dues, who had worked their jobs and fought their wars, and now spent their days at the gas station, drinking bad coffee from Styrofoam cups, complaining about the weather, arguing about the best months to reap alfalfa.

There were incapable men. Men who rarely shaved and watched daytime television in their once white underpants. Men who lived in trailers and filled their shopping carts with Busch Light, summer sausage, Oreo cookies. Men like Floyd Pitts. Everyone called Floyd special and I suppose that’s as good a word as any. He had a faraway look to his eyes and often twisted his face into weird expressions and every night for the past ten years, rain or snow or shine, set up his karaoke machine before the Dairy Queen and sang, in a trembling alto, oldies songs.

And then there were the men who scavenged whatever our fathers had left behind. Vulturous men. Men like Dave Lightener.
Dave Lightener worked as a recruitment officer. I’m guessing he was the only recruitment officer in world history who drove a Vespa scooter with a *Support Our Troops* ribbon magneted to its rear. We sometimes saw it parked outside the homes of young women whose husbands had gone to war. Dave had big ears and small eyes and wore his hair in your standard-issue high-and-tight buzz. He often spoke in a too loud voice about all the insurgents he gunned down when working a Fullujah patrol unit. He lived with his mother in Tumalo, but spent his days in Bend and Redmond, trolling the parking lots of Best Buy, ShopKo, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Mountain View Mall. He was looking for people who were angry and dissatisfied and poor.

People like us.

But he knew better than to bother us. On duty he stayed away from Tumalo entirely. Recruiting there would be too much like poaching the burned section of forest where deer, rib-slatted and wobbly legged, nosed through the ash, seeking something green.

One time my grandfather dropped Gordon and I off at Mountain View Mall and there, near the glass-doored entrance, stood Dave Lightener. He wore his creased khaki uniform and spoke with a group of Mexican teenagers. They were laughing, shaking their heads and walking away from him as we walked toward. We had our hats pulled low and he didn’t recognize us.

“Question for you, gentlemen,” he said in the voice of telemarketers and door-to-door Jehovah’s Witnesses. “What do you plan on doing with your lives?”

Gordon pulled off his hat with a flourish, as if he were part of some *ta-da!* magic act and his face was the trick. “I plan on killing some crazy-ass Muslims,” he said and forced a smile and turned to me. “How about you, Josh?”
“Yeah, killing some people and then getting myself killed,” I said, grimacing even as I played along. “That sounds like a good plan.”

Dave Lightener tightened his lips into a thin line and straightened his posture and asked us what we thought our fathers would think, hearing us right now. “They’re out there risking their lives, defending our freedom, and you’re cracking sick jokes,” he said. “I think that’s sick.”

We hated him for his soft hands and clean uniform. We hated him because he sent people like us off to die. Because at twenty-three he had attained a higher rank than our fathers. Because he slept with the lonely wives of soldiers. And now we hated him even more for making us feel ashamed.

I wanted to say something sarcastic but the words caught in my throat like a bunch of bones. So I fell back on my I-could-give-a-shit posture, my hips cocked, my lips slightly turned up at the edges—even as I felt my eyes tighten with shame.

But Gordon only hesitated a moment. No way would he permit a prick like Dave Lightener to preach at him. So he dug into his mental toolbox of snappily inappropriate comebacks and said, “Here’s your maple syrup,” holding out his hand, his fingers gripping an imaginary bottle.

And when Dave said, “And what is that for?” Gordon said, “To eat my ass with.”

Right then a twenty-something skateboarder-type with green hair and a nose-ring walked from the mall, a bagful of DVDs swinging from his fist. Dave turned to him, and after giving us a smarmy little smile and a snappy little salute, said, “Hey, friend. Let me ask you something. Do you like war movies?”
When we fought we painted our faces—black and green and brown—with the camo-grease our fathers left behind. It made our eyes and teeth appear startlingly white. And it smeared away against our gloves just as the grass smeared away beneath our sneakers—and the ring became a circle of dirt, the dirt a reddish color that looked a lot like scabbed flesh.

One time Gordon hammered my shoulder so hard I couldn’t lift my arm for a week. Another time I elbowed Cody in the kidneys and he peed blood. We struck each other with such force and frequency the golden gloves crumbled and our knuckles showed through the sweat-soaked blood-soaked foam like teeth through a busted lip. And so we bought another set of gloves. And the air grew steadily colder and we fought with steam blasting from our mouths.

When we grew tired we would clutch each other’s bodies, awkwardly, passionately, trying to find our breath. And when we found our breath we would break apart and punch and get punched and feel wonderful. There was a sort of reverse vampirism at work. In order to drain ourselves of emotion, we forced it upon each other with fists, spellbound by the impressions we could make on skin.

Quite a sensation.

When we fought, all of a sudden the world came into focus and we could see in each other every follicle of hair—the pores of Gordon’s nose, the burst capillary in Cody’s eye that reminded me of Mars. Our vision became near-sighted and the rest of the world fell out of focus and in a way that was the whole fucking point.
For twenty years my father worked at Noseler, Inc.—the bullet manufacturer based out of Bend—and the Marines correspondingly trained him as an ammunition technician. Gordon’s father, an electrician, became a technician as well, specializing in ground electronic repair. Cody liked to say his father was a Gunnery Sergeant, and he was, but we all knew he was also the battalion mess manager, a cook, which was how he made his living in Tumalo, tending the grill at Hamburger Patty’s.

We knew their titles but we didn’t know, not really, what their titles meant, what our fathers did over there. We imagined them doing heroic things. Rescuing Iraqi babies from burning huts. Sniping suicide bombers before they could detonate on a crowded city street. We drew on Hollywood and CNN to develop elaborate scenarios, where maybe, possibly, at twilight, during a trek through the mountains of Northern Iraq, bearded insurgents ambushed our fathers with rocket-launchers. We imagined our fathers leaping from their Humvees just in the nick of time. We imagined them silhouetted by a fiery explosion. We imagined them burrowing into the sand like lizards and firing their M-16s, their bullets streaking through the darkness like the meteorites I observed on sleepless nights.

They were the last of the John Waynes, we imagined, only tougher.

We didn’t fully understand the reason they fought. We only understood that they had to fight. The necessity of fighting made the reason for it irrelevant. And so we didn’t waste a lot of time whining, editorializing. No one in Tumalo did. Maybe my grandfather said it best when he said, “It’s all part of the game. It’s just the way it is.”

They were gone and that was the way it was. So we could only cross our fingers and wish on stars and hit refresh, refresh, hoping they would return to us, praying we would never find Dave Lightener on our porch uttering the words, “I regret to inform you…”
Gordon was too fat and I was too short and Cody was too skinny. All of us were too much, or too little, of something. But as October gave way to November we were getting stronger, slowly.

I lived with my grandfather and long ago my grandfather—a retired Naval officer—had converted his basement into a gym. I’m talking matted floors, adjustable steel chairs, weight racks, dumbbells, curl bars, medicine balls, an exercise bike, a bench press, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, the works. He no longer used it—his muscles had been reduced by age to withered slabs that slid loosely beneath his skin—so we took it over.

We slid plate after plate after plate onto the bench until the weight was impossible to bear, until our faces went tomato-red face and our veins rose jaggedly from our foreheads. When we lifted, our breath went rip-rip-rip and the weights rattled with each rep, sounding like a teacup set hastily on its saucer.

We smoked between sets and the basement took on a hazy dreamlike quality.

We did flat bench, incline, decline, and military-press. We did squats and lunges and calf-raises and lat pull-downs and tossed a medicine ball back and forth until we thought our arms would fall off. We did triceps extensions followed by preacher curls, done in a stooped-over position that made Gordon’s belly full of rolls that matched the four small bulges coming out the back of his neck. After awhile—several months—his muscles began to creep out from behind his fat and the four bulges became two bulges became no bulges.

His body, like all of our bodies, changed. Not only did our voices begin to bottom out. Not only did hair begin to grow thickly on our cheeks and chests. But we began to look like men. Fifteen years old, no kidding, and we looked like men. It was kind of spooky.
I would stand in front of the mirror at night, naked, pleasuring in the way my body rippled when I moved it. Cody’s scrawny frame developed so that his muscles looked like knots in ropes. But it was Gordon who changed the most severely. Before, his face pillowed around his cheeks and below his jaw. Now it tightened into a sharp-cornered block that showed off his veins and dimples, his skin so taut it looked as if it were made for someone half his size.

His stomach still stuck out but now it was armored with little square muscles, looking like a turtle-shell, only there was nothing slow about Gordon: he moved nearly as fast as he talked, the muscles in his legs and arms jerking even when he sat still.

“You know what I wish? I wish somebody would start something with me,” he would say, bringing his fist into his open palm. “I wish.”

He got his wish when we drove our dirt bikes deep into the woods to hunt.

Sunlight cut through the branches and dappled the ground with sun puddles and we growled along the winding logging roads that led past tall pines and thin clusters of birch, past hillsides packed with huckleberries, past moraines that coyotes scurried across, trying to flee us, only to slip, causing a tiny avalanche of loose rock. Every root and rock we ran over jarred our bikes as deeper and deeper into the woods we went, until the road we followed petered out into nothing.

It hadn’t rained in nearly a month, so the crab grass and the cheat grass and the pine needles had lost their color, dry and blond as cornhusks, crackling beneath my boots when I stepped off my bike. With everything so waterless, you could hear every chipmunk within a
square acre, rustling for pine nuts, and when the breeze rose into a cold wind the forest became a giant whisper.

We dumped our tent, our sleeping bags, near a basalt grotto with a spring bubbling from it, and Gordon said, “Let’s go, troops,” holding his rifle before his chest diagonally, as a soldier would. And he dressed as a soldier would, wearing a too big pair of his father’s cammies rather than the mandatory blaze-orange gear.

Fifty feet apart we worked our way downhill, through the forest, through a huckleberry thicket, through a clear-cut crowded with stumps, taking care not to make much noise or slip on the pine needles carpeting the ground.

Buzzards circled overhead. Lizards scurried underfoot. A woodpecker banged away at a dead tree. And a chipmunk worrying at a pinecone screeched its astonishment when a peregrine falcon swooped down and seized it, carrying it off between the trees to some secret place. Its wings made no sound. And neither did the blaze-orange hunter when he appeared in a clearing several hundred yards below us.

Gordon made some sort of SWAT team gesture that, I think, asked us to stay low and carefully make our way toward him. We did and once huddled together behind a boulder, we peered through our scopes at the hunter, tracking him with the lines of our rifles. “It’s that cocksucker,” Gordon said in a harsh whisper. By this he meant Seth Johnson.

Seth Johnson weighed over 250 pounds and in his blaze-orange vest and an ear-flapped hat looked like some kind of muscular pumpkin. His rifle was strapped to his back. His mouth was moving. He was talking to someone, we realized. He was approaching a campsite at the corner of the meadow. There, four members of the varsity football squad sat
on logs around a smoldering campfire, their arms bobbing like oilrigs as they brought their beers to their mouths.

I took my eye from my scope and noticed Gordon fingering the trigger of his thirty-aught. I told him to quit fooling around and he pulled his hand suddenly away from the stock and smiled guiltily and said he just wanted to know what it felt like, having that power over someone.

Then his finger, his trigger finger, rose up and touched the gummy white scar that split his eyebrow, remembering. “I say we fuck with them a little.”

I looked at Cody and Cody looked at me and both of us shook our heads, no.

Gordon said, “Just to scare them a little,” and I said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to scare somebody when somebody has a gun.”

“So we’ll wait till he doesn’t have a gun. We’ll come back tonight.”

With that he slid away from the boulder and retreated up the hillside and we followed him and later that day, after an early dinner of beef jerky and trail mix and Gatorade, I happened upon a four-point stag nibbling on some bear grass and shot it with my rifle resting on a stump and it stumbled backwards and collapsed with a rose blooming from behind its shoulder, where the heart was hidden. The wind made a soft hissing sound.

Gordon and Cody came running and we stood around the deer and smoked a few cigarettes while watching the thick arterial blood run from its mouth, pooling around its head. Then we took out our knives and got to work. I cut around the anus, cutting away the penis and testes, and then ran the knife along the belly, unzipping the hide to reveal the delicate pink flesh and greenish vessels into which our hands disappeared.

Blood steamed in the cold mountain air.
When we finished—when we skinned the deer and hacked at its joints and cut out its back strap and boned out its shoulders and hips, its neck and ribs, making chops, roasts, steaks, quartering the meat so we could bundle it into our insulated saddlebags—I said, “Should we pack it home?”

“No,” Gordon said and picked up the deer head by the antlers and held it before his own. Blood spilled from its neck and made a pattering sound on the ground. In the half-light of early evening he began to do a little dance, bending his knees and stomping his feet, weaving between us. “I think I’ve got a better idea,” he said in the deepest voice he could manage.

“I don’t know,” Cody said and Gordon pretended to rake at him with the antlers and said, still using the Darth-Vaderish voice, “Don’t pussy out on me, Cody.” And then he let the head fall, dangling it from one hand, and told us the rule of three. The rule his father had told him about it. This was the rule: every Marine had three things to worry about. There were three men to a rifle squad. Three rifle squads to a platoon. Three platoons to a company. Three companies to a battalion. “Three, Cody. The Marines operate in threes.”

Cody looked to me for help, and though I was exhausted and reeked of gore, I could appreciate the need for revenge, the need to strike out at something that had caused you pain. “Just to scare them, right, Gordo?” I said.

“Right.”

Cody let his bony shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. “Fine,” he said.

So we filled our cooler packs with meat and lugged them back to the campsite and partially submerged them in the icy spring. And then Gordon took the deer hide and slit a hole in its middle and poked his head through the hole so the hide hung off him loosely like a
hairy sack. And we helped him smear mud and blood across his face and then, with his Leatherman belt-tool, he sawed off the antlers and held them in each hand and slashed at the air as if they were claws.

In a cheery voice unbefitting his nightmarish appearance he said, “Ready?”

By this time night had come on in full and the moon hung over the Cascades and grayly lit our way as we crept through the forest, imagining ourselves in enemy territory, with trip-wires and guard towers and snarling dogs around every corner.

We stationed ourselves once again behind the boulder that overlooked their campsite and we observed them as they swapped hunting stories and joked about Jessica Robertson’s big ass titties and passed around a bottle of whiskey and drank to excess and finally pissed on the fire to extinguish it. And then each of them drunkenly retired to their tents.

We waited an hour before making our way down the hill. And we descended with such care it took us another hour still before we were upon them. In the far distance an owl hooted, its noise barely noticeable over the chorus of snores that rose from their tents. Seth had parked his Bronco on a nearby haul road. The license plate read SMAN and all their rifles lay in its cab. Cody collected them, slinging them over his shoulder with a clatter that made us say Shh. And then I took my knife and slowly eased it into each tire and the air escaped from them at a slow hiss.

We returned to the campsite then and Cody continued on past it, starting up the hillside with the rifles, just in case. Gordon and I stood outside Seth’s tent. I had my knife ready, glinting in the moonlight, but Gordon held up his hand, telling me to wait. And so we waited a few moments until a cloud scudded over the moon and made the meadow fully dark.
Then Gordon held out his arms and took a few practice slashes with the antlers. He showed his teeth in a snarl that against his blackened face seemed to emit a light of its own. I put my knife to the tent and in one quick jerk opened up a slit that Gordon rushed through, staining the flaps of nylon with blood in his passing. I could see nothing but shadows but I could immediately hear Seth scream the scream of a little girl as Gordon raked at him with the antlers and hissed and howled at him like some cave-creature hungry for man-flesh and then the tents around us came alive with confused voices and Gordon reemerged with a horrible smile on his face and I followed him up the hillside, crashing through the undergrowth, leaving Seth to make sense of the nightmare that had descended upon him without warning.

Then it was November, and in Tumalo we hate November. The ice-tinged taste of it. The bare-branched, cement-skied look of it. It’s a time of waiting. It’s an in-between time, right before winter comes on in earnest, howling down from the mountains like some shaggy white beast. All you can do in November is zip up your jacket and rub udder cream into your cracked skin and drink that second mug of coffee and twist up your face in a scowl, and wait.

So it was November and I was sitting in third-period Geometry when I felt a pinprick sort of pain at the back of my head. I put my hand there and turned around in my desk and found Cody grinning at me, a gray hair pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “You’re getting old,” he said and handed me the hair like a clover of bad fortune.

And he was right. I didn’t know it at the time but he was exactly right.
Snow fell. And we threw on our coveralls and wrenched on our studded tires and drove our dirt bikes to Hole in the Ground, dragging our sleds behind us with towropes. On the way there our engines filled up the white silence of the afternoon. And our back tires kicked up plumes of powder and on sharp turns slipped out beneath us and we lay there, in the middle of the road, bleeding, laughing, unafraid.

Earlier, for lunch, we had cooked a pound of bacon with a stick of butter. The grease, which hardened into a white waxy pool, we used as polish, buffing it into the bottoms of our sleds. Speed was what we wanted, was why we traveled to Hole in the Ground. We wanted the wind, blasting into our open mouths, to give us an ice-cream headache. We wanted the world to blur. We wanted to approach the edge and leap into nothingness and feel brave for doing so.

We found the steepest section of the crater we could and one by one we descended into its heart, 300 feet below us. We followed each other to iron down the snow and create a chute, blue-hued and frictionless, that would allow us to travel at a speed equivalent to freefalling. Our eyeballs glazed over with frost, our ears roared with wind, our stomachs rose into our throats, as we rocketed down the crater and felt five—and then we began the slow climb back the way we came and felt fifty.

We wore crampons and ascended in a zigzagging series of switchbacks that took us nearly an hour. By this time the air had begun to purple with evening. We all stood around for a while, taking in the view, sweating in our coveralls, watching our breath fog from our mouths, and then Gordon packed a snowball.

Cody said, “You better not hit me with that,” and Gordon cocked his arm threateningly and smiled—like: don’t be such a pussy—before he dropped to his knees and
began to roll the snowball, to build it into something bigger, until eventually it grew to the size of a large man curled into the fetal position.

He went to his bike and dragged it over to where we stood and from the back of it he removed a short garden hose—the hose he used to siphon gas from fancy foreign cars—and then he unscrewed the tank and dipped the hose into it and sucked at its end until gas flowed. He doused the giant snowball as if he hoped it would sprout. It did not melt, like maybe you’d expect—he had packed it tight enough—but it puckered slightly and appeared leaden, as when blue-coconut flavoring dribbles onto shaved-ice.

Then he withdrew his Zippo from his pocket and sparked it and brought it toward the ball and the fumes caught flame and the whole thing erupted with a noise like gasping that sent us staggering back a few steps.

And then Gordon rushed forward and kicked it and the ball of fire rolled forward and went tumbling down the crater, down our chute. Like a meteor. In a flash. And the snow beneath it instantly melted, only to freeze again a moment later, making a slick blue ribbon.

When we sledded it, we went so fast our minds emptied and we felt as if we had shrugged away time and physics and emotion, the limits of this world—a sensation at once like flying and falling.

On the news Iraqi insurgents fired their assault rifles skyward. On the news a reporter stationed in Baghdad reported the gruesome deaths of seven American soldiers when a car bomb detonated at a traffic checkpoint. On the news President Bush said he did not think it was wise to provide a time frame for troop withdrawal.
I checked my email before I ate breakfast and found nothing but spam that promised great mortgage rates, cheap painkillers, and increased erectile performance.

And soon enough one gray hair became ten gray hairs became thirty gray hairs, most of them clustered around my temples.

Whereas before, after a fight or after a hard hour of lifting, I would take a cold shower and pop a few Advil and feel fine, my body now began to complain. My wounds wouldn’t heal as fast and my face took on a permanent decayed-fruit look. My wrists felt swollen, my knees ached, all my joints feeling full of tiny dry wasps.

This didn’t happen all at once. But it happened.

And I wasn’t alone. Cody began to go bald, his hairline creeping back into a horseshoe shape. Gordon developed a serpentine varicose vein behind his knee and one night called me, weeping, after he passed a kidney stone the size of a Rice Krispie.

There were others, too. Sons and daughters and wives. You could see it in their stooped shoulders, the black bags beneath their eyes, the wrinkles framing their mouths like a set of parentheses. They were getting older. We were getting older.

And our fathers haunted us. They were everywhere. In the grocery store when we spotted a 30-pack of Coors on sale for ten bucks. On the highway when we passed a jacked-up Dodge with a dozen hay bales stacked in its bed. In the sky when a jet roared by, reminding us of faraway places. And now we saw our fathers even in the mirror. We began to look like them. Our fathers, who had been taken from us, were everywhere, at every turn, imprisoning us.
Let me tell you about my grandfather, my father’s father. He was the retired captain of a Nevada-class battleship stationed in the South Pacific during WWII. From the walls of his house, our house, hung exotic swords, paintings of ships, his glass-framed purple heart. You might wonder what a naval captain was doing in the middle of the desert, and when I asked him this, he said, “I’ve seen plenty more than enough of the goddamned sea.”

He talked like that. Like a rock cracked open and his voice fell out. His craggy features conveyed a disappointed nobility. He spent most of his days at the gas station, along with the rest of the old timers, playing cards and drinking coffee and trading scar stories.

My grandfather had the greatest scar of any. He was locally famous for it—for his foot, his right foot. He lost in during the war but he wouldn’t say how. Or maybe lost is the wrong word because he actually kept the severed foot in a sealed bucket of formaldehyde. When people asked him why, he said, “I wanted it. It’s me, you know. It’s mine. It’s not like a nail clipping or a clump of hair. It’s my foot, goddamn it.”

He gave away the toes to his closest friends.

“Long after I’m gone,” he would joke, “I will remain afoot.”

It was his way of never growing old, of living forever, suspending his foot in formaldehyde like a bee trapped in amber.

I had seen the foot on many occasions, usually around the holidays, when he drank too much wine and dragged it from the closet to show off. He would peel away the lid and we would peer into its pungent waters and see the foot, hairless, maggot-white, floating there with a bit of bone poking from its ankle. I remember one time he tossed an empty beer can in with it and when I asked why, he said, “It’s evolving. Stuff will go in, stuff will come out. It will be representative.” Like some kind of art.
The last I saw he had tossed in a photo of my father.

Seth Johnson’s father was a staff sergeant. Like his son, he was a big man—but not big enough. Just before Christmas he stepped on a cluster bomb. A US warplane dropped it and the sand camouflaged it and he stepped on it and it tore him into many meaty pieces.

When Dave Lightener climbed up the front porch with a black armband and a somber expression, Mrs. Johnson, who was cooking a honeyed ham at the time, collapsed on the kitchen floor and Seth pushed his way out the door and punched Dave in the face, breaking his nose before he could utter the words, “I regret to inform you…”

Hearing about this, we felt bad for all of ten seconds. And then we felt good because it was his father and not ours. And then we once again felt bad and on Christmas Eve we drove to Seth’s house and laid down on his porch the rifles we had stolen, along with a six-pack of Coors, and then, just as we were about to leave, Gordon dug in his back pocket and removed his wallet and placed under the six-pack all the money he had, a few fives, some ones.

“Fucking Christmas,” he said.

I began to walk with a limp until mid-morning. My testicles seemed droopy. When I masturbated I stopped thinking about Jessica Robertson and began thinking about her mother. My veins wormed their way from beneath my skin in gray networks. Occasionally, just waking up made me feel a little defeated, until I had my coffee, several cups of it.

We stopped fighting—it hurt too much to fight—and took up drinking instead.
Weekends, we drove our dirt bikes to Bend, twenty miles away, and bought beer and took it to Hole in the Ground and drank there until a bright line of sunlight appeared on the horizon and illuminated the snow-blanketed desert. Nobody ever asked for our ID and when we held up our empty bottles and stared at our reflections in the glass, warped and ghostly, we knew why.

After awhile we got braver and went to the bars—The Golden Nugget, The Weary Traveler, The Pine Tavern—where we square-danced with older women wearing purple eye shadow and sparkly dream-catcher earrings and push-up bras and clattery high heels. We told them we were Marines back from a six-month deployment and they said, “Really?” and we said, “Yes, ma’am,” and when they asked for our names we gave them the names of our fathers. And then we bought them drinks and they drank them in a gulping way and breathed hotly in faces and we brought our mouths against theirs and they tasted like menthol cigarettes, like burnt urinal pucks. And then we went home with them, to their trailers, to their waterbeds, where among their stuffed animals we fucked them.

The grayness began along the backs and sides of our heads and then began its slow creep upward. By New Years I was nearly as white-headed as the mountains. At this time two months had passed since I last heard from my father.

We stopped going to school. “Fuck school,” we said. “Who fucking needs it?”

Nobody seemed to notice, to care, when we spent all day in the basement, smoking, drinking, throwing weights around and pawing through the same crumpled copies of Penthouse.
One evening we emerged from our cave and went to Dairy Queen. It was ten degrees but we were drunk and crazy with cabin fever and by God a Butterfinger Blizzard sounded like the most delicious thing.

Floyd Pitts was there—he was always there—from six to nine every evening. He had his karaoke machine set up near the entrance, an orange extension cord running inside. Snow stuck to his narrow shoulders and his gray hair as he stood on the sidewalk, shifting his weight from foot to foot, singing his oldies songs to no one, to everyone, each song interrupted by a whispery broadcast from his imaginary radio station, 97.5 OINK.

We got our Butterfinger Blizzards and took them outside and cleared the snow off one of the picnic tables and cheered and clapped for Floyd as he warbled out, “Unchained Melody” and “House of the Rising Sun.” He was at once a child and an old man and we felt a strange love for him.

“You fucking rule, Floyd,” Gordon said and Floyd said, “Okay. Thank you.”

“We want to hear ‘Help Me, Rhonda,” Cody said and Floyd said, “Okay. That’s what we’re going to sing in just a minute. In just a minute, after this commercial break.”

He stood there a moment, staring off into the darkness, and then a little too loudly began to sing, “Help me, Wanda. Help, help me, Wanda,” and Cody shrugged and took a spoonful of Blizzard and said, “Close enough.”

But Floyd only knew the chorus and his voice soon mellowed and his body went still and without transition the brightly tuned innocence of the Beach Boys gave way to a gruff and haunting rendition of “Little Soldier Boy” by the Yardbirds.

I’ll be honest with you here: I completely lost it. Right then something came loose inside of me and I began to cry in the open way men generally avoid.
I don’t know what it was—whether it was the beer, the raw emptiness of Tumalo, or the somber timbre of Floyd’s voice—but I couldn’t help it. I cried as I had never cried before. I cried over everything and nothing and Gordon and Cody put their hands on me and said, “Don’t cry.” And then, “Fine. Cry then.”

Sleet fell and the world glazed over with a blueness as slick as the bottoms of our sleds. Highway 97 looked like a polished vein of obsidian. There were many car accidents. Trucks turned over in the ditches. Cars veered uncontrollably across the meridian as if dragged there by invisible wires. When Seth Johnson collided head-on with a semi, which knocked his Bronco over the guardrail, crumpling it into a little white ball, like a discarded piece of paper, we weren’t surprised to hear he had died.

Here is what surprised us.

He was in a state of rigor mortis. Meaning he had been dead for a long time—for at least three days, the autopsy later determined.

After Cody dropped a forty-pound dumbbell on his big toe and split open the nail like the shell of a peanut, we all ended up in the living room watching television with my grandfather. Cody had an icepack on his foot and every few minutes he took it off and checked his toe, which by this time had turned a purply shade of black with a red line running down its middle.

“You think that’s bad,” my grandfather said. “You should see my foot.” He was sitting in his Lay-Z-Boy recliner and he rocked forward with a groan and reached down and pulled up his pant leg to reveal the flesh-colored shaft that fit his prosthesis onto his leg. He
knocked on it and it made a hollow noise that made him grin a grin that was more gum than tooth. “Josh, go get me my foot. I want to show it to your friends.”

All of us had seen the foot, had seen it many times, but we never tired of it—in the same way we never tired of reading over and over the same issues of *Penthouse*, the golden showers, the suggestively placed Popsicles, a grotesque pleasure. I went to his bedroom closet and brought the sloshing bucket back to the living room and my grandfather peeled off the lid and our eyes watered from the ammoniac smell. And there it was, there was his severed foot, and alongside it, the remains of the picture. The formaldehyde had leached my father from the photo paper and flecks of him hung along the top of the bucket and maybe in one fleck I saw his eye, watching us.

“Yes,” my grandfather said. “There it is. My foot.” As if it were a childhood photograph we couldn’t quite match to his present likeness.

We always asked him how he lost it and he always said, “I don’t want to talk about it.” But this time, for the first time, he clicked off the television and made a point of looking us each in the eye and said, “I’ll only tell you on two conditions.” He held up his hand and lifted a finger for each. “One: when I begin, nobody says nothing. No interruptions. You just sit there and you listen. Two: after I finish, nobody says nothing. No questions. I hate questions. Questions ruin stories. Okay?”

We nodded and he began to speak, his voice low, growly.

In Manilla he bought a kitty cat off an old Filipino man. That’s what my big tough grandfather called it: a kitty cat. It was black and he called it Pussy. “I joked I was the only man on board with a pussy in my cabin,” he said and told us, chuckling a little, about how the kitty cat liked to chase around a button he dangled from a string.
Then his face went slack with seriousness. “One night we ran aground a coral reef. From the feel of it, the sharp lurch of the ship, I thought we had taken a torpedo and I jumped out of bed and stepped on Pussy and broke her back. She bit my foot. I don’t blame her for it. I would have bit my foot, too. So she bit my foot and the bite got infected. Every fucking thing over there gets infected. It’s the humidity does it.

“I tried to be a man. By that I mean I had this idea of what it meant to be a man that was foolish. So I didn’t get it treated. Didn’t get help. Here my men were taking bullets to the stomach and going yellow from malaria. We were at war. I mean, more often than not the walls of the ship were shaking from artillery shells exploding in the distance. I couldn’t complain about a stupid bite from a kitty cat. But the next thing you know I’ve got blackness in my veins and a fever of a hundred and ten. My foot looked like the foot of a corpse and the rest of me was catching up. So they sawed it right off me.” Here he made a cutting motion with hand. “Like a cancer. Before it took me over.”

He put the lid back on the bucket and leaned back in his chair and we sat there, not knowing what to say. Finally Gordon said, “Is that true?”

My grandfather’s eyes were closed. His body was still. He might have been asleep but for the look of secret knowledge playing on his lips. “Of course it’s true,” he said. “Everything I tell you is true. Even the stuff I make up. And I told you before—weren’t you listening?—no goddamn questions.”

Yesterday, after happy hour, we drove our dirt bikes home from the Weary Traveler to find Dave Lightener waiting for us. He must have just gotten there—he was halfway up the porch steps—when our headlights cast an anemic glow over him and he turned to face us
with a scrunched-up expression, as if trying to figure out who we were. He wore around his arm a black band and he wore over his nose a white-bandaged splint. We did not turn off our engines. Instead we sat in the driveway, idling, the exhaust from our bikes and the breath from our mouths clouding the air a ghostly shade of gray. Above us a star hissed across the moonlit sky, vaguely bright, like a light turned on in a daylit room. And then Dave began down the steps and we leapt off our bikes to meet him.

Before he could speak I brought my fist to his diaphragm, knocking the breath black from his body. Right then he looked like a gunshot actor in a western, clutching his belly with both hands, doubled over, his face making a nice target for Gordon’s knee. A snap sound preceded Dave falling back on his back with blood sliding from his already broken nose.

He put up his hands and we hit our way through them. I sucker-punched him once, twice, in the ribs while Cody and Gordon kicked him in the spine and stomach and then we stood around gulping for air and allowed him to struggle to his feet. When he righted himself, he wiped his face with his hand and blood dripped from his fingers. I moved in and roundhoused with my right and then my left, my fists knocking his head loose off its hinges. Again he collapsed, a bag of bones, a bloody heap of a man, his eyes walled and turned up, trying to see the bodies looming over him, trying to discern the look of animal hatred on our faces.

He opened his mouth to speak and I pointed a finger at him and said, with enough hatred in my voice to break a back, “Dave, I’m only going to tell you this once: Don’t say a word. Don’t you dare. Not one word.”
He closed his mouth and tried to crawl away and I brought a boot down on the back of his head and left it there a moment, grinding his face into the ground so that when he lifted his head the blood had melted the snow into a red impression of his face.

Gordon went inside and returned a moment later with a roll of duct tape and we held Dave down and bound his wrists and ankles and threw him on a sled and taped him to it and tied the sled to the back of Gordon’s bike and drove at a perilous speed to Hole in the Ground.

Here the moon shined down and the snow glowed with pale blue light as we smoked cigarettes, looking down into the crater, with Dave at our feet.

There was something childish about the way our breath puffed from our mouths in tiny clouds. It was as if we were imitating choo-choo trains. And for a moment, just a moment, we were kids again. Just a bunch of stupid kids. Recalling that innocent time, so long ago, Cody said, “My mom wouldn’t even let me play with toy guns when I was little.” And he sighed heavily as if he couldn’t understand how he, how we, had ended up here.

I looked at my hands. They were dark and warmly sticky with blood. I didn’t feel the pain, not yet, but I knew it was there, an unsayable pain.

And then, with a sudden lurch, Davey began struggling and yelling at us in a slurred voice and our faces hardened with age and anger and together we put our hands on him and shoved him forward and he descended into the darkness of the crater, going so fast—so fast I imagined him catching fire, burning up with a flash, howling as his heat consumed him.
Quickening

When school let out the three of us went to my backyard, as we sometimes did, to fight. We were in ninth grade—Gordon and Cody and I—and we were trying to make each other tougher.

So in the grass, in the shade of the pines and junipers, we slung off our backpacks and laid down a pale green garden hose, tip to tip, making a ring. And then we stripped off our shirts and put on our gold-colored boxing gloves. And fought.

Every round went two minutes. If you stepped out of the ring, you lost. If you cried, you lost. If you got knocked out, or if you yelled, “Stop!” you lost.

Afterwards we always drank Coca-Colas and smoked Marlboros, our chests heaving, our faces all different shades of blacks and reds and yellows.

This started after Freshman Kill Day, when Seth Johnson—a no-neck linebacker with teeth like corn kernels and hands like T-bone steaks—beat Gordon until his face swelled and split open and purpled around the edges. Seth did this to Gordon because Gordon was a freshman and because Gordon was fat.

Eventually he healed, the rough husks of scabs peeling away to reveal a different face than the one I remembered, older, squarer, fiercer, his left eyebrow separated by a gummy white scar.
It was his idea, fighting each other. He wanted to be ready. He wanted to hurt back those who hurt him. And if he went down, he would go down swinging, as his father would have wanted.

And this is what we all wanted, to please our fathers, to make them proud, even though they had left us. Even though they were a million miles away.

This happened in Tumalo, Oregon—population 1,500—a high desert town situated among the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. We have a Dairy Queen and a BP gas station, a Food-4-Less, a meat-packing plant, a bright green football field irrigated by canal water, your standard assortment of taverns and churches—and in this way nothing distinguishes us from Bend or Redmond or La Pine or any of the other nowhere towns off 97, except for this:

We are home to the 2nd Battalion, 34th Marines.

The 50-acre base, just five minutes away, is a collection of one-story cinder-block buildings interrupted by cheat grass and sagebrush. It was built in the eighties. Apparently conditions here match very closely those of the Middle East, particularly the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan, of Northern Iraq.

All throughout my childhood, crowding the sidewalks and bleachers and grocery store aisles, I could find ranchers in Wrangler jeans alongside sergeants in desert fatigues. I could hear, if I cupped a hand to my ear, the lowing of bulls, the bleating of sheep, the report of assault rifles shouting from the hilltops.

No longer.
Our fathers were like all the fathers in Tumalo. All of them, just about, had enlisted as part-time soldiers, as reservists, for drill pay. Beer pay, they called it. For two weeks every year, and for one weekend every month, they trained. They threw on their cammies and filled their rucksacks and kissed us goodbye, and the gates of the 2nd Battalion drew closed behind them like teeth.

For this they earned several thousand as a private and several thousand more as a sergeant. And so once a month they would vanish into the pine-studded hills, returning to us Sunday night with their faces reddened from weather, with their biceps trembling from fatigue and their hands smelling of rifle grease. They would use terms like ECP and PRP and MEU and WMD and they would do push-ups in the middle of the living room and they would call six o’clock eighteen-hundred hours and they would high five and yell “Semper Fi!” and then a few days would pass and they would go back to the way they were, to the men we knew: Coors-drinking, baseball-throwing, crotch-scratching, Aqua Velva-smelling fathers.

Then, in January, the battalion was activated—and in March they shipped off for Iraq—and our fathers—our coaches, our teachers, our barbers, our cooks, our gas-station attendants and UPS deliverymen and deputies and firemen and mechanics—our fathers—so many of them—they climbed onto the olive-green school buses and pressed their palms to the windows and gave us the bravest, most hopeful smiles you can imagine, and vanished. Just like that.

Nights, I sometimes got on my Honda dirt bike and rode through the hills and canyons of Deschutes County. Beneath me the engine growled and shuddered while all
around me the wind, like something alive, bullied me, tried to drag me from my bike. And a
dark world slipped past as I downshifted, leaning into a turn—as I accelerated on a
straightaway to 70, to 80, concentrating only on the twenty yards of road glowing ahead of
me.

I liked the way the bike made me feel. Like I could just leave Tumalo behind me,
shrug it off like a second skin. On this bike I could ride and ride and ride, away from here, up
and over the Cascades, through the Willamette Valley, until I reached the ocean, where the
broad black backs of whales regularly broke the surface of the water, and even further—and
further still—until I finally caught up with the horizon, where my father would be waiting.

Inevitably I ended up at Hole in the Ground.

Fifty years ago a meteor came screeching down from space and left behind a crater
5,000 feet wide and 300 feet deep. This is Hole in the Ground and it is regularly frequented
during the winter by the daredevil sledders among us, and during the summer by bearded
geologists from OSU interested in the metal fragments strewn across its bottom.

Here, I dangled my feet over the edge of the crater and leaned back on my elbows and
took in the sky, just a little lighter black than a crow, with only stars in it, no moon. Every
d few minutes a star seemed to come unstuck, streaking through the night in a bright flash that
hissted greenly into nothingness.

I wondered how many meteorites actually touched down and opened up the earth.
And when I peered into the crater, the black cavity of it, I wondered what the impact sounded
like, looked like. Like the greatest kind of thunder you can imagine, I bet, accompanied by a
crown of dirt rising skyward.
In the near distance the grayish green glow of Tumalo dampened the sky and it didn’t take much imagination to realize how close we came, fifty years ago, to oblivion. A chunk of space ice or a solar wind could have come along at just the right moment, jogging the meteor sideways, and rather than landing here, it could have landed there, at the intersection of Main and Farwell. Wham—just like that—no Dairy Queen, no Tumalo High, no 2nd Battalion.

Amazing how something can drop out the sky and change everything.

Just like that.

And this was October, when Cody and I circled each other. We wore our golden boxing gloves, both sets cracked with age and letting off flakes when we pounded them together. Browned grass crunched beneath our sneakers and dust rose in little puffs like distress signals.

Cody was thin to the point of being scrawny. His collarbone poked against his skin like a swallowed coat hanger. His head was too big for his body and his eyes were too big for his head and the football players—Seth Johnson among them—regularly tossed him into garbage cans and called him ET.

He had had a bad day. And I could tell from the look on his face—the watery eyes, the trembling lips that revealed, in quick flashes, his buckteeth—that he wanted, he needed, to hit me. So I let him. I raised my gloves to my face and pulled my elbows against my ribs and Cody lunged forward, his arms snapping like rubber bands. I stood still, allowing his fists to work up and down my body, allowing him to throw the weight of his anger on me, until eventually he grew too tired to hit anymore and I opened up my stance and floored him with a right cross to the temple. He lay there, sprawled out in the grass with a small smile on his
ET face. “Damn,” he said in a dreamy voice. A drop of blood gathered along the corner of his eye and streaked down his temple into his hair.

I don’t know that we knew what we were fighting for. It was more of an instinctual thing. Maybe by beating at each other, by feeling sparks of pain, we were reminding ourselves we were alive. Or maybe we were striking out at the seeming unfairness of it all. Or maybe we weren’t just hitting each other—in a really weird way maybe we were helping each other—we were trying to save our lives.

Or maybe D) all of the above.

When I helped Cody up, Gordon clapped and howled from the sidelines, the hole of his mouth as dark as the bruises rising from our skin.

My father looked like someone you might see shopping for motor oil at Bi-Mart. He wore steel-toed boots, Carhartt jeans, a T-shirt advertising some place he had traveled, maybe Yellowstone or Seattle. To hide his receding hairline he wore a John Deere ball cap and it laid a shadow across his face, his brown eyes blinking above a considerable nose underlined by a gray mustache. Like me, my father was short and squat, with the build of a bulldog. His belly was a swollen bag and his shoulders were broad and good for carrying me during parades, fairs, when I was younger. He laughed a lot. He liked game shows. He drank too much beer and smoked too many cigarettes and spent too much time with his buddies, fishing, hunting, bullshitting, which probably had something to do with why my mother divorced him and moved to Boise with a hairdresser/tri-athlete named Chuck.

When my father first left, like all of the other fathers, he would email whenever he could. He would tell me about the heat, the gallons of water he drank everyday, the sand that
got into everything, the baths he took with baby wipes. He would tell me how safe he was, how very safe. This was when he was stationed in Turkey. Then the 2nd Battalion shipped off for Kirkuk, where attacks and sandstorms came roaring in on an almost daily basis. His emails came less and less frequently, with weeks of silence between them.

Sometimes, on the computer, I would hit refresh, refresh, refresh, hoping.

And then, in October, I received an email that read, “Hi Josh. I’m OK. Don’t worry. Do your homework. Love, Dad.”

I printed it up and hung it on my door with a piece of Scotch Tape.

Our fathers had left us. But men remained in Tumalo.

There were old men, like my grandfather, who had paid their dues, who had worked their jobs and fought their wars, and now spent their days at the gas station, drinking bad coffee from Styrofoam cups, complaining about the weather, arguing about the best months to reap alfalfa.

There were incapable men. Men who rarely shaved and watched daytime television in their once white underpants. Men who lived in trailers and filled their shopping carts with Busch Light, summer sausage, Oreo cookies. Men like Floyd Pitts. Everyone called Floyd special and I suppose that’s as good a word as any. He had a faraway look to his eyes and often twisted his face into weird expressions and every night for the past ten years, rain or snow or shine, set up his karaoke machine before the Dairy Queen and sang, in a trembling alto, oldies songs.

And then there were the men who scavenged whatever our fathers had left behind. Vulturous men. Men like Dave Lightener.
Dave Lightener worked as a recruitment officer. I’m guessing he was the only
recruitment officer in world history who drove a Vespa scooter with a *Support Our Troops*
ribbon magneted to its rear. We sometimes saw it parked outside the homes of young women
whose husbands had gone to war. Dave had big ears and small eyes and wore his hair in your
standard-issue high-and-tight buzz. He often spoke in a too loud voice about all the
insurgents he gunned down when working a Fullujah patrol unit. He lived with his mother in
Tumalo, but spent his days in Bend and Redmond, trolling the parking lots of Best Buy,
ShopKo, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Mountain View Mall. He was looking for people who were
angry and dissatisfied and poor.

People like us.

But he knew better than to bother us. On duty he stayed away from Tumalo entirely.
Recruiting there would be too much like poaching the burned section of forest where deer,
rib-slatted and wobbly legged, nosed through the ash, seeking something green.

One time my grandfather dropped Gordon and I off at Mountain View Mall and there,
near the glass-doored entrance, stood Dave Lightener. He wore his creased khaki uniform
and spoke with a group of Mexican teenagers. They were laughing, shaking their heads and
walking away from him as we walked toward. We had our hats pulled low and he didn’t
recognize us.

“Question for you, gentlemen,” he said in the voice of telemarketers and door-to-door
Jehovah’s Witnesses. “What do you plan on doing with your lives?”

Gordon pulled off his hat with a flourish, as if he were part of some *ta-da!* magic act
and his face was the trick. “I plan on killing some crazy-ass Muslims,” he said and forced a
smile and turned to me. “How about you, Josh?”
“Yeah, killing some people and then getting myself killed,” I said, grimacing even as
I played along. “That sounds like a good plan.”

Dave Lightener tightened his lips into a thin line and straightened his posture and
asked us what we thought our fathers would think, hearing us right now. “They’re out there
risking their lives, defending our freedom, and you’re cracking sick jokes,” he said. “I think
that’s sick.”

We hated him for his soft hands and clean uniform. We hated him because he sent
people like us off to die. Because at twenty-three he had attained a higher rank than our
fathers. Because he slept with the lonely wives of soldiers. And now we hated him even more
for making us feel ashamed.

I wanted to say something sarcastic but the words caught in my throat like a bunch of
bones. So I fell back on my I-could-give-a-shit posture, my hips cocked, my lips slightly
turned up at the edges—even as I felt my eyes tighten with shame.

But Gordon only hesitated a moment. No way would he permit a prick like Dave
Lightener to preach at him. So he dug into his mental toolbox of snappily inappropriate
comebacks and said, “Here’s your maple syrup,” holding out his hand, his fingers gripping
an imaginary bottle.

And when Dave said, “And what is that for?” Gordon said, “To eat my ass with.”

Right then a twenty-something skateboarder-type with green hair and a nose-ring
walked from the mall, a bagful of DVDs swinging from his fist. Dave turned to him, and
after giving us a smarmy little smile and a snappy little salute, said, “Hey, friend. Let me ask
you something. Do you like war movies?”
When we fought we painted our faces—black and green and brown—with the camo-grease our fathers left behind. It made our eyes and teeth appear startlingly white. And it smeared away against our gloves just as the grass smeared away beneath our sneakers—and the ring became a circle of dirt, the dirt a reddish color that looked a lot like scabbed flesh.

One time Gordon hammered my shoulder so hard I couldn’t lift my arm for a week. Another time I elbowed Cody in the kidneys and he peed blood. We struck each other with such force and frequency the golden gloves crumbled and our knuckles showed through the sweat-soaked blood-soaked foam like teeth through a busted lip. And so we bought another set of gloves. And the air grew steadily colder and we fought with steam blasting from our mouths.

When we grew tired we would clutch each other’s bodies, awkwardly, passionately, trying to find our breath. And when we found our breath we would break apart and punch and get punched and feel wonderful. There was a sort of reverse vampirism at work. In order to drain ourselves of emotion, we forced it upon each other with fists, spellbound by the impressions we could make on skin.

Quite a sensation.

When we fought, all of a sudden the world came into focus and we could see in each other every follicle of hair—the pores of Gordon’s nose, the burst capillary in Cody’s eye that reminded me of Mars. Our vision became near-sighted and the rest of the world fell out of focus and in a way that was the whole fucking point.
For twenty years my father worked at Noseler, Inc.—the bullet manufacturer based out of Bend—and the Marines correspondingly trained him as an ammunition technician. Gordon’s father, an electrician, became a technician as well, specializing in ground electronic repair. Cody liked to say his father was a Gunnery Sergeant, and he was, but we all knew he was also the battalion mess manager, a cook, which was how he made his living in Tumalo, tending the grill at Hamburger Patty’s.

We knew their titles but we didn’t know, not really, what their titles meant, what our fathers did over there. We imagined them doing heroic things. Rescuing Iraqi babies from burning huts. Sniping suicide bombers before they could detonate on a crowded city street. We drew on Hollywood and CNN to develop elaborate scenarios, where maybe, possibly, at twilight, during a trek through the mountains of Northern Iraq, bearded insurgents ambushed our fathers with rocket-launchers. We imagined our fathers leaping from their Humvees just in the nick of time. We imagined them silhouetted by a fiery explosion. We imagined them burrowing into the sand like lizards and firing their M-16s, their bullets streaking through the darkness like the meteorites I observed on sleepless nights.

They were the last of the John Waynes, we imagined, only tougher.

We didn’t fully understand the reason they fought. We only understood that they had to fight. The necessity of fighting made the reason for it irrelevant. And so we didn’t waste a lot of time whining, editorializing. No one in Tumalo did. Maybe my grandfather said it best when he said, “It’s all part of the game. It’s just the way it is.”

They were gone and that was the way it was. So we could only cross our fingers and wish on stars and hit refresh, refresh, hoping they would return to us, praying we would never find Dave Lightener on our porch uttering the words, “I regret to inform you…”
Gordon was too fat and I was too short and Cody was too skinny. All of us were too much, or too little, of something. But as October gave way to November we were getting stronger, slowly.

I lived with my grandfather and long ago my grandfather—a retired Naval officer — had converted his basement into a gym. I’m talking matted floors, adjustable steel chairs, weight racks, dumbbells, curl bars, medicine balls, an exercise bike, a bench press, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, the works. He no longer used it—his muscles had been reduced by age to withered slabs that slid loosely beneath his skin—so we took it over.

We slid plate after plate after plate onto the bench until the weight was impossible to bear, until our faces went tomato-red face and our veins rose jaggedly from our foreheads. When we lifted, our breath went rip-rip-rip and the weights rattled with each rep, sounding like a teacup set hastily on its saucer.

We smoked between sets and the basement took on a hazy dreamlike quality.

We did flat bench, incline, decline, and military-press. We did squats and lunges and calf-raises and lat pull-downs and tossed a medicine ball back and forth until we thought our arms would fall off. We did triceps extensions followed by preacher curls, done in a stooped-over position that made Gordon’s belly full of rolls that matched the four small bulges coming out the back of his neck. After awhile—several months—his muscles began to creep out from behind his fat and the four bulges became two bulges became no bulges.

His body, like all of our bodies, changed. Not only did our voices begin to bottom out. Not only did hair begin to grow thickly on our cheeks and chests. But we began to look like men. Fifteen years old, no kidding, and we looked like men. It was kind of spooky.
I would stand in front of the mirror at night, naked, pleasuring in the way my body rippled when I moved it. Cody’s scrawny frame developed so that his muscles looked like knots in ropes. But it was Gordon who changed the most severely. Before, his face pillowed around his cheeks and below his jaw. Now it tightened into a sharp-cornered block that showed off his veins and dimples, his skin so taut it looked as if it were made for someone half his size.

His stomach still stuck out but now it was armored with little square muscles, looking like a turtle-shell, only there was nothing slow about Gordon: he moved nearly as fast as he talked, the muscles in his legs and arms jerking even when he sat still.

“You know what I wish? I wish somebody would start something with me,” he would say, bringing his fist into his open palm. “I wish.”

He got his wish when we drove our dirt bikes deep into the woods to hunt.

Sunlight cut through the branches and dappled the ground with sun puddles and we growled along the winding logging roads that led past tall pines and thin clusters of birch, past hillsides packed with huckleberries, past moraines that coyotes scurried across, trying to flee us, only to slip, causing a tiny avalanche of loose rock. Every root and rock we ran over jarred our bikes as deeper and deeper into the woods we went, until the road we followed petered out into nothing.

It hadn’t rained in nearly a month, so the crab grass and the cheat grass and the pine needles had lost their color, dry and blond as cornhusks, crackling beneath my boots when I stepped off my bike. With everything so waterless, you could hear every chipmunk within a
square acre, rustling for pine nuts, and when the breeze rose into a cold wind the forest became a giant whisper.

We dumped our tent, our sleeping bags, near a basalt grotto with a spring bubbling from it, and Gordon said, “Let’s go, troops,” holding his rifle before his chest diagonally, as a soldier would. And he dressed as a soldier would, wearing a too big pair of his father’s cammies rather than the mandatory blaze-orange gear.

Fifty feet apart we worked our way downhill, through the forest, through a huckleberry thicket, through a clear-cut crowded with stumps, taking care not to make much noise or slip on the pine needles carpeting the ground.

Buzzards circled overhead. Lizards scurried underfoot. A woodpecker banged away at a dead tree. And a chipmunk worrying at a pinecone screeched its astonishment when a peregrine falcon swooped down and seized it, carrying it off between the trees to some secret place. Its wings made no sound. And neither did the blaze-orange hunter when he appeared in a clearing several hundred yards below us.

Gordon made some sort of SWAT team gesture that, I think, asked us to stay low and carefully make our way toward him. We did and once huddled together behind a boulder, we peered through our scopes at the hunter, tracking him with the lines of our rifles. “It’s that cocksucker,” Gordon said in a harsh whisper. By this he meant Seth Johnson.

Seth Johnson weighed over 250 pounds and in his blaze-orange vest and an ear-flapped hat looked like some kind of muscular pumpkin. His rifle was strapped to his back. His mouth was moving. He was talking to someone, we realized. He was approaching a campsite at the corner of the meadow. There, four members of the varsity football squad sat
on logs around a smoldering campfire, their arms bobbing like oilrigs as they brought their beers to their mouths.

I took my eye from my scope and noticed Gordon fingering the trigger of his thirty-aught. I told him to quit fooling around and he pulled his hand suddenly away from the stock and smiled guiltily and said he just wanted to know what it felt like, having that power over someone.

Then his finger, his trigger finger, rose up and touched the gummy white scar that split his eyebrow, remembering. “I say we fuck with them a little.”

I looked at Cody and Cody looked at me and both of us shook our heads, no.

Gordon said, “Just to scare them a little,” and I said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to scare somebody when somebody has a gun.”

“So we’ll wait till he doesn’t have a gun. We’ll come back tonight.”

With that he slid away from the boulder and retreated up the hillside and we followed him and later that day, after an early dinner of beef jerky and trail mix and Gatorade, I happened upon a four-point stag nibbling on some bear grass and shot it with my rifle resting on a stump and it stumbled backwards and collapsed with a rose blooming from behind its shoulder, where the heart was hidden. The wind made a soft hissing sound.

Gordon and Cody came running and we stood around the deer and smoked a few cigarettes while watching the thick arterial blood run from its mouth, pooling around its head. Then we took out our knives and got to work. I cut around the anus, cutting away the penis and testes, and then ran the knife along the belly, unzipping the hide to reveal the delicate pink flesh and greenish vessels into which our hands disappeared.

Blood steamed in the cold mountain air.
When we finished—when we skinned the deer and hacked at its joints and cut out its back strap and boned out its shoulders and hips, its neck and ribs, making chops, roasts, steaks, quartering the meat so we could bundle it into our insulated saddlebags—I said, “Should we pack it home?”

“No,” Gordon said and picked up the deer head by the antlers and held it before his own. Blood spilled from its neck and made a pattering sound on the ground. In the half-light of early evening he began to do a little dance, bending his knees and stomping his feet, weaving between us. “I think I’ve got a better idea,” he said in the deepest voice he could manage.

“I don’t know,” Cody said and Gordon pretended to rake at him with the antlers and said, still using the Darth-Vaderish voice, “Don’t pussy out on me, Cody.” And then he let the head fall, dangling it from one hand, and told us the rule of three. The rule his father had told him about. This was the rule: every Marine had three things to worry about. There were three men to a rifle squad. Three rifle squads to a platoon. Three platoons to a company. Three companies to a battalion. “Three, Cody. The Marines operate in threes.”

Cody looked to me for help, and though I was exhausted and reeked of gore, I could appreciate the need for revenge, the need to strike out at something that had caused you pain. “Just to scare them, right, Gordo?” I said.

“Right.”

Cody let his bony shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. “Fine,” he said.

So we filled our cooler packs with meat and luged them back to the campsite and partially submerged them in the icy spring. And then Gordon took the deer hide and slit a hole in its middle and poked his head through the hole so the hide hung off him loosely like a
hairy sack. And we helped him smear mud and blood across his face and then, with his Leatherman belt-tool, he sawed off the antlers and held them in each hand and slashed at the air as if they were claws.

In a cheery voice unbefitting his nightmarish appearance he said, “Ready?”

By this time night had come on in full and the moon hung over the Cascades and grayly lit our way as we crept through the forest, imagining ourselves in enemy territory, with trip-wires and guard towers and snarling dogs around every corner.

We stationed ourselves once again behind the boulder that overlooked their campsite and we observed them as they swapped hunting stories and joked about Jessica Robertson’s big ass titties and passed around a bottle of whiskey and drank to excess and finally pissed on the fire to extinguish it. And then each of them drunkenly retired to their tents.

We waited an hour before making our way down the hill. And we descended with such care it took us another hour still before we were upon them. In the far distance an owl hooted, its noise barely noticeable over the chorus of snores that rose from their tents. Seth had parked his Bronco on a nearby haul road. The license plate read SMAN and all their rifles lay in its cab. Cody collected them, slinging them over his shoulder with a clatter that made us say Shh. And then I took my knife and slowly eased it into each tire and the air escaped from them at a slow hiss.

We returned to the campsite then and Cody continued on past it, starting up the hillside with the rifles, just in case. Gordon and I stood outside Seth’s tent. I had my knife ready, glinting in the moonlight, but Gordon held up his hand, telling me to wait. And so we waited a few moments until a cloud scudded over the moon and made the meadow fully dark.
Then Gordon held out his arms and took a few practice slashes with the antlers. He showed his teeth in a snarl that against his blackened face seemed to emit a light of its own. I put my knife to the tent and in one quick jerk opened up a slit that Gordon rushed through, staining the flaps of nylon with blood in his passing. I could see nothing but shadows but I could immediately hear Seth scream the scream of a little girl as Gordon raked at him with the antlers and hissed and howled like some cave-creature hungry for man-flesh and then the tents around us came alive with confused voices and Gordon reemerged with a horrible smile on his face and I followed him up the hillside, crashing through the undergrowth, leaving Seth to make sense of the nightmare that had descended upon him without warning.

Then it was November, and in Tumalo we hate November. The ice-tinged taste of it. The bare-branched, cement-skied look of it. It’s a time of waiting. It’s an in-between time, right before winter comes on in earnest, howling down from the mountains like some shaggy white beast. All you can do in November is zip up your jacket and rub udder cream into your cracked skin and drink that second mug of coffee and twist up your face in a scowl, and wait.

So it was November and I was sitting in third-period Geometry when I felt a pinprick sort of pain at the back of my head. I put my hand there and turned around in my desk and found Cody grinning at me, a gray hair pinched between his thumb and forefinger. “You’re getting old,” he said and handed me the hair like a clover of bad fortune.

And he was right. I didn’t know it at the time but he was exactly right.

Snow fell. And we threw on our coveralls and wrenched on our studded tires and drove our dirt bikes to Hole in the Ground, dragging our sleds behind us with towropes.
On the way there our engines filled up the white silence of the afternoon. And our back tires kicked up plumes of powder and on sharp turns slipped out beneath us and we lay there, in the middle of the road, bleeding, laughing, unafraid.

Earlier, for lunch, we had cooked a pound of bacon with a stick of butter. The grease, which hardened into a white waxy pool, we used as polish, buffing it into the bottoms of our sleds. Speed was what we wanted, was why we traveled to Hole in the Ground. We wanted the wind, blasting into our open mouths, to give us an ice-cream headache. We wanted the world to blur. We wanted to approach the edge and leap into nothingness and feel brave for doing so.

We found the steepest section of the crater we could and one by one we descended into its heart, 300 feet below us. We followed each other to iron down the snow and create a chute, blue-hued and frictionless, that would allow us to travel at a speed equivalent to freefalling. Our eyeballs glazed over with frost, our ears roared with wind, our stomachs rose into our throats, as we rocketed down the crater and felt five—and then we began the slow climb back the way we came and felt fifty.

We wore crampons and ascended in a zigzagging series of switchbacks that took us nearly an hour. By this time the air had begun to purple with evening. We all stood around for a while, taking in the view, sweating in our coveralls, watching our breath fog from our mouths, and then Gordon packed a snowball.

Cody said, “You better not hit me with that,” and Gordon cocked his arm threateningly and smiled—like: don’t be such a pussy—before he dropped to his knees and began to roll the snowball, to build it into something bigger, until eventually it grew to the size of a large man curled into the fetal position.
He went to his bike and dragged it over to where we stood and from the back of it he removed a short garden hose—the hose he used to siphon gas from fancy foreign cars—and then he unscrewed the tank and dipped the hose into it and sucked at its end until gas flowed. He doused the giant snowball as if he hoped it would sprout. It did not melt, like maybe you’d expect—he had packed it tight enough—but it puckered slightly and appeared leaden, as when blue-coconut flavoring dribbles onto shaved-ice.

Then he withdrew his Zippo from his pocket and sparked it and brought it toward the ball and the fumes caught flame and the whole thing erupted with a noise like gasping that sent us staggering back a few steps.

And then Gordon rushed forward and kicked it and the ball of fire rolled forward and went tumbling down the crater, down our chute. Like a meteor. In a flash. And the snow beneath it instantly melted, only to freeze again a moment later, making a slick blue ribbon.

When we sledded it, we went so fast our minds emptied and we felt as if we had shrugged away time and physics and emotion, the limits of this world—a sensation at once like flying and falling.

On the news Iraqi insurgents fired their assault rifles skyward. On the news a reporter stationed in Baghdad reported the gruesome deaths of seven American soldiers when a car bomb detonated at a traffic checkpoint. On the news President Bush said he did not think it was wise to provide a time frame for troop withdrawal.

I checked my email before I ate breakfast and found nothing but spam that promised great mortgage rates, cheap painkillers, and increased erectile performance.
We fought in the snow, while wearing snow-boots, and our blood melted the snow around us. We fought so much our wounds never got a chance to heal and our faces took on a permanent decayed-fruit look. Our wrists felt swollen, our knees ached, all our joints feeling full of tiny dry wasps.

And we weren’t alone. I’m talking about the sons and daughters and wives of Tumalo. Their shoulders took on a pronounced stoop. Black bags grew beneath their eyes. Wrinkles seemed to frame most of their mouths like a set of parentheses. They were getting older. We were all getting older.

And our fathers haunted us. They were everywhere. In the grocery store when we spotted a 30-pack of Coors on sale for ten bucks. On the highway when we passed a jacked-up Dodge with a dozen hay bales stacked in its bed. In the sky when a jet roared by, reminding us of faraway places. And now, as our bodies thickened with muscle, as we stopped shaving and grew patchy beards, we saw our fathers even in the mirror. We began to look like them. Our fathers, who had been taken from us, were everywhere, at every turn, imprisoning us.

Let me tell you about my grandfather, my father’s father. He was the retired captain of a Nevada-class battleship stationed in the South Pacific during WWII. From the walls of his house, our house, hung exotic swords, paintings of ships, his glass-framed purple heart. You might wonder what a naval captain was doing in the middle of the desert, and when I asked him this, he said, “I’ve seen plenty more than enough of the goddamned sea.”
He talked like that. Like a rock cracked open and his voice fell out. His craggy features conveyed a disappointed nobility. He spent most of his days at the gas station, along with the rest of the old timers, playing cards and drinking coffee and trading scar stories.

My grandfather had the greatest scar of any. He was locally famous for it—for his foot, his right foot. He lost it during the war but he wouldn’t say how. Or maybe lost is the wrong word because he actually kept the severed foot in a sealed bucket of formaldehyde. When people asked him why, he said, “I wanted it. It’s me, you know. It’s mine. It’s not like a nail clipping or a clump of hair. It’s my foot, goddamn it.”

He gave away the toes to his closest friends.

“Long after I’m gone,” he would joke, “I will remain afoot.”

It was his way of never growing old, of living forever, suspending his foot in formaldehyde like a bee trapped in amber.

I had seen the foot on many occasions, usually around the holidays, when he drank too much wine and dragged it from the closet to show off. He would peel away the lid and we would peer into its pungent waters and see the foot, hairless, maggot-white, floating there with a bit of bone poking from its ankle. I remember one time he tossed an empty beer can in with it and when I asked why, he said, “It’s evolving. Stuff will go in, stuff will come out. It will be representative.” Like some kind of art.

The last I saw he had tossed in a photo of my father.

Seth Johnson’s father was a staff sergeant. Like his son, he was a big man—but not big enough. Just before Christmas he stepped on a cluster bomb. A US warplane dropped it and the sand camouflaged it and he stepped on it and it tore him into many meaty pieces.
When Dave Lightener climbed up the front porch with a black armband and a somber expression, Mrs. Johnson, who was cooking a honeyed ham at the time, collapsed on the kitchen floor and Seth pushed his way out the door and punched Dave in the face, breaking his nose before he could utter the words, “I regret to inform you…”

Hearing about this, we felt bad for all of ten seconds. And then we felt good because it was his father and not ours. And then we once again felt bad and on Christmas Eve we drove to Seth’s house and laid down on his porch the rifles we had stolen, along with a six-pack of Coors, and then, just as we were about to leave, Gordon dug in his back pocket and removed his wallet and placed under the six-pack all the money he had, a few fives, some ones.

“Fucking Christmas,” he said.

We stopped fighting—it hurt too much to fight—and took up drinking instead.

Weekends, we drove our dirt bikes to Bend, twenty miles away, and bought beer and took it to Hole in the Ground and drank there until a bright line of sunlight appeared on the horizon and illuminated the snow-blanketed desert. Nobody ever asked for our ID and when we held up our empty bottles and stared at our reflections in the glass, warped and ghostly, we knew why.

After awhile we got braver and went to the bars—The Golden Nugget, The Weary Traveler, The Pine Tavern—where we square-danced with older women wearing purple eye shadow and sparkly dream-catcher earrings and push-up bras and clattery high heels. We told them we were Marines back from a six-month deployment and they said, “Really?” and we said, “Yes, ma’am,” and when they asked for our names we gave them the names of our
fathers. And then we bought them drinks and they drank them in a gulping way and breathed hotly in faces and we brought our mouths against theirs and they tasted like menthol cigarettes, like burnt urinal pucks. And then we went home with them, to their trailers, to their waterbeds, where among their stuffed animals we fucked them.

We stopped going to school. “Fuck school,” we said. “Who fucking needs it?”

Nobody seemed to notice, to care, when we spent all day in the basement, smoking, drinking, throwing weights around and pawing through the same crumpled copies of *Penthouse*.

One evening we emerged from our cave and went to Dairy Queen. It was ten degrees but we were drunk and crazy with cabin fever and by God a Butterfinger Blizzard sounded like the most delicious thing.

Floyd Pitts was there—he was always there—from six to nine every evening. He had his karaoke machine set up near the entrance, an orange extension cord running inside. Snow stuck to his narrow shoulders and his gray hair as he stood on the sidewalk, shifting his weight from foot to foot, singing his oldies songs to no one, to everyone, each song interrupted by a whispery broadcast from his imaginary radio station, 97.5 OINK.

We got our Butterfinger Blizzards and took them outside and cleared the snow off one of the picnic tables and cheered and clapped for Floyd as he warbled out, “Unchained Melody” and “House of the Rising Sun.” He was at once a child and an old man and we felt a strange love for him.

“You fucking rule, Floyd,” Gordon said and Floyd said, “Okay. Thank you.”
“We want to hear ‘Help Me, Rhonda,’” Cody said and Floyd said, “Okay. That’s what we’re going to sing in just a minute. In just a minute, after this commercial break.”

He stood there a moment, staring off into the darkness, and then a little too loudly began to sing, “Help me, Wanda. Help, help me, Wanda,” and Cody shrugged and took a spoonful of Blizzard and said, “Close enough.”

But Floyd only knew the chorus and his voice soon mellowed and his body went still and without transition the brightly tuned innocence of the Beach Boys gave way to a gruff and haunting rendition of “Little Soldier Boy” by the Yardbirds.

I’ll be honest with you here: I completely lost it. Right then something came loose inside of me and I began to cry in the open way men generally avoid.

I don’t know what it was—whether it was the beer, the raw emptiness of Tumalo, or the somber timbre of Floyd’s voice—but I couldn’t help it. I cried as I had never cried before. I cried over everything and nothing and Gordon and Cody put their hands on me and said, “Don’t cry.” And then, “Fine. Cry then.”

After Cody dropped a forty-pound dumbbell on his big toe and split open the nail like the shell of a peanut, we all ended up in the living room watching television with my grandfather. Cody had an icepack on his foot and every few minutes he took it off and checked his toe, which by this time had turned a purplish shade of black with a red line running down its middle.

“You think that’s bad,” my grandfather said. “You should see my foot.” He was sitting in his Lay-Z-Boy recliner and he rocked forward with a groan and reached down and pulled up his pant leg to reveal the flesh-toned shaft that fit his prosthesis onto his leg. He
knocked on it and it made a hollow noise that made him grin a grin that was more gum than tooth. “Josh, go get me my foot. I want to show it to your friends.”

All of us had seen the foot, had seen it many times, but we never tired of it—in the same way we never tired of reading over and over the same issues of *Penthouse*, the golden showers, the suggestively placed Popsicles, a grotesque pleasure. I went to his bedroom closet and brought the sloshing bucket back to the living room and my grandfather peeled off the lid and our eyes watered from the ammoniac smell. And there it was, there was his severed foot, and alongside it, the remains of the picture. The formaldehyde had leached my father from the photo paper and flecks of him hung along the top of the bucket and maybe in one fleck I saw his eye, watching us.

“Yes,” my grandfather said. “There it is. My foot.” As if it were a childhood photograph we couldn’t quite match to his present likeness.

We always asked him how he lost it and he always said, “I don’t want to talk about it.” But this time, for the first time, he clicked off the television and made a point of looking us each in the eye and said, “I’ll only tell you on two conditions.” He held up his hand and lifted a finger for each. “One: when I begin, nobody says nothing. No interruptions. You just sit there and you listen. Two: after I finish, nobody says nothing. No questions. I hate questions. Questions ruin stories. Okay?”

We nodded and he began to speak, his voice low, growly.

In Manilla he bought a kitty cat off an old Filipino man. That’s what my big tough grandfather called it: a kitty cat. It was black and he called it Pussy. “I joked I was the only man on board with a pussy in my cabin,” he said and told us, chuckling a little, about how the kitty cat liked to chase around a button he dangled from a string.
Then his face went slack with seriousness. “One night we ran aground a coral reef. From the feel of it, the sharp lurch of the ship, I thought we had taken a torpedo and I jumped out of bed and stepped on Pussy and broke her back. She bit my foot. I don’t blame her for it. I would have bit my foot, too. So she bit my foot and the bite got infected. Every fucking thing over there gets infected. It’s the humidity does it.

“I tried to be a man. By that I mean I had this idea of what it meant to be a man that was foolish. So I didn’t get it treated. Didn’t get help. Here my men were taking bullets to the stomach and going yellow from malaria. We were at war. I mean, more often than not the walls of the ship were shaking from artillery shells exploding in the distance. I couldn’t complain about a stupid bite from a kitty cat. But the next thing you know I’ve got blackness in my veins and a fever of a hundred and ten. My foot looked like the foot of a corpse and the rest of me was catching up. So they sawed it right off me.” Here he made a cutting motion with hand. “Like a cancer. Before it took me over.”

He put the lid back on the bucket and leaned back in his chair and we sat there, not knowing what to say. Finally Gordon said, “Is that true?”

My grandfather’s eyes were closed. His body was still. He might have been asleep but for the look of secret knowledge playing on his lips. “Of course it’s true,” he said. “Everything I tell you is true. Even the stuff I make up. And I told you before—weren’t you listening?—no goddamn questions.”

Mid-afternoon and it was already full dark.

On our way to The Weary Traveler, we stopped by my house to bum some money off my grandfather, only to find Dave Lightener waiting for us. He must have just gotten there—
he was halfway up the porch steps—when our headlights cast an anemic glow over him and he turned to face us with a scrunched-up expression, as if trying to figure out who we were. He wore around his arm a black band and he wore over his nose a white-bandaged splint.

We did not turn off our engines. Instead we sat in the driveway, idling, the exhaust from our bikes and the breath from our mouths clouding the air a ghostly shade of gray. Above us a star hissed across the moonlit sky, vaguely bright, like a light turned on in a daylit room. And then Dave began down the steps and we leapt off our bikes to meet him.

Before he could speak I brought my fist to his diaphragm, knocking the breath black from his body. Right then he looked like a gunshot actor in a western, clutching his belly with both hands, doubled over, his face making a nice target for Gordon’s knee. A snap sound preceded Dave falling back on his back with blood sliding from his already broken nose.

He put up his hands and we hit our way through them. I sucker-punched him once, twice, in the ribs while Cody and Gordon kicked him in the spine and stomach and then we stood around gulping for air and allowed him to struggle to his feet. When he righted himself, he wiped his face with his hand and blood dripped from his fingers. I moved in and roundhoused with my right and then my left, my fists knocking his head loose off its hinges. Again he collapsed, a bag of bones, a bloody heap of a man, his eyes walled and turned up, trying to see the bodies looming over him, trying to discern the look of animal hatred on our faces.

He opened his mouth to speak and I pointed a finger at him and said, with enough hatred in my voice to break a back, “Dave, I’m only going to tell you this once: Don’t say a word. Don’t you dare. Not one word.”
He closed his mouth and tried to crawl away and I brought a boot down on the back of his head and left it there a moment, grinding his face into the ground so that when he lifted his head the blood had melted the snow into a red impression of his face.

Gordon went inside and returned a moment later with a roll of duct tape and we held Dave down and bound his wrists and ankles and threw him on a sled and taped him to it many times over and then tied the sled to the back of Gordon’s bike and drove at a perilous speed to Hole in the Ground.

Here the moon shined down and the snow glowed with pale blue light as we smoked cigarettes, looking down into the crater, with Dave at our feet.

There was something childish about the way our breath puffed from our mouths in tiny clouds. It was as if we were imitating choo-choo trains. And for a moment, just a moment, we were kids again. Just a bunch of stupid kids. Recalling that innocent time, Cody said, “My mom wouldn’t even let me play with toy guns when I was little.” And he sighed heavily as if he couldn’t understand how he, how we, had ended up here.

I looked at my hands. They were dark and warmly sticky with blood. I didn’t feel the pain, not yet, but I knew it was there, an unsayable pain.

And then, with a sudden lurch, Dave began struggling and yelling at us in a slurred voice and my face hardened with anger and I put my hands on him and pushed him slowly to the lip of the crater and there he grew silent.

For a moment I forgot myself, staring off into the dark oblivion. It was beautiful and horrifying. “I could shove you right now,” I said. “And if I did, you’d be dead.”

“Please don’t,” he said, his voice cracking. “Oh fuck. Don’t. Please.”
He began to cry. Hearing his great shuddering sobs didn’t bring me the satisfaction I hoped for. If anything, I felt as I did that day, so long ago, in the Mountain View Mall parking lot: shameful, false.

“Ready?” I said. “One!” Here I inched him a little closer to the edge. “Two!” And then I moved him a little closer still and as I did I felt unwieldy, at once wild and exhausted, my body seeming to take on another twenty, thirty, forty years.

When I finally said, “Three,” my voice was barely a whisper.

And so we left Dave there, at the brink of the crater, sobbing. We got on our bikes and we drove to Bend and we drove so fast I imagined catching fire, like a meteor, burning up in a flash, howling as my heat consumed me, as we made our way to the Armed Forces Recruiting Station where we would at last answer the fierce alarm of war and put our pens to paper and make, so we hoped, our fathers proud.
APPENDIX D: VERSION OF “REFRESH, REFRESH” PUBLISHED IN

THE PARIS REVIEW (FOURTH, FINAL VERSION)

Benjamin Percy

Refresh, Refresh

When school let out the two of us went to my backyard to fight. We were trying to make each other tougher. So, in the grass, in the shade of the pines and junipers, Gordon and I slung off our backpacks and laid down a pale-green garden hose, tip to tip, making a ring. Then we stripped off our shirts and put on our gold-colored boxing gloves and fought.

Every round went two minutes. If you stepped out of the ring, you lost. If you cried, you lost. If you got knocked out or if you yelled ‘stop,’ you lost. Afterward we drank Coca-Colas and smoked Marlboros, our chests heaving, our faces all different shades of blacks and reds and yellows.

We began fighting after Seth Johnson—a no-neck linebacker with teeth like corn kernels and hands like T-bone steaks—beat Gordon until his face swelled and split open and purpled around the edges. Eventually he bled, the rough husks of scabs peeling away to reveal a different face than the one I remembered—older, squatter, fiercer, his left eyebrow separated by a gummy white scar. It was his idea that we should fight each other. He
wanted to be ready. He wanted to hurt those who hurt him. And if he went
down, he would go down swinging as he was sure his father would have.
This is what we all wanted: to please our fathers, to make them proud, even
though they had left us.

This was in Crow, Oregon, a high desert town in the foothills of
the Cascade Mountains. In Crow, we have fifteen hundred people, a
Dairy Queen, a BP gas station, a Food-4-Less, a meatpacking plant,
a bright green football field irrigated by canal water, and your standard
assortment of taverns and churches. Nothing distinguishes us from Bend or
Redmond or La Pine or any of the other nowhere towns off Route 97, except
for this: we are home to the 2d Battalion, 34th Marines.

The marines lived on a fifty-acre base in the hills just outside of town, a
collection of one-story cinder-block buildings interrupted by chest grass and
sagebrush. Throughout my childhood I could hear, if I cupped a hand to
my ear, the lowing of bulls, the bleating of sheep, and the report of assault
rifles shooting from the hilltops. It’s said that conditions here in Oregon’s
ranch country closely match the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan and
northern Iraq.

Our fathers—Gordon’s and mine—were like the other fathers in Crow.
All of them, just about, had enlisted as part-time soldiers, as reservists, for
drill pay—several thousand a year for a private and several thousand more
for a sergeant. Beer pay, they called it, and for two weeks every year plus
one weekend a month, they trained. They threw on their cammies and filled
their rucksacks and kissed us goodbye and the gates of the 2d Battalion drew
closed behind them.

Our fathers would vanish into the pine-studded hills, returning to us
Sunday night with their faces reddened from weather, their biceps trembling
from fatigue and their hands smelling of rifle grease. They would talk about
ECPs and PRPs and MEUs and WMDs and they would do push-ups in the
middle of the living room and they would call six o’clock “eighteen hundred
hours” and they would high-five and yell, Semper Fi. Then a few days would
pass and they would go back to the way they were, to the men we knew:
Coors-drinking, baseball-throwing, crotch-scratching, Aqua Velva-smelling
fathers.

No longer. In January the battalion was activated and in March they
shipped off for Iraq. Our fathers—our coaches, our teachers, our barbers,
our cooks, our gas-station attendants and UPS delivermen and deputies and firemen and mechanics—our fathers, so many of them, climbed onto the olive-green school buses and pressed their palms to the windows and gave us the bravest, most hopeful smiles you can imagine and vanished. Just like that.

NIGHTS, I SOMETIMES GOT ON my Honda dirt bike and rode through the hills and canyons of Deschutes County. Beneath me the engine growled and shuddered, while all around me the wind, like something alive, bullied me, tried to drag me from my bike. A dark world slipped past as I downshifted, leaning into a turn, and accelerated on a straightaway—my speed seventy, then eighty—concentrating only on the twenty yards of road glowing ahead of me.

On this bike I could ride and ride and ride, away from here, up and over the Cascades, through the Willamette Valley, until I reached the ocean, where the broad black backs of whales regularly broke the surface of the water, and even further—further still—until I caught up with the horizon, where my father would be waiting. Inevitably, I ended up at Hole in the Ground.

A long time ago a meteor came screeching down from space and left behind a crater five thousand feet wide and three hundred feet deep. Hole in the Ground is frequented during the winter by the daredevil sledders among us and during the summer by bearded geologists interested in the metal fragments strewn across its bottom. I dangled my feet over the edge of the crater and leaned back on my elbows and took in the black sky—no moon, only stars—just a little lighter than a raven. Every few minutes a star seemed to come unstuck, streaking through the night in a bright flash that burnt into nothingness.

In the near distance Crow glowed grayish green against the darkness—a reminder of how close to oblivion we lived. A chunk of space ice or a solar wind could have jogged the meteor sideways and rather than landing here it could have landed there at the intersection of Main and Farwell. No Dairy Queen, no Crow High, no 2d Battalion. It didn’t take much imagination to realize how something can drop out of the sky and change everything.

This was in October, when Gordon and I circled each other in the backyard after school. We wore our golden boxing gloves, cracked with age and flaking when we pounded them together. Browned grass crunchèd beneath
our sneakers and dust rose in little puffs like distress signals.

Gordon was thin to the point of being scrawny. His collarbone poked against his skin like a swallowed coat hanger. His head was too big for his body and his eyes were too big for his head and football players—Seth Johnson among them—regularly tossed him into garbage cans and called him E.T.

He had had a bad day. And I could tell from the look on his face—the watery eyes, the trembling lips that revealed in quick flashes his buckteeth—that he wanted, he needed, to hit me. So I let him. I raised my gloves to my face and pulled my elbows against my ribs and Gordon lunged forward, his arms snapping like rubber bands. I stood still, allowing his fists to work up and down my body, allowing him to throw the weight of his anger on me, until eventually he grew too tired to hit anymore and I opened up my stance and floored him with a right cross to the temple. He lay there, sprawled out in the grass with a small smile on his E.T. face. “Damn,” he said in a dreamy voice. A drop of blood gathered along the corner of his eye and streaked down his temple into his hair.

My father wore rolled-up jeans, Carhartt jacket, and a T-shirt advertising some place he had traveled, maybe Yellowstone or Seattle. He looked like someone you might see shopping for motor oil at Bi-Mart. To hide his receding hairline he wore a John Deere cap that laid a shadow across his face. His brown eyes blinked above a considerable nose underlined by a gray mustache. Like me, my father was short and squat, a bulldog. His belly was a swollen bag and his shoulders were broad, good for carrying me during parades and at fairs when I was younger. He laughed a lot. He liked game shows. He drank too much beer and smoked too many cigarettes and spent too much time with his buddies, fishing, hunting, bullshitting, which probably had something to do with why my mother divorced him and moved to Boise with a hairdresser and triathlete named Chuck.

At first, after my father left, like all of the other fathers, he would e-mail whenever he could. He would tell me about the heat, the gallons of water he drank every day, the sand that got into everything, the baths he took with baby wipes. He would tell me how safe he was, how very safe. This was when he was stationed in Turkey. Then the reservists shipped for Kirkuk, where insurgents and sandstorms attacked almost daily. The e-mails came
less frequently. Weeks of silence passed between them.

Sometimes, on the computer, I would hit refresh, refresh, refresh, hoping. In October, I received an e-mail that read: “Hi Josh. I’m OK. Don’t worry. Do your homework. Love, Dad.” I printed it up and hung it on my door with a piece of Scotch tape.

For twenty years my father worked at Notlon, Inc., the bullet manufacturer based out of Bend—where the Marines trained him as an ammunition technician. Gordon liked to say his father was a gunnery sergeant and he was, but we all knew he was also the battalion mess-manager, a cook, which was how he made his living in Crow, tending the grill at Hamburger Patty’s. We knew their titles but we didn’t know, not really, what their titles meant, what our fathers did over there. We imagined them doing heroic things: rescuing Iraqi babies from burning huts, sniping suicide bombers before they could detonate on a crowded city street. We drew on Hollywood and TV news to develop elaborate scenarios where maybe, at twilight, during a trek through the mountains of northern Iraq, bearded insurgents ambushed our fathers with rocket launchers. We imagined them silhouetted by a fiery explosion. We imagined them burrowing into the sand, like lizards, and firing their M-16s, their bullets streaking through the darkness like the meteors I observed on sleepless nights.

When Gordon and I fought we painted our faces—black and green and brown—with the camouflage our fathers left behind. It made our eyes and teeth appear startlingly white. And it smeared away against our gloves just as the grass smeared away beneath our sneakers—and the ring became a circle of dirt, the dirt a reddish color that looked a lot like scabbed flesh. One time Gordon hammered my shoulder so hard I couldn’t lift my arm for a week. Another time I elbowed him in the kidneys and he peed blood. We struck each other with such force and frequency the golden gloves crumbled and our knuckles showed through the sweat-soaked, blood-soaked foam like teeth through a busted lip. So we bought another set of gloves, and as the air grew steadily colder, we fought with steam blasting from our mouths.

Our fathers had left us, but men remained in Crow. There were old men, like my grandfather, whom I lived with—men who had paid their dues, who had worked their jobs and fought their wars and now spent their days at the gas station, drinking bad coffee from Styrofoam cups, complaining about the weather, arguing about the best months
to reap alfalfa. And there were incapable men. Men who rarely shaved and watched daytime television in their once-white underpants. Men who lived in trailers and filled their shopping carts with Busch Light, summer sausage, Oreo cookies.

And then there were vulturous men like Dave Lightener—men who scavenged whatever our fathers had left behind. Dave Lightener worked as a recruitment officer. I'm guessing he was the only recruitment officer in world history who drove a Vespa scooter with a Support Our Troops ribbon magnet on its rear. We sometimes saw it parked outside the homes of young women whose husbands had gone to war. Dave had big ears and small eyes and wore his hair in your standard-issue high-and-tight buzz. He often spoke in a too-loud voice about all the insurgents he gained down when working a Falluja patrol unit. He lived with his mother in Crow, but spent his days in Bend and Redmond trolling the parking lots of Best Buy, Shopko, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Mountain View Mall. He was looking for people like us, people who were angry and dissatisfied and poor.

But Dave Lightener knew better than to bother us. On duty he stayed away from Crow entirely. Recruiting, there would be too much like poaching, the banned section of forests where deer, rabbit, and wobbly-legged, nosed through the ash, seeking something green.

We didn't fully understand the reason our fathers were fighting. We only understood that they had to fight. The necessity of it made the reason irrelevant. "It's all part of the game," my grandfather said. "It's just the way it is." We could only cross our fingers and wish on stars and hit refresh, refresh, hoping they would return to us, praying we would never find Dave Lightener on our porch uttering the words I regret to inform you...

One time, my grandfather dropped Gordon and me off at Mountain View Mall and there, near the glass-doored entrance, stood Dave Lightener. He wore his creased khaki uniform and spoke with a group of Mexican teenagers. They were laughing, shaking their heads and walking away from him as we approached. We had our hats pulled low and he didn't recognize us.

"Question for you, gentlemen," he said in the voice of telemarketers and door-to-door Jehovah's Witnesses. "What do you plan on doing with your lives?"

Gordon pulled off his hat with a flourish, as if he were part of some *tut-tut* magic act and his face was the trick. "I plan on killing some crazy-ass
Muslims," he said and forced a smile. "How about you, Josh?"

"Yeah," I said. "Kill some people then get myself killed." I grimaced even as I played along. "That sounds like a good plan."

Dave Lightener's lips tightened into a thin line, his posture straightened, and he asked us what we thought our fathers would think, hearing us right now. "They're out there risking their lives, defending our freedom, and you're cracking sick jokes," he said. "I think that's sick."

We hated him for his soft hands and clean uniform. We hated him because he sent people like us off to die. Because at twenty-three he had attained a higher rank than our fathers. Because he slept with the lonely wives of soldiers. And now we hated him even more for making us feel ashamed. I wanted to say something sarcastic but Gordon was quicker. His hand was out before him, his fingers gripping an imaginary bottle. "Here's your maple syrup," he said.

Dave said, "And what is that for?"

"To eat my ass with," Gordon said.

Right then a skateboarder-type with green hair and a nose ring walked from the mall, a bagful of DVDs swinging from his fist, and Dave Lightener forgot us. "I say, friend," he was saying, "let me ask you something. Do you like war movies?"

In November we drove our dirt bikes deep into the woods to hunt. Sunlight fell through tall pines and birch clusters and lay in puddles along the logging roads that wound past the hillside packed with huckleberries and on the moraines where coyotes scurried, trying to flee from us and slipping, causing tiny avalanches of loose rock. It hadn't rained in nearly a month, so the crabgrass and the cheat grass and the pine needles had lost their color, dry and blond as cornhusks, cracking beneath my boots when the road we followed petered out into nothing and I stepped off my bike. In this waterless stillness, you could hear every chipmunk within a square acre, rustling for pine nuts, and when the breeze rose into a cold wind the forest became a giant whisper.

We dumped our tent and our sleeping bags near a basalt grotto with a spring bubbling from it and Gordon said, "Let's go, troops," holding his rifle before his chest diagonally, as a soldier would. He dressed as a soldier would, too, wearing his father's over-large camics rather than the mandatory blaze-orange gear. Fifty feet apart we worked our way downhill, through the forest,
through a huckleberry thicket, through a clear-cut crowded with stumps, taking care not to make much noise or slip on the pine needles carpeting the ground. A chipmunk worrying at a pinecone screeched its astonishment when a peregrine falcon swooped down and seized it, carrying it off between the trees to some secret place. Its wings made no sound, and neither did the breathless, sweaty hunter when he appeared in a clearing several hundred yards below us.

Gordon made some sort of SWAT-team gesture—meant, I think, to say, *stay low*—and I made my way carefully toward him. From behind a boulder, we peered through our scopes, tracking the hunter, who looked—in his vest and ear-flapped hat—like a monstrous pumkin. "That cocksucker," Gordon said in a harsh whisper. The hunter was Seth Johnson. His rifle was strapped to his back and his mouth was moving—he was talking to someone. At the corner of the meadow he joined four members of the varsity football squad, who sat on logs around a smoldering campfire, their arms bobbing like oil-pump jacks as they brought their beers to their mouths.

I took my eye from my scope and noticed Gordon fingering the trigger of his 30-06. I told him to quit fooling around and he pulled his hand suddenly away from the stock and smiled guiltily and said he just wanted to know what it felt like having that power over someone. Then his trigger finger rose up and touched the gummy white scar that split his eyebrow. "I say we fuck with them a little."

I shook my head no.

Gordon said, "Just a little—to scare them."

"They've got guns," I said, and he said, "So we'll come back tonight."

Later, after an early dinner of beef jerky and trail mix and Gatorade, I happened upon a four-point stag nibbling on some bear grass, and I rested my rifle on a stump and shot it, and it stumbled backwards and collapsed with a rose blooming from behind its shoulder where the heart was hidden. Gordon came running and we stood around the deer and smoked a few cigarettes, watching the thick arterial blood run from its mouth. Then we took out our knives and got to work. I cut around the anus, cutting away the penis and testes, and then ran the knife along the belly, unpeeling the hide to reveal the delicate pink flesh and greenish vessels into which our hands disappeared.

The blood steamed in the cold mountain air, and when we finished—when we'd skinned the deer and hacked at its joints and cut out its back
strap and bared out its shoulders and hips, its neck and ribs, making chops, roasts, steaks, quartering the meat so we could bundle it into our insulated saddlebags—Gordon picked up the deer head by the antlers and held it before his own. Blood from its neck made a pattering sound on the ground, and in the half-light of early evening Gordon began to do a little dance, bowing his knees and stamping his feet.

"I think I've got an idea," he said and pretended to rake at me with the antlers. I pushed him away and he said, "Don't pussy out on me, Josh." I was exhausted and reeked of gore, but I could appreciate the need for revenge. "Just to scare them, right, Gordon?" I said.

"Right."

We lugged our meat back to camp and Gordon brought the deer hide. He slit a hole in its middle and poked his head through so the hide hung off him loosely, a hairy sack, and I helped him smear mud and blood across his face. Then, with his Leatherman, he sawed off the antlers and held them in each hand and slashed at the air as if they were claws.

Night had come on and the moon hung over the Cascades, grayly lighting our way as we crept through the forest imagining ourselves in enemy territory, with trip wires and guard towers and snarling dogs around every corner. From behind the boulder that overlooked their campsite, we observed our enemies as they swapped hunting stories and joked about Jessica Robertson's big-ass titties and passed around a bottle of whiskey and drank to excess and finally pissed on the fire to extinguish it. When they retired to their tents we waited an hour before making our way down the hill with such care that it took us another hour before we were upon them. Somewhere an owl hooted, its noise barely noticeable over the chorus of snores that rose from their tents. Seth's Bronco was parked nearby—the license plate read SMAN—and all their rifles lay in its cab. I collected the guns, slinging them over my shoulder, then I eased my knife into each of Seth's tires.

I still had my knife out when we were standing outside Seth's tent, and when a cloud scudded over the moon and made the meadow fully dark I stabbed the nylon and in one quick jerk opened up a slit. Gordon rushed in, his antler-claws slashing. I could see nothing but shadows but I could hear Seth scream the scream of a little girl as Gordon raked at him with the antlers and hissed and howled like some cave-creature hungry for man-flesh. When the tents around us came alive with confused voices, Gordon reemerged with a horrible smile on his face and I followed him up the hillside, crashing
through the undergrowth, leaving Seth to make sense of the nightmare that had descended upon him without warning.

**Winter came.** Snow fell, and we threw on our coveralls and wrenched on our studded tires and drove our dirt bikes to Hole in the Ground, dragging our sleds behind us with snowbags. Our engines filled the white silence of the afternoon. Our back tires kicked up plumes of powder and on sharp turns slipped out beneath us, and we lay there in the middle of the road bleeding, laughing, unafraid.

Earlier, for lunch, we had cooked a pound of bacon with a stick of butter. The grease, which hardened into a white waxy pool, we used as polish, buffing it into the bottoms of our sleds. Speed was what we wanted at Hole in the Ground. We descended the steepest section of the crater into its heart, three hundred feet below us. We followed each other in the same track, ironing down the snow to create a chute, blue-hued and frictionless, that would allow us to travel at a speed equivalent to freefall. Our eyeballs glazed with frost, our ears roared with wind, and our stomachs rose into our throats as we recoiled down and felt like we were free again—and then we began the slow climb back the way we came and felt fifty.

We wore crampons and ascended in a zigzagging series of switchbacks. It took nearly an hour. The air had began to go purple with evening when we stood again at the lip of the crater, sweating in our coveralls, taking in the view through the fog of our breath. Gordon packed a snowball. I said, “You better not hit me with that.” He cocked his arm threateningly and smiled, then dropped to his knees to roll the snowball into something bigger. He rolled it until it grew to the size of a large man curled into the fetal position. From the back of his bike he took the piece of garden hose he used to siphon gas from fancy foreign cars and he worked it into his tank, sticking at its end until gas flowed.

He doused the giant snowball as if he hoped it would sprout. It didn’t melt—had packed it tight enough—but it puckered slightly and appeared leaden, and when Gordon withdrew his Zippo, sparked it, and held it toward the ball, the fumes caught flame and the whole thing erupted with a gasping noise that sent me staggering back a few steps.

Gordon rushed forward and kicked the ball of fire, sending it rolling, tumbling down the crater, down our chute like a meteor, and the snow beneath it instantly melted only to freeze again a moment later, making a
slick blue ribbon. When we shedded it, we went so fast our minds emptied and we felt a sensation at once like flying and falling.

On the news, Iraqi insurgents fired their assault rifles. On the news, a car bomb in Baghdad detonated seven American soldiers at a traffic checkpoint. On the news, the president said he did not think it was wise to provide a time frame for troop withdrawal. I checked my e-mail before breakfast and found nothing but spam.

Gordon and I fought in the snow wearing snow boots. We fought so much our wounds never got a chance to heal and our faces took on a permanent look of decay. Our wrists felt swollen, our knees ached, our joints felt full of tiny dry wasps. We fought until fighting hurt too much and we took up drinking instead. Weekends, we drove our dirt bikes to Bend, twenty miles away, and bought beer and took it to Hole in the Ground and drank there until a bright line of sunlight appeared on the horizon and illuminated the snow-blanketed desert. Nobody asked for our ID and when we held up our empty bottles and stared at our reflections in the glass, warped and ghostly, we knew why. And we weren’t alone. Black bags grew beneath the eyes of the sons and daughters and wives of Crow, their shoulders stooped, wrinkles encircling their mouths like parentheses.

Our fathers haunted us. They were everywhere: in the grocery store when we spotted a thirty-pack of Coors on sale for ten bucks on the highway when we passed a jacked-up Dodge with a dozen hay bales stacked in its bed; in the sky when a jet roared by, reminding us of faraway places. And now, as our bodies thinned with muscle, as we stopped shaving and grew patchy beards, we saw our fathers even in the mirror. We began to look like them. Our fathers, who had been taken from us, were everywhere, at every turn, imprisoning us.

Seth Johnson’s father was a staff sergeant. Like his son, he was a big man but not big enough. Just before Christmas he stepped on a cluster bomb. A U.S. warplane dropped it and the sand camouflaged it and he stepped on it and it tore him into many nasty pieces. When Dave Lightener climbed up the front porch with a black armband and a somber expression, Mrs. Johnson, who was cooking a honeyed ham at the time, collapsed on the kitchen floor. Seth pushed his way out the door and punched Dave in the face, breaking his nose before he could utter the words I regret to inform you…

Hearing about this, we felt bad for all of ten seconds. Then we felt good.
because it was his father and not ours. And then we felt bad again and on Christmas Eve we drove to Seth’s house and laid down on his porch the rifles we had stolen, along with a six-pack of Coors, and then, just as we were about to leave, Gordon dug in his back pocket and removed his wallet and placed under the six-pack all the money he had—a few fives, some ones.

“Fucking Christmas,” he said.

We got braver and went to the bars—The Golden Nugget, The Weary Traveler, The Pine Tavern—where we square-danced with older women wearing purple eye shadow and sparkly dreamcatcher earrings and push-up bras and clattery high heels. We told them we were Marines back from a six-month deployment and they said, “Really?” and we said, “Yes, ma’am,” and when they asked for our names we gave them the names of our fathers. Then we bought them drinks and they drank them in a gulping way and breathed horly in our faces and we brought our mouths against theirs and they tasted like menthol cigarettes, like burnt detergent. And then we went home with them, to their trailers, to their waterbeds, where among their stuffed animals we fucked them.

M

It was already full dark. On our way to The Weary Traveler we stopped by my house to burn some money off my grandfather, only to find Dave Lightener waiting for us. He must have just got there—he was halfway up the porch steps—when our headlights cast an arsenic glow over him and he turned to face us with a scrunched-up expression, as if trying to figure out who we were. He wore the black band around his arm and, over his nose, a white-bandaged split.

We did not turn off our engines. Instead we sat in the driveway, idling, the exhaust from our bikes and the breath from our mouths clouding the air. Above us a star hissed across the moonlit sky, vaguely bright like a light turned on in a day-lit room. Then Dave began down the steps and we leapt off our bikes to meet him. Before he could speak I brought my fist to his diaphragm, knocking the breath from his body. He looked like a gun-shot actor in a Western, clutching his belly with both hands, doubled over, his face making a nice target for Gordon’s knee. A snap sound preceded Dave falling on his back with blood coming from his already broken nose.

He put up his hands and we hit our way through them. I sucker-punched him once, twice, in the ribs while Gordon kicked him in the spine and stomach and then we stood around gulping air and allowed him to struggle

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to his feet. When he righted himself, he wiped his face with his hand and blood dripped from his fingers. I moved in and roundhoused with my right and then my left, my fists knocking his head loose on its hinges. Again he collapsed, a bloody bag of a man. His eyes wailed and turned up, trying to see the animal bodies looming over him. He opened his mouth to speak and I pointed a finger at him and said, with enough hatred in my voice to break a back, "Don’t say a word. Don’t you dare. Not one word.”

He closed his mouth and tried to crawl away and I brought a boot down on the back of his skull and left it there a moment, grinding his face into the ground so that when he lifted his head the snow held a red impression of his face. Gordon went inside and returned a moment later with a roll of duct tape and we held Dave down and bound his wrists and ankles and threw him on a sled and taped him to it many times over and then tied the sled to the back of Gordon’s bike and drove at a perilous speed to Hole in the Ground.

The moon shined down and the snow glowed with pale blue light as we smoked cigarettes, looking down into the crater, with Dave at our feet. There was something childish about the way our breath puffed from our mouths in tiny clouds. It was as if we wereInitiating, choo-choo train. And for a moment, just a moment, we were kids again. Just a couple of stupid kids. Gordon must have felt this, too, because he said, “My mom wouldn’t even let me play with toy guns when I was little.” And he sighed heavily as if he couldn’t understand how he, how we, had ended up here.

Then, with a sudden lurch, Dave began struggling and yelling at us in a stunted voice and my face hardened with anger and I put my hands on him and pushed him slowly to the lip of the crater and he grew silent. For a moment I forgot myself, staring off into the dark oblivion. It was beautiful and horrifying, “I could shove you right now,” I said. “And if I did, you’d be dead.”

“Please don’t,” he said, his voice cracking. He began to cry. “Oh fuck. Don’t. Please.” Hearing his great shuddering sobs didn’t bring me the satisfaction I hoped for. It anything, I felt as I did that day, so long ago, when we taunted him in the Mountain View Mall parking lot—shameful, false.

“Ready?” I said. “One” I inched him a little closer to the edge. “Two” I moved him a little closer still and as I did I felt unwieldy, at once wild and exhausted, my body seeming to take on another twenty, thirty, forty years. When I finally said, “Three,” my voice was barely a whisper.
We left Dave there, sobbing at the brink of the crater. We got on our bikes and we drove to Bend and we drove so fast I imagined catching fire, like a meteor, burning up in a flash, howling as my heat consumed me, as we made our way to the U.S. Marine Recruiting Office where we would at last answer the fierce alarm of war and put our pens to paper and make our fathers proud.