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Scattering ashes: stories

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Major Professor

For the Major Program
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Lincoln's Face, A Reconstruction

For Suzan-Lori Parks

Before she accidentally shot him, killing him instantly, Denise was a personal attendant to Mort Braggert, the award-winning actor. At the time of the accident Braggert had been getting ready to play the role of Abraham Lincoln in a movie, and Denise was in the process of working out how to transform the fragile-faced actor into the hard-featured American icon. In preparation for the job, Denise had checked an American history textbook out of the library and, hoping that no one would notice, snipped three photographs from its pages. Using a small pair of sewing scissors, she dissected two of the Lincoln photos feature by feature, and she put the third one aside, leaving it intact.

When the sixteenth president's ears, noses, beards, mouths, brows, and moles lay scattered about the table, Denise picked them out from among the other scraps, brushing them into the purple box her ex-husband had once used to present a ring to her. She located the copy machine in the back of the same library where she had borrowed the book and made magnified photocopies of each part of Lincoln's face. Observing each feature on a separate sheet of paper, as it existed by itself, allowed Denise to see it as it actually was and not as it appeared in relation to the face's other appendages. It had taken Denise the first four years of a twenty-year career in stage and film make-up to understand that she was only able to recreate the whole when she looked at all the parts separated from it.

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1 "Lincoln's Face, A Reconstruction was published in slightly different form in Iron Horse Literary Review
Ears: Lincoln’s ears, although usually somewhat covered by strands of deep black hair, had been extremely large. To create bigger ones for Braggert, Denise made negative casts of the actor’s ears by pouring plaster over them and then cutting the dry casts off in halves. Fitting the pieces back together, she prepared positive molds by allowing layers of liquid latex to harden inside. When the plastic solidified, Denise pulled the two pieces of plaster apart and peeled out the latex. Everything went correctly, and the prosthetics fit comfortably over Braggert’s ears. Using wax, she built them up to the correct size. Then with grease make-up, Denise matched the ears to Braggert’s skin tone.

Denise’s ex-husband had moved out three years ago, silently filling two suitcases with clothes and stacking them in the trunk of the Dodge. While he slowly backed the car toward the street he rolled down the window and, without anger, called her a black bitch. Denise had continued to live in the same house with her workshop in the back room of the first floor, disposing of his remaining things as she came across them. Besides the ring-box, and the insult she could not quite forget, the only other thing Denise had not discarded was the loaded handgun he kept in case of intruders. Denise could not remember when she moved the .22 from the bedroom to the bottom drawer of her make-up desk where it remained buried, and she was reminded of the gun only when searching for rarely used make-up or magazines. Every time she glimpsed the pistol, she did not recall her ex-husband, but instead remembered that she was avoiding the possible embarrassment of somebody discovering it in her garbage.
When Mort Braggert entered Denise’s workshop, two months before she shot him, she noticed how much older the actor was beginning to appear. The speckled gray in Braggert’s hair suggested aging, and the skin on his slender face seemed as though it was fighting to stay taut, struggling against its wrinkles. Denise was combining powdered plaster with warm water, her hands churning in the muck, but Braggert’s appearance, so different from the way she remembered him, made her pause in her work.

He approached her, reached into the bowl, and enclosed her fingers in his palms. Through the oozing plaster that gloved her hands, Denise could feel the slight chill of February on his skin.

I’ve got the part, he said simply.

Denise, who had not seen him in three years, stared at him and removed her hands from his.

You should be happy for me, Braggert said as he picked up a towel that lay on the table. He cleaned his hands, glanced at her, dug into his pocket and pulled out a penny. Bracing it between his thumb and index finger, he held it up in the air as if he were trying to let the light shine through. Braggert brought the coin down slowly and looked past it to the image of himself reflected in the huge mirror Denise had propped against the wall in front of the barber’s chair she had once picked from a dumpster.

It was between me and a few others, he said. I had to sell myself. I told them I knew the famous Denise Davis. Denise Davis, I told them, is someone who can make me look exactly like Abe Lincoln. You know it’s true, I told them. I don’t know if that’s why I finally got the part, but I said it. So I’m here now.

Braggert looked at her as if he expected something.
Honest Abe, he said when she did not respond. It's up to you now.

You think I can do that? Denise asked.

I know, he said simply. And then he grinned at her with a perfect, contagious smile.

Who’s the director?

Ryan McMan.

McMan, Denise said as if she were talking to herself.

He’ll give you a lot of freedom, Braggert said.

How do you know I want to do it?

I can’t imagine, Braggert said, leaving his thought unfinished.

What? Denise asked. What can’t you imagine? She was smiling although she did not want to be, and when she caught a glimpse of her teeth in the mirror, she tried to iron the smirk out of her face with her hand.

What can’t you imagine? she asked again.

What this country would be like, he said, staring at the penny in his palm, if it wasn’t for this man. What a responsibility to play him. If it hadn’t been for him, you might still be a slave.

And who’d be on the penny then, Denise said.

Nose: Even though Lincoln’s nose was not actually as large as Denise seemed to remember, it took a lot of derma wax to shape Braggert’s small appendage into one that resembled Lincoln’s. Denise even covered it with a thin layer of cotton before applying the wax. She was very careful when building Braggert’s nose because it was the part of Lincoln’s face with which people were most familiar. Many people she knew had made the trip to Lincoln’s
grave and rubbed the statue's burnished nose for good luck. When she was young, her parents had taken her on the two hundred mile drive to Springfield from Chicago. She was far away from that frozen city now, rooted in a place where a fifty degree day caused people to pull out their winter coats. Denise rarely thought about Chicago's grid-like streets, but when the warmth of California's climate reminded her what it was like to be cold, she pictured herself as a little girl waiting for the El in the winter, shivering until the train came to take her to the private school she attended. Studying her magnified photocopy of Lincoln's nose, Denise noticed that it curved slightly to the left, and she wondered how she would be able to create that effect.

_Dissection:_ Early in her undergraduate studies, Denise's professors taught her to keep a make-up morgue, a scrapbook where each page contained a collage of magazine and photograph cut-outs of different facial features. Afterward, when Denise moved to California, carrying her still incomplete morgue with her, she worked for a year with a black man named Sam Lankford who had been doing stage make-up for two decades. In an attempt to propel young African Americans into the business, Sam had set up an apprenticeship program for aspiring make-up artists, and that year he had chosen Denise from over a dozen applicants. Sam's morgue was not in a book but on the walls in his workshop. One eight-by-ten-foot rectangle had cut-outs of only noses, another only eyes, another only mouths, and he had marked off each section's borders with a rectangle of blue duct tape. He called the room his anatomy theatre, and whenever he was preparing for a job, he would stand very close to the wall, brushing his index finger along the pictures until he found the one he wanted to mimic.
All the body parts I paste up have already become the dead, Denise remembered him saying. She often recalled the time when he told her this, and how the magazine and photograph cut-outs behind him made the outer lines of Sam’s body appear as if they were merging with the wall. Years passed before Denise realized he was claiming that photographs of people were separate from the people themselves, and the photos he had hung did not actually represent any life lived.

Braggert’s assumption that she would agree to do work for him did not surprise Denise, and even though she still disliked the man, she was flattered he had attempted to use her name to garner the role for himself. Braggert must have been very desperate; in the three years since she had seen him, nobody had employed him for a single movie role, nor had she heard of his receiving a job on any California stage.

Denise had blamed Braggert for the disintegration of her marriage three years ago because he was there to be blamed, his overly imposing presence making him an easy scapegoat. Braggert had always had an offhand way of making the work she did seem brilliant, and this attracted her to him. The affair had not lasted long, but when it ended, her marriage was also over and then, in the void created by the absence of her husband, only Braggert remained, his constant smile a symbol of her failure. She had not told Braggert to leave, but he must have sensed her hatred because soon after the divorce, he stopped coming to her. In the three years since that time, Denise had stayed alone, designing make-up for many other famous actors and actresses and becoming very well known in the industry. She had had few free moments, and she spent almost none of them in missing either the actor or her husband.
Braggert's sudden invasion into her workshop seemed to dismiss all that had happened to them in the past, and when she saw him, Denise was again reminded of the loathing she had felt for him three years ago. But Braggert's appearance was so disconnected from the way she remembered him, that Denise suddenly decided Braggert had not caused the end of her marriage, he simply had been a reason for her to abandon it.

Haven't seen the script yet, Braggert was saying. I hear its got a huge budget.

You're about to have a comeback? Denise asked.

Where did I go? Braggert said with a serious expression on his face, and then he began to smile.

Denise, he said. Please? Will you?

With the knowledge of how much he needed her, Denise was able to demand a large commission for the job, and Braggert accepted under the condition that she drop all other projects. Before he left, she told him he would have to start growing a beard and that he would need to begin coming to her workshop every day so she could make casts and begin experimenting. Since this was a film, she told him, everything had to be refined and perfected. If it was not, every close-up would expose all the seams in his make-up.

Beard: Denise noticed, when studying Lincoln's beard in her pictures, that Braggert's chin did not protrude like Lincoln's, and she knew that he would have to grow his facial hair quite long so she could shape it in a way that made his jaw seem strong and pronounced. As the whiskers began to grow, it became clear that they were streaked with gray like his hair, so once they were long enough, dye would have to be used for coloring. The problem with the real beard was that when it was at a satisfactory length, it would have to be shaved and
clipped every day. Unlike the prosthetic ears and wax nose, the beard defied Denise’s manipulation by growing and changing on its own. The beard was completely natural, and she did not like that because then her work was relying upon a part of Braggert’s face she could not control.

One month before filming started, Braggert entered Denise’s workshop with a script. The windows were open to dilute the odors of plaster, wax, and glue that collected in the corners of the small room. In March, the temperature was climbing to the lower seventies, so the breeze moving slowly about the workshop was slight and warm, and when Braggert opened the door, Denise could feel the movement of the air quicken. He had been anticipating reading the screenplay with impatience, and from the heaviness of his steps and the agitated way he was rustling the pages of the script, she knew he had.

I don’t think I agree with some of the stuff in here, he said to her back. There’s some stuff in here I’ve never heard of. A bunch of Indians hung in Minnesota? A weakness for women?

What are you talking about? Denise asked without turning.

Scenes the movie spends a lot of time on. I guess a person couldn’t live then and not be a little racist. But this seems overdone.

Don’t talk like that, Denise said. She noticed that he was standing right behind her, and she felt him patting the hair on the back of her head.

Talk like what? he asked.

Saying those things.
Denise, he said, do you have anything more for me? I gave the photos you took to McMan and he says you’re doing a great job. He said I’m going to have to start coming in on afternoons two weeks before shooting, and to wear my make-up so he can play with the lighting.

I figured that, Denise said. Your wig just arrived. But you’re going to have to sit still while I trim it.

Put it on me, he said. I want to see it.

Hair: With the large budget that Braggert had allotted her, Denise was able to buy a wig of real human hair, already attached to a lace foundation. She had been studying her pictures very closely to understand how to cut it, and when she saw Braggert sitting in the barber chair with the untrimmed wig on his head, she knew progress would be slow. This kind of hair did not grow back, and she kept reminding Braggert of that when he would move just before she was about to snip.

Construction: After Sam, Denise worked with a white man who told her to be very cautious when modeling her living actor after a historical figure. Recreating the historical figure was one of the most demanding and difficult tasks that a make-up artist could undertake, he told her. Many different sides of history had to be taken into consideration, and people who studied the past would be scrutinizing the work, determined to find flaws. They want blemishes, he said. They want to prove that a filmmaker can’t be a historian. He told her that if she decided to reconstruct the dead, the dead will be watching despite what the living would say. She owed it to the deceased to do a flawless job.
The last scene of the movie was appropriately set in Ford’s Theatre. According to the screen directions, the camera would be situated so that the audience could see the front of Lincoln’s face and the rest of his private box behind. Booth would sneak up on him, hold the gun to Lincoln’s head for an incredibly long amount of time, and then with a blast the movie would end. Before the screen blacked out, Braggert explained to Denise, there would be a brief moment where the script instructed Lincoln to realize his own death and to acknowledge his mistakes and successes.

Braggert returned from break that day with a gun, which he took out of his pocket and handed to Denise. He asked her to stand behind him as if she was Booth, so he could watch her in the big mirror as she pulled the trigger. It was the only way, he told her, for him to gain enough perspective on the scene to act it correctly.

I brought this hat for you to wear, Braggert said.

Booth wasn’t wearing a hat.

He was wearing one in the picture I saw.

There weren’t pictures of Booth as he was about to kill Lincoln, Denise said. If there had been, someone would’ve seen him and stopped him.

Stopped a gun with a camera? That’s silly.

I don’t want to see a picture of a man getting shot, Denise said.

Why would a black woman shoot Lincoln? Put the hat on so I can pretend.

A black woman probably wouldn’t, she said, but if anyone should want to shoot someone it should be one of us. In school, Denise told him, teachers gave me good grades so
I wouldn’t think they were racist. And I used to visit my brother at the prison when my parents wouldn’t. I couldn’t ever get free of the guard’s glares.

Don’t be stupid, Denise.

I saw opinions in their eyes, she said. When I hadn’t done anything.

The hammer clicked.

Did you just pull the trigger? Braggert asked.

*Mouth:* There was nothing overly remarkable about Lincoln’s mouth. His lips pursed much more than Braggert’s did, but Denise accentuated that easily by darkening the area under his bottom lip. Unlike the other facial features, the stuff she did with Mort’s mouth was a complete illusion. No wax needed to be added, no plaster casts needed to be made, only a few dark lines to bring out his bottom lip. She laughed at the idea of Braggert’s mouth repeating Lincoln’s famous words: all those great speeches coming out hollow and false. As Lincoln was aware, his words had begun the abolishment of the chains that enslaved her ancestors. And now Braggert’s mouth, the lips that were beautiful in their shape and easy in their lies, would be speaking those words. It did not anger Denise, and she did not feel offended, for she was unsure of what Lincoln really meant to her. He seemed a symbol of freedom yet also somehow a representation of oppression, one with which she was somewhat familiar in her own experience, and one she had seen in the lives of many who looked like her but were less fortunate. She could not remember much about what the historians said about Lincoln, so she went to the library and took out a documentary on the Civil War in which some actor whose name she did not know delivered Lincoln’s long speeches over fifes and drums playing Civil War cadences. She turned it on while she worked with Braggert, and
soon he began to attempt to talk like the Lincoln on the tape. He was doing an impression of a
impression.

Three years before Denise shot Braggert, he had told her that he loved her, and she did not
believe him because she knew it was a lie. When Braggert later admitted to his lie, she
assumed he had been lying to himself for so long he was beginning to forget the existence of
any kind of truth. It was something that make-up artists and others in the business called
actor’s sickness: an amnesia of identity. Since Braggert was always working on a movie or a
play, he was always somebody else, and because of this Denise felt she could not trust him,
for how was she to know if the man she was talking to was the real Braggert?

One of the things that bothered her about him was that he did not understand
boundaries, and he had no idea that people wanted anything besides to love him. He knew
that people went to see his movies, but he did not know what kind of people. At awards
shows, he accepted trophies on stage, and from that he was aware people thought he was a
good actor, but Denise was under the impression he had no idea what it actually meant. She
felt sure audiences had come to the point where they could no longer tell the difference
between good and bad acting. Braggert was not humble, and he considered himself self-
made, commenting often on the belief that his success was completely his own doing. Denise
knew this was rarely the case for anyone and that luck was at the core of everything Braggert
had accomplished. If he had been born any less attractive, he probably would have spent the
prime of his career as a stage actor, known only to those who frequented the theatre.

If you work hard enough, you can do anything, he had once told Denise, sounding as
though he was reading a bad line from a movie.
I'm doing what I want to be doing, she told him, but she could tell he did not understand that what she cared about most was her work.

**Forehead:** The forehead was the one part of the body that Denise could not see more clearly when it was separate from the face. It was also the one part of Braggert’s body that she knew she would not have to do much for; Lincoln’s forehead was high and arching, and his hairline was receding a bit, and Braggert’s was exactly the same. At the end of each day, when she had finished, Denise stared at her work in the mirror and the way its flaws stuck out from Braggert’s face reminded her of fish skeletons on one of Chicago’s polluted beaches. The swimming would so often be closed due to the pollution creeping up from the south side and Gary. She only remembered those factories when thinking of her father and how he would take her to White Sox games on the South Side. He would always point out the public housing high-rises a few blocks from Comiskey Park, and tell her to be thankful that they did not live in one. Even after Denise moved away, her memory of the South Side took on the broken tint of those buildings. She was not thankful like her father told her; instead, she felt as if the luck in her life was out of her control, and that she had been allowed to cheat while the people that had to live in those buildings were forced to follow the rules.

All Braggert’s brow needed was a slight stipple in the make-up to recreate the roughness of Lincoln’s skin. As simple as that seemed, Denise still did not feel as if her work was as good as it could be.

**Imitation:** Denise knew that in Braggert’s film, he was bringing the dead Lincoln back to life. Make-up artists, the cameras of directors, and the brains and bodies of actors were constantly
resurrecting icons of human history. Cinema had revived the dead. But when filtered through the subjective lenses of so many living people, it was inevitable that the deceased’s life would be altered. The filmmakers had become the new historians. Unlike scholars, who had to use numerous sources and documents to back up their claims, the filmmaker could manipulate history on a whim. If a lie was put on film, or even an exaggeration, and Denise could think of many examples, the dead would become someone else, and nobody had the power to right these wrongs. That there was no limit to the filmmaker’s poetic license bothered Denise. If millions of people saw Braggert’s movie, the audience would believe that his Lincoln was the real one. Denise wondered how many of her beliefs were based on the impulses of others.

Two weeks before shooting began, Braggert started coming to her in the morning and then leaving in his make-up to drive down to the studio in the afternoon. After a few days, Denise stopped expecting him to return at night to have the make-up removed. Instead, he would enter her workshop in the mornings with the make-up appearing as if it had begun to slide off his face. After constant questioning, Braggert finally admitted to Denise that he was sleeping in an arm chair so the make-up would not smudge.

McMan expected Braggert on the set to begin filming in six days, and since Denise was almost finished, Braggert asked her if he could take her to lunch.

You need to leave the workshop more, Braggert said in a tone that made Denise feel like he was only offering the lunch out of charity. He was in the habit of delivering everything he said in the voice from the documentaries and had begun to wear the full
costume: the black suit and the top hat perched upon the newly sculpted wig. All that remained was the famous mole, and Denise knew she could do that in twenty minutes.

At the restaurant, Denise watched people stare at the table where Abraham Lincoln sat stiffly in a booth across from a black woman. They listened to him order a BLT sandwich and a chocolate milk shake. In their uneasiness, they left him alone in a way they would not have had they recognized that it was Mort Braggert.

I don’t like this film at all, Braggert said to Denise as they waited for their food. It’s not going to make people happy. Remember when people took it upon themselves to destroy Columbus? This film is their decimation of Lincoln. People don’t want to be content. They need to break up their history until nothing remains. They won’t ever be happy.

On the face of America, Denise said, happiness makes no sense.

That’s insightful, Braggert said smiling. Did you hear that somewhere?

I’ve been thinking about it.

Mole: The mole was giving Denise difficulty because when she finished it, Braggert would finally be Lincoln. Just a little derma wax covered by a dark color of grease paint, and her job would be done a few days early. Soon she would have to do her work on the set which, until they traveled to places like Gettysburg out east, was only about an hour’s drive from her workshop. The mole was the easiest part of the make-up, but Denise avoided it. Instead, she attempted to improve minor things, smoothing out places that were already smooth and pretending to snip hairs that did not exist. She had malicious thoughts of shaving off Braggert’s beard so that it would take him another two months to get ready. She had begun to hate seeing him in costume. She did not want to see him become Lincoln.
On the day before McMan expected them on the set, Braggert came in loudly, as always. He was wearing the entire costume, as he had every day during the last two weeks, and his walk resembled Lincoln’s long, stiff gait that Denise remembered from movies.

Braggert had taken pictures of his make-up to McMan that morning and learned the director was planning to film the last moment of the movie first. After relating this information to Denise, Braggert anxiously told her that he still had not figured out how to act the scene. He asked Denise to try it with him again, and before she agreed, he remembered that he had not brought his gun.

I was at the shooting range yesterday, Braggert said in Lincoln’s voice. People were amazed to see Lincoln shooting a gun. I guess they always believed he was only supposed to be shot.

Actually, Denise said, there’s a gun here.

She went past Braggert to her desk, dug the pistol out of the drawer, and then walked behind him.

As she watched Braggert sit down in the barber chair, she looked at his face reflected in the mirror. So much work had gone into his make-up that Denise no longer saw Braggert’s or Lincoln’s face, but instead perceived both of them merging together, all of the make-up and wax and plastic floating like a mask just a centimeter away from Mort’s face as she recalled it.

I can’t seem to get this scene right, Braggert said.

You want me to wear the hat again? Denise asked.
Please. I mean if I can see your face, someone I know and love, I won’t be able to believe the gun. That’s what it’s really about, believing the gun. Lincoln never really saw it, but I can’t play those final seconds unless I can imagine the scene as it’s being filmed.

Denise stood behind him, holding the pistol out toward the actor’s head. She saw him peeking at her in the mirror and then looking at the gun and then at himself. He closed his eyes and then opened them. A flicker of terror and then one of anger crossed his face, and then it was blank. He stared deep into the mirror as if he was searching for something far away and then laughed. Turning to an imaginary Mary Todd, he whispered something that Denise could not hear.

She watched his process, her mind empty of any thoughts of her own. Then she pulled the trigger and Braggert’s wigged head fell forward.

A moment ago, Braggert had been alive, and Lincoln had been dead for one hundred and thirty five years, his bones safe in a mausoleum in Springfield, Illinois. Denise would remember Braggert’s expression as she saw it in the mirror before his face slammed into the desk, and how it had filled her with a dark fright. But she knew, as she dropped the gun, that Braggert would never have been Lincoln, for the work she did was only for the movies, illusions separate from history. Braggert had become the dead, a photograph, and the fear she saw on his face, so true in its acknowledgement of the death, could only have been his. Along with the mole she had not yet crafted, it would all have transferred magnificently to the screen.
Lacerations

*People do not read mystery stories to find out whodunit, but to discover why the crime has been committed and to decide whether they are capable of committing that crime themselves. In this film, as in most, we find a motive that is completely unsatisfactory.*

—from a movie review by Howard Mullen

*Samuel, the youngest*

My brother Samuel was taken from the large, suburban house at thirteen, and I have heard that he left stolidly and without objection. In the five years following this horrible but necessary truncation, during which Samuel was separated from our birth mother and living with our Aunt Nichole, our mother stalked her youngest son, haunting his new home and frequent hangouts in costumes she stitched and make-up she purchased from a theatre catalogue. Most of the time, our mother dressed herself as elderly women, and she marveled at how easily she could approach Samuel and his friends when disguised that way. She remarked how the difference in ages seemed to impose a void between them, causing the young people to look through her as though she were already a ghost. Thus our mother never allowed Samuel to catch her watching him, and by eavesdropping on many of his conversations at the old-fashioned hotdog restaurant near the high school or on the tennis courts where he joked with his teammates and played third singles, our mother probably learned much more about her son’s life than those parents who interrogate their teenagers at
the dinner table every evening. What our mother believed she had observed during those years was a boy who, like many adolescents, seemed uncomfortable and taciturn amidst crowds of unfamiliar people, preferring instead the company of three or four close friends with whom he would converse openly and energetically. He was, she thought, a fairly normal child who could grow up to be an exceptional adult.

On the day after Samuel went downstate to college, just before he turned eighteen, my mother told me that she had stopped spying on him. I had spoken to her only a few times in the five years since I left to attend the University of Illinois, but I was back in the Chicago area for a job interview, and afterward, as I attempted to find my car in one of the city’s underground garages, I began to wonder how my mother was dealing with Samuel’s recent departure. We met at a small outdoor café located in the suburb of Evanston, and I told her about the potential job and how, in those years after the attack on the World Trade Center and the decline of the stock market, I had little expectation of getting good work. Knowing this, I had applied for a graduate position at the University of Illinois and they had accepted me into their master’s program in accounting. Toward the end of the hour-long meeting with my mother, I began to get the impression she was barely listening, and even though I was the child in front of her, she only wanted to discuss my youngest brother. My mother told me that since Samuel had left the day before, she had begun to search through her memory in an attempt to review every situation in which she had observed him. She declared then that, although she knew her son’s personality was still developing, the Samuel she had witnessed bantering with his close friends was the real Samuel.

My mother’s satisfied tone while stating this opinion suggested such conviction that I could not disagree, and I remember being struck with the notion that, contrary to the political
rhetoric that thrived in our country in those years, it was possible a person’s true character was better shown when they were surrounded by comfort and not when they were confronted with adversity. I have since realized that when my mother claimed she decided upon the true Samuel, she had completely forgotten, or decided to overlook, the time she watched her youngest son save the life of a drunk woman whose car had angled across the sidewalk and rammed an oak tree only yards from where he was walking. While concealed in the shadows, my mother had seen Samuel run up to the car, pull out the bloody and ragged body, find the mouth somewhere on that smashed face, and begin blowing into it as he had learned in training sessions at the public swimming pool, where he worked as a lifeguard in the summer. My mother’s disregard of these heroics and most other situations that I associated with my brother caused me to ponder an idea: that everyone has one true personality, and that there is a moment in every person’s life when something causes that person to emit himself in the purest and most simple form, giving off his qualities to all viewers, like a television broadcast that comes in clear through the static for a few seconds. As I sat in the wire chair across from my mother, sipping coffee, those ideas passed through my mind as inarticulate impressions, and I have since attempted to confine those feelings, harness them, and convert them to the language written above. They are notions I have often questioned and sometimes even rejected entirely.

Our father, who had been taken from us by cancer when I was seventeen, Howard sixteen, and Samuel eleven, had been a professor of literature at Northwestern University in Evanston, and although his dissertation examined Whitman’s American romanticism, his true love was Russian literature and Dostoyevsky. A new translation of The Brothers Karamazov
came out in hardback a few months before he died, but his sickness prevented him from reading it or even listening to our mother read it to him. He was very aware that he would never experience the translation, and we could all sense it pained him as much as the fact that he was slipping away from his family. When our father died, our mother sat everyday near the plot in our backyard where we buried his ashes and read the translation aloud. During the week it took her to finish Dostoyevsky's novel, I often watched her through the back window with an expression on my face that felt something like a smile, although when I refocused my eyes and studied my reflection in the glass, it appeared to be something else, an expression I do not think anybody has ever had the courage to name.

When she finished *The Brothers Karamazov*, our mother read more Dostoyevsky books to the grave—*The Idiot, The Gambler, Crime and Punishment*—and after completing all of his works, she started novels by other authors. I left for the University of Illinois soon after my father’s death, and Howard followed me to Champaign-Urbana the next year, leaving Samuel alone with our mother in a house that was quickly filling with books and dust. My father’s sister, Nichole, went to visit them one afternoon a few months later, and she walked out after five minutes, leading Samuel away. According to Nichole, Samuel had not only been washing his clothes to avoid the suspicions of those at school, but he had also been doing his mother’s laundry and shopping and cooking for her. He left without a word of resistance, and although our mother called Nichole to promise an end to the neglect of her duties, she never went to the police. I believe that my mother’s pledges to Nichole at that time were probably quite genuine, not because our mother had decided it was finally time to stop obsessing over her husband’s death, but because the situation with the thirteen-year-old
Samuel had made her turn away from our father and focus on her youngest son with an intensity that seemed equally as unbreakable.

During that afternoon at the café, five years after Nichole took Samuel away, my mother told me, without feeling sorry for herself, that she was destined to pursue the receding images of people. She likened herself to a wanderer who strains and strains his eyes just to see a mirage: a vision he will never advance upon. When she said this, I realized my mother was only interested in those who were taken from her, like my father by cancer or my brother by Nichole. Since I was not one of those people, I began to avoid her after that meeting at the café, and I spoke to her only twice in the four years afterward. One time she called me to ask how I was, and another when I was in the area visiting with Howard who had moved back to the city after his graduation. On that visit, I decided to go over to her stuffy, suburban house, and when she finally let me inside, I noticed how skinny and dirty she had become. Even though I planned to stay five minutes, I felt so sorry for my mother that I stayed, opened all the windows, and cooked some linguini for her. The night I entered the thick air of the house again and killed her, when I was twenty-seven, I did not say a word to her nor did she attempt to utter anything to me.

I saw and talked to Samuel many times between the meeting with my mother at the café and her murder. During those four years, Samuel was working on his bachelor's in computer science, and I was completing my master's degree or avoiding my inevitable move up to Chicago to begin a career as an accountant, a future I felt hanging ominously overhead. I will always remember the time Samuel phoned to ask for a ride to class, and while in my old Dodge, which he always said smelled like wet newspapers, our conversation led him to tell
me with surprise and regret, as if he had only just noticed it and immediately felt guilty, that
never in his life had he allowed himself to truly speak his mind. He told me, as I drove by the
restaurants and shops on University Avenue, that in high school and now in college he had
never been more than an actor. In all his social interactions up to that day, he had contrived a
personality for himself, acting as he thought other people wanted. Contrary to most actors
who adhere to a script, Samuel told me, he always displayed a self that would satisfy
whoever he might be talking to, and this disingenuousness, which he seemed unable to
control, often had him feeling sick and distant. Many times as a form of protest, he would not
allow himself to be an actor under the audience’s control, and instead, he would fall silent,
answer questions briefly and close his ears to all conversation around him. When I asked him
why he had avoided showing himself, Samuel answered that his concealment of his true
impulses did not seem to be a choice. He felt like he lived under the force of others, those
who always judged him, and their interpretations of his actions—whether he was a good or
bad person, or whether they liked or disliked him—were like restraints, chains that held him
down by attaching immense importance to the perspectives of anybody with whom he
interacted. If he were to be himself, Samuel said, he would not be able to control how other
people thought of him, and that was frightening. When he encountered a face he did not
recognize, Samuel told me, he also saw an opening behind that face that extended outward in
the shape of a cylinder, which, much like the inside of camera’s lens, enclosed a darkness his
eyes could not penetrate. Deep in that darkness, he could just see reflections of himself
making motions and saying words that were not his. Throughout his life, Samuel told me, he
avoided talking with people he did not know because he needed time to gauge them as a
potential audience. The way my youngest brother described his maneuverings through life
reminded me of a ship that charts its path through the arctic not by mileage or longitude or latitude, but simply to avoid ice.

After dropping Samuel at his class that day, I found an open parking spot on the street, and I left the car to walk though campus. It had been almost a year since I received my master’s degree, and as I passed the eighteen-year-old girls dressed so provocatively to welcome in the first warm days of spring, I began to feel that, at twenty-six, I was an outsider. Finding an open bench, I sat down to think, and just minutes after Samuel had shared what had long been on his mind, I began to realize how horribly my mother had misinterpreted my youngest brother. From her observations, our mother could never have deduced the anxieties my brother had related to me. If all his social interactions were performances, then our mother had never witnessed Samuel at all, and her declaration of her youngest son’s true personality that day at the café could only have been incorrect. While alone in the middle of a campus of a school I no longer attended, I began to notice a strange and recursive pattern between Samuel and our mother. My youngest brother was playing to the audience of his peers—a group that was not shy about showing what they wanted from him—but he was also performing for the audience of his mother: a watcher who lurked at the outskirts of his life and who observed him secretly, attempting to gather data on him, judging him and categorizing him with a fastidiousness his friends never would. And all the information our mother collected had been false, tainted by her youngest son’s innate defense against those very acts of judgment and interpretation that she was secretly imposing upon him.

***
I remember one important weekend when I was a junior in college and Howard, my middle brother, convinced me to drive him to Chicago for a friend's party. He had just begun to date a plain, taciturn girl named Anne who rode quietly in the cramped backseat of the Dodge, and at some point during the boring, two-hour drive from Champaign-Urbana to Chicago, I wondered aloud whether I should try to visit our mother. Anne reacted to my statement by asking if our mother was in town from California, and from the brief dialogue that followed, it soon became clear that my brother had lied to his new girlfriend, telling her that our mother lived on the west coast. Howard quickly confessed, and as his voice rose in conjunction with his building anger, he argued that our mother had alienated her sons by changing her locks and preventing us from entering our childhood home. I agreed with Howard that our mother had shut us out, and I told that to Anne, explaining to her that our mother was a recluse with whom we rarely spoke. As far as I knew, of her three sons, I was the only one who tried to contact her, and that was merely three times in the last three years. I told Anne and Howard that the first two times I went nobody had answered the door, and during the third visit, when I was twenty-one, our mother met me outside on her front porch and insisted that I not enter the house.

That weekend, only a few months after I had met my mother on her front porch, I left Howard and Anne at his friend's apartment in Wrigleyville and then drove to Evanston, the suburb that bordered Chicago on the north side. I went to Nichole's house, but found nobody home, so I decided to waste some time by taking a walk. At the park that lay almost equidistant from both Nichole's and my mother's houses, I spotted Samuel on a bench at the edge of the flower garden, and sitting next to him was an elderly woman whose large dog lay at their feet. For a reason I do not remember, I thought it would be fun to sneak up on him, so
I circled around the outskirts of the park and approached slowly from behind. As I neared them, I saw that Samuel was conversing with the woman and petting her dog, and from the brevity with which they seemed to speak and the distance they kept between each other, I decided that Samuel and the woman had never met. While creeping toward my brother, I passed another bench where a second old woman sat, and for some reason, I turned to glance at her face. Our eyes caught, and although I did not recognize her, the woman jumped and in her surprise she gasped my name. I remember the word, Ivan, slipping out of my disguised mother’s mouth, and how it began as an exclamation and ended in the upturned tone of a question. When the woman rose and began to hurry away from me, I followed. She kept turning her head to look at me after every few steps, and she eventually must have realized I would not stop pursuing her. Stopping, my mother walked up to me, pulled off the wrinkled latex mask as if she were shedding her skin, and she told me simply that she had been spying upon Samuel for three years.

After catching my mother at the park, I could not bring myself to contact her for two more years, until we met at the café. During that conversation I felt somewhat excluded, for it was clear my mother truly loved the child she had spied on. Although there were moments when she was shocked by the inconsistency of his personality, those were easy to forget when, most of the time, the actions of her youngest son filled her with happiness. My mother spoke of that day at the park with a glowing affection, and she told me that before my presence distracted her, she watched Samuel read for hours on that park bench, and then put his book down to pet the dog of a woman who was sitting next to him and say a few kind words to her. There was a startling discrepancy, though, between what my mother thought she was seeing and what my brother had actually been thinking, for a year after talking to our
mother at the café, I met with Samuel in Champaign and mentioned that I had seen him at the park that weekend so long ago sitting next to an old woman and her dog. To my surprise, Samuel remembered that moment vividly, and he told me that although he did not recall anything he said to the woman, he could picture the dog snifning at his feet, and could recall how he had watched it with hatred. Speaking slowly, he related to me that he had had thoughts of strangling that dog, and how he then began to imagine committing suicide in numerous different fashions, all of which seemed unsatisfactory. During that conversation, I asked Samuel what he remembered about our mother’s old house. He could picture most of the rooms in his mind as though he were viewing them from their doorways, he answered, but he also noticed a strange shadow covered all of those memories, a shadow that he could not see but only feel, like a familiar yet hurtful presence hovering just beyond the walls. I did not correct him when he stated that this presence was our deceased father’s, but I was sure that what Samuel actually sensed was our mother’s watchful eye.

I have no way of knowing whether Samuel’s words during our conversations should be completely trusted, for during all our interactions, Samuel may have been performing for me as well. The possibility that my youngest brother fabricated the entire story of his acting has also occurred to me. I have never decided whether I should believe my youngest brother, and I will never ask him. All the episodes I have recounted above reflect Samuel’s strange and precarious personality, and I have done all I can to show his character as I have observed it.
Howard, the middle

For a while after the interview with my youngest brother, during which he told me of his malicious thoughts involving the old woman’s dog, I found myself often thinking of that scene in the park where Samuel read quietly and my mother, disguised as a non-descript old woman, sat on a bench one hundred feet away, pretending to read a paperback that lay open on her thighs. I can picture myself sneaking up on them, watching both from behind as our mother spied on my youngest brother. The novel on her lap was probably one she had already read to my father, an older translation of The Brothers Karamazov perhaps, or maybe a Dostoyevsky that was not quite so thick and heavy. Years had passed since she sat by my father’s grave during the day, and she no longer read books to him; instead she attempted to read her son. But I have begun to think that my mother was like those inexperienced readers of fiction who insist on deciding a passage’s significance before even completing the book, for she had already determined what she wanted Samuel to be, and she saw only those things that supported that preemptive interpretation. Thinking back, I realize that at the moment in the park, I was doing the same. I could not see what I was looking at, for it would have never occurred to me that the old woman I only peripherally noticed could be my mother, and that Samuel, who seemed to be interacting with a different woman, was, in his mind at that moment, rejecting ways of killing himself.

I have other associations with that park as well. It remains only a few blocks from where I grew up, and as a child I went there with friends to play pick-up games of football after school. On the west side was a large flower garden surrounded by benches, and in the center of that rose a tall flag pole. A metal cord secured the huge American flag to the pole,
and even when I lived downstate, I sometimes recalled the nervous sound of that cord as it clicked against the aluminum pole on windy days. Near the bench on which Samuel once sat with a book in his hands and contemplated choking the dog, Howard and I often sat together in the weeks after our mother’s murder, facing the other direction and staring out over the baseball diamonds on the park’s east side. One day, my brother related the story of a homerun he once hit on that baseball field. It had been a hard groundball, and because it had not rained in many weeks, the ball bounced past not only the shortstop but also the left fielder, and continued rolling until it struck the base of the fence that marked the park’s perimeter. Because of his teammates’ teasing, Howard was aware it was the first homerun he had ever hit in his seven years of youth baseball, and he remembered feeling, as he crossed the plate and left a footprint in the dust that covered it, an emotion he had never noticed in himself before. It was an emotion, he told me, that puzzled him because he had felt it only a few other times in his life, in moments which seemed entirely unconnected. My brother conceded that twenty-two was far too young to have married, but his three years with Anne had not been a total failure, and he reported how one night toward the end of their marriage, as he got into bed an hour later than his wife, he noticed that she had been naked and waiting for him to come to her. Anne, who had not been the type of woman to initiate those kinds of things, had fallen asleep, and when he touched her warm, smooth skin, working his palm from her breast to her stomach to her thigh, all without waking her, he noticed the same feeling as the day he had hit that homerun.

The last time he had felt it, he confessed sadly, as if he were speaking to a priest and preparing for contrition, was in the moments after we had received our mother’s ashes in the cardboard box, dug the hole next to our father’s grave, and buried her remains without
opening the transparent bags in which they were packaged. During that particular conversation in the park, Howard asked in desperation what I thought the origin of this feeling might be. If he had to describe it, he went on, his eyes seeming to lose focus, he might place it somewhere between happiness and recklessness. Just after we buried our mother, Howard told me, the strange emotion completely engaged him, so that for a moment he felt he was reliving all three of those experiences at once. Wondering aloud, he began to try to find a connection between them, and he asked me if I could see a link. I do not recall where the conversation strayed afterwards, and I believe we were unable to reach any conclusions regarding my brother’s strange reaction to these situations, but we did agree that each circumstance was unique to his life, all three having something to do with a change in his relationship with those other people. I also remember how the conversation ended, and how our inability to come to any conclusions annoyed my brother. Anger often engulfed Howard, rising quickly inside him in waves, and as he stood to leave, he told me I was still the typical Ivan, leading people into these types of conversations, and always looking at them as if I were making a documentary, classifying it all, giving them a number for analysis. Howard told me, as he turned his back to me and began to walk away, that I would always get it slightly wrong.

I was used to my middle brother’s outbursts and how unfairly critical he could be to people. He pointed out their weaknesses with arrogance as if he were exposing plot holes in a popular novel. Sitting alone, my gaze swept back over the empty baseball fields, and I knew that, like everybody, my attempt to interpret the world would always be slightly wrong, and I wondered if those small failures were what pushed me to continue the hopeless pursuit.
Howard had just turned twenty-six when I murdered our mother. His marriage to Anne had just ended, and he had been employed for a year as a movie critic at one of the free newspapers that circulated throughout the city. Most of the paper’s revenue came from selling classified and personal ads which filled the last two of the paper’s four sections. The first two offered liberal commentary on politics, and reviews of art, music, and film. Before his promotion to staff writer, Howard had been typing up handwritten ads that came in by mail, sending out bills to those who had miscalculated the fifty-cents per word fee, and taking complaints from people who had responded to an ad and found a product other than what was advertised. The classified office, Howard told me as we sat one day in the park, had a file cabinet full of addresses for which the paper would no longer place an advertisement. The paper was responsible for banning those who would, for example, buy an ad and then answer the door wearing a skimpy leather outfit, or those lonely people who only wanted someone to call them. Mostly the behavior was not illegal, just annoying, but according to the editor-in-chief, every false ad hurt the paper’s reputation. While Howard worked there, he rarely saw anyone open that file cabinet, and despite taking hundreds of complaints, he never added a new address to it. The cabinet remained in the corner, standing as a monument to all the bogus ads the paper knew it was selling, and to all the readers who believed the paper had some responsibility to print only the legitimate ones. To the readers, the cabinet meant the newspaper was listening, creating a trust that things were what they appeared to be. But the staff, Howard said, knew it was all just a show because, to continue circulating, the paper had to sell as many ads as possible. The cabinet was a deception only to those who could not see it.
When Howard received the job as critic, he wrote reviews that were extremely harsh, and whenever I came up to Chicago during that first year he was writing, I picked up the paper’s latest issue just to read Howard’s short critiques, finding their ruthlessness to be immensely entertaining. It seemed to me that Howard was finally focusing his criticisms toward something that deserved it, like Hollywood, and that averted his antagonizing eye away from the people he met. After our mother’s murder, Howard’s gaze swung back to his family, and he began to criticize not only me and Samuel, but also both of our deceased parents and the police detective in charge of the case. During that time, I had moved up from Champaign, and Howard had broken the lease on his apartment in Lincoln Park on the north side, so we lived together in our mother’s large, suburban house. Samuel was finishing his studies at the University of Illinois, and when he came up to the city, which he did often in the months after the murder, he stayed in his room at our Aunt Nichole’s house. In the late afternoons, I often walked with Howard to the park. Some days we remained there only a few minutes and others we sat and talked for hours. Now that he once again had a key to his childhood home, my middle brother’s vocal animosity toward our mother slowly began to wane.

After finding the body, our mother’s neighbor—a young teacher whose husband had a high paying job at a bank downtown—ran back to her house and called Howard’s cell phone. All the blood she had seen made it difficult for her to talk, and as she attempted to tell Howard about his mother, he had to ask three times whose blood it was before he began to understand what she was trying to say. He called the Evanston police on his train ride up to the suburb, and then he left a message on my phone in Champaign. When it rang, I had just returned
from my trip to Evanston, and in my amazement at how quickly they found our mother's body, I decided not to answer it. I called Howard twenty minutes later to hear what I predicted he would tell me, his voice rough and unfeeling as I suspected it would be. Ten minutes after I hung up the phone, I left for Chicago.

According to Howard, who heard the neighbor's testimony, the teacher had awoken that morning, decided she did not have the energy to deal with a class full of children that day, and called in sick. Since the heat of summer was waning, and it was cool in the mornings, she went to the garage with the intention of getting out the lawn mower. On her way, she glanced over at our mother's yard, and noticed through the slits in the wooden fence that the top half of the screen door had broken off its hinges and was leaning outward in the air. This did not surprise her, for she knew our mother did not care about the condition of her house, but for a reason the neighbor could not recall, she decided to knock at the back door to tell our mother that her doorframe had finally rotted out. She opened the gate, walked through the yard overgrown with grass and weeds, and found that someone had smashed the back door in. Calling our mother's name, she moved slowly through the house, almost unable to breathe in the stale air. Our mother lay on her bed, her head propped up on a pillow, her throat cut, and the knife next to her temple. Her blood, the neighbor told Howard and the police, had washed over the tan blanket, soaking into the sheets in a shape that resembled a triangle, starting at a point near her neck and then opening outward in the direction of her feet.

Before the murder none of us were aware that in the year Samuel was born, our parents hired a financial consultant who prodded them to buy life insurance policies and invest some of
their savings. When I talked to my brothers before our mother’s death, we had often
wondered how our mother, who did not hold a job, was able to send us checks to pay for
college tuition and keep the house in Evanston. The consultant had made a large amount of
money for our parents, and we were all astounded to find out that our mother had
inadvertently maximized her profits by taking the money out of the market after our father
died and placing it in a long term account where it received a good interest rate, so three
years later, when the Trade Towers crumbled and the economy suffered, our family lost no
money at all. The sum of money that came to the three of us upon our mother’s murder,
which we received as a printed number on a bank statement, seemed almost otherworldly and
not quite for spending, but I allowed myself, with the approval of both my brothers, to use a
portion of my inheritance to renovate our parents’ house. I decided, with Howard’s promise
to help, that I would save by not hiring contractors for any work I could do myself. So during
that year, while professionals restored the rotting foundation, I removed the dilapidated back
porch and built a new one, I re-roofed and repainted the house, and I took down the wood
fence that surrounded the yard, dug out all the weeds, and planted new grass. When I had
finished working for the day, I would accompany Howard to the park. I had also begun to
read some of the books that lay about the house, although I avoided anything by
Dostoyevsky.

Contrary to my mother’s insistence when I met her at the café, Howard and I found,
after the police removed her body and completed a forensics inspection of the bedroom, that
our mother had not abandoned her hobby of disguise. Hundreds of long dresses, pairs of
pants, blouses, and shoes, all in different styles, hung and were piled along the walls in her
walk-in closet. Wigs reposed in round-boxes on the shelf just above our heads, and bags of
powdered plaster, some of them ripped and spilling their gray contents, leaned against the walls in the corners. Standing there, I remembered the day in the park when my mother accidentally gave her concealment away. She had been wearing a flower-print blouse and baggy pants that hung off her as if to disguise her body. Our mother was a very thin woman, and as we dug though the clothes in her closet, we found padding with straps attached to it, and I suspected that was what she used to increase her girth. On the counter next to the sink in our mother’s bathroom, there were at least thirty different shades of make-up, and heaped between the toilet and the sink were latex casts of faces, noses, and ears. Bottles of liquid plastic, brushes, plaster casts, and other implements of costuming that I could not identify lay upon the dusty, tiled floor and along the bathroom walls. Seeing it all made me picture the moment when she peeled the mask off her face, her fingers stretching the plastic so that the mask’s wrinkles, which at first seemed so real, flattened, and the younger skin was slowly revealed underneath. Howard had been unaware of our mother’s disguises, and as he stared at the clutter in her bedroom, he asked me quietly if this was who our mother really had been. I told him about our mother’s one-sided relationship with Samuel, but he only reacted to the news with silence. While going through our mother’s costumes, I was aware that Samuel was not with us, and I wondered how he would find out about our mother’s hobby. I did not have to tell him, for later that month, the police detective, assuming that Samuel already knew, mentioned it in the midst of an interrogation. My youngest brother told me later that he thought the detective had fabricated the story up to get him to say something new, but as my youngest brother sat there, he decided the detective was not that imaginative, and the situation he mentioned seemed so unlikely that it could only be true.
Since the day we cleaned our mother's bedroom, Howard's movie reviews seemed to soften, and when he was tired of writing, or he hated a movie so much it made him nauseous, he commissioned me to write them, barely editing my work before signing his name and sending them to the paper. Howard and I did not often speak about our mother's costumes, and at first it seemed to me as though he did not give them much thought, simply interpreting her actions as desperate and maternal instincts. But one month after the murder, a very personal critique on art by Howard Mullen appeared on the cover page of the movie and theatre section of his paper. The article began by explaining the situation between our mother and Samuel, and from there, Howard began to muse upon American society: "Something like this could only have happened in a place," Howard wrote, "where people have amped up their senses of sight and turned down all other senses, a place where pornography has turned what was once the quintessential moment of touch into a moment of voyeurism, a place where MTV has made it so our eyes can be visually stimulated while we listen to music, a place were we watch television while we eat." Howard's article then began to wonder whether we should not just accept our visual illusions and construct a fourth-wall that was permanent and indestructible. He questioned whether we should rid ourselves of all self-conscious and reflexive art: Hamlet's play within a play, for example, Jonson's introduction to Bartholomew Fair, and Hitchcock's North by Northwest. Terrorism too, Howard argued, disrupts our illusions, showing us that our lives could end at any time. His article claimed that those pieces of art that reminded us we were experiencing illusion were similar to acts of terror in that they broke the distinction between the real and the fantastic. He ranted that, "We don't need to be reminded that we are viewing a play, we don't need to be reminded that we are watching a movie, and we don't need women who mother with their eyes." It was
an article that many disapproved of, but, according to the classified office, it resulted in a slight increase in the sale of ads.

Although Howard preferred to surround himself in illusion, I could not do so, and when I approached him about the article, he surprised me by claiming not to remember why he had written it. Thinking about the situation later, I realized that contrary to what I initially believed, Howard did not criticize people so they would change, but he did it so he could identify constants: familiarities to recognize as he wandered through the vast range of experiences everyone negotiates. Howard had forgiven our mother for severing us from her life. He told me that, but he could not forgive her for shutting us out of the house he still considered his home. Worse, our mother used that home to consciously change her identity, transforming a place that Howard associated with stability into a factory that manufactured illusions. The costumes, which lay on the floor of our mother’s bedroom, were a proof of fabrication, and it turned out to be the illusions produced by our mother that allowed Howard to see the illusions he had constructed about his childhood. As I attempt to articulate this strange idea here, I second-guess myself, and I wonder if I am not, as Howard would say, just slightly off.

*Ivan, the oldest*

Everything I have written above is my second attempt at confession, and although it seems I have used many pages to discuss the personalities of my brothers, I am hoping that the act of expressing those ideas will help me to articulate why I killed my mother. Now, I am twenty-
eight years old and I continue to live with Howard in our mother's large, suburban house. Samuel, who just turned twenty-two and earned his bachelor's degree last year, has decided to remain in Champaign-Urbana to complete a master's. When I wrote the first confession six months ago, the police were still investigating the murder, and it seemed as though their scrutiny would never end. It was easy to see that the Evanston detective assigned to the case was becoming frustrated, and even though it would have been easy for him to simply call the incident a botched robbery and blame some faceless person who came in from the city, he seemed unable to overlook his suspicion of me and my two brothers.

One day in his office at the police station on Ridge Ave., just before I decided to write the first confession, he rubbed his eyes and told me he could not reach any conclusions regarding the strange relationships between the members of our family. Had we been normal, the detective said, he would have forgotten the murder long ago, but the case continued to fascinate him because each detail seemed to turn back in on itself, obscuring the crime's truth from his sight. Usually, he said, he could take the facts from a case—the elements of the crime scene and the psychology of the people involved—and generate possible ways the crime could have happened. Then he worked backward, using facts to eliminate each possibility that did not fit until he was left with only one or two options. Our mother's murder, though, incorporated so many mysterious circumstances and strange people that he was unsure how to pinpoint the psychology of any of those involved. Out of the three of us, I was the one he least suspected, he told me, and that was mainly because I was willing to talk to him. My two brothers had long found his interrogations insufferable, and the detective's suspicion of their guilt annoyed them so much they only cooperated with him when forced to by law. That day in his office, the detective told me that in his first meeting with Samuel, my
youngest brother was extremely cordial, but in each talk afterward, he seemed distant and unfocused, as if he were ignoring everything around him and imagining he was in another place. Howard’s answers to the detective’s questions had become more recalcitrant and abstract with each discussion, and the detective related one moment during his third meeting with Howard where my brother began to explain that no one in America had any vision, and everyone was compromising themselves for money. The statement confused the detective at first, and he wondered if Howard was referring to the murder as a robbery or whether he was speaking of his brothers and the life insurance money, but soon the detective realized that my middle brother had not been listening to the questions at all and was talking about a movie review he had just completed. There was a very good possibility, the detective told me, that any one of us could have killed our mother, and our motive could be so obscure he would never even be able to imagine it.

While thinking of that meeting in the detective’s office six months ago, I am reminded of the weeks just after the murder when the same detective insisted on questioning all three of us separately, and sent patrol cars almost daily to carry one of us to his office. At that time, he talked to me, and I assume to my brothers as well, with a kind of smirking condescension, and he told me outright, in our first meeting, that he suspected one of the three of us, although he never seemed sure which of us it could have been. In Evanston, where many families had money and large homes, it was not unusual for crooks to come in from the city and attempt to rob one of the houses there, but our case had some strange clues which caused the detective to believe it may not have been a typical robbery. Howard’s article in the free paper had answered any questions the detective had regarding the peculiar clothes and facial make-up found in our mother’s bedroom, and when talking to Nichole, he
also discovered how she had removed Samuel from the house because of our mother's incompetence. Also our mother's body was found, the detective told me, in a way that was unsettling, for crooks entering with the intent to steal often made quite a bit of noise and only murdered people who threatened them. From the coroner's report, it seemed as if our mother had not only neglected to rise from her bed, but she also had been awake and must have watched the murderer approach without resistance. What concerned the detective most of all, he related to me, studying my reactions with skeptical eyes as if I were a puzzle he was attempting to solve, was that the perpetrator stole nothing from the house, and because all three of us lived alone, none of us had given suitable alibis.

Each time the detective called me into his small office, he questioned me for about an hour, asking me to explain my feelings toward my mother and her unexpected death. Without lying, I told him that I was not quite sure how to describe those emotions, for at times I felt sad, or guilty, or even had a sense of freedom, and sometimes I experienced a combination of those and other sensations which created emotions I could not name. In contrast, I told him, there were also moments when I forgot my mother's murder entirely or felt nothing about it at all. With a smile that seemed forced and mask-like, the detective said that, when piecing together what actually happened, he and other law officials relied upon the fact that every crime, especially a murder, had a motive. In every one of our meetings he asked if I had hated my mother, if I was jealous of her, if I had ever felt anger toward her, or if I believed I was more secure now that I had inherited the life insurance money. During each interrogation, I always responded by requesting a moment to think, and I would remember standing over my mother and pushing the blade through the muscles in her neck. Other than my surprise at how easily the knife sliced through her, I could not recall any sensation, nor
could I pinpoint an emotion that led to my decision to murder her. The detective’s insistence on uncovering the crime’s motive and his need to place that motive within a word—hatred, anger, jealousy, greed—did the opposite of his intention: it did not force me to confess, it absolved me. As I talked to him in his office in the weeks after the murder, a reason for my actions refused to present itself, and I began to wonder whether I had committed a crime at all, for if I had a motive, it was something that could not be defined as simply as anger or jealousy or hatred.

A few months later, just before I wrote my first confession, the detective was still asking me the same questions, and I still gave him the same answers. When he allowed me to leave that meeting, he shook my hand and thanked me for all my help. I knew then that he had finally admitted failure and would not call me into his office again. Walking out of the station that day, the detective’s presence still looming behind me, I headed for the old Dodge, and I felt the edges of my mouth turn up in an uncontrollable grin. My reflection in the glass of the car’s driver-side window showed me that I was not smiling, but I had the same twisted expression from when I used to watch my mother read Dostoyevsky to my father’s grave. It was a strange look, halfway between a grimace and a smile, and I did not know what was forcing that outpouring of emotion. At that moment, as I turned in horror from my image and opened the car door, I interpreted it as an affirmation, a verification of my act of murder. I sat in the car before I started it, and I decided to write a confession to send the detective.

Parking on the street, I walked down the driveway and entered our mother’s house through the back, the same door I had broken on the night I killed her. I sat at the kitchen table in the quiet of the house and I recalled how, almost five years ago at the outdoor café, thoughts of murdering my mother began imposing themselves in my mind. At the time, I did
not know where they would lead me, but during each discussion I had with any member of my family, the thoughts began to strengthen, and they became final when, that day in the middle of campus, I realized how our mother was misreading my younger brother. I also knew I had the sense that our mother cared more for Samuel than she did for either me or Howard, and that was irritating, but that annoyance had long passed before the murder, so I did not consider it as a motive. I worked on the confession for a few hours, writing and rewriting my thoughts in an attempt to understand my actions, but the more I tried to articulate the feelings within me, the more they began to spread and avoid classification. As I sat at the kitchen table, I smiled at the thought that this moment was something Howard always wanted for me, an experience that I could not categorize. Even if I had sent the first confession to the detective, he would not have been able to decode the three pages of disconnected ideas, so I grabbed a box of matches from the kitchen drawer and went out to the driveway to watch the flame eat the words, sending them into the air in charred pieces.

During the last year, I have watched my brothers from a distance and noticed how our mother’s characteristics continued to live on within each of us. Since reading Howard’s article, Samuel seemed to recede from both me and Howard, and before he went back to Champaign, he refused to visit us at our mother’s house, staying at Nichole’s six blocks away. When I asked Samuel about Howard’s article, he stated that he had no reaction to it. Samuel seemed to be falling away from his family, preferring to avoid discussion of the events in his life. He did tell me once, when I prodded him for a response, that any one of us could have reason to kill our mother, but when he said it, he did not indicate an opinion on which of his two older brothers he may have suspected. Even after that conversation, Samuel
continued to withdraw, and he even refused to defend himself from Howard's accusatory outbursts. As soon as the detective allowed him to go, Samuel quietly informed me that he planned to return downstate to school, and I have not spoken to him since.

A few days after I burned the first confession, I went to the park with Howard and tried to convince him to sell our mother's house. I had been spying on him and was aware of the time he spent in the basement separating and folding our mother's costumes. When I confronted him that day at the park, he confessed his inability to bring himself to throw them away, and how touching the clothes and imagining our mother wearing each outfit was bringing him back to the emotion he had described to me earlier that year. He was getting closer to it, he claimed, like a reader nearing the end of a mystery. He announced proudly that the feeling always came when he noticed, either consciously or unconsciously, a point when his relationship with another person was beginning to end. It was something he could see only now, looking back on all three situations, reviewing them in his mind: the homerun had ended the teasing, Anne's desperate attempt to save their marriage through sex had notified him of their last days together, and our mother's death had marked the conclusion of his anger toward her. Although an end to each unhappiness was somewhat relieving, Howard said, it was also scary because he was so bad at living though change. In the basement the past few months, he had begun to grow comfortable with the emotion, and had even come to crave it, desiring that mix of happiness and fear. I had not told Howard about our mother's tendency to be drawn to people taken from her, and after his explanation of the strange emotion, I mentioned it to him, telling my middle brother that I had seen the same obsession in him. Unlike Samuel and our father, I told Howard, we had both left the suburban house voluntarily, and it allowed us to escape our mother's watch. I contended that it would be
sensible for him to leave again before he became like our mother: a follower of that which is receding. He argued that the actual brick, wood, and paint of the house had nothing to do with the way he reacted to each incident, but I told him that the large home had become, with its basement full of costumes and the two graves in the backyard, a symbol of our mother’s determination, and his persistence mirrored hers in too many ways. Without our mother, I warned Howard, the house would always feel empty, and as long as he stayed here, he would continue to try unsuccessfully, like our mother, to pack the rooms with whatever he thought might help him retrieve anything that had been taken away.

My youngest brother had receded from the world just as our mother had done, while my middle brother was beginning to show some of her same fixations. I began to realize I was in the middle of those two, and when I watched my two brothers in an attempt to understand their personalities, I had developed into the voyeur our mother had been. It struck me that our generation of the family had repeated the last, and I was again reminded of my father and a story he told to me when I was young. Our father had tried very hard to convince our mother to have four sons whom he could then name after the four main characters in his favorite book, *The Brother’s Karamazov*. My mother told him that she had no control over the gender of their children, and after some discussion, they agreed that even if they were to have ten sons, my father would only name one after a character in Dostoyevsky’s novel. When I was born, I remember my father telling me with pleasure, he took the opportunity to named me after his favorite: Ivan, the most intellectual of Fyodor Karamazov’s offspring. Because my father connected me to that book, I know I will never be able to separate myself from the image of my mother reading the novel to my father’s grave. A month before I began to write this version of the confession, I came across a copy of *The Brother’s Karamazov*.
while installing a bookshelf on the wall of my parents' large bedroom. When I finished work for the day, I searched the stacks for other copies and found four different translations all covered in dust. I flipped through each and chose a paperback copy that was full of my father's notes. Reading it was like reading two books—Dostoyevsky's story and my father's reaction to it—and it took me a long time to make my way through it. I found that even though I liked reading about Ivan, he was, like all the Russians in the novel, almost unreasonably controlled by his emotions, and I decided that of all the characters, my father was the most interesting.

As I write this second draft of my confession, I am still thinking about Howard's article seven months after I first read it. When it was first published, I could sense underneath the words how angry Howard had been at our mother for exposing his errors in judgment, showing him she was not the woman he thought she was. At that time, Howard's angry words led me to wonder whether we all have a responsibility to remain as constant as possible, thereby upholding the illusions of whom others believe us to be. It seems strange to me how my brothers and I tended to manipulate our perceptions in order to view people as we wanted to see them, and like our mother, we overlooked any actions that threatened to break those expectations. From that mistake, I have realized that nobody's personality is completely internal, and, like my brother Samuel, we are all swayed by external forces, acting at times solely for our audiences. As Howard takes so much time to point out in his article, the influences of our way of life contributes to this, but there is nothing we can do about that. America is as it should be, or as it should not be, and that's the way it is. But I wonder if we all have the desire to break from the expectations of those who are observing
us, and that might be the moment when are true selves come through. I believe it happened for me, and that the decision to do so was the origin of my malicious act toward my mother. I remember standing over her, staring through the dark into her open eyes, and wondering if she was still in costume, and if she was, realizing that I did not know who I was killing. As I drove back to Champaign-Urbana that night, I questioned why my mother had not fought back, and why she stared at me instead, as if she already knew I planned to kill her even before I even did so.

I understand that so far in this confession, I have avoided writing why I killed my mother, but I will get to it, for my purpose in writing this is to coerce a response from both of my brothers. I want them to read my analysis of our lives and tell me where my errors in interpretation lie. Samuel most likely will not reply, and Howard will tell me how wrong I am, but a response from either is all I can hope for. Here I will try to articulate my motive for killing our mother to Howard and Samuel: During life, we all construct our own rope of decisions, and most of those decisions are based on how others are going to perceive us. Because of this, our ropes tie us to all other people we interact with, connecting everyone. I believe the events in our lives can be mapped like spirals, where we stand in the center and our experiences and interactions turn around us, circling endlessly outward, and those spirals intersect with the spirals of others, leaving us attached to other people, and allowing us, even in death, to continue turning and interacting with others. To put it simply, my mother expected me to keep her secret, and even without asking, she trusted that I would. Because of this, the rope that tied me to her began to feel as though it was knotted around my neck, and I
was choking. I finally decided the only way to breathe was to cut the tie between us, and as can be seen from my confession above, murdering my mother did nothing to sever the rope that kept me attached to her, but it did allow me to slip in a finger and loosen the force from around my neck.
As she stepped outside to begin her gardening on Sunday morning, Ethel’s hope that her spouts had begun to peek through drained away, her gaze caught by an aerosol can that lay in the center of the backyard. Ethel stared at it with mistrust, as if it were going to stand upright and begin chanting insults at her, and she quickly scanned the lawn for other debris. At nine, it was quiet in the suburb that bordered Chicago. Ethel could not even hear any cars on the busy street a block away; few people living in the neighborhood, including her and her husband, even bothered going to church anymore. A five-foot high wooden fence surrounded her yard, and she was too short to see over it. The fence made her feel trapped on her own property, and she tapped the can with her toe, rolling it over until she could feel that it had dispensed most of its black spraypaint. Ethel shook her head. Jonathan, her son, had arrived from his apartment in the city ten minutes ago, and despite the litter, she was determined to think only about gardening. She felt as if it was important for her to dispel her husband from her thoughts for an hour, so she walked over the can and headed toward the side door of the garage.

To Ethel’s disappointment, the plants had not yet broken the surface in the small garden. Careful not to step in the places she had marked with white plastic tabs, she crept slowly over the dirt, pulling the weeds that seemed to grow five times faster than anything she planted. In these mid-spring days, she liked to imagine how her garden would transform this patch of dark soil into herbs and vegetables. It was always beautiful: thyme, sage, fennel, and pumpkin plants on the left, while on the right, the bean and tomatoes climbed the wire
frames her husband had constructed. Ethel kneeled in the dirt while she pictured this, and smoothed away her footprints with the back of her spade. She had gardened every Sunday morning for a decade, but in the last few years she was aware that she only came to this spot behind the garage to escape her husband. Although William’s disease had been diagnosed almost eight years ago, she had only begun to notice it in the last few. While planting seeds in the spring or picking tomatoes in summer, Ethel tried to avoid any thoughts of him, but there were times when she could not concentrate on anything else, and then she forced herself to remember William as a younger man. It was a way of deluding herself, she knew, a diversion similar to reading a book or watching a movie. In the last few years, her garden had changed from hobby to leafy refuge.

Today, Ethel wanted an hour in which she would not recall the staccato thumping of Will’s body as it slid down the stairs and the crack of his arm at the bottom. The first major injury of William’s life had occurred five days ago, and it was almost exactly as she suspected it would be, for she had observed her husband’s uneasiness each morning as she helped him descend the twelve steps to the first floor. The only difference was that when William tripped in her imagination, she tried to catch him, and that sent both of them tumbling downward. Ethel had not been present for his actual fall. Once she realized what happened and had rushed to him, he was in a heap, shaking and moaning, and he had remained that way until the ambulance came six minutes later. So for the whole hour of gardening, Ethel tried to push away thoughts of William by concentrating on her own pain, the sharp twangs she experienced in her knees each time she decided to kneel or rise.

At ten o’clock, Ethel felt as if she had been away too long. She picked up her spade, watering can, gloves, and weedspray, and returned them to her metal bucket. She retrieved
the aerosol can, which made her shiver when she touched it, and moved toward the backdoor, dreading the scene inside. William could be on the floor again, she thought, having tipped out of his chair, or he might have slipped, or worse, he may have had a heart attack, or cut himself. No lights were on in the house, so the windows seemed dark and quiet, the exterior giving Ethel no indication of what was happening within. These suburban homes held secrets behind well-maintained façades. Shingles and shutters acted much like the clothes people wore by screening out what was supposed to be embarrassing or private: the stretch-marks and genitalia of family life. Ethel cringed at the thought, and fighting the conflicting impulses of hesitance and hurry, she opened the door.

In the back room, Will sat on his green easy chair, his legs propped up on the ottoman, his broken arm resting on his stomach. The television was on, but Will did not seem to be watching. In the adjoining kitchen, Jonathan was cooking breakfast, and the house was filled with the scrape of his spatula and the slippery smell of eggs.

Ethel stood behind her husband and dropped her hand lightly on his shoulder. Instead of the softness of muscle, there was now only the slope of bone, and the fragility of Will’s body surprised her as it did each time she touched him. Ethel was used to seeing the way his old clothes appeared too big for his hunched body and rarely noticed it, but whenever she removed her fingers from her husband, memory seemed to overpower her, and until she came into contact with him again, she would always assume Will’s body felt as it did when he was fifty.

She heard Jonathan taking plates out of the cupboard.

Breakfast is almost ready, she said to her husband. Come on Will, I’ll help you.
The room was silent except for the sound of the television, and Ethel wondered how many times she would have to repeat herself before she got her husband into the kitchen.

That girl, Will said without moving his eyes from the screen. Remember that girl, Eth.

What girl? Ethel asked.

You remember her, Will said. She came home for dinner and mother made pie for her. She sobbed all night.

I don’t think I ever knew her, Ethel said.

He’s been talking about that pie all morning, Jonathan said softly from the doorway behind them. He won’t tell me what kind it was. The girl’s name is Marion. Maybe she got divorced or her husband died? Something like that.

Yes, that’s what I’ve been telling the boy here, William said.

That boy is your son, Ethel told him.

Of course, William said without conviction, his eyes staring pensively toward the cast on his arm.

It’s okay dad, Jonathan said. I’ve just come back. I’ve been away for awhile.

Ethel glanced reproachfully at her son. Jonathan had moved back to Chicago from California eight years ago, and since then, she had to constantly remind him not to lie to his father.

Where have you been? William asked, looking up at her.

Mom’s been out gardening.

Gardening again, William said, chuckling. Must be Sunday. How was the garden, Eth?
Ethel was again suddenly aware of her hands and the bones she felt under William’s shirt. It was okay, she answered. My cold weather plants haven’t sprouted yet.

While they ate, Ethel asked Jonathan about his son. Jonathan stopped eating to glance at her, and Ethel gazed back, trying to make clear that she was not being spiteful. Jonathan had told them about their grandson, Michael, a year ago. William forgot the news in five minutes, but Ethel had insisted on meeting the thirteen-year-old Michael, and one Sunday, without warning, Jonathan brought him. Michael was exactly how Ethel pictured Californians; he had long hair and seemed almost instantly comfortable in his surroundings. The boy’s lack of shyness and his ease in meeting and then talking to his sick grandfather impressed Ethel. After watching the boy for an hour, though, Ethel realized that Michael talked to Will so easily because he did not care that his grandfather was dying. The boy’s lack of familial attachment to the old man saddened Ethel, but she did not blame him; having lived most of his life in Los Angeles with his mother, Michael had never known William before he got sick. Ethel did not blame Jonathan for this either, although she knew she should.

Jonathan had brought Michael with him for a second visit last Sunday, two days before William’s fall. Watching William struggle to eat with his left hand had reminded Ethel of her grandson.

Michael’s fine, Jonathan said to her. He’s back in LA. He told me he likes coming to Chicago.

Ethel smiled, and they continued eating in silence.

After the meal, Ethel rose to collect the dishes and take them to the sink.

Don’t worry about them, mom, Jonathan said softly. I’ll do it.
Okay, Ethel said, somewhat taken aback. It seemed inconceivable that after forty years her only child could still surprise her, and each time he did, his identity appeared to alter, causing her to reassess Jonathan’s personality. Jonathan had been a quiet and morose child, and he had retained those traits into manhood. These were characteristics that Jonathan had received from her, since even now, with his mind decaying in sickness, Will remained talkative and animated. The difference between her and her son was that Jonathan often seemed to forget that his actions affected others. Her son was absentminded, and what he forgot or overlooked, often hurt people. Ethel was sure this was why Jonathan was not married to Michael’s mother, and why she had not been told about her grandson for the first thirteen years of his life. She had realized long ago that Jonathan rarely understood that he hurt other people, but when he did notice, his complete surprise showed Ethel that her son had never intended to upset anyone.

What do you think about the garage? Jonathan asked through the sounds of clinking dishes and rushing water.

What do you mean? Ethel asked.

I saw it when I drove up, Jonathan said.

The garage? Will asked.

Don’t worry about it dad, Jonathan said from the sink.

Did the garage burn down? the old man asked.

Nobody answered him.

Ethel walked out the backdoor, crossed the deck and opened the gate’s latch. She stepped out onto the driveway.
Her white garage door had the word GLEN spray painted in black upon it. Ethel stared at the name for a long time and then glanced over at the neighbors' houses to her right. With her high fence, she could not see anything to her left, but waist-high, chain-link fences marked off the three yards in the other direction, and she could see through them. The houses next to hers were quiet and still. The garages she could see, each painted in the shade that matched that of the house it belonged to, were clean, none tainted by graffiti. Ethel wondered who Glen was and decided that he must have come in from the city as she slept. She imagined him as a black man, creeping down her driveway at night, the aerosol paint can clinking in his fingers. Ethel was ashamed of her assumption; it could have been a white teenager from the neighborhood, she thought, and in her imagination, she tried to convert the picture of the black youth to that of a white one.

Ethel walked up to the garage. Glen had printed his name in foot-high letters and a wavy penmanship. The word slanted slightly to the left and upwards so that it was not parallel with the pavement or the straight lines of the garage. This caused it to seem remarkably separate from the surface on which it was printed, but when she touched the dry paint, its texture was no different from the rest. The name emerged as a loud exclamation in the silence of the morning: a proclamation almost. Ethel again looked at the houses next door, peering quickly into the dark windows for movement of some kind. On the first house next to hers, the lavender paint was beginning to chip off and no one had mowed the lawn in the backyard for several weeks. Two Hondas were parked in the driveway, but there was no motion inside.

Ethel remembered reading in the suburban paper that incidences of graffiti had increased. Angry letters written by the suburb's residents blamed the police for inaction.
They claimed that too many had occurred in the suburb, and each was further and further from the city line. One letter argued that the perpetrators were getting more courageous. Ethel knew that villagers who wrote to that paper had a tendency to exaggerate, but even so, there must have been two or three incidents to spur their worry. She had never written a letter to that paper, but she had often thought of writing to tell people that they worried too much. Too many of them lived inside the suburb as if it was a gated community, pretending they were guarded from the city’s crime, and now she knew that she was no different. Glen, whoever he was, had taken her property and announced it as his own. The name on the door didn’t scare Ethel, but it did make her feel as though a security she had believed in for so long was precarious and breakable.

Are you going to call the cops? Jonathan asked.

The cops? William said. What happened? Were you just outside?

I was in the garden earlier, Ethel told him, but the graffiti was still shadowing her thoughts and her answer came out quick and harsh.

Will did not seem to notice: Where were you this time? he asked.

Out by the garage, she replied calmly. I was just outside. Don’t move like that, Will, you’ll put too much pressure on your arm.

Were you gardening earlier? he asked once he had settled back into the chair.

Yes, of course, Ethel answered, It’s Sunday, isn’t it? In her mind, she could still hear herself snapping at William, her voice horribly pointed with annoyance. And as she touched William’s cast, she wondered if people who lost their memories also lost the dread of causing pain in others, a fear that seemed to instruct so many of her decisions.
Willam’s fall down the stairs had not been Ethel’s fault. She had read enough books and watched enough movies in her lifetime to know that she was blaming herself for something she could not have prevented. Taking her eyes from him for two minutes to start the coffee maker was not the same as pushing him down the stairs. But Ethel felt an awful and draining responsibility toward him, and she could not help feeling guilty. She had always felt it was important to answer all his questions truthfully, even if she was replying for the sixth time. Nor did she ever fuss about driving him to the hospital every other month. She always gave him his medication on schedule, and she rarely left him alone. She loved him, but she found herself loving the memory of him in place of the remnant of him that she now cared for.

There were many moments when she wished to God that she had been the one to get sick.

Ethel had always thought of her family as necessary, as if each member could not exist without the other two. When Jonathan moved to California to attend college, and then decided to stay there, Ethel refused to realize how far from them her son was. She kept his bedroom as it had been, and each Saturday when she cleaned the house she dusted his things, as if he had only left a few minutes ago. In the days since Will had broken his arm, Ethel often remembered the Sunday, a year ago, when Jonathan told her about Michael. That morning, her son confessed that he could not keep lying to them, and that he had a child he never told them about. Whenever he made enough money from selling a painting, Jonathan reported, he would fly to California to see him. He had split from the woman just after the birth, but he still saw his son whenever he could.

Before Jonathan left that day, he had told Ethel how horrible yet freeing it was to tell them that secret. He had never felt that way before.
I know dad won’t remember it, Jonathan said to her. And that’s good. But I know you will.

As he said that, Jonathan changed before her again, and even though Ethel should have been angry, she was filled with a great affection for him. After he drove away, Ethel wondered how this new grandson would fit into the family she had worked so hard to maintain.

Before William’s fall, he only had to see the doctor every two months or so. Five years ago, his doctor had referred them to a specialist in the city, and Ethel had to drive him to a hospital for the appointments. By expressway, the trip would have taken ten minutes, but the highway traffic moved too fast, and Ethel did not trust her reactions. So for twenty minutes they had to drive through the broken-down neighborhoods on the city’s west side. She preferred to drive through early in the morning when, she believed, all the criminals would still be sleeping off their hangovers, and the only people she saw were waiting for the bus.

Churches and fastfood places lined the busy street she took to the hospital. The churches there were not steepled like those in the suburb, and appeared to be much the same as the restaurants, their signs proclaiming CHURCH instead of ITALIAN BEEF. Many of the places had boarded windows, and some of their facades, even those of the churches, were covered in graffiti. The paint formed skeletons of words that she refused to read as they flowed by the windows of her car, and they gave Ethel a dirty feeling.

A day after William’s fall, the doctor cleared him to go home, and he told Ethel how relieved he was that Will had only broken his arm. He showed her the x-ray and warned her that the bone would take time to heal because William’s body could not fix itself as quickly
as a young person’s would. The doctor assured her that the bone would mend, but if William
had broken his hip, for example, it probably never would have healed. The doctor also made
sure Ethel was strong enough to help her husband move from one place to another, and made
her promise never to leave him upstairs unwatched.

To help rid Ethel of the graffiti on her garage, Jonathan offered to drive to the hardware store
and buy some white paint and a roller. While he was gone, Ethel sat down near her husband.
The backroom was so small that it could only fit two easy chairs and the coffee table, all of
which angled in the direction of the television. One door led out to the backyard, while the
other opened into the kitchen. On the two walls without doorways hung Jonathan’s paintings
from high school. The larger showed the front of their house, and the smaller was a family
portrait their son had copied from a Christmas card photograph. He had still been learning
then, and these were his least accomplished paintings, but they remained the only pieces he
had ever given to them as presents. In their bedroom upstairs, Ethel and Will had one of their
son’s recent works, an abstract painting she had offered to buy from him when she knew he
needed money. Jonathan had sold it to them at a discount, and it was beautiful, but Ethel
liked the two that hung in this room better because they were the work of her son while he
still lived with them.

Ethel could not see the garage door from where she sat, but she had not forgotten
Glen’s name, which perched on the white of the door as if it were going to jump off and set
fire to everything she owned. Again she pictured Glen, shrouded by darkness, creeping down
her driveway. He was invading her mind just as he had invaded her property the night before.
She wondered if Glen was from the dilapidated neighborhood between theirs and the hospital. If so, she felt sorry for him; it must be a horrible place to live.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Will’s moaning.

What is it? she asked.

But he only continued to moan, until she noticed that he was in pain and did not know how to say it.

The doctor said it’ll be tough, she reassured William as she helped him adjust his weight.

What day is it? he asked. How long have I been in this cast?

It’s Sunday, she said to him. Five days.

Did you do your gardening?

Yes, Ethel said.

Eth, do you remember that girl?

No, Ethel said, I never knew her.

She came home and mother made her a pie, he said simply.

Ethel had never met Will’s sister, Marion. Years ago, Will’s mother had told the story of Marion to Ethel in confidence, and it had left Ethel speechless. While healthy, William never mentioned his sister, and seemed to have forgotten her, but in the last two years, since the sickness had really taken hold on his mind, Will began referring to the incident often. When he talked about it, Ethel always pretended to be ignorant. She was still shocked by the episode and had no desire to hear the story again from her husband’s mouth.
When Will was about ten, his older sister had fallen in love with a black man. The man came to ask Marion’s mother and father if he could marry her, but the parents did not allow him into the house, and in nasty language through the upstairs window they suggested that he leave their daughter alone. Marion ran away to live with him for a few months, but for a reason Ethel did not know, Marion eventually chose to return to her family. That night she cried, and to welcome her home, the mother made her an apple pie, her favorite. Even though she remembered how intolerant people were at the time, Ethel was still felt shame when recalling the story. She realized later that Will’s mother had interpreted her silence as an agreement, and Ethel always regretted her inability to stand up to the old woman.

With William beside her, Ethel imagined Marion’s humiliating return. How she must have knocked on the door of that big Chicago house, and how once it was opened, the light from the inside surrounded her family’s faces and illuminated their hideous expressions. They probably celebrated, acting as though Marion had beaten cancer. And then Marion would have noticed her little brother hanging on the stairs behind, and seeing him with her parents, Ethel thought, must have filled Marion with love and hate. Ethel pictured Glen watching it all, the can of paint in his hand, and she saw how his shadow fell between Marion and the rest of her family, separating them with a black as dark as the spraypaint.

Ethel closed her eyes, listening to the sharp volume of the television. What kind of pie was it? she asked.

Oh Eth, it was an apple. It was so good. I couldn’t understand why she was crying.

Why was she crying?

She left Harold. I liked Harold. It was too bad he never came around afterward, but he shouldn’t have asked.
What do you remember about him?

I don’t know. He worked at the factories on the south side maybe. My sister told me never to tell about Harold. To pretend he was a ghost that came to play with me when mother and father were away.

Did you ever tell?

Of course not Eth, what do you take me for? He was staring at the television, but he did not seem to see it.

So why did Harold stop coming, and why’d your sister run away?

Later we found that Harold wasn’t a friend, he said. Marion had been wrong. She was sneaking Harold to her room. He was black. She couldn’t marry a black man.

Ethel sighed.

What’s wrong? Why all the questions, you Nosy Nelly? Will asked, laughing. He turned to her and smiled. It was an expression she hadn’t seen on his face in a long time. She liked it.

I’m realizing, Ethel said calmly to him, That you never let me know you very well.

Sure, he said. Sure.

But then she could not stay with him. I’ll be back in a minute, she said, and with the pain needling in her legs, she hurried into the kitchen. There, she stood alone, just around the corner, hating her tendency to trust things always to remain the way they were. It was a weakness she had begun to notice more and more as everything around her grew older.

Jonathan’s words flashed though her mind, I know he won’t remember it, Jonathan had said.

But I know you will: she saw the word GLEN painted on her garage door.

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Ethel returned to the backroom five minutes later, the longest she could bear to stay away. Outside she heard Jonathan, and from the window she could just make out the top of his head on the other side of the fence.

What’s going on outside, Will asked when he noticed Ethel peering out the window.

You’re son’s painting the garage, she answered.

Oh okay, Will said and refocused on the TV.

Ethel returned her gaze to the top of Jonathan’s head.

What day is it? Will asked.

Sunday.

Did you do your gardening this morning?

Sure, she said. Ethel knew that he had forgotten their conversation about Marion, but she wondered if some piece of it had stayed with him.

How’re your plants? Will asked.

The plants are two feet high, she told him. The biggest they’ve been in years.

Amazing, he replied, smiling at her again.

Out on the driveway, Ethel stood next to her son and stared at the name he was about to cover.

It’s beautiful in a way, Jonathan said quietly.

It doesn’t seem pretty to me, Ethel said.

Is Glen an artist? Jonathan asked. Or is he a vandal? In this place of solid colors and mock safety, we’ll treat him like a vandal.

Ethel glanced at her son. Please, just paint over it, she said.
Jonathan did not move.

I have no reason why I didn’t tell you about Michael, he said. I really don’t know why I didn’t.

Ethel touched her son lightly on his back.

It took three coats to make Glen disappear, and Ethel hoped she would be able to forget him. His incursion had caused her to act in a way she never wanted to. As far as she could tell, none of her neighbors had seen the graffiti, so it would be easy for her to keep the incident a secret. It was one of those things best forgotten.

As her son left, she hugged and kissed him.

I’ll see you next Sunday, mom, Jonathan said. Bye dad! he yelled toward the back of the house, but Ethel knew there was little chance her husband would hear it over the sound of the television. Then Jonathan drove away in his old Volvo station wagon.

The next morning, before Ethel helped William down the stairs, she glanced out her bedroom window. The new paint had dried but the black paint had soaked through; the name, Glen, was not quite readable, but its traces remained.
Under the World

Down here, the trains pull endlessly against their tracks. They slide from the long, dark tunnels into lighted stations, their brakes screeching, sparks shooting from their metal undersides. There are so many in this world-wide subway system that the vibrations through the platform floors are almost constant. I push though the crowd of waiting passengers and am aware for a moment of a moist smell, an odor strangely comforting and out of place, almost like mud after spring rain. A young, Asian man brushes silently at my hand with a flier advertising one of the underground cathouses, and I give in to the urge to speak to him in passing. I ask where it is but do not pause to look in the direction indicated by his outstretched finger. Instead, my gaze returns to the fifty-year-old man I am following, and I notice that in the instant I glanced down at the boy's leaflet, the man has removed his white suit-coat and adjusted it to hang over his crossed forearms while he walks. Now he wanders the platform about a hundred feet ahead in a deep blue button-down shirt that blends with the darker clothes worn by most of the other travelers. This extra difficulty does not excite me, for I do not regard my following as entertainment. What I am doing has become a necessity, an arrow that indicates my steady descent into the past.

Moments later, the man sits on a bench toward the far end of the station, his jacket blanketing his lap. I sit down too, against the wall on the floor, and watch sparks from the wheels of an arriving engine skip about in the throat of the subway tunnel. As a train moves past, individual clouds of electricity seem to seethe around each car, and I am reminded of the train-set my parents bought me for Christmas when I was young. My father worked for
an hour to construct it, and he sighed with relief as the toy lurched forward at the first nudge of the lever. After two hours of watching the engine haul its three boxcars around the oval track, I realized with dismay that my father had not assembled a station, and there was no place for me to stop the train. There was only the suffocating turn of cold metal lying on the family-room carpet and the plastic locomotive upon it, circling and circling, without end.

The man in the white suit has fallen asleep on the bench, his head back and his mouth gaping open in the shape of a zero. It is an embarrassing position, and one that leaves him vulnerable in a place notorious for pickpockets and crooks. The man opens his eyes, rearranges his position under his coat, and then slips helplessly back into sleep. It is unclear how long I have been following this man, for my avoidance of schedules and clocks has disrupted my ability to distinguish between a day or a week, but the more I observe him, the more I become convinced he is not a typical passenger. Most travelers have a definite destination, a reason for their journey, and they know which train will take them there. They come down here simply to be transported from one place to another, and that awareness of their direction permits them to pass smoothly through the system, allowing them to ignore the fact that in the five years since the subways first began running, the stations have connected to function like a world-wide city, populated by those who sleep on the platform floors or occupy the underground cathouses and hotels. Like many of the travelers I have followed, this man has a watch, which he often checks, and he keeps a train schedule and system map in his briefcase, but his tendency to loiter seems to defy the habits of those who move in straight lines, from point to point and station to station. Yet it is also obvious he is not a lingerer, one of those who have chosen to live out their time in this web of stations and tunnels.
The man in the white suit’s nap on the bench is beginning to annoy me. I am also
tired, but I know I cannot risk allowing him a chance to escape by sleeping here. To keep
myself from drowsing, I begin to wonder if this man is similar to me, someone who has
decided to ride the trains until he understands why he has decided to ride the trains. If this
man is like me, he will not begin to comprehend why he is traveling until he throws away the
schedules and maps. I have only recently realized this, and it was after my following of a
seventy-year-old woman some time ago that my destination started to reveal itself. That
woman was a lost traveler who was attempting to find a certain station, and I pursued her as
she rode from place to place, checking her map and shaking her head in confusion. At the
peak of that following, we entwined together, and even though I did not know her
destination, I knew her, and I began to anticipate her next decision, until it seemed less like I
was tracking her and more like she was after me, the two of us shadowing each other, our
bodies circling like satellites spinning at the wheel of earth’s gravity. During the following, I
stepped away from our bodies and into the circle we created, and while in the center, I was
able to watch how we danced away the distances that separated us. As we traversed the
stations, I observed our movements, lines crossing and weaving like a screen, and I knew I
was outside time, outside the forward direction of my life, and the past was swirling around,
memories imposing themselves, until I chose to enter the moment when I was camping with
my father as an eleven-year-old. It was the year before he had his first heart attack, and he
was attempting to teach me to tie knots. This is a Bowline, I heard him say. It takes three
seconds to tie and it’s for securing the canoe to a tree. It’s the only knot you really need to
know. My father counted to three as he tied it. I watched him demonstrate and counted along
with him, but when he gave the rope to me, it hung in my hands, the seconds ticking off in
my head. He looked at me expectantly while I made a loop, and to avoid his eyes, I stared through the circle of rope to the pine needles on the ground below. It was then, before I could even attempt to tie the knot, that the elderly woman stepped onto one of the escalators. Without her, I was again alone in the subway complex. The knowledge of my father’s second heart attack and subsequent death returned, and I became conscious of the uncommonly stagnant air in the train station and the people standing nearby who talked loudly in an effort to be heard over the roar of the trains.

The man rises slowly from the bench and I follow him away from the platform and into the station behind, the area where these underground structures often sprawl out with people and clutter. Restaurants, vendors, and those promising services like haircuts, shoe-shines, prostitutes, or hotel rooms grab at my jacket or yell at me, hawking whatever they are selling. This station, like them all, has places to get all types of cheap, ethnic foods. I have noticed that when sound overlaps sound down here, it results in a muddled static, but this does not happen with the smells. The stations’ walls trap in the aromas from the food, and they mix together and undulate so that at one moment I can smell Asian spices, at another a grilling hamburger, and then both of them at once. When the platforms are crowded, the smell of food is rarely noticeable over the thick smell of people, but there are times when the odors of cooking are so strong that they carry out to the trains or linger on a car even after it has pulled away from the station.

The man buys stir-fry from a white-man in a makeshift kiosk, and then takes his food back to the platform, finding the same bench empty that he slept on before. After he eats, he takes out his camera and begins the procedure of picture taking and notation that I have
witnessed him follow at every station. In my fear of accidentally reading the face of a clock, I always try to keep my gaze low, away from the architecture of these stations, but something about the way the camera’s flash bounces off the walls here, makes me glance around without thinking. I see a shiny, white overlay that lacquers everything in this station. The dozens of arches that open at the peak of the ceiling and run down the lengths of the side-walls are so thin they appear as pliable as cloth, yet they somehow seem responsible for preventing the whole station from what feels to be an inevitable collapse. At first it appears as if the station goes on for miles, but then I notice that this is an illusion. Huge mirrors at each end of the platform reflect off each other, making the station into an eternity of vaulted passageways. In the center, away from where I stand, two stairways, adorned with thousands of sculpted leaves, curve to meet each other one story above. Quickly, I stare down at my hands, lucky that I did not accidentally decipher the face of a clock, glimpse a schedule board, or read the name of the city this station is under. I do not want to lose all the progress I have made.

Long ago, when I first decided to buy a pass that would allow me unlimited travel for a whole year, I used this subway system for what it was intended, to journey from one part of the world to another. After a few months, I began to notice that I was failing to acquaint myself with a world and that it was too big to know. The characteristics of each city I visited were mixing with those of the cities I had seen before, and I forgot which memories belonged to which places. In addition, I had the daunting realization that, with the forward evolution of these cities, it was possible I could return to them a few years later and find something completely different. Understanding this, I stopped traveling only three months after I began,
my aimless wanderings around the world reminding me of my life after college, the seven years in Minneapolis before I went back to the small town in northeastern Iowa to take care of my mother for the last year of her life. Leaving the Twin Cities had not been a difficult decision, for during my time there, I had only survived, working at a low paying copy-editing job for a city newspaper and refusing to place any direction on my life. At thirty, I left Minnesota to look after of my mother, feeling as though I could return to my childhood home and start over. While watching her, I could see my future clearly for the first time. I knew she would die, and I would continue to live in Iowa, staying in my childhood home. Toward the end of the year, my mother began to deteriorate, and I watched as her drug addled mind slipped back into the past, causing her to have discussions with my father who had died fifteen years earlier. She passed suddenly, and after her death, my future blurred again. Although I had grown up in that house, inhabiting it without my parents made me feel like I was trespassing. It was as if I lived in a home where the true owners were always hovering in the next room, waiting to complain that I, as their tenant, had offended their hospitality by assuming what was theirs was mine.

I sold the house, planning to use some of the money to travel, and three months after descending into the subway complex, I felt lost. The only constants I saw in all my recent movements were the trains on which I rode from station to station, so I stopped taking the steep escalators up to the surface and decided just to ride the trains. During that time, I often thought of my mother’s dementia in her last days of life, and I wondered whether I could stop keeping track of time and enter a similar mindset, where I could defy the forward tug of the future. At first it was too hard. Even with my seven years experience of scanning texts
without absorbing their meaning, I could not glance at clocks or schedules without reading them. So I tried something else: I started to follow.

Following permitted me to avoid thinking of my direction, for to be a follower, I was required to concentrate completely on tracking a person and keeping a mindless watch on them. As I continued to pursue others, I noticed how I ceased to worry about how time always seemed to drag me ahead, and it no longer felt like all my actions propelled me into the future. After my experience with the seventy-year-old woman, I began to wonder whether my following not only dislocated me, but also allowed me to move backward, permitting me to descend into the past, where time was no longer a collection of succeeding moments but a circle where memories I had long forgotten flowed around me as though they had happened only moments before.

I am afraid I have lost the man in the white suit, and I glance frantically from my left to my right, trying to untangle myself from the strangling musk of the crowd. It is a relief when I see him only twenty feet ahead, appearing as though he plans to board a train. In this white, lacquered station, I have stayed with him while he checked into two different hotels and sat for multiple meals, and now he stands near the edge of the platform for several moments, scanning his map and reading a notebook he has taken out of his briefcase. When he enters one of the cars, I step up after him, finding an open seat behind where I can see the top of his head. Eventually, the train lurches, and we glide forward, the light from the station receding to black in the windows. I sigh at how overwhelming it is to again be at the beginning of one of these seemingly endless tunnels, hurtling through a darkness that stretches perilously ahead into the future.
After awhile, I watch the man stand and glance around the half-full train car, his coat glowing under the overhead lights. Turning, he ambles toward me. His face is calm as he takes the empty seat to my left.

You were following me, he says simply. You probably recognize me from my book.

No, I say.

People used to follow me all the time. They wanted me to sign books.

I haven’t read it.

Then I guess I should be concerned, he says. Every time I turn around I see you. He grabs my arm as if he is angry, but shows no sign of that emotion on his face.

There’s no reason to be concerned, I say, pulling away.

By speaking, this man has disrupted the following, and as he continues to sit next to me, all the hope I had to replicate my experience with the seventy-year-old woman fades. I decide that because we have just left the last station and it will be a while before we get to a place I can escape, it may help to tell him how I follow people, explaining that I am trying to dislocate myself and that I do not intend to bother anyone. He seems eager to know my explanation, and as he listens, he perches tenuously on the edge of the seat, his chin in his hand, as if he may tip away from me at any second.

When I am done, the man peers at me for a moment without speaking.

I tell him that I am sorry and rise to move past his legs.

You’ll never see me behind you again, I say.

No, wait, the man says, blocking my way to the aisle. People tell me I’m rarely speechless. But this time, I’ve got nothing to say. That’s really interesting. You’re sort of like
Dante following Virgil through hell, or like Orpheus singing and playing his way out of the underworld. Or Odysseus.

When I tell him I am not familiar with any of those stories, the man squints his eyes and nods his head, as if he is both ashamed and pleased to hear it.

I’m John Markus, NYU, he says, speaking quickly and holding out his hand for me to shake.

As we speed along through the dark tunnel, John Markus talks. He recounts the myth of Orpheus, and I tell him that, as a story, it is comforting in its simplicity, like something I have not heard since childhood, or possibly something I have even thought up myself.

I ask him why I reminded him of the myth and he shrugs.

Both stories involve following and tunnels, he says, nudging my forearm lightly with his elbow to make sure I know he is telling a joke.

I like to say that Greek myths are like the Beatles’ songs of literature, he continues. That’s an analogy that doesn’t quite work, but they’re both sort of a basis for everything in their medium that came afterward. What I like most about the myths is that the stories are not isolated like folk tales. In myths, the people and gods that show up in one story, show up in others. The stories were continually revised over time, so it’s not always clear when one was supposed to happen in relation to the others, but everything that happens sort of has consequences throughout all the other stories. The stories are fascinating, and the world they form through their connection is amazing.

Although Markus is only trying to be funny when he refers to me as Orpheus, I found that while I listened to the story I was able to identify with the mythic musician. Markus is right, there are vague similarities between the following and the tunnels, but my empathy
seemed deeper than that. While Markus told the story, I pictured myself behind Orpheus, the two of us walking down into the underworld, the shades of the dead surrounding us, a constant reminder that they were memories, remnants of what used to live.

During my talk with John Markus, I decide that I am enjoying myself. Since I started following, I have not been a part of any real conversations, and sometimes it felt as if all that neglected language had built up and gathered in my lungs. Although I am almost squirming with the need to speak, I decide to listen to Markus, ask him questions, and rarely interject my own views.

What’s your book about? I ask when Markus pauses.

Periods in history when architects were failing to create anything new, he says. I’m working on a new one now, one that maybe you’d be interested in reading. It’s about the architecture of these stations.

As a copy-editor in Minneapolis, I was responsible for checking the grammar of what felt like an infinite number of articles. Most, I only scanned, but for some reason, the ambition of this subway system, which had already been under construction for a number of years, fascinated me, and I read any article that discussed its progress. When the system was conceived, each city that wanted to be included was responsible for choosing an architectural design for their station and then paying for half the construction. Many dissenters complained, contending that the system was too deep in the ground, that there was no way to travel through the oceans, and that the project was too risky to invest huge amounts of capital. But the appropriate technology was invented, adjustments were made, and production kept moving forward, until eventually trains began to carry passengers from one continent to
another. Because of money constraints and varying cultural tastes, all the stations are completely different. Some, like the one I just left with Markus, are cavernous and recall the architecture of ancient cities, while others have ceilings that are low and suffocating. Beautiful or not, each is very deep in the ground, and each is part of a system that often feels as if it operates separately from the world above.

While the train speeds forward, Markus asleep in the seat beside me, I think of one editorial I read in the Minneapolis newspaper that argued how the system’s plans were so unrealistic only gods would be able to build it. I compare that accusation made years earlier to the accomplishments of the gods in Markus’ telling of the Orpheus myth. Those gods essentially reversed time to bring back the dead, something the builders of this system could never do. As I consider the idea, it seems to me that this miraculous achievement is really a hopeless reaction to the fact that the builders are not gods. In planning the construction, they must have realized that no matter how large they made it, it must still function within those elements that constrained their lives. Instead of doing what gods could, they built a structure that mastered one of those restraints. This subway system is set up to predict and alleviate every complication and inconvenience, and all of those are related to time. If a train is running even a minute late, the schedule broadcasts that change, but unless there is some interruption from the world above, the train can never fall out of its schedule. Trains here go thousands of miles, and in every station, huge boards display when each will arrive and depart. Clocks are so abundant down here it seems as if passengers have no choice but to move according to the time they display.

Although I know very little about the system’s mechanics, ever since I threw away the maps and started to follow, I have been composing a mental picture of the underground
structure, one which continues to evolve as I move through it. From a distance, the image I see is not unlike a spider-web where a weaving of tracks connects all the world’s furthest points. As I move toward it, I can make out the engines powering forward, pulling cars packed with bodies, doors opening, and rushes of passengers flowing out into the stations, their mouths sucking in air stiff with electricity. I mark the path of these travelers by imagining a line that represents how each is aware of his destination and is determined to move toward it. I also note the stagnancy of those who live in each station, marking them with a dot. Within all this horizontal traveling, where millions of these lines cross and pile atop each other, hiding the dots beneath, I can see that in this chaos there is actually very little randomness. Rarely does a traveler ever divert from his path. In the center of this large, round system, is a smaller circle, a midpoint around which everything rotates. It is a place where there is calm and control, an eye to the storm, an electric heart. As I peer at it this time, the image seems slightly different, but I do not know what it is until I look closely. In the center which I once saw as a refuge, I see a clock which hangs above everything, and it is spilling time in a viscous liquid that creeps across the platform floors. Although the lines are still crisp, the travelers have begun to slow, for now they must wade and swim.

The train continues to race through the dark and Markus is still sleeping beside me. I begin to remember a moment I have not thought of in many years, and before I am surrounded by it, I am glad that speaking to Markus has not altered my path, and I am still discovering new memories, journeying backward into the past. It was just after my father’s second attack, and I stood with my mother watching the helicopter disappear into the darkness. At thirteen, I was aware we lived one hundred miles from the hospital, so once the chopper was only a light in the dark sky, we ran to the car, arriving an hour and a half later.
Inside, the air felt strange, as if it was manufactured and not real, and the nurse gave us only sparse information on my father’s status. Furious, my mother kept trying to convince her that her husband only had minutes to live. When the nurse was occupied, my mother dragged me past the desk and we found ourselves in the weave of white hallways, not knowing where my father was. My mother kept repeating that he only had minutes to live and it felt as if we were racing against that arbitrary time. We wandered for half an hour, traversing corridors and taking elevators to different levels, until my mother finally sat down to cry in the middle of one of the halls, her face in the palms of her hands. As we huddled in the center, my hand on my mother’s shoulder, there were doctors and patients caught in their own directions, moving around us as if we were boulders in the center of a river.

John Markus wakes me as the train begins its mile of slowdown before a stop. Hurriedly, he explains that this next station is not on his designed route, but since he has recently started to second-guess his hypothesis, he has put his map away and decided to get off and see it. At first I am disappointed to hear that after all his wandering, Markus is also a traveler with a destination.

The architecture, Markus says, trying to persuade me, consists mostly of statues commemorating the hundreds who died when terrorists attacked the station.

Markus’ description sounds interesting, and I realize that by going into this station, he is diverting from his path. I wonder how he will react to this lack of progress, and I say I will accompany him.

We stand together near the door of the train car, and when it opens, the platform appears crowded with bodies all adorned in white. Stepping down among them, I notice that
the figures are not moving, nor do they have heads. John Markus sweeps his hand toward the
statuary we are about to enter and warns me to be careful.

I’ve heard, Markus says, that pickpockets and homeless wear white costumes and
stand among the statues waiting to grab at those who walk by.

There seems to be no other passengers moving between the figures. I can hear only
the echo of our footsteps on the marble floor and a rustling that I assume is the sound of rats
scavenging on the tracks for food. The station smells of ammonia and burnt cold, and the
walls are empty, gray, and covered with deep cracks that creep downward like living vines. A
chilly breeze moves through in slight gusts, which is very uncommon in a station so deep.

The headless figures that stand on the platform appear to be forever waiting, half in life, half
in death, for the next train to glide in. Against the walls, there are other types of statues that
resemble piles of dead bodies, and beneath a sculpted rope meant to show how those heaps
are secured together, the cold limbs of the dead twist and lock.

John Markus tells me that these statues are supposed to show two moments. Those
standing represent the moment between life and collapse, just seconds after the gas swept
through. And the heaps of bodies against the wall illustrate how the dead were tied together
and hauled to the escalators which carried them up to the street.

The absence of the heads, I say, is extremely strange.

It was a gas attack, Markus answers. Nobody was actually beheaded. And the original
statues had heads with faces that appeared to be choking and in an extreme pain. The
expressions on the faces frightened passengers so much they stopped using the station.

Eventually the heads were sawed off and taken away.
I touch the shoulder of one with my fingertips. The marble is cold, and the sculpture is hard and smooth.

My new book is an investigation of a hypothesis I have formed and recently rejected, Markus continues. When I began this journey, my plan was to move through these stations so that I would start with those influenced by the very beginnings of architecture and then move station by station into the future. I thought that if I could experience the entire history of architecture in the flash of two or three weeks, I would sort of be able to see what comes next. In the last week though, the book seems to have turned into more of a tour guide than a work that will say anything new.

Where would this station fit into the tour? I ask him.

This would probably be somewhere toward the end. This non-functional type of architecture is very contemporary. Non-functional means it isn't made for living in. Usually sculptures would be used by architects to decorate the building, but here the building is used to house the decorations. Of course it does have a function. The term non-functional only means it is not useful in the traditional way. This is architecture for the memory instead of the body.

I've always wanted to see this, Markus continues. People say that if you've had a relative die in one of these types of attacks, you should come here. It reminds me of my wife and my mother who both died in New York attacks. I always wanted to see this, but could never get this far away from home.

John Markus says all of this without emotion.

It was, but since my wife died, I’ve come to hate it there, to feel out of place. I have another theory, which probably can’t be proven either, Markus says, but it’s when an architect plans a building, he is really designing a home for himself. Even though most don’t live in their buildings, they have to make something they would be comfortable in, a place they would know. In each room is a different memory.

Sitting in this cold station on a long bench located between two piles of bodies, I notice that John Markus is again falling asleep, and I decide that both of us have chosen to wander through this structure under the world because we felt compelled to reject its acceptance of time’s forward progress. Markus’ reaction was to outrace it, while I turned and attempted to move backward, trudging against it as though I was negotiating a strong wind. Both reactions seem as viable as the other, two different routes that point in a similar direction, two different paths leading to the same destination. Most people have accepted this system’s compliance with time, and view it as a convenience, but Markus and I do not, and although we are moving toward something, our destination is not entirely clear. We are not travelers, for to travel, a person needs not only a destination but a place to leave behind. I had hoped to reject the incessant forward ticking of the clock by twisting time into a circle, convincing myself that everything reoccurs, and that in the center was a place of comfort, a home. Like Markus, I witnessed the deaths of those whom I associated with stability, and knew that time was dragging me toward my end as well. But what I really lost was a home, a constant place, and we were obsessed with eluding time not because it reminded us of our own deaths, but because it exacerbated our inability to travel forward. Iowa had ceased to be my home when I was thirteen, and I was sent spinning out into the world.
I return to my architectural plans of this system, and see that they have changed again. The liquid has engulfed it, and all the travelers are drowning. It may be true that time functions in a circular way, but we have all learned to travel through it in a straight line, moving from our births to our deaths. Most travel around the world because they want to forget that they are constantly heading toward an inevitable destination, but I could not even do that, for I needed to find a home, a center, from which I could depart. In imagining the architectural design of this station, I was attempting to do what, according to Markus, every architect does, I was assimilating the system into something familiar, twisting it into a location where I could live. With my following, I had attempted to place myself through displacement.

I must have fallen asleep as well, for when I awake, Markus is gone and a train is pulling noisily into the station. The statues startle me at first, until I remember what they are, and without looking for Markus, I rush from the bench and onto the waiting train, hiding low in the seat until we have moved out of the station. The vibrations underneath steady as the train reaches its top speed.

I still have not looked at a clock, and I wonder if all those thoughts I had in the last station were simply products of exhaustion. Even though I have come to understand that I may not be moving backward, it seems difficult to accept, and if those thoughts are wrong, reading a clock would negate all my progress. As if to strengthen my resolve to continue following, a memory comes to me. I was thirteen, just after my father's death, and I was in the habit of digging holes. It felt good to choose a spot randomly, and then move the dirt from one place to another, creating something by removing something else. Two hours of
digging and I had a hole large enough to stand in. It was a habit, an action to concentrate on that stopped me from wandering through my mind. I dug until later that day when I found a collection of bones three feet under the grass. Taking a few with me to the house, I asked my mother about them. She told me that before I was born she had raised chickens, and when her birds died, she buried them unmarked in that corner of the property. She used to spend an hour each morning tending them, but once I was born she had forgotten all about them, and dismissed their grave from her mind. It’s amazing how the past comes back up to the surface, she said.

Outside the window it is dark and inside the moving car it is quiet. At no time during that memory was I lost within it, for I was always aware I was riding a train. My future is again blurring as it did in the days after my mother’s death. Any attempt to picture my system plan fails as well. That architectural design, which has now sunk away, was my circular destination, the place outside of time where I wandered with the seventy-year-old woman. All of the memories I thought I was traveling back into were shaping that map, and at the same time, the map was shaping the memories. Time has grounded each memory I have had since I began following, yet each episode also fluttered in a moment of displacement. Every station was a memory, and I had watched each without seeing it, as if I was scanning a text for errors.

When I decide to get off the train, I have to push against the flow of people trying to board. In this new station, the smell of food mixes with the smell of dirt, and there is an instant feeling of lechery, as men selling hotel rooms, women, and cheap tickets surround me. A huge, lighted globe hangs in the center of the station, and along the platform is a line of columns. As I walk down the colonnade and away from the globe’s light, the shadows
become elongated and slant ominously across the platform. The globe must heat the station also, for it is very cold where I am. Turning to look back at it, I notice that I can not see what holds the light source in the air, and it seems to float there, its illumination glinting brilliantly off the metal tracks in rays that reflect to lines on the walls and ceiling. I have never seen architecture like this, and I wonder if Markus would categorize this station as contemporary as well. Because of the temperature were I am, the number of passengers here are sparse, and I find an open bench on which to sit. On my left, two great escalators purr with electricity, taking passengers up and down, adding and subtracting to the flow of people who travel through this system, all of whom move toward their destinations.

A movement catches my attention, and I turn to see John Markus ducking behind a column thirty yards away. I walk up to him.

You’re following me, I say.

Yes, he answers.

It won’t work, I say. It isn’t going to work.

Markus comes out of the shadows and we stand next to each other watching the heads of passengers blur past in the yellow windows of a subway rumbling by. To my ears, the high, shriek of the brakes sound strangely similar to a woman screaming in pain.
Scattering Ashes

I.

I grew up the son of a mortician, so I remember my father always coming home nervous. He was scared of seeing our bodies on his table, and he said if one his two sons ended up there, he would bury us and then he’d retire his business. It would be the last thing he could do. Lucky for him, that never happened. Neither of us died before he did, and we both went into the family business because it seemed like the right thing to do. My father always kept death at arm’s length, and he was so scared that it would come closer. For awhile, I was determined not to be like that. But once I started working with my brother, I saw how both of us kept death at a distance just like our father used to. I’ve come to pretend that death is something that only happens to other people and I’ve come to like it that way. My brother put me in charge of the crematorium, so I see bodies enter the fire everyday. But I’m safe as I watch them dissolve to ash through the thick glass on the incinerator’s door. My brother says that our business is growing. He keeps a map in his office with the surrounding towns blacked in with pen, so he can remember where he advertises. And when our day is over, we nod to each other and go home to our families with the same nervousness that was in our father.

II.

The story I tell myself about my grandfather and grandmother’s deaths is that on the night she died he decided to save her body from the oven. At Auschwitz, electrified barbed-wire
separated the men from the women, but the prisoners whispered and news traveled between them in surreptitious strings thin enough to pierce those barriers.

My grandfather was startled out of half-sleep one night by the almost invisible twenty-year-old boy whose face angled out of the shadows.

Your wife has died of sickness, he told my grandfather. Tomorrow they will find her and take her to the crematorium.

The boy’s breath on my father’s ear made him shiver, and when my father reached out to caress the informer’s unseen face in appreciation, the boy had gone. In his place was only the tumbling dark.

III.

Excerpts from *Notes on the Afterlife*, Chapter 2, George Leever, 1967:

Screams. I hear them. But they are more like cries than screams. Screams in pieces. The cries of those who creep through the air five feet above the ground. Their world is above ours and, desperately, they run from mind to mind.

They talk and they never stop talking. They try to gain the attention of the living. Their voices are frantic because if they fail, they will be forgotten. To be forgotten is really to be dead: dissipation. They need the living to listen. The need the living to speak about them.

They struggle against dissipation, constantly, as a swimmer fights a strong current; or, as a backpacker labors under the weight of a pack which seems to become heavier with each step.
They are always negotiating these limitations. Some of them even gang together to dissolve those that scare them.

Is it possible we can classify the words that the dead speak and call them stories? Is it possible we, the living, can tell them?

IV.

To Whoever Finds This Letter,

If you find this letter you’re probably my Mama. Although you may not be. Me and my Mama may have died together in a car wreck and it would be better that way. At least nobody would’ve taken our lives from us.

If you find this letter you may be my sister. If she comes back from wherever she is. She disappeared three months ago. Probably run off with her baby’s daddy. I wish I could disappear like that sometimes and not know where I was.

I’m writing this letter cause we moved again. If you find this you may not know that our last building was torn down by the mayor. So me and Mama moved. The streets is just as dangerous in this new neighborhood. I’ll turn eleven in two months but I’ll be dead before sixteen. That may be a good thing cause then I won’t have no more worries. Except Mama and maybe Mr S my teacher from school nobody will care. So I’m leaving this letter to tell whoever finds it not to care.

If you find this letter and can’t find my body just take the letter for my body and don’t try to find my body. It’s not worth searching.
V.
The birches end, and I enter a grove of red pines. The needles from these trees form a canopy fifty feet above, and only a few rays of light are able to seep all the way through to the dirt. The beauty of the woods in northern Wisconsin amazes me (until my cancer diagnosis, I would come here from Milwaukee at least five times a year), and, even when I traveled with others, I could find a patch of trees in which to be alone. My familiarity with this nature trail tugs at my memory, but I can’t recall when I last stood here (there are many places like this that I’ve forgotten but still feel as though, at one point, they were at the center of my life, and I’ve always wondered if someone were to connect those points, whether they would find some map of my living).

From behind the hill ahead, I hear voices, and I stop in surprise, almost ducking behind a tree to avoid being seen. But then I realize there are at least ten different people talking, and they are not moving toward me but must be standing still. I creep up the hill and, from around the trunk of a pine tree at the top, I stare at the people below. I recognize them instantly, they are my family, the Southworths (all fourteen of them are there: my parents, my wife Nancy, my five brothers Jim, Mike, Tom, Neil, Jason, all their wives and children, and my only son with his fiancé). Closest to me, my son, Phillip, and his fiancé, Dara, stand with my nephew Luke. They are talking.

Are you still teaching in the city? my son asks.

No, I left, Luke replies, It was burning me out. It was ninety-five percent discipline and five percent teaching. I’m working in the suburbs now where it’s eighty percent discipline and twenty percent teaching.
They laugh, but strangely, as if they are attempting to stifle the sound.

It’s stupid, Phillip says, that even though we all live in Chicago, we don’t see each other very often.

I watch my son who seems more distant than usual, and I remember the moment when he told me he was moving from Wisconsin to Chicago to marry Dara. He had the same displaced look in his eyes as now (then I took it to mean that he was reluctant to move away from his sick father).

***

I.

The worst thing you can do with a job like mine is hang around wakes and overhear people telling stories about the bodies in the coffins. If you hear too many, you’ll start to imagine who might be laying there. Then you’ll know too much, and in your mind you may begin to see the body stand up and speak the words people are saying he used to speak. You’ll feel like those words will never be spoken again. If you get to know a body too well, it will become a ghost, and when you hear its moans heaving against the inside of the incinerator, you’ll be filled with shame. You’ll feel like you’re killing the person who is already dead, and you’ll want to turn the fire off to save him. To avoid that, you have to stay deaf to the stories, and keep the dead at arm’s length. Lucky for me, I do, so when I take the cremains out, I don’t mind that the ghost has slipped past me into the small room. I hardly notice that it
has joined the others in the corner, or that its arms and legs are the same gray color as the walls and ceiling. When I do allow myself to observe them, the expressions on their faces remind me of the look my kids get when they’ve been out playing all day and come in to watch as my wife prepares supper. It’s almost like they are already eating the food with their eyes. And the ghosts in the crematorium nibble at me with their stares the same way.

II.

At twenty-five years-old, I am living and working in Chicago, and am engaged to a guy I’ve known since college. We have been dating for three years and are very much in love; we are now about the same age as my grandparents when the Nazis imprisoned them. A few years before that, my grandparents had my father, and when he was a year old, they sent him to live with relatives in the Netherlands. Those relatives fled to America, and they took my father with them. That is really all we know about them. Through family letters and Nazi records, my father believes he has traced his parents to Auschwitz, but once there, they seem to disappear. There are no records of my grandparents’ internment at the camp. Having studied Auschwitz, I know there was no life at the camp, only the many ways in which the Nazis could have killed them. In my mind, though, I can picture only the furnace, the crematoria for which the camp is so infamous. It stands at the north edge and breathes and roars and spits like a hungry dragon.

III.

Excerpts from *Notes on the Afterlife*, Chapter 1, George Leever, 1967:
I imagine the world of the dead as a web of crisscrossing hallways where rows of closed doors line the walls. The dead walk these hallways trying each silver doorknob, but they find that most of the doors are forever locked. When, after a while, the dead finds a doorway that is open, he will enter it hungrily. On the inside, there is not a room as we would expect; instead, there is an emptiness that, impulsively, the dead enters and evaporates into until he or she fills out the entire space of that emptiness. It reminds them of living.

Each room is actually a mind of the living, and the words that the dead has to speak louder to try to be heard by the thoughts of the person whose mind he/she has infested.

To us, their words are jumbled. Their answers to our questions are blind and adulterated.

Just like us, the living, the dead are greedy, always trying to fill themselves with what they can not have.

We are scared. I know it. Get them out of my head. I cry.

In the deads’ hovering world, time is absent, and they only know two things: whether they are in conversation with the mind of a living person or whether they are, anxiously, in search of one.

IV.

To Whoever Finds This Letter:
This is the second letter I've written. It's been a few months since I wrote the first one and now that I've turned eleven I will write a new one. My teacher Mr S at school says eleven is a big step meaning I'm halfway though Middle School. Me and Mama have not moved since I wrote the last letter. Our new neighborhood is getting better and I'm getting used to it. We've moved so often I can't remember were I lived even three years ago. I've been hanging with my new best friend Dianté and Mama works all night so I don't see her often.

Yesterday I was waiting for the El with Dianté in the middle of the highway and we saw a gang of kids a little older running on the overpass above us. They had guns and were shooting across the highway. We crouched behind one of the metal posts at the station so we wouldn't get shot. I said to Dianté that we will not live much longer. He agreed.

I was reading my last letter over and I still feel the same way. If my body is too hard to find don't worry about it cause my body will only tell you how I died. Once I'm dead who cares about that.

V.

Have you ever heard of George Leever? Luke asks my son and his fiancé.

That's the guy who went into libraries and snuck his books onto the shelves? Dara asks.

Yeah. It worked too, the books sat there. Most libraries thought they had made a mistake and added the book when they switched to computers. Leever died a few years ago, and nobody seems to have known him, but that story has become so popular they're actually
publishing his books. I’ve got a paperback copy of one of them. It’s very strange. Virtually unreadable. It’s the first book I’ve read in a long time that I thought I wouldn’t finish.

If you can’t finish it, Phillip says, there’s not much hope for the rest of us.

It’s interesting to imagine, Luke continues, what it would be like to be dead if some of his ideas are true.

He writes about death? Dara asks.

Yeah.

What are his ideas?

I can’t quite explain them. It’s probably the most passionate and unintelligible book I’ve ever read. I underlined a bunch of passages and then wrote them out so that the excepts became the book for me. I’ll send them to you. I gave my book to the man at the mortuary when we picked up the ashes. I didn’t want it anymore. It was like a ticking bomb on my bookshelf.

Dara spends a lot of her time at the library, Phillip says, sounding proud of her.

Still researching your grandparents?

Not them really, Dara answers. I’m just trying to get a feel for their situation. To understand what it may have been like.

All three of them stop talking and stare down toward the bottom of the hill below, where the pines end and the sun shines brightly upon a patch of green grass.

Eventually, the thirteen other members of the family begin to arrange themselves in a half-circle around my wife, who carries a small cardboard box. When Nancy struggles with the tape, my father steps forward, takes out a pocketknife and slits through the tape (the box is such a strange size and all fourteen of them stare at it intently). Then my father has the box
open, and he uses the blade to slice something inside. My wife reaches in and when she
removes her hand, I can see that it is full of a gray dust, which she holds carefully so it will
not sift through her fingers.

***

I.

It takes about an hour for my incinerator to burn a corpse. The thermometer gets up to 1,600
degrees, and I can watch the gas flame through the window on the incinerator’s door. At the
beginning, the heat is blue around the body’s head as the hair singes down from tips to roots.
Then the skin catches in spots and yellow flame shoots up. The fire begins to eat at the skin,
and then the bones are exposed. The heat works at the muscles in the legs and arms, but they
refuse to burn at first. The middle of the body hollows and then crumbles inward. The bones
begin to turn to dust. The organs sizzle in the growing pile of ashes. The brain does not burn
for almost the entire hour. But then just before I turn the heat off, it begins to melt. At the
end, all you have is cremains, which are gray ash and bits of bone. Nothing resembles the
body I slid in an hour ago. I tell the ghosts that ever since there was fire, people have been
using it to dispose of corpses. I’m not sure they believe me. They see what I do, and they see
how cremation has become a science. We’ve almost taken all of the flame out of the fire. The
body almost disintegrates instead of burns. There’re chemicals and precautions involved. It’s
so clean, so easy, so mechanical. The possibilities so scary it makes me nervous.
II.

In the story I tell to myself, my grandfather set off across the camp on foot, and as he neared the furnace, he noticed the pit-smell of death to which his nose never became inured. He approached the crematorium and waited there, hidden, until the Nazis brought the collection of those that had died in the night. The air around the building was hot, for it had been firing for hours, and in its terrible heat, my father attempted to surreptitiously find my mother by digging through the pile of emaciated arms and legs. His hands burrowed into the cold, naked limbs, but he could not find his wife.

Even in my imagination, it does not seem possible that he would find her, for there were far too many bodies. In my research, which is separate from my father’s and elementary next to it, I have found that at that time in Auschwitz there were five different buildings used for firing the dead. Also in the northwest, among the trees, just before the humped grave of Russian soldiers, was a pyre used for mass burnings. In my mind, Auschwitz is empty and gray ash; barbed wire crisscrosses about on the ground while smooth, white bones protrude from the packed soil like the blades of sharp knives.

It is strangely frustrating that as detailed as the Nazi’s books were, my grandparents still seem to have disappeared. Many of the records were lost or destroyed, and families like mine, whose relatives might have been listed in one of those missing volumes, do not have the horrible luxury of knowing just how their family members were slaughtered. It is odd to me that I even want to know. Those who do know are lucky, in a way; they can fill in a little more of their family history.
III.

Excerpt from *Notes on the Afterlife*, Chapter 4, George Leever, 1967:

There are living people who, I think, would greatly benefit from this knowledge. Especially those people whom, incidentally, have had their history conquered and destroyed by others. Those who lust to know only what the dead know. There may be a way for them to unlock the doors of their minds to the dead relatives that were so brutally severed from them.

We take a bit of each place we visit with us. We leave a piece of ourselves with each person we meet.

IV.

To Whichever Finds This Letter,

I’ve been writing letters for three years. Nobody’s found them. I’m still alive. When I write a new one I lay the old paper on the concrete and burn it. Trying to stop the wind with my body. It always gets by me and puts the fire out. I stamp on the pile until it is ashes and then watch the wind carry them down the street. Each time I burn one I get rid of that old part of my life. It makes me feel new. It gets me through. Most other guys get through with their talk about getting out of here. They’re hungry to be known. Talk about getting so much money they can’t spend it all and so many cars they can’t drive em all.

We’re all sick of walking into stores and knowing the clerk already has his hand on his gun. Sick of watching our backs. I hate this neighborhood.
I went back to the Middle School to tell my old teacher Mr S. I’m still going to school almost everyday and that’s really cause of him. I wanted to tell Mr S that the teacher in High School said how angry she is cause we been forced from our African roots. We’re all angry she says. And she’s right I think. But the woman at the desk told me Mr S doesn’t work there no more. He’s abandoned me too. Although him being white I don’t know why he was messing around in a school like that anyway.

It used to matter to me who would find these letters but that doesn’t matter to me anymore. I wonder if when I die I’ll meet my dad or if I can know him just by seeing him. I don’t know if he is dead or where he is. Mama doesn’t keep pictures. I have one in my head through. I imagine he will be happy to see me and that keeps me living sometimes.

V.

My family watches silently as the dust flies from Nancy’s hand and spreads out into the air. Each little mote seems to catch in its own current and then they all sink to the grass and dirt at Nancy’s feet (I am reminded of when she used to whip a picnic blanket out into the air, doing it over and over until there were no wrinkles in the fabric, and then how she bent over slowly to guide the blanket as it settled upon the ground). My father stands a little behind my wife, holding the box in one hand and the knife with its blade still open in the other. He notices the knife and wipes it on his jeans before closing it and sliding it back into his pocket. Then my father seems to realize something, and he stares down at his pants, the white dust from the blade just above his knee (he seems almost frozen). Soon, many of them are reaching into the box, grabbing huge handfuls of the dust and tossing it toward the grass at the bottom of the hill. My brother Jim (always the most reluctant to act) stands, arms crossed,
a step behind the group, and whenever somebody offers him the box he shakes his head. Eventually, our father carries the box over to Jim, takes his hand, and shoves it in. Jim does not resist, and when his hand comes out it is full of dust as well. He walks down the hill a few steps and flings it outward. Relieved, Jim turns to Luke (his son) and grabs his hand, spreading the dust on his skin (Luke steps back in surprise, but then embraces his father, smiling briefly). A few paces away from them, I notice my son next to his mother and fiancé. All three are crying softly.

In some spots the powder coats the ground. My wife Nancy crouches, and with her fingertips, she wipes at it until all the dust has disappeared.

You know, she says with her back still to the rest of the family, that didn’t give me the satisfaction I thought it would. It didn’t feel like we were reuniting my husband with the world. I’ve realized, she continues, her eyes closed to the daylight, we’ve already begun to forget him.

Around me, the trees and the sky seem to shiver, and I feel as though I am dissolving (there is no pain, but instead a sense of floating, as if the wind is weaving my body into the tapestry of my surroundings).

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I.

One of the people that came through here to pick up some ashes today left a book with me, and I’ve been looking through it and reading the underlined passages. I don’t know if I agree with what the author says, but I can tell he knows what he’s talking about. He’s been around the dead just like I have. The book’s words are filled with the same nervousness and the same fear. I’ve been reading parts out loud to the ghosts and as far as I can tell they seem to open to the idea. But if the dead wander a world just above ours, why would the ghosts stay in the crematorium? If they can only interact with us by entering the room of our minds, why can I see them waving in front of me? So from my experience, some of Mr. Leever’s book doesn’t seem entirely right, and if you read it, you’ll see how he makes up stories about death. I think he does it so he can keep death at arm’s length. He is making us stories for the same reason I ignore them. We’re both looking away from the actual life.

Ever since I started working at the crematorium, I’ve been watching my children the same way my father must have watched us. Everything I see them do is in the shadow of my fear of losing them. My brother could carry them in and drop their dead bodies upon the table at any time. As I get older, and death gets closer, it becomes harder to ignore. When you start to feel its breath upon your cheek, it seems like it’s not only close to you but close to all the people you know. And you want to protect them from it. Maybe I’ll write a book to protect them from it too.

II.

There is also Auschwitz as it is diagramed in history books, and since I have not yet been there, I can only see the camp as those architectural drawings. In the illustrations, fencing
divides the camp into long, thin sections, and in each strip are barracks arranged side by side like hospital beds lined up for the dying. The hospital complex is in the center of the camp, and for some reason something always draws my eye there. I like to think that some of the story I have invented about my grandparents is true, and it is that slight truth that informs the way my stare moves around the camp diagram.

Since I was young, I have collected photographs from that camp. There are many of children, their faces hanging behind the awful wire, their thin bodies seeming to shiver. There are also pictures of women, bare and thin, their naked breasts flaccid and drooping off their chests like withering flowers. We do have a portrait of my grandfather and grandmother taken at some point before they were imprisoned in the camp, probably just after my father was born. In it, he is dressed in a jacket and tie, his pant legs stiff, and my mother stands next to him, gazing off the right side of the picture at something I cannot see. She wears a dress that looks like, in the black and white photo, it may have been blue, and on her head, there is a wide hat. I have searched the photographs of Auschwitz numerous times for the faces of my grandmother and grandfather, but I never found anyone that I knew was them.

III.

Excerpts from Notes on the Afterlife, Chapter 3, George Leever, 1967:

Should we howl to keep the dead out of our minds? Should we make noise so we cannot hear them? I contend that most people, unknowingly, already do.
Do the ways they infest our minds hurt us or save us? Are the dead a disease or a cure? Should we try to remember or should we try to burn the cords of memory that tie them to us? I contend that most people already, and unknowingly, sway between the two.

Is it possible, as I have already deliberated upon in the previous chapter, that the actual stories of the dead are in the cracks between the words or, possibly, in the distortion? Maybe our experience with them is much like the way the shadow of an object will bend and change when one moves or brightens the light source.

The dead talk to fill the silence, and that spurs our imaginations, for better or worse.

IV.
To Whoever Finds This Letter,

I've been burning away my life. Why waste time wondering how I'm going to die?

My life is controlled by where I've been and where I live. I can't escape. I don't see any other way but to accept. I've never seen anyone do it any other way.

V.
I'm in a long hallway with many tall doors on either side, and I feel as if I should be searching for something. Others walk up and down the hall (two rivers of people flowing side by side in opposite directions). In front of some of the doors, people stand with their arms crossed, as if they are guarding what is inside. I brush by one of these sentinels and he grabs me by the neck, pushing me back into the steam of people. Everyone here is talking (so many
voices pounding together causes the air to seem solid and brick-like). I walk, trying the
doorknobs as the others are. Eventually, one turns, and the door opens.

It is dark, and I feel Nancy lying on her side in our bed, thinking of me, and sliding her hand under her t-shirt to clutch her stomach against a rising sickness. I talk to her and wonder if she can hear. I talk to her as she sits up in bed, clutches the meat of her bare upper arms and shivers. She wants to throw up, but can’t (there is nothing inside her because she is so full of grief she hasn’t eaten in two days). On the night table next to her is a framed picture of us together, the photo taken before my hair started to fall out. I talk to her as she glances at it.

I talk to her as she puts a pair of shorts over her bare hips and walks down the stairs. She jumps into the darkness (having stopped to lace her shoes tightly, something she always does to avoid blisters), and she begins running down the empty street, panting, until her lungs feel stretched and raw. She runs until her legs cannot hold her and her knees buckle, and she falls onto the grass next to the street. I talk to her as she dreams that she is in the dark coffin next to me, touching my cold skin.

And then I am back in the hallway with the others, walking up and down, trying doorknobs. I talk and talk to nobody (I feel if I were to stop, I will disappear, and that scares me more than anything has ever scared me). I never wander too far from Nancy’s door, and I wonder if I will ever find that it has been locked to me forever.
There she is, forever withering, sighing what is probably her last breath. In this photograph that breath can’t be seen, but in my imagination it seems to curl and hang, like the powdery smoke of a cigarette. So when I look at this photo of her dying, I don’t see it; instead I see her in life—there she is, tight-skinned, the corners of her mouth turning up in pleasure, her body moving slowly, the tip of her nipple brushing against my upper lip. But that is only a flashing image, and it is infected by the horrible change the cancer caused her. I only visited her once in the hospital. I remember her drooping, dying hand, her blue veins pushing against her skin like tree roots breaking the soil’s surface. The expression on her face in this photograph makes me want to cry for her. I hope it was hard for Laura’s husband to see her dying like this. I can only imagine how it would have been to be the lucky one who married her, to have seen her body change over years and years from the beautiful girl to that of this dying woman. Why would her husband want to take a picture of her like this? Why would he want to capture those moments when Laura appeared to have already left herself behind? I believe he sent this photo to me because he was jealous of how we loved each other before I left to teach in Boston. He married her quickly before I could convince her to come east, and for a long while, he wouldn’t let us talk to each other. With the memories I have of Laura, I shouldn’t have kept this picture. But I’ve found that I can’t love anyone else.
I don’t know when I first saw that picture. I hope the next time a classic moment like that’s captured, there’ll be a woman like me in there too, her hair waving behind her maybe. They tell me I’m a hippie, so obviously it would be more to my liking if that new photo would have something to do with peace. Anyway, that photo taken at Iwo Jima is in every American history textbook I’ve ever had up 'til now, a junior in high school. It might be the most famous picture I’ve ever seen. I think it was probably framed and on the wall of the hospital room where they cribbed me after my birth. Maybe I was lying there with the other babies, all of us crying, and we’re all looking at this photo of four Army men propping up the American flag. Maybe we weren’t crying at all, maybe we had our hands over our hearts. We were patriotic babies, fourteen years before September 11. I think somebody actually reproduced that photo using New York City firefighters. I always wondered how heavy that flag was. Why so many men were there to lift it. Although I heard it was staged too, the original’s a great and moving photo. I feel like the new version is a little cheap. I don’t know why, I just feel ashamed and defiant when I look at the firefighter one. I wish it were possible for an act of hatred to bring peace. I’m going to college in a few years, and they tell me I’ll get into a good one. Once I’m away from my parents, and these obnoxious suburbs, I’ll allow myself to become fully hippified. Although if hippies still believe in peace and equality like they did in the sixties, why wouldn’t everybody want to be one?
When Robert brought this back from the war, I framed it—although he didn’t want me to. This picture’s in black and white, so the thin-green of his fatigues can’t be made out, and he’s not wearing anything on his head. But even if I didn’t know him, I would be able to look at this picture and sense that he is at war—he is uncomfortable and inside himself, I can tell by how dull his eyes are, the stiffness of his shoulders and the wrinkles in his uniform. This photo, Bob told me, was taken by an Arab who had obtained an antique daguerreotype somehow. He was charging a dollar for each photo and Bob had to stand still for a whole minute while the film was exposed. This isn’t like the photographs we take today; it’s more of a thin plate that Bob’s body seems burned into—more ghostly than one taken with a modern camera. My husband was traveling across northern Africa. I’m not sure where he was going at the time. Eventually he ended up in Italy, I know. He didn’t ever see any action. Toward the bottom, that thing he’s holding, is the sheath of a bone-knife. I guess the Arabs used to ride up to the moving train and try to sell things through the windows. Bob paid three dollars for the knife—that isn’t so much, especially now-a-days—but when he reached out for it, he only grabbed the casing, and the Arab slipped the knife out from underneath. Bob was very impressed by the way he was swindled. It was almost worth the money, he said. And then he had the picture taken so he wouldn’t forget. That’s the way my husband told it. I don’t like the term Arab myself. But that was his story—that’s how the war was for him.
People say if these’re kept in good condition, they’re worth money. I don’t care about that. I keep this in my wallet to remind me of when I was a boy. People keep pictures of their wives and families, I keep this card here—Lou Gehrig. Saw Gehrig play at the same stadium that still sits down the block. Used to go to those bars near the stadium, too. Don’t go there anymore; it’s not my crowd. In the thirties, Wrigley Field was almost new. You could smell chalk and dirt mixing with cigar smoke and roasting peanuts. My daughter and her husband don’t understand how I can spend the last days of my life drinking and watching Cub’s games. But these here are my friends. They know me, they know what I like to drink, they’ve got TVs, and they root for the Cubs. But I carry this Gehrig card here to remind me of the games I was at as a child. With my dad. In the thirty-two series, I remember clear as this picture here, the exact moment when Gehrig had the winning hit. Ball settled into the last square of sunlight left by those shadows that cover the outfield in the afternoon. There were thirty thousand of us. It was a World Series game, and the Cubs had already lost three in a row. We all gasped at the same time. Thirty-thousand, all sucking air. Years later, it’s not about whether the Cubs win. It’s never really about that. It’s about losing yourself in the crowd—becoming a single person with thirty-thousand others. After that Series game, it took a long moment before I could find myself again. That’s why I keep Gehrig here, even though he was a Yankee.
Ever seen the *Wizard of Oz*? That’s a silly question, everyone’s seen it. Well, everybody knows that Dorothy was played by Judy Garland before she had all that trouble. I read, too, that the part almost went to someone else. My wife adored celebrities. She wanted to be an actress when she was small, but I had a good job and we couldn’t move to California. She used to tape their photos on the wall of our bedroom. We would be making love there and Humphrey Bogart would be staring at me with a smile that seemed to say, in that drawling voice of his, that he would be doing it so much better. I’m just kidding. But it makes sense that Bogey could make a man think something like that, doesn’t it? During our marriage my wife hung many Bogarts, but the pin-up I remember most was a *Life* cover of Judy Garland. She’s so young in that picture, a teenager. She was beautiful in a childish way, her hair drawn up into two loose buns. She appeared wise beyond her years there, and the way she stares out, it bores into you. She’s almost taunting, yet also almost demure, two attitudes that don’t seem to go together. Because my wife used tape, the pictures wouldn’t hang on the wall for very long. So when the tape brittled and they fell, my wife would hang a new one. Can you imagine what our bedroom looked like? Beautiful faces all over the wall. That one of Garland stayed on the wall, though. It didn’t ever come down. It was still there when my wife died, of natural causes. I remember driving myself home from the funeral, and going upstairs to take off my tie. In the days since her death, I’d had this rotten, sad feeling in my gut. I saw that picture of Garland surrounded by those other faces, and I felt as though she was mocking me. But how can a photo know how I’m feeling? But I exploded and tore all the photographs off the wall. Some of the paint came off with them. Since then, when I remember my relationship with my wife, I think of that *Life* cover. I don’t like how that photo has become our marriage. What my wife wanted was not what she became.
There is a Greek myth where Zeus—that notorious god and adulterer—swears to grant one of his mistresses anything she could request. But Zeus' wife tricks her to ask Zeus to show himself in all his glory. The god pleads with his mistress to change her mind, but she does not, and since he has sworn to her, he must reveal his true self. So Zeus shows himself, becoming so that the mortal woman's eyes can't comprehend him, and the mistress dies instantly. Those poor Greeks were so misguided, but it is forgivable; they lived before the coming of Christ, and that was why Dante placed them in the outer ring of hell—without torments, but devoid of the eternal pleasure of heaven. I do enjoy Greek myths, but I never refer to them in life. Their stories are fun, a pastor's guilty pleasure. But just as the Greeks believed that the true Zeus could not be grasped, neither can the true God; and if someone photographed God—which I believe I have accidentally done here—He could not be confined to shape or structure. He is, in fact, more powerful than anything in our imagination. Since the human mind can't comprehend Him, I've always wondered whether a camera—a machine—could capture an accurate picture. I realized that the image on the photograph still must be filtered through the human senses. So, sadly, I have this picture of God that nobody can see. Most people don't believe me; they say it is just faulty development, or that I accidentally snapped a picture of a fluorescent light. But there is something powerful in this photo, a reassurance and warmth I can feel when I look at it. I don't like to deny my intuitions, since I find them to be correct so often. When I look at this picture, I see heaven, and I can even feel the faint fingers of its ecstasy caressing me. I do not know what others see, maybe nothing, but for me this photo swells so much larger then the four by six inches it's printed on.
I might be the only one who buys those magazines near the supermarket check-out. I’ve seen shoppers reading the headlines while they wait. Some smile to themselves over the celebrities who’ve fallen on hard times. Nobody except me ever buys one. I do. My husband always takes my magazines and hides them. I’ve found them on top of the refrigerator and underneath the cushions of our couch. He hates that I always leave them lying around. He thinks people are going to come over and see that we read them. He calls them trash. People will judge us either way I tell him. They’ll judge us by the way we look, by the way we live, by the way we raise our kids. My husband should read those tabloids because they’re full of people so famous they can’t be afraid. Everything they try to hide, somebody will find. And those secret things are what I want to read about. When you’re a mother and a wife, it’s hard to have secrets. I don’t even have my own room or my own closet. I’ll admit it, I’m nosy. I want to see those photographs of other people. Sometimes I’ll poke around my teenage son’s room just to see what his story is. It’s a scary feeling, knowing that you might find something out about him. It’s exciting. Even if the tabloids print lies, at least they give a story. I want to read the writing on the back of the photograph. It doesn’t matter to me if it’s the truth. There’re so many things that photos don’t show. There’re so many things that people don’t tell each other. Even families. How can I not be fascinated?
This stuff’s fucking great: all I do is post one of these pics on my website for a few hours and it’s all over the Internet. Look, all you have to do is scan a picture from a magazine, cut the girl’s face out, find one of those nude photos online or in a nudie mag, and then paste them together. It can be done on almost any paint or photo program. Some are better than others though. I take pride in my work, much more than other photo doctors. I make sure the skin tones match and the size and shape of the body looks right. But that’s not so hard, it’s fun actually. I get to look at a lot of pictures of naked women.

And high school girls my age now-a-days are so fucking frigid, I don’t get to dip it in very often. When I first started doing this, it was for fun, to look at the tits of girls like Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, Cameron Diaz. You know, women that every guy wants to see naked. Some of them do *Playboy* now because they figure guys like me won’t make fake photos if there are real ones out there. Brook Burke did it. Cindy Crawford did *Playboy* once too, but people always want more. Some of the stars who won’t take their clothes off get so concerned about these photos. I get really peeved when celebrities complain about things like that. So I do a lot of pictures just as, you know, a fuck you to them. The way I look at it is: only two people know for sure these pictures are fake: me and her. If she knows they’re false, she shouldn’t be angry about it. Because really, when you think about it, the only opinion that matters is your own. But then again I can sort of see her problem. Thinking about all those guys jerking off to an image they think is you. Those guys don’t know what’s fake: to them it doesn’t matter.
I just got home from a backpacking trip to Greece and Turkey, sort of the after-college-graduation European backpacking trip that everyone takes. Me and two other girls from my sorority hung out with people we met there—the guys on the Greek Islands were fabulous and Turkey was filled with Australians and their sexy accents—but we still got some sightseeing in. I brought my small automatic camera and took so many pictures I had to keep going into those tourist shops to buy more film. In Turkey, the poverty was very apparent, but surprisingly not so in your face that you felt depressed. The Turkish seemed to look at the brighter side, which was refreshing. A group of travelers we met in one of the eight dollar a night hostels were competing to get the most interesting pictures they could. Any of the Turkish merchants would probably have posed for a photo for a hundred Turkish Lira or so, but these people refused to pay. And they didn’t want their pictures to be posed. So they’d sneak up on interesting people, take their picture without permission, and run away with their image on film. They convinced me to try it. And I did, but felt awful afterward. I felt like I’d sort of stolen something from someone who had nothing. Not their soul or anything like that, but more like their pride. I felt like travelers like us were giving other tourists a bad name. We were as bad as the paparazzi, so I decided to destroy that picture when it was developed, and I concentrated instead on taking photos of the old, ruined cities we spent so much time in. The statues of the Roman gods and goddesses are still standing exactly where they were in ancient times. Those statues were portraits from before cameras and oil paint. When I got the pictures back from the drugstore, I went through them trying to find the one I’d vowed to throw away. I couldn’t find any picture like the one I remembered taking.
When I ride the subway, I like to watch the reflections that float upon the darkened windows. During rush hour, most riders are solitary, and ride, standing or sitting, in silent observance—watching others and allowing themselves to be watched. As the train moves on, there is nothing to do except examine faces, but since nobody wants to be caught in the act of observing, people watch the reflections on the glass, their eyes flicking from image to hovering image. I am a photographer, at least I majored in art with a concentration on photography in college. I enjoy watching these reflections because I would have such a hard time capturing them clearly with the equipment I can afford. First, people here would not stand by while I took their picture nor would they allow me to snap at their reflection, as if they owned the images they cast upon the windows. Second, the subway car is lighted artificially and badly. Taking a picture down here requires a flash, and the glass would bounce that light right back at the lens. If I decided not to use a flash, I would have to decrease the aperture and that would require me to hold the camera still for a second. With the movement of the train, that would be extremely difficult. So I use my eyes and my memory, both of which have weakened from relying on so many photographs, and I watch until we slow at a lighted station, where the reflections on the glass seem to mix with the actual faces of those standing outside the train. I wouldn’t call these photographs, but it seems to me, it’s difficult to tell one medium of image from another. Memory and imagination fit into that as well. An image I see in my head isn’t any different than those on a glossy four by six. Because I don’t feel right separating people’s stories from their images, I have been interviewing people, asking them what they’d say is the most important photo to them. Some answer with talk of well-known photographs; some speak of photographs of famous people. Some speak of portraits of loved ones. Some talk of photos they still possess, while others refer to those that have been lost. Every person tries to fill the space around the picture with their own lives and stories. I add my own voice to these interviews by not speaking of a photograph at all. Instead I speak of those reflections I see on the subway windows.
The Principal’s Slight Fear of Worms

Last Day of School

This Friday at 2:30 P.M., on the last day of school, the principal imagines he is staring at a yellow button. Its burnished color strikes him as ugly, and he sees himself pushing it, pressing with his index finger until a horizontal door lurches and begins to slide open above him. The wheels make scraping noises as they pull along their metal tracks, and the way they struggle against the door’s weight reminds the principal of an old team of horses, their necks sagging in fatigue. Through the square that would open in the ceiling, the principal expects he will see the sky. He is alone in the only remaining unfurnished room on the third floor of his cramped school, and in his mind is a picture of an opening above him: an image he knows is false even if it is based on a genuine fear.

On this last day of school the principal has decided he can no longer face the complications caused by increasing enrollments. In the past few years, he has met the problem with denial, working tirelessly to orchestrate a barrage of petitions, parent complaints, and letters to the community paper, all aimed to convince the district’s superintendent to pay for school renovations. Eventually the superintendent tired of hearing about the issue, and he allotted the principal enough money to redo one maintenance room per year. So far, the extra classrooms have appeased the problem, but with only one spare room remaining, the principal is again facing the evaporation of useable space. Around him,
groups of yellow and black wires loop down toward the floor and then back up to the beams that crisscross along the ceiling. The principal is standing, slouched and helpless, imagining a doorway above him, and through that, the clouds, which seem to rest comfortably in the sky like warm laundry left out to be folded.

The principal is familiar with the anxiety that pervades his stomach on last days of school, but this year it is worse, and the discomfort he feels causes his thoughts to ebb for a moment from the fantasy of the sliding door to a memory of the nausea he experienced at a torture museum in Belgium. He had been a young man then, not a principal but a college student, and he was touring Europe to see its differences. At that museum, he walked in the thin aisles between showcases, gazing at mannequins strapped to strange devices. One apparatus was a large pyramid with a female dummy straddling it. Weights attached to her legs pulled her cloth vagina down upon the metal point. Another appeared to be nothing more than a grill for humans, upon which a limp body was tied. Beneath it, a flame cut from yellow paper was propped between two logs. The brochure that he received when he paid too much for admission said that the torturers used the pyramid for witches, prostitutes, and sodomites—sins against nature—and the grill was a punishment for heretics and blasphemers—sins against God. That there were no facial features on the tortured figures, relieved the principal, for they almost made him recall the slack-jointed and smiling scarecrows he saw hovering among the corn crops in Iowa as he rode with his parents toward Nebraska to visit his grandparents just outside of Omaha.

This place is a prison, the principal thinks. I’ve become a warden for children.

He imagines that soon he will hear the beeping of a truck in reverse and then the screams as it dumps the new students into the school building. The principal watches the
children fall from the bed of the truck through the hole in the roof and scatter and flip at his feet, like coins shaken from the pockets of his overturned pair of khakis.

Just what we need, the principal hears the voices of his teachers saying to him.

There’s nothing I can do, he replies. It’s not because of me these students keep coming.

But more students? they will ask him.

I’ve got kids sitting three to a desk, one will say.

They’re piled up on the shelving like outdated textbooks, says another.

Cigarette? they ask. You sure?

Without the smokes and the muzzles, we’d all go crazy.

Ha Ha.

It is almost 3:00, the end of the last school day, and as the images in front of his eyes fade, allowing him to again notice the utility room, the principal reminds himself that he will not actually have to deal with the new children until they arrive by bus on the third day of September. In his sweaty hand he holds the list of incoming students, its collection of names longer than last year’s, following the trend of every year since he has become principal. With more students each year, comes further problems in teaching, discipline, and overbearing parents, which the principal knows will result in less learning, lower test scores, and less funding. When the principal receives the list of names at the end of each school year, as he has done on this day, he feels as if he is trying to hold off a tidal wave. He has always pushed back at the wall of water, holding it at bay with his palms. But this year, with only one spare room remaining—the one in which he now hides—he senses the rising liquid begin to seep between his fingers.
At the morning meetings earlier in the week, the principal noticed his administrators and teachers vocalizing their frustrations through sarcasm, a dissatisfaction rattling behind their humor. Their joke was that these new students couldn’t all be coming from the suburb, that they must have been shipped in from places like Nicaragua, Iceland, Greece, Turkey, Alabama, Chile, and Japan. At the meeting this morning, the principal added to their joke by telling them that these foreign children would be trucked to the building and then dumped through a hole in the school’s ceiling.

Moments of Happiness

The teachers will leave as soon as possible, turning in their room-keys, announcing the name of the bar where everyone is meeting for drinks, and driving away in their Toyota Corollas and mini SUVs. By 4:00 on the principal’s watch, the parking lot is surely empty. The principal opens the door to the utility room and steps back into the empty school building. At the beginning of summer vacation, he always notices a sense of ending, a ghostly feeling of escape that drifts throughout the whitewashed hallways. Noises usually drowned by the presence of the students begin to emerge slowly, like bones surfacing under the brush of an archaeologist. The principal hears the echoed padding of his own footsteps, the whir of the air conditioning, and, far away, the radio of a straggling teacher, tuned to a song he cannot make out.
At 4:30, the principal decides he will not join his staff at the bar, and he departs for home. As he walks to the train station, he thinks of his girlfriend, Lorene, a teacher from one of the district’s elementary schools, who is at the bar now, drinking, smoking, taking pictures, and looking forward to the wide open summer. Lorene is a pretty woman who smokes a pack of cigarettes and snaps at least one roll of film per day. Her mouth, when the principal kisses it, reminds him of a seldom used clothes closet, and the clutching pupils of her eyes have become akin to the black lens of her camera.

Drugstore developed prints cover the walls of Lorene’s apartment. When he is there, the principal often stares at the photos on the wall for hours, his eyes moving from one picture to the next. These journeys always end in the same place: the only photograph Lorene has ever found affecting enough to blow up, frame, and hang prominently on the wall. It is a picture of the ice on Lake Michigan. The wind has blown much of the sand from the beach into piles at the edge of the water and they have frozen over, forming five-foot high off-white mounds. Out in the distance, the ice is thinning and eventually it gives way to open water that seems to chop at its edge. On the left side of the photo, the ice is chipped and a person’s head in a red, knitted cap emerges from the gray water.

The principal knows that Lorene takes pictures of everything, and he knows she has a shoebox full of nude pictures of him.

That doesn’t look like me. I’m hideous there, he remembers telling her once when she made him look at one.

You just don’t know what you look like, she replied. That’s you.

I must be gaining weight, he said, glancing back at it.

I made you something, Lorene said as she handed him a piece of paper.
It was a printout of the same naked photograph, but in this one his penis fell down to his knees, hanging limp, like a smooth piece of rope.

Jesus Christ, the principal said. Now that’s me. That’s more like it.

Lorene was smiling.

How did you do that? he asked her.

I’m an attractive woman, she answered. Attractive women can do things like that.

Hold still, she told him as she raised the camera to catch a moment of him laughing.

Why did you want that picture? I wasn’t doing anything.

You know how I have no memory, she answered.

The principal recalls wondering, as he posed for another photo, whether she always had a bad memory or if it just began to recede as she took more and more photographs. He finds Lorene’s loss similar to Socrates’ fear that the widespread use of the written word would weaken the memory of his people. So the next day when Lorene received the stack of photographs from the store, he would be frozen that way, laughing, but years from now when she finds the picture in a shoe box or in a drawer, she will see his smile and will not be able to remember what it was that made him laugh. The principal often questions whether a captured moment is anything without the moments that precede it.
Dismembering the City

The principal raises his stare from the tracks that edge the train platform and gazes east toward the city where he can see the top of the Sears Tower ten miles away. While living in Chicago or in its suburbs for his entire life, he has never inhabited a place where, on a clear day, he can not find that tower on the horizon. The red flashing lights at the tips of the building’s antennae are like a beacon of home for him, and the skyline, so familiar in its metal undulations, is always comforting. When he was younger, he would eye the skyline and wonder how much concrete must be packed underground to support the buildings. As a child the thought gave him the feeling of power, of stability. But as he grows older, the concrete both under and above the ground mystifies the principal because the soft, natural land that used to exist has been hardened. Pavement, he has decided, is a substance that by defying wear, defies history. Instead of allowing footprints like the earth, the city’s massive amount of concrete acts like a mirror, reflecting back up into the air all events that should be absorbed into the ground. The principal wonders if the city allows for roots, if there is any digging in, any staying. He wonders whether anything will ever be remembered. Postcards, he thinks, will last awhile, and they allow images of the city to flutter throughout the world, making the city more permanent by freezing its image and dismembering that reflection from its source. And the postcards are everywhere: available on racks at the White Hen or the CVS or the Seven-Eleven.

Across the windowed façade of the Sears Tower, is the splayed reflection of the sun. The principal turns to look at it in the sky above him, and it reminds him of the yellow
button. Since 2:30, it has been growing in his mind, absorbing almost all of his thoughts. To him the bright, ugly color of that button stands for everything unpredictable in his work, and he associates those irregularities with the structures from which his work originates: locked doorways, dried urine on bathroom tile, single-file lines, and discipline programs. No matter what happens at the school and no matter how many students come and go, the principal thinks in frustration, we will keep rotating around that button, until we crash into it and burn. He remembers the blasphemer searing on the grill in Belgium, and the principal wonders if he can send him a postcard. The tortured might appreciate holding a photo of the Hancock Building as the skin on his face and chest slowly blackens, the picture flaming in his fingers. He considers whether the witch in Belgium might enjoy looking at the façade of the Art Institute while her labia tear.

**Carrying the Skin**

The principal's eyes follow the train tracks and he thinks about how their straightness forces him to move in a straight line. It is not just those tracks, the principal decides, his whole life is rarely more than a negotiation of outer barriers. On his stroll from the school to the train this afternoon, he'd stayed on the sidewalk, avoided the cars, and turned at the corners. It seems that things are built to block him from seeing and moving. Trees are planted for the same reason. Fences are erected to push him off others' property. Houses, apartments, schools, and offices close in on him, halting any movement. Chicago is a limited space
crowded with too many people. When crammed with other bodies on the train, it seems, sometimes, that even his own limbs occlude him, and until he realizes that they are his, he tries to push them away. In Chicago, space has been walled, sanctioned, and suffocated. And every year, when more students come into his school, their bodies seem to wall off the linear path of his life.

The principal has been pondering these ideas for a few years, and he believes that his body has adapted the properties of the world around him. He has become his own type of wall, where his skin blocks the outer from the inner, and he is not just carrying his skin, but toting the space inside his skin and hauling his whole body behind, dragging it like sheet metal along the warm concrete. His hardened skin allows no interaction between what is inside his body and what is outside: the breeze that blows through the trees does not brush through him. Of all the barriers and borders he is forced to succumb, his skin is the most difficult to manage, and this problem is not only his, he thinks, but every persons’ from Chicago, and everyone who lives in a city.

From what the principal knows of Darwin’s research, living species evolve at a very slow rate, and their progress is so minute that it can hardly be detected. But when the principal looks through some of the history books used by the students at his school, he realizes instantly that three hundred years ago humans did not have to live within this armor. The closed skin completely blocks the outside, and the inner body begins to clot, cutting off its breathing. As that space dwindles, becoming pressurized, the body becomes infected, and it fouls the outer space it inhabits, showing discontent through violence, unhappiness, and riot. People begin to live in walled-off moments, defining pieces of their lives by the walls in which they are contained.
The principal breathes the stale, empty air of the city, and thinks about these problems. He does not have any ideas on how to solve them. The train pulls into the station, and the principal boards it, slumping down heavily into his seat as if he has reached the end of something.

Guttural Titles

On the train into the city, the principal opens his briefcase and begins shuffling though a stack of papers. He notices his name at the top of one of them and barely recognizes it. His name, or the title that is on his birth certificate, is Lucas. In the first grade he asked his teacher to call him Lucas, and then he changed his mind, telling people to call him Luke. But when he was a young history teacher, his students began calling him History Teacher, and then after garnering a master’s degree in administration and rising to the rank of principal, he was called Principal.

Luke likes when people call him by the name of his career, because he believes that for most people, a job defines a person more accurately than a given first name. The first name is almost completely arbitrary, given to a baby by parents who know nothing about the child’s personality or interests. So when the principal hears the name Luke, or Lucas, he feels as if that is not his name but that of a person standing behind him. He does not know who Luke is, but the principal has a strange feeling that Luke is someone he knows. Luke is a word that starts at the top of the mouth followed by an ugly, guttural exhale, and then a
closing off of the throat by the heel of the tongue. Luke is a word that is low and bass-like, almost unheard sometimes; a word that is easily drowned out in large gatherings or noisy restaurants; a word to shake hands to. The name Luke, the principal thinks, must have come from something his parents saw as they stared at their baby only a few hours old. The name must have been a fiction story they read in his infantile eyes.

So, the principal never goes by his given birth name, nor does he often recognize it when somebody uses it. And while the train slows to stops and then lurches forward in movement again, his thoughts move to his school and the obnoxious number of students that infiltrate his halls every year.

**Lovely and Shaking Shoulders**

The principal transfers from the train to the subway, and as he plunges through the underground tunnel, he stares at the shoulders of a woman a few rows in front of him. Because of the train’s rattling, he can not hear what the man sitting next to her is saying, so he watches the woman’s shoulders, and how they seem to jerk upward in a shrug each time she laughs. She wears a yellow sundress in the early summer heat, although it is chilly in the train’s air conditioning, and her arms are round and thick. From where he sits, the principal cannot see her face, nor can he decide how old she is. Because he would fear saying something that she would not find funny, the principal knows that he does not wish to be the cause of her laughter—the one telling the jokes—he only wants to watch her from this angle,
anonymous from his seat behind. When the train reaches his stop, he exits without having seen her face.

At home, the principal calls Lorene on her cell phone at the bar. Half drunk, she drives to his apartment and they have sex like he has seen in pornographic movies. Going down on her is like stuffing his nose into somebody’s gym locker, and while he licks her, he wonders if her smoking has soiled not only her mouth but her entire body. He turns her over on her knees and penetrates her from behind, watching the hanging undersides of her breasts; it is a part of her body he can only glimpse when they take this position, or when she straddles his mouth and he looks up at the bottoms of her breasts resting softly against her torso, like drops of water that threaten to fall into his eyes.

When the principal rolls over on his back, his upper arm presses against the warmth of Lorene’s. He pictures the smooth skin of the woman on the train, and then he thinks about history. Growing up, he had always wanted to be a history teacher and in college he took only history and education classes. Once involved in school administration, he stopped thinking about the past, but tried and failed to create a curriculum that included a significant concentration on black and Native-American history. The superintendent had not approved; he contended there was no point in teaching information which was not included on the state funding tests. History too, the principal thinks, is a collection of captured moments; a place where individual lives are mostly lost amongst a crowd of significant events.

How’s it going? Lorene asks when she returns. The principal does not allow her to smoke inside, so she has dressed, gone out to the street and then come back. She removes her shoes and, fully clothed, gets back into bed.

Not talking again, huh? Lorene asks.
No, he answers. Maybe not. I’m worried about more students.

I’m thinking about going home, she says. I have tests to grade.

The principal does not answer.

I don’t really need to go home, she says, prodding him in the side with her finger, there’s no school today. It’s a joke. And you don’t have to worry. You’ve got three months.

The principal remains silent.

Good, she says. I’ll do anything for a laugh.

Yes, I know, he answers distantly. As she turns her back to him, he places his hand on her hip and leaves it resting there.

**Unhappiness against the Odds**

The next morning, Saturday, the principal drops Lorene off at her apartment in Bucktown on the city’s nearwest side, and drives her car to the school. Even though it is summer, he has work to do, preparations to make, a school to run. The anxiety he experienced in the utility room the day before has stayed with him, and he feels as though his work cannot wait until Monday. The building’s emptiness in the summer only causes him to remember the children that should be filling it. In the hallway, he can almost hear the sounds of the students—the clang of lockers, the shuffle of feet, the thud of bodies—and he walks among them as if he is wading through a sea of childish ghosts.
For the first time in the five years since he has become a principal, Luke wonders if he is unhappy with his career. It is a thought that carries with it a feeling of guilt, for his life has not been difficult. Both his mother and father live together in northern Wisconsin and are healthy. He has never gone without their love. And while pondering this notion, the principal realizes that he is in his thirties and is still a young man. It is something he has not recalled in a long time. He thinks about the school year that has just ended—the knife fight that resulted in the expelling of three students, the mother of the disabled child whom he had convinced to drop her lawsuit against the school, the firing of the math teacher caught exchanging sexual emails with female students. The principal knows it was his affable countenance that allowed him to deal effectively with these three situations. People had the tendency to relax when near him, and that has allowed him to be successful at his position. The three separate groups he has to negotiate—the students, the parents, and the teachers—are often much like three rivers converging into sometimes very tumultuous white water. The principal's job is to keep these waters flowing calmly, and he does it as well as he can. But as more students enroll in the school each year, the numbers of problems have increased. His school is beginning to clog like a drain, the bodies of his students bunching up. His unhappiness, or the feeling he is calling his unhappiness, comes from knowing his school is the place where the children's skins first begin to harden.

It's not their fault, the principal thinks. I cannot blame the students. Therefore it must be mine. I am responsible for this.
A Moment of Death

The principal finds himself standing in front of the door to the third floor utility room, and as he enters the room, he pictures how it will look in three months as a classroom. The yellow button is no longer where he imagined it yesterday. Instead he can see it up in the sky, hanging amongst the clouds like a dull sun. A day later, he is no longer scared of what pushing that button will cause, but he is more hesitant to reach out and press it. The principal doubts that his arms are long enough to reach the button anymore, and he knows now that it is all out of his control. The students will filter through the school’s halls, entering after fifth grade and leaving for high school, their names moving from one piece of paper to another. Only the class photograph stored in the archive at the back of the school’s library will recall their moments at the school. The principal’s life will move on too, separating from theirs, his name no longer on the same list. And each day, as he finds himself wedged amongst people he does not know on the train, he will forget the students, thinking only of those that inhabit his halls that year. It is unsettling that he is so close to the people he does not know or too far away from those he does know. He is not happy at all with the distances in his life.

While standing in the maintenance room, the principal knows that this is a moment in his life he may remember because it is a time when he has to make a decision. He is not quite sure what his choices are, but he is sure that his life will not be written of in any history book. This moment is too small; it is more like something he would read in a piece of fiction, and even then it may fail to be compelling. The yellow button still floats in the imagined sky above him and he wonders whether he should reach out to touch it.
The principal remembers that when he was young he was afraid of worms because, when cut in half, they had the ability to live as two. In first grade, when he went by Lucas, his teacher told him that worms could do this because their bodies were segmented. He wonders why he was slightly afraid of a body connected by segments when even at that early age his skin was hardening and he was learning to live his life in divisions. But unlike the worm whose severed body crawls off in different directions, the principal’s life does not work that way. Any direction I chose, the principal thinks, my whole body will have to follow. My body drowning in the throng of others.

**Fiction Stories have Endings & Photographs Burn**

The principal turns out of the maintenance room and walks quickly down the hallway. The yellow button follows closely behind. The principal decides that he must have been afraid of worms because they are so unnatural. He remembers now that the same teacher also informed the class that all stories must have a beginning and end. He accepted everything that she told him then, so he supposed it was all true, but he does not believe her now. Although he still abstains from touching worms, the principal is not afraid of them anymore and he no longer believes in beginnings and endings. In the last two days he has witnessed so many endings and few beginnings.

From his office on the school’s first floor, the principal calls Lorene.
I've decided that museums don't remember people, he tells her. They display people's actions against one another. And photographs don't remember people either, they just recall their images.

Where are you and what are you talking about? Have you crashed my car? Lorene answers. Are you finally going crazy?

The principal is silent for a few seconds. Would it be crazy to leave? he asks her.

If you leave me, she tells him, I'll burn all the photographs I took of you. I'll let myself forget.

No, I mean to leave this place. I can already see the yellow button floating further up into the sky. Like a balloon. Remember Lorene, photos burn and rot. Memories recede.

You're finally going crazy, Lorene says sounding stunned and angry at the same time.

I don't think so, the principal says.

Where are you going to go? she asks.

I'm going to ride off into the setting sun with a camera, a twenty-four shooter, strapped to my belt. And for every portrait I take, I'll write details about the person on the back.

You don't have the courage, Lorene says. You'll be back by the end of the day.

Maybe, the principal says. But I have to try.

How're you getting there?

Maybe I'll take the bus. I'll leave your car at the station, and call me Luke, for I'm the fastest shot in the west. And I'll put holes in the injuns because we never speak of them.

And I will hold slaves because black history is also overlooked.
You're awfully playful. And you sound crazy to me.

Lorene, he says, I want to be like a fingerprint on the glossy side of a photograph. A small mark that means something has happened. That someone has been there.
An Interview with Luke Southworth

On October 7, 2004, Luke Southworth turns fifty-two years old, and I celebrate my twenty-second birthday. Both of us still live in the Chicagoland area, near where we were raised, the suburb of Oak Park. Ever since I found Southworth's address, I've been sending cards to his home in Evanston, requesting an interview, which I hoped to publish in one of the literary magazines based in the city: Another Chicago Magazine, Story Quarterly, or even Rain Crow, or the Rambunctious Review. At twenty-two, I've never been published, and there is a good chance that if I ever get to interview Southworth, the transcript of our discussion will end up buried in a pile of notebooks with other discarded pieces of my writing. But only a few years into adulthood, I can’t yet ignore that force pressing in my chest—a combination of guilt and ambition—that makes me keep writing and promoting the writing of others.

At twenty-two, I, Luke Southworth, am not a writer, but at fifty-two years old, Luke Southworth can consider himself to be one, although he has not published a book in many years. Critics have received his books—two collections of short stories and one novel—fairly well, but those books have not been of much interest to the reading public. All of the stories and the novel, titled Scattering Ashes, are set in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. Southworth's first book of stories, White Flight, deals with the city's racial divisions during the nineteen-seventies and the migrations of certain ethnicities from the city to the suburbs. Around age thirty-three, his work began to become more experimental in story and structure. His portrayal of Chicago in the last book of stories, Rope Slaughterers and Hog Weavers,
renders the city as a place that contains all the landmarks with which we are familiar, but gives the sense that the city we have been seeing all this time is only a screen, and that the actual Chicago exists somewhere behind what we have come to know.

This October, I finally received a reply. In his letter, which I now hold in my hand, Southworth promises to “unlock [his] front door to [me],” allowing me inside his house to talk. The note’s ending, which contains a reminder of Southworth’s right to deny the interview’s publication at any time, is scripted in language too formal to even be sarcastic. As I drive down the block where he lives in Evanston, I am nervous, but when I shut the door of my old Volvo, and stare at what I am about to enter, I cannot help feeling disappointed. It is mid-fall, and the air is wet with mist. Southworth’s mid-sized house, which in the summer would be mostly hidden behind the leaves of two large trees in his front yard, is now revealed. Paint is chipping off the siding and from what used to be white latticework around the two upstairs windows. While the lawns on either side of Southworth’s have taken on a callous dark-green, his grass, where I can see it poking through the carpet of dead leaves, is brown. I creep up the walkway feeling as though I have entered a horror movie or have become the narrator in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” I pause for a moment before the front door to imagine myself running back to the car and fleeing the situation; how the next hour is going to go is uncertain and that scares me. Before I can knock, the door opens, the man has my nose and chin, and he is, of course, the same height as I; but at first glance, his baldness causes him to seem shorter.

“Hi,” he says as he stands next to me on the stoop, attempting to weave his arms into an overcoat, “Nice to meet me. Here’s my house. It’s cramped and almost entirely filled with furniture. Rarely do I sit or lie on any.”
The "nice to meet me" seems rehearsed and forced, like he has pushed the words out of his mouth, and I do not know how to respond to his remark about his house and furniture. Southworth has a strained smile on his face, and he is noticeably uncomfortable. He laughs when he notices I am confused, and he saunters down the walkway without looking back, his thin torso swaying with his stride, as if his body is negotiating great gusts of wind. Still perplexed, and unsure where we are headed, I assume he wants me to go with him, and I match his slow gait on the way to the El station, where we push through the turnstiles and race up to the platform, catching a purple-line train just as it slows into the station.

Southworth does not speak to me in the five minutes it takes to ride to Howard or the ten minutes while we wait for our red-line transfer. When we are finally on that train, out of the wet air, and sitting next to each other, I notice that I have been carrying the notebook with my questions; it is damp and starting to turn at the edges.

"Last year," I say, clutching the notebook in both hands, "I wrote a story where a man tries to lose himself in a subway system." I have to shout over the metallic din of the train and my awareness that the other passengers nearby are eavesdropping.

"I had a thought like that some time ago," Southworth answers, his eyes scanning the train car. "Not last year, though." He is silent for a moment and then continues, "This time of year there are some days when I take the train at six in the morning. All the passengers are quiet, and the homeless that have slept on the train all night are still sleeping."

Southworth walks out onto the Addison platform where the air, I notice, has the iron-smell of cloudy tap-water. We take the short escalator down to the street and hike the quarter mile around Wrigley Field, the brick stadium where the Cubs play, which in this weather resembles an open-roofed, shadowed fortress: a building constructed primarily to house
torture. Three blocks north along Clark, Southworth stops at a bar with no name on the outside, and I follow him to a booth in the back. Cotton protrudes from holes in the upholstery, and although Southworth seems comfortable, it takes me a moment to find a position where my body does not feel as though it’s going to slip down into the insides of the vinyl bench. When settled, I take a pen out of my pocket, and before opening the notebook, I ask my first question:

LS: This is not a question that I had prepared, but why this bar in Wrigleyville? Why have you led me here instead of simply meeting with me for a half-hour in your house?

LS: To be honest, and since this is an interview, I might as well be honest—although in writing, which I know you want to discuss, I would say that it is possible to be honest and to lie at the same time—I simply don’t like allowing writers into my home. In the letter I wrote to you, I said that my house would be opened, but since writing that, I’ve changed my mind. Basically, I believe that all writers are thieves, not of material things, but of images and events. I have a friend who’s a writer, I won’t mention his name, but he came over to my house one day to help me move a bureau from my bedroom to the guestroom. In my house, the rooms are next to each other, but even with the drawers removed it took us a few minutes to lift it from one to the other. When we’d finally placed it where I wanted, we went back to the bedroom to get the drawers, and in the space where the dresser used to be was a deflated red balloon, and resting on top of that balloon was a spider. This writer had a book published the next year, and in it was a scene in which the narrator moves his bureau—a bureau exactly like mine—and under it the he finds a spider atop a red balloon. I was glad he was able to use
such a strange image and make it work with the themes he was exploring, and I think the book might have been nominated for an award, but I also felt as though he had stolen something from me. His idea came from an experience at my house and it should have been mine to use. And the image was so strange, a spider perched on the balloon, that I know I would have used it. Critics have said that at times my writing can be strange, but that strangeness is usually of my own invention. Here, I had something bizarre happen in my own house and I couldn’t even use it. Since then, I haven’t allowed writers into my home, and rarely do I ever talk to them. I don’t have much time anymore to observe when I leave the house now—I have to watch my wife carefully—so all my ideas and memories are somehow spurred by what I find inside.

I also knew that a twenty-year-old version of myself was coming to meet me, and that reminded me of my skills as a writer at your age. Even though you grew up in a different time, I can guess that your writing couldn’t be much better or worse than mine was at twenty. Never do I go back to read what I wrote at that age, and to be a bit harsh, I don’t trust you as a young writer to correctly interpret what you see. I don’t want you to observe too much of me that isn’t me. My house, for example, is associated with me, and you will look at it and decide you know something about the person who lives there. Think about what you noticed about the outside of my house. No doubt you can still picture the flaking paint and the dead grass. You may be able to see, although your memory of this detail isn’t as sharp, that my house has a Victorian-style peaked roof. And I bet you saw but didn’t notice the ramp leading up to the front door, and that the door is a bit wider than normal. I’ll take your nodding to mean that I’ve interpreted you correctly. Both renovations were very expensive. Luke, whatever you choose to write will be inevitably biased and wrong, and I sympathize
with that. But as long as you’re honest with yourself it doesn’t matter as much. You’re going
to get it wrong. In this interview, though, since I’m your subject, I don’t want readers reading
a description of the inside of my house and then believing that they know something about
me from that description. So I took you here, where all you have are the words I say. Now I
get to dictate the words you use, because they’re mine. I don’t trust you to take my body and
life and write them accurately. I’ve learned to be wary.

LS: But aren’t you worried whether I will infer something about you from the fact that
you brought me here?

LS: I’ve never been here before. Well, I came here once about twenty-years ago, but it didn’t
look like this. I came to this place with a friend to watch the Cubs in the playoffs in ’84. I
don’t remember whether they lost that game, but I do know they lost the series. Everyone in
Chicago knows that. If you want to infer that I’m a cubs fan, that’s okay. It’s not true though.

LS: Since you mentioned the city, I’ll ask you this: What are you doing now? I know
you have a house in Evanston, but I don’t know anything else. What about Chicago
made you come back?

LS: Although fifty-two sounds old to someone who is twenty-two, I don’t feel very old at all.
You’re looking at me like I used to look at older people when I was twenty, thinking they
had nothing left to give. I was a hideously critical teenager, too; it appears that growing up in
different eras doesn’t change a person a whole lot. You probably see me and can’t tell
whether I'm forty or sixty, but perception reverses when you get older. I see you and I can't
tell if you're sixteen or thirty. At my age, I need to take time to remember what it was like to
be young. If a person doesn't take some time to remember, he'll forget in very little time.
Memory, I think, works like a muscle, if you don't keep flexing it, you'll get weaker. What
was the original question?

LS: What are you doing now, here in Chicago?

LS: I'm still working, still writing. My wife works from home, and with the investments we
made ten years ago, we have enough money so I can just write. I'm working on another book
of short stories, actually. I'm writing slowly and deliberately. Each of the stories I've been
working on is in a form I've begun to call a fictional essay. An essay, I think, is a searching
of sorts: it begins with something almost tangible—a place or thing, an experience or
emotion—and then examines that thing for some sort of truth. Now, I want to say that I think
"truth" is a bad word for what a writer is really looking for when he sits down to write. Its
meaning is too broad. There's a difference between finding the truth and telling the truth, and
as I mentioned earlier, a writer can illuminate a truth through a lie. So, you see, that word's
meaning has been stretched like a rubber band. I'm not sure whether it has snapped into
meaninglessness—as a rubber band does when it breaks—but when I hear the word "truth,"
it doesn't mean anything tangible. What I try to do in the fictional essays is examine topics or
ideas or experiences using characters and situations that I've entirely made up. Some of
them, for example, are collections of short monologues where different people discuss a
similar topic. I try to make them come together a bit at the end, but what I'm really trying to
do is create more questions than answers. I decided long ago that if the author presents a situation as believable, it doesn’t matter whether it actually happened. Fiction is often more believable than real life.

_Southworth pauses to give me time to write, and reminds me to transcribe his words as accurately as possible. Whenever he cannot think of the exact words he wants to use, he positions his palms across from each other, his fingers hooked inward as if he is trying to catch the absent thought. As he speaks, he does not look at me, but instead stares past me toward the wall behind or at the table before him. “You haven’t asked me any questions from your notebook yet, or asked anything about my books,” he says._

“I’m getting to them,” I say, and remember that he has not completely answered the question I asked him a few minutes earlier.

_LS: The second part of my earlier question was what brought you back to Chicago?_  
**What about this city is attractive to you?**

_LS: Attractive? Like a woman? It doesn’t seem like the same thing to me. Until I married, the women in my life were sturdy enough when around, but once they left they became like ghosts to me. All these women kept leaving me, or I left them, so I find it somewhat interesting that a few years after I finally married, my wife began needing me to help her move from one place to another. Maybe it was her physical independence that finally showed us how to exist together. Since this is an interview, I won’t say anything else about her, but I will say that the city isn’t like a woman at all. Whether I live in it or not, it is always there; it
never moves. I always know where it is, and I’m always there, or here, in a way. So I don’t really come back to it, I just solidify it again. This city holds a certain energy and tone for me that’s almost a lens through which I see the rest of the world. In one of my stories in Hog Weavers, I had a character that wore something I called Chicago glasses. That came from an idea I had about myself, as many of the things I write do. Chicago glasses means that the way I respond to any place is filtered through my past experience with this city. The only time my Chicago glasses don’t affect my sight is when I’m here. There’s no doubt that growing up here, in these surroundings, has instructed my writing and the way I recreate the world. I heard somewhere that Yeats was always trying to write the moment when he saw someone light a match. The man was under a bridge, and when he lit the match, the light echoed between the bottom of the bridge and the water flowing underneath, and the world sparked up for a moment, illuminating those crevices which were shadowed by the dark of night. I think all writers have moments like that: an image or feeling that they are attempting to recreate. I would say that I’m always trying to write the feeling I have when I stand at Austin Blvd., the street where the city ends and the suburb of Oak Park begins. I have stood there and observed the differences between one side of the street and the other, the cracked pavement and dirt lots on the city side, and the nice houses and manicured lawns on the other, and I felt as if I was seeing waves crash against a wall. The suburb is a completely different place, and not only does it lack the energy and mystery of the city, it abhors and defies the city. I grew up when those borders were strengthening, when the city was falling into poverty and the suburb was becoming affluent, and my book, White Flight, is based on that one feeling.
LS: I understand what you’re saying. For the last few years I think I’ve been trying to write the way the traffic lights streak down the icy pavement in the winter. It’s almost like a stroke of glowing paint on the dark concrete.

LS: Yes, you’re a city writer, too, as I’d hoped you would be. It’s very hard to grow up in Chicago as we have and not have it inform our descriptions in some way. That’s what I meant when I was talking about Chicago glasses. It’s hard not to write how the vapor floats out of the manholes. It’s hard not to write about how when you stand on one end of the El platform in the winter, you can watch the exhalations leaking out of fifty mouths. In this city the air, the breath, makes itself known when it’s cold. And it’s hard not to write how the sparks follow the cold wheels of the train out of the station.

LS: If the main experience you are trying to write is the divide between the city and the suburb, and the crossing of those borders, do you see everything like that? Do you see our world as a place where distinctions are solid, where everything is divided?

LS: No, I don’t. That’s one of the reasons why that border fascinates me. Land and gender are two of the few places where borders are obviously marked. Our culture tries hard to differentiate everything. And we place distinctions on everything, but for most of those things, the lines are blurred. We start to learn to do this when we are very young. A baby learns the difference between his father and mother by the different timbres of their voices. Then the child notices that they look and smell different. Eventually he concludes that these are two different people. At some point he learns that his father and mother have a difference
in their genitalia as well. That’s when, as soon as the child learns to say it, he knows the
distinction between male and female. In this country, children also learn the difference
between property and race fairly quickly. From there they learn that everything has
something that is opposite. If there is good, there has to be evil. If there is a God, there has to
be a devil. It’s one or the other. What makes you ask a question like that?

LS: Partly because this year I wrote a memoir based on when my friend murdered a
girl in our dorm hall. My professor told me to enter it in a fiction contest because he
didn’t see a difference between fiction and non-fiction. I entered, got to the final round,
but was disqualified by the judge when I told her it was based on a real experience.
Since then I’ve become unsure of the difference between the two genres, and I have
wanted to prove her wrong. But that’s only a personal thing. I’m interested in defining
the differences, or lack of differences, between fiction and non-fiction.

LS: That sounds like an interesting situation, both what you wrote about and the exchange
between you, the professor and the judge. The question you’re asking is one that, I think, has
only begin to be examined in the last ten years or so. I read an essay by a man named Joseph
Clancy, and in it he tries to convince college professors to change the way they teach by
genre. He was arguing that fiction and non-fiction, or at least narrative non-fiction like
memoir and biography, should be taught together in a genre called narrative. His argument is
that both the genres use story the same way, and because of that, it matters less whether the
story really happened, and more how the author tells the story to us. Although Clancy’s
argument is illuminating, genres won’t change anytime soon because the book-buying public
have become comfortable with them, and these are people who are generally not literature students. As I said, I’ve been working on a book of fictional essays but haven’t been looking at them in terms of genre. I’ve been looking at them in terms of truth, or some word that is better than truth. I’ll have to think about them in those terms now and see where that thinking takes me.

LS: I’ve always been told that I have a good imagination, but I’ve never felt as though I’ve ever made anything up in my entire life. I used to try by writing lots of dream sequences, but even those were based in my own reality somehow. So I’m not sure I understand how mixing up a bunch of my own experiences is different than relating one as it actually happened.

LS: The human imagination cannot transcend the human senses. Borges edited an anthology, where he listed information on a collection of different monsters, and in the introduction, he states that all the features of these monsters are drawn from the features of real animals. Descartes wrote the same thing. A painter, he said, can never transcend his senses. He must use colors that already exist, and if he wants to paint something that does not exist, he has to use elements of things he has observed in the real world. He can distort them, but they are still based on an empirical reality. Why fight the way our own mind works? That seems impossible to overcome. And I’m tired of bothering.

I can feel Southworth watching me as a write, but do not know how to interpret his gaze. I would have expected him to look at me warmly, as a father might eye his son, but he does
not. I pause and attempt a confused expression as though I’m recalling Southworth’s exact words, but really, I just want a break. I try to imagine what it would be like in his position, to know how much life my younger self has left to live.

“Are you done writing?” Southworth asks, peeking at his watch.

“Yes,” I say.

“You still haven’t asked me any questions from your notebook. I’ve got about five minutes. Ask me at least one before I go.”

LS: The questions in the notebook are not good ones. I wasn’t as prepared as I should have been, but here’s something we did not get to: Do you have any advice for young or struggling writers?

LS: I assume you’re asking that to benefit your own experience rather than for anyone who might read this interview. So when I look back on my life and I see a younger version of myself both sitting across from me and in my memory, I can only tell you the two things I regret: that I didn’t sleep with more pretty women, and that I didn’t take better care of my teeth. Here’s a question for you as a young writer: Is it hard to keep writing, knowing there is a good chance you’ll never get published?

LS: Yes, it’s hard, but what I’m mostly struggling with right now is just getting myself to write. I put it off whenever I can, and when I do write, I have to write through this tremendous fear. I’m really scared. Many times, I’m too scared to write. So I go and do something else. The strange thing is, I think I’m as scared of succeeding as I am of
failing. I don’t even like talking to people I don’t know, and I think that’s for the same reason. At the end of a conversation, someone will either like or dislike me, and I’m wary of both.

LS: Unfortunately, that will never change. That fear will always be there. That’s a good place to end, don’t you think?

_Southworth rises, smiles, and then leaves, carrying his coat under his arm. Through the window, I watch him stride down the street, and I wait about twenty minutes, until I’m certain he has caught a train. I’m unsure how I would react to him if I saw him again, and to save myself the embarrassment, I want to avoid him on my way back to Evanston. When I step outside the bar, the rain has stopped, but the pavement and the air are still moist and gray. Cautiously, I ascend to the Addison platform, and I’m relived to find Southworth is not there. On the train back, I imagine sending the interview to Southworth, how he will send it back with a note telling me that he does not remember half of those questions and answers, followed by an accusation that I’ve fabricated most of the interview. It occurs to me that it would be more fun to make up an interview that never happened and, just to hear his reply, send that one to Southworth instead. Listening to sound of the train and the rumble of conversations, I picture myself in the body of the man I’ve just met. I try to predict my future, but besides the baldness, I can’t see much through the fog. I notice that every time the train stops at a station and the doors open, a gust of cold air invades the heat, and I open my notebook to record this detail._
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