

Abstract

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Charlotte Cline, Master of Fine Arts, 2007

Thesis directed by: Professor Maud Casey
English Department

Sandstone appears cohesive and solid on the surface, yet it is extremely porous. The grains do not fit together as puzzle pieces because of their individual shape. Vast distances separate each grain from the other on a microscopic level.

Humanity seeks to compress itself into the more cohesive and solid surface of community. Individual identity is mediated through difference and opposition to the greater whole. We cannot know who we are, if we do not know who we are not.

For any group to feel whole, strangers exist. These individuals serve as both scapegoat and outcast to validate the inconsistencies that exist in any group. By exploring the fissures that exist between community and individual I hope to mirror the inconsistencies each person has between their external and their internal realities. Each of the main characters within this collection is a stranger, not only to the community that each seeks admittance to, but to themselves as well.

**COWBOY CHRONICLE
AND OTHER STORIES**

by

Charlotte Cline

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair
Professor Merle Collins
Professor Howard Norman

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Cue Your Voices

The angel broke as Marissa watched television in the dark of her apartment. She watched bombs drop on a distant country. The noises made her jump. She was glad to have the dog at least.

Her roommate, Katherine, was having dinner with her boyfriend, so Marissa was alone this Friday night, which might have bothered most people, but not her. Marissa was used to being alone. Every Saturday morning, Marissa spent time with the only remaining family member who spoke to her, her grandmother. They sang karaoke or played cards together in the nursing home. She used these visits to the nursing home to explain to Katherine why she could never go dancing or drinking, when the real reason was much simpler. Marissa was so socially awkward, even with herself; she thought it best to avoid interacting with others.

On television, the detonations only increased while Marissa pushed a cracker with cheese into her mouth. She waited for something else to happen while the little terrier waited for her to drop crumbs. The detonations were a furious and there were so many the individual explosions could no longer be heard. The cacophony sounded like one note that caused the terrier to yap in fear. It ran between the kitchen and the door; then it sat in the hall, panting and shaking. Every once in a while the terrier would trot to the door, hoping to hear the comforting jingle of Katherine's keys in the door. Even the dog preferred Katherine over Marissa, who growled at the terrier, which only caused another shrill series of barks.

The only way to quiet the dog was to play a game of fetch. Yet the flash of thousands of bombs drew Marissa's eyes away from the dog and across the dark expanse of the living room. Marissa waited, sitting forward and closer to the television, hoping for a human face to flash on screen.

Headlines scrolled below the news report at too rapid a rate for Marissa to catch. Newscasters applauded the quick deaths the new "smart" bombs afforded. If you stood close enough to the detonation point, you could disappear with a flash; your soul carried to heaven quick as a picture. Nothing but ash, and perhaps not even ash, left behind. All that destruction, all that pain, and not even a human face for Marissa to reference. There was only the distant and obscure image of a sky filled with light. A sky thousands of miles from Marissa's living room, but very much like her own.

Marissa tossed the ball towards the kitchen and away from the long hallway. She didn't even *throw* the ball; she just flicked her wrist. Yet the ball curved up and into the cranny where the angel spied upon the rest of the house.

Marissa had crafted a sort of hole in her memory, a nether region where the angel stood transfixed by her hatred. Katherine loved the chintzy angel, and now, there it was broken on the floor.

The angel split in four pieces: the wings separating from the body, the head intact but damaged, and the hands clasped in prayer, disembodied. The rest of the angel became a fine white dust suspended around the space that had been the angel.

It was fortunate that Katherine had taken a series of classes on crafting the perfect dining room arrangement. This meant the apartment had a glue gun. And the only solution to Marissa's problem was to piece the angel back together.

With a dust pan and a little broom Marissa gathered the remains into a small pile, plugged the glue gun into the outlet on the laundry room wall, and waited for it to heat. Anything that fragile was something doomed in this world, thought Marissa. Only two sticks of glue remained in the kit so Marissa would have to be careful and keep her hands steady as a surgeon.

The phone rang, and an overwhelming feeling of guilt, as if she were being watched, filled Marissa.

“Hello,” said the voice.

“And how are you tonight Mr. B?” Marissa hoped this wouldn’t turn into a long lecture concerning her promise and potential as his employee and as the favored friend of his daughter.

“Listen,” Mr. B broke Marissa’s sweeping, “I’m about to step in to a show at the theatre. Katherine and Ben are already inside with the wife.” Marissa waited for him to continue. She never really spoke much when he called yet, he called a lot still.

“Ashley needs to stop by the apartment. She’s to pick up something for Katherine.” This would be the first time Marissa had seen Ashley since a dinner the Buel family had with Marissa during her junior year of college. Mr. B invited Marissa out of what she assumed to be a sense of duty, but during the meal itself it became apparent to her that he simply adored having an audience to perform for, and Marissa was that audience. The Buels were always silent where Ashley was concerned. And when they did speak of her they could only speak praise: Ashley is smart. So beautiful. And witty to boot. Yet there was a faint silence or a pause of uneasiness that permeated conversations surrounding Ashley, who seemed to be an entity rather than an ordinary person. Ashley

was the center of the Buel way of life, an embodiment and a token for why they were who they were.

“Just wanted to let you know she was en route,” his thinly disguised condescension annoyed Marissa. In a way, Mr. Buel believed his family had saved Marissa, that the Buels had set her on track from the poverty that he assumed to be her destiny. The thing that most annoyed her was slight truth in these assumptions.

He gave a small laugh and Marissa bristled. She gave the broom a stiff tug to relieve some of her quiet anger.

“I’m sure Ben told you all about it or that Ashley will. We all thought it best that she pick it up. Well, thank you for letting her in. Thank you so much. Thank you so much for doing this.”

If Marissa hadn’t been fatherless she would have said: No. Not at *all!* I should be thanking such a generous man as you. You’ve taught me so, so much. Flattery was always a good way to deal with Mr. Buel and only her tone would give away her disgust, and Mr. Buel was not a subtle man; he never understood her mockery. Although, even Mr. B’s nagging and pedantic lectures were comforting to Marissa since they showed he cared, somewhat, and care and acceptance, even if tinted with condescension, were the things Marissa craved most.

“We Buels are extremely grateful,” Marissa was running her hands over the three chunks of the angel, half-listening. The cold black eyes of the angel pitied her.

“Oh and don’t forget to deliver that package to Brookline on Monday morning. First thing, when you get to my office.”

Marissa nodded yes at the angel's black eyes, but then realized the ridiculousness of the gesture. Mr. B couldn't see her.

"Bye." She slammed the phone into the receiver. On cue, the door knob of the laundry room began to turn.

For half a second Marissa considered running into her room and hiding like the child she was, yet before she could so much as turn, Ashley was through the door.

Ashley, who was sun and blonde hair, and green eyes. Ashley, who was the reversal of her younger, darker and much shorter, sister.

"Hello," Marissa said to break the awkward silence, "It's been so long since I've seen you." To shield herself from Ashley's stare, Marissa hugged her out of a sense of embarrassment, trying to relax so Ashley wouldn't feel her stiff and nervous stance. Neither woman truly knew each other, they only knew *about* one another, so it became a hug muted by awkward elbows and clapping of backs.

Ashley kissed Marissa's cheek. "Yea. I haven't seen you since Kat's junior year. I feel like I know you well. Kat talks about you all the time." Ashley quieted and said, "Dad talks about you too." Marissa looked down at the angel and away from Ashley because she was not allowed to assess the beauty of Katherine's eldest sister.

Not speaking to Ashley was the one thing that Katherine asked her to do. In fact, Katherine exact statement had been, "Stay *away* from my sister. She reminds me of a, a wild animal trapped in a building. She stands very still, looks right through you, and any minute she's ready to bolt or bite.

There's violence in the way she walks."

To break the strange silence that hung between them Ashley explained, “I’m here to snatch a ring from Kat’s dresser. Won’t be long,” and she left the laundry room, walking at a fast pace towards the back hallway that lead to Katherine’s room.

Marissa thought about covering the body of the angel with a towel or perhaps a folded newspaper until Ashley left, but Ashley was already witness, so she resigned herself to sitting in front of the television again. Using the remote, she changed the channel to a sitcom then turned the volume up a little.

From the down the hallway Marissa could hear Ashley tossing Katherine’s room. A few times a loud bang was accompanied by Ashley swearing. Marissa listened to these noises that occasionally drowned out the sitcom’s laugh track.

To herself more than to Ashley, Marissa said, “Why do you think this is only the second time we’ve seen each other?”

Silence from the other room, not even the sound of drawers opening and closing. It was as if Ashley were waiting for an explanation for the question itself or formulating an answer. It did not occur to Marissa that Ashley had simply not heard her, so she settled back into the couch, concentrating on an infomercial to hide her disappointment.

Finally Marissa heard, “Here it is.” Ashley emerged from Katherine’s room with a ring pinched between index finger and thumb. She looked from Marissa to the television.

“I love this episode,” Marissa concentrated on the screen and felt the weight of Ashley bounce her on the springy couch.

“Well.” And Ashley looked at her then, “You want help assembling that angel?” Marissa didn’t speak, but stood and went to the laundry room. Ashley followed behind, stopping only for a moment to peruse the contents of the fridge.

“Not much in there. You girls keep a sparse house.”

Marissa held the wings of the angel in her hand. “Your sister is going to hate me.”

Ashley laughed and waved the suggestion away, “She’ll survive,” and she turned over some of the larger chunks to scrutinize the edges.

Finally, she put two of the pieces together like a puzzle and gestured towards the other piece. Marissa snatched it up and looked at the jagged edges with one eye half closed.

“I didn’t take a useless art course in college for nothing,” laughed Ashley. “Hold these, just like this.”

Marissa kept her hands frozen and a glob of glue fell onto the fringes, burning her, but she refused to let a single sound escape her lips while the glue burned her skin.

After only a few moments, Ashley stepped back to observe her work.

“The glue will dry clear. She’ll never notice.” Ashley held the wings and Marissa took over. The warm glue stretched; the wings half sinking into the angel’s back

“It looks a little off center,” said Marissa, although it did appear a little less sinister to Marissa now. “I guess I’ll have to go to Australia to get Katherine another one.”

“She bought it off U-buy,” laughed Ashley, “She got it from some crazy woman in the mid-west who collected angels and who needed a little cash. Cash is about the only thing Katherine gives easily”

“She didn’t buy it on a beach in Australia? After, after... A man bought it for her because they were lovers or something.” Ashley’s giggles broke the sentence and Marissa was too embarrassed to finish it.

Ashley shook her head at Marissa as if she was too innocent and trusting. “Why would my sister lie about that?” Ashley waited for the question to sink into Marissa.

“Katherine lies about all sorts of things.”

Ashley shrugged her shoulders. “Katherine always has been exceedingly private. It’s so annoying. Only she knows what her truth is.”

“Everyone lies once in awhile.” Marissa felt the need to protest, to protect herself against the idea of Katherine lying, but she found she had nothing to say.

Ashley shrugged, her eyes level with Marissa, “I don’t. I’ll just tell a person what I think of them.”

Ashley moved towards Marissa and put her hand on her shoulder, “The wings are the only place you can even tell it’s been broken,” yet Marissa wasn’t listening to Katherine’s sister. She stared at the angel; the black eyes still brimmed with pity.

If Katherine didn’t tell her the truth about such a small detail as the angel’s origin, then what else had Katherine lied about? What other details had been omitted?

There were still a small pile of strands, pieces that hadn’t quite fit as they had reconstructed the angel. Ashley pushed these remainders into the trashcan with a quick swipe of a wet cloth. She put her hand on Marissa’s hand and smiled. Her green eyes kept moving, kept looking over the contents of the laundry room.

“That’s finished.” Ashley inched her fingers into leather gloves and buttoned her coat, “Now you have to go get a drink at that corner bar. And I have to wait for my boyfriend. We might as well do it out and together.”

Marissa got her coat.

A loud, half-distorted version of a 70's power ballad blasted through the bar door. Marissa held the door for Ashley, who breezed passed and into the immediate warmth without a thanks. Looking down the street for Katherine, an act that was as absurd as it was necessary, Marissa cleared her throat and stepped in from out of the cold.

Although Marissa knew that Katherine was at the Little Black Box theatre, watching actors move across an empty stage, speaking sparse monologues, which were not quite dialogues, Marissa still believed Katherine was capable of appearing where she was least expected or wanted. So Marissa gave another quick glance down the street to reassure herself that Katherine wasn't there.

Katherine could see the truth about people. Physical truth was why Katherine enjoyed going to theatre shows and rock concerts. According to Katherine, the body illustrated desire. A soul's impulse. That the itching and tapping movements of boredom were really the soul struggling to free itself. Some tiny pecking sensation started up in Marissa's heart, which made her foot tap. A bird pecking to free itself from the cage of her wiry and no longer muscular body.

Movement always precipitated action that would indicate character. Based on how Marissa would be standing or sitting Katherine could sense her guilt or her unease. She would frequently say: There! You are folding your arms again. Now I know you're upset!

Marissa folded her arms because she was often annoyed that Katherine was dictating to Marissa what she was supposedly feeling, which struck Marissa as ridiculous because she was hardly aware of why she committed any action.

With a deep breath, Marissa walked into the bar and let the door shut behind. The leather bar was pitch black and barely wide enough to fit more than thirty people, but somehow roughly forty men, dressed in black boots and black pants, milled around watching the television. Someone flipped the channel.

The atmosphere made Marissa instantly comfortable, more comfortable than she had been in the apartment. It was less disconcerting to walk into a leather bar than to walk into a bar filled with men wearing the uniforms of Corporate America, a place where, according to Katherine, Ashley was always comfortable.

Already Ashley had attracted a man who picked a few bills from his pocket to pay for a pair of shots. He put one hand on the second glass and Ashley playfully smacked him away, “That one is for my friend,” she gestured towards Marissa. There wasn’t another woman in sight. Ashley didn’t notice, but Marissa felt herself become hyper-aware as the bar suddenly became smaller. Ashley counted to three with her fingers, and they took the shots while the man watched on.

“Thanks,” Ashley said and waved him away, but he stood fast. To shoo him along Ashley said, “You asked me what I wanted. And I said: ‘two shots.’”

“Well let’s get three more and I can sit with you ladies.” He reached back into his pocket for the money.

“No. My friend and I have things to discuss.”

“You’re just going to take the liquor and leave me then,” grumbled the man. He leaned over towards her, staring her straight in the eyes.

“Looks that way,” The bartender said as he laughed, “Greg looks like this woman just screwed you.” Wiping a rag across the bar, his voiced filled with warning, “No harm though. You got to it by buying a pretty lady a drink.”

“Bullshit. She ain’t pretty.” And the man puffed his chest a little then returned to watching the silent TV. He traced patterns with his index finger into the wood and gulped the rest of his beer down.

“Can I get you ladies something else besides another man’s liquor?”

“Beer,” said Ashley.

“Beer and get one more of whatever he’s having for him,” said Marissa. Ashley rolled her eyes. Marissa wanted to talk to some of these men, and she looked around to see who appeared to be the most interesting. This impulse always annoyed Katherine “to pieces.” It frazzled Katherine and made her uncomfortable. There was no point in even discussing Katherine in front of Ashley. Marissa suspected that Ashley was a woman who knew how beautiful she was and used that power, along with her wit, to wiggle her way into another’s heart.

“Katherine is right. You just let people control you.” Ashley said.

Marissa only committed a half-shrug as a response. “I just don’t want to be rude, that’s all.”

“So who cooks and cleans with your arrangement?” Marissa didn’t quite understand the question so she swigged the beer because she wanted to see what would be said before formulating a response.

The television channels scrolled by at the bar. News anchors in a blizzard. Man hunting swordfish. Horses pulling beer wagons. And the channels stopped. A bull bucked on the television screen in the bar; a young cowboy tossed like a rag doll. A little acid-metal bit the room. Cowboy shouts and looping screams made Marissa look up and around at the men in the room. The knocking of pool balls could be heard from some hidden place.

“I guess you’ll have to find a new apartment since Ben’s proposing soon.”

Marissa nodded. Ben mentioned the impending marriage to Marissa constantly. He always leaned in as if it was a secret, and when Katherine returned from the bathroom, he would immediately grab her hand and say, “She’s mine and she’s beautiful.” As if Marissa could forget.

Ashley fidgeted. She was full of nervous energy, bouncing her feet. Marissa wasn’t certain what to keep looking at so she looked down and around. She tore the napkin that her beer glass rested on into shreds. Ashley put her hand into her pocket and took out a ring from within her coat pocket. She squinted, one eye closed, staring at Marissa through the ring.

“How do you feel about marriage?”

“I’m happy for Katherine. I want what she thinks is good for her.”

“What if she thinks the wrong thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well Ben is handsome and cute.” Marissa agreed with a slight shrug. “And he absolutely adores her.” Ashley added.

“But you can always tell if a couple is in love based on the unconscious manner they touch. So what do you really think?”

Ben constantly touched Katherine and felt for her at parties. When they were at a party he moved beside Katherine, afraid to be away from her side even for a minute.

Echoing her thought Ashley said, “He follows her like a puppy.”

Another man sat down next to Ashley. Marissa watched him try to catch her eye. He did this by smiling and grinning any time she managed to swivel his direction, even momentarily.

Marissa took a swig of beer and continued to observe the rest of the room trying not to look at Ashley. Beautiful women always made her nervous; women that she was attracted to her made her feel a little like a bug on a microscope. Suddenly everyone watching.

“You could move in with me if you want. I need a new roommate.” The statement made Marissa a little shaky. She didn’t know how to respond so she kept her head down, tracing her initials on the bar.

“I’ve been thinking about a place of my own instead.”

“Katherine doesn’t pay you enough,” Ashley put her hand on Marissa’s and tapped it as if to console her, “I know and it’s not enough.” Marissa knew better than to believe a woman like Ashley when she was offered something like this.

“You live here now? Permanently?”

“Yea my boyfriend and I moved here.” Then in a voice that was very level. “We never lived together; he’ll be here soon though. An engineer with the merchant marines.”

“Sounds interesting.”

Now it was Ashley's turn to shrug, "He goes on trips a lot. Very decent man. Good job. Well-mannered."

"You sound bored." The sentence had fallen out of Marissa's mouth before she realized it. Ashley stared. A suddenly cold, blank stare.

"It's true. He can be a little ...predictable."

The man who bought the shots turned towards them, putting his hand on Marissa's shoulder. She shrugged it off because she did not like his smile. It was dangerous.

"You girls like bullfights." He didn't ask it as a question; he used the statement as a wedge into their conversation.

Marissa shrugged and said, "Seems a little cruel." He stared back at them hard, his eyes leveled into Marissa's. Katherine always accused Marissa of picking up strange people, collecting oddballs that would talk to the pair for hours. What usually happened was these people would just talk to Marissa. In her mind, there were only two types of conversation, confessions and declarations. Once there had been a drunken man who turned from speaking with Marissa to paw at Katherine. Marissa had to kick him in a shin and pull Katherine, who had sobbed, out of the bar. Men rarely bothered with Marissa in a sexual manner because she was not the most approachable of women. They were often intimidated.

"I saw a bullfight once," Marissa said to the man who had bought them shots. It was typical for her to carry on two strands of conversation at once.

“My sister and I do have a bit of competition between us, but it’s not like I’m trying to make Kat jealous.” Marissa took a swig of beer and stared directly ahead. “Your life sounds exciting. Katherine has told me a lot about you.”

Marissa wondered if Ashley was making fun of how she spent her time: working for the Buels, arranging music at night and visiting her sick grandmother. Marissa didn’t have a ‘life’ in the traditional sense.

“I mean. I don’t know anyone who has stolen before.” The largest and best things that Marissa had stolen were three televisions and a bedroom set.

“That was half my life ago. I was fourteen and bored and knew I couldn’t really be prosecuted.”

More to test the weight of Katherine and Marissa’s friendship than to disprove the existence of it, Marissa asked, “Why do you think Katherine didn’t tell me that you moved here?” Perhaps what Katherine wanted was distance between them, perhaps she wanted to keep her true self hidden from Marissa and perhaps, Marissa realized, she had been a fool. Yet how could trusting someone be foolish?

“She’s a busy and cold woman. Lots of hours in a day that could be billed. Lots of people to sue and lots of…”

But Marissa didn’t really want to know the answer so she asked another question, “Why do you want me to move in?”

“Oh, I just thought it would be fun. And it’s no big deal that Katherine doesn’t want us to talk. I mean, what could possibly happen that would bother her?”

To test Ashley’s sincerity Marissa said, “Okay then, I’ll move in with you.”

“Well it could be fun. We seem similar. Katherine told me how impulsive and fun you can be. You remind me of me when I was your age.”

“Really?”

“Yep. You do. But maybe we should wait and see if it would bother Katherine. I can't think why though.”

“Did you move here to work at your dad's office?”

“Nope, quit. Bored of it. I'd like to do something else.”

“You girls from around here?” said the man who had bought them shots. His interruption shocked Marissa out of what she wanted and back into what had to be.

“I'll get my own place,” Marissa's voice shook as she said the words, using them in the way Marissa slapped away the man from her hand. Marissa turned to the man, “Actually I just live in that red brick building up the street.”

He nodded as if he knew it. And continued to stare at them. He moved closer, scooting along the bar stools towards them. Marissa half-smiled and turned back towards Ashley.

Ashley said, “I didn't mean anything by asking you to move in. It's just that if I'm going to move in with a stranger it might as well be a stranger who is practically family. And Kat does talk about you a lot.” Marissa wondered if Katherine had told her how every party they went to Marissa would end up alone and on the fringes, sipping a glass of wine and simply watching everyone. She often believed that Katherine was bothered by her, that Katherine considered her dead weight left over from college.

Ashley moved closer to Marissa, their knees now touching, “Kat told me. I think it’s cool.” Marissa turned to the television screen and hoped that Katherine had managed to tell her older sister about her hearing “troubles.”

Marissa was allowed to watch people’s lips a little more carefully because of the slight hearing loss but most of the time Marissa feigned a greater loss than was necessary. This lie didn’t bother her because it allowed her time to stare at people more closely, so she could judge them.

Ashley touched Marissa’s hand in a tentative way and Marissa realized that Ashley was waiting for an answer Marissa hadn’t heard her ask.

“Couldn’t hear you.” Marissa managed. Although the music was a little loud Marissa read Ashley’s lips, focused against the noise that caved into her hearing. The music amplified and Marissa wondered if it was the beer.

“Everybody knows in the family. They just love you,” from Ashley’s lips.

“Glad to hear.” A few more people glanced over at the pair. Marissa now focused on the television playing in the background. A different bull had thrown its rider and climbed over guard rails. In the stands, people fled. A young boy of 12 or 13 was gored and trampled upon as the bull ran over his right shoulder. A roar of laughter from the others at the bar. Some people clinked the bottoms of their beer bottles.

“You need to stay away from boys. Girls will think you are straight.”

“There aren’t any girls here. Besides you.”

“It’s what makes this bar lame,” said the man sitting next to Marissa. Taking a swig he repeated, “Lame!”

“I understand what you’re complaining about,” said Marissa to the man, “Trust me.”

He touched Marissa’s hand. She shook him off and with cool eyes Marissa spoke while staring directly at him, “Sometimes everything is really annoying. Everyone seems really frustrated, don’t you think?” He didn’t move. “Don’t you think everyone feels pretty much the same loneliness?”

The man stared at Marissa and scrunched his features as he went through various modes of confusion, “You’re fucking strange,” but most people said these types of things to Marissa when she told a truth. He stood up and dug around in his pockets for cash, muttering.

The bartender now stood in front of them, waiting to be paid by the man and giving Marissa and Ashley a frown because his customer was leaving. They were drinking their beers slowly.

“She is a lesbian. Not interested in someone like you anyway.” But the man couldn’t hear Ashley because he had disappeared out the door.

From the sea of leather and from the fog of cigarette, a youngish man appeared. He put his arm on Ashley’s hip and kissed her on the cheek.

“Look, don’t be weirded out about my asking you to move in,” Ashley still spoke a little too quietly, “It’s not anything other than me being too lazy to put an ad up. And I feel like your part of the family.”

“Hello.” Ashley said, kissing the man on the cheek.

“You have to come out with us tonight,” she whispered into Marissa’s ear. Another roar from the crowd and the small group, Ashley, Marissa and the youngish

man, looked up as the bull was now being pulled from the stands by a lot of clowns, tugging at the animal's neck with about ten ropes.

Marissa followed the pair out into the dark. The boyfriend looked back, a little confused.

No one introduced each other.

Marissa felt her anxiety inch up her throat. So she sipped wine to stop her itching throat, but she was intoxicated and hanging over the wine glass. She waited for Katherine to return home.

Marissa stared at the angel, wondering if it was better to tell Katherine what happened or let her discover the angel's crooked posture on her own. Since Katherine was the type of woman who knew when a spoon had been moved from within the kitchen drawers and because she knew when any of her knick-knacks had been moved, Marissa decided it was best to let her discover the angel's crooked wings to buy herself peace. That way there would be distance between the action of the breaking and the emotions the act would cause.

Although it seemed likely that Katherine would go to Ben's house, Marissa also knew Katherine enough to believe that she would return home without her boyfriend. Katherine was a private woman and her father bored her. Deep down Katherine probably knew that Ben bored her. She loved him, that was certain, and she loved her mother, but after a visit to the theatre, Katherine loved to analyze their movements, and she could only do that with Katherine.

Marissa was too drunk to hear the key in the door. She heard Katherine sigh and the purse and package that were dropped at the door, but Marissa couldn't bring herself to look at her friend.

"I heard that Ashley stopped by our apartment."

"She's a beautiful woman, your sister."

Katherine opened her purse with a violence and took a small box out of it. She presented a hefty ring to Marissa.

"It just needs to be fitted."

"Pretty ring." Marissa held her wine glass up, "A toast to Ben."

"You knew this was going to happen and so did I." Katherine watched Marissa who was tightly curled around the barstool in their kitchen.

"I mean congratulations. I mean it."

"You can never have children with someone you love." Katherine said this as if it was an explanation to an unasked question.

Marissa replied, "There's a population problem anyways." She straightened her stooping shoulders and dour face. "I'm not certain I want kids, besides."

"Ashley just likes to be contentious, and sometimes she likes to hurt people."

"She was quite pleasant and fun. We didn't analyze anything. We just had a few drinks and talked with that Merchant Marine of hers."

Katherine rolled her eyes, "He can be annoying."

"So can everyone."

"True."

“She’s a beautiful girl, your sister.” Marissa spun the wine glass between her hands, “She asked me to move in with her.”

“Well you can’t do that. You know that.”

Marissa shrugged, “Why not?”

Katherine wanted to believe she was unique, and Ashley only reminded her of how predictable she was. Katherine set her purse down on the couch and kept her face turned from Marissa.

Marissa said, “It was just a little talking.”

Katherine was the woman who Marissa calculated herself around and something about Ashley made Marissa want to hurt Katherine, made her want to break what didn’t really exist in the first place.

“She has seduced you.”

Ashley was the center of the Buels because she would not quite integrate herself into their clan and that was something that Marissa envied, something she wanted. She wanted that ability to be both the center of a group yet separate from it.

“Maybe I seduced myself. Everyone seduces themselves concerning something. Take our friendship as an example.”

Marissa sensed Katherine’s pity more acutely than any other emotion but she could not stop herself from pushing Katherine away.

Marissa walked into the living room to stare at the angel.

Marissa believed in the idea that you can order the universe to your advantage. A belief that is born from the realization that there was a pattern to reality. With all the modern ingenuity and our acceptance of chaos, routine continues to be what most people

crave in a day. Marissa discerned those day to day patterns and wanted to disrupt them, but with Katherine she wanted to maintain equilibrium; she felt safe with her. Marissa took the angel from its shelf and went into Katherine's room.

Katherine was undressing. No longer did the dance of polite and boring talk take place. The forms and gestures of polite acquaintances didn't apply between the pair anymore. They had lived together and known one another for years. Instead there was simmering violence beneath the way Marissa walked into the room and ignored Katherine undressing.

Marissa set the angel down with an angry sigh. You always hurt those you love because they feel the weight of your actions.

Katherine turned around and looked at it.

"Why are the wings crooked?"

"It had an accident."

Katherine fell silent and sat on the edge of her bed. Marissa recognized in Katherine the same quality of fear that she felt on a daily basis. The anxiety of having to make decisions, thousands of decisions and never knowing which were correct. Out of drunkenness Marissa went to shrug as if she wasn't quite certain, and her elbow knocked the angel onto the ground.

Marissa felt the silence that followed the crash strangle the remaining moments she would have with Katherine

"Aren't you glad I convinced Kat and Dad to let you have the day off?"

Ashley didn't wait for a response, "I know you are. It's better than being stuck in the office." A gust of wind caused Ashley to sort of dance to keep warm. She began humming. According to Katherine, her sister was not only beautiful but had a graceful voice. In the quiet awning of the bus shelter Marissa watched Ashley bob up and down to a tune. She strained her ears, willed them to imagine words to the melody, but she could think of nothing. Ashley's impulsive nature is what attracted Marissa to her and the reason that Marissa made certain to stand at a greater distance from her.

"I think I should only spend a few hours out. Kat's suit is in mid-swing and I've got to help her."

"No. We're going to the park and then a little shopping. I'll help with the cases. According to Kat you ought to go to law school like we did. Got a good mind."

Ashley stepped closer to Marissa so that she could whisper. They stood only inches apart as if she were imparting a secret, "How is your grandmother?" Ashley knew all about her but Marissa knew only hazy details, an outline of who Ashley might be. A collection of suggestion and circumstance.

"See Grandma every Saturday." Ashley took Marissa's hand for a moment and then began to rub her hands using hers.

There was a directness to Ashley that Marissa wanted to believe. Marissa shook her head no a few too many times and took her hands back, stuffing them into her coat pockets and finally Marissa asked, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I'm not doing anything. I'm just inviting you out for the day."

Nervous Marissa blurted out, "My grandma loves this hymnal about dancing," to protect herself from Ashley, who inched closer.

A laughing smile passed over Ashley's face, but it disappeared when a boy almost knocked into Ashley, who bumped Marissa. He looked at Ashley and gave a little nod as if he approved of her. Ashley ignored him.

Ashley held Marissa's arm and said in a voice that was filled with sadness, "You have to get out and do something. Keep your youth."

"I do. Every Saturday is activity day at the nursing home and I go there. Sometimes we play cards." The light in the overhang flickered.

The pair moved further away from the crowd almost unconsciously. As they did so, Marissa wondered if she had indeed seen Ashley smile, "At the nursing home, they do lots of karaoke on Saturdays. They do all the usuals. Patsy Cline. Nina Simone. My grandmother loves hymnals though."

Marissa turned away from Ashley, putting her hand on Ashley to sort of push her away a little underneath the feigned impulse to look down the road for the bus.

"I hope the bus comes soon." Ashley laughed and began to dance against the cold wind, bopping from one foot to the other, inching closer.

"How does the song go?"

"I'm not singing it. I never learned how to sing. Tone deaf. It's the hearing problem."

"Tell me the refrain; I might know it."

"It's about a dancing Jesus. The piper calling his worshippers to service."

Ashley suddenly broke into a chorea starting with her fingers. She whispered but Marissa could not make out what she was saying. All the eyes at the bus stop turned to watch this girl, who represented summer and warmth, dance beneath the cold light of the

stop. She was graceful. There was something in the way she moved that made her seem intelligent, a kind of purpose in the way she threw her hands back and around, laughing with a tight smile. You couldn't hide from Ashley. She pursued you if she cared to. The young man reached for her hand and she took it, dancing and laughing. He spun and dipped her, nearly knocking a couple. He was a bit off rhythm but no one seemed to mind. Marissa could only grin at them and watch.

“Enough,” said Ashley.

“Quite the scene.” Ashley laughed and bent to pick up a handful of snow. She tossed it in Marissa's face but Marissa easily dodged the throw.

“Dance.”

It is not possible that accidents occur between two people, even two people that don't truly know each other. Action is only a result of intention, either premeditated or subconscious. Action for Marissa was a way to relieve the pent up anxieties she held deep down, away from herself.

Since she was quiet and let others write the fictions they wanted on her, she felt she understood Ashley's intentions. For Ashley this was about being the center of the family, being the one who caused emotion, who broke out of the boring, monotonous drawl of the Buel way of life. She cared little for effect and wanted mostly to shock her sedate family awake.

“I can't dance,” Marissa said with not a little disappointment. And the people continued to watch. It was Ashley's turn to look around and to pretend that the bus was coming; she stepped off the curve and squinted into the morning sun.

“My grandma dances like this,” Marissa shook her hands, her head thrown back towards the sky. “It reminds me of that game trust. Where you close your eyes and fall back into someone’s arms.”

Ashley suddenly turned and said, “Catch me,” but of course Marissa dropped her because she had always been a bit slow. Or so people thought. Really, Marissa allowed people to impose their personalities on her so she often waited to react and waiting made her appear slow.

Marissa had learned to mute her impulsive nature. She had learned the difference between thinking and action. The only problem with action was if you did something silly such as steal a car her family expected her to be able to explain why. And often there wasn’t a why, the only completed action that allowed relief from the every day.

Marissa had often committed these different transgressions without thinking. Her parents acted as if they had never been in a store and wanted to fall asleep on one of the department store beds. Friends acted like they had never broken a tea set in a store, only to politely put it back in the recesses of a shelf on the opposite side of the store so as to escape being found out as not quite a thief but someone who breaks things and doesn’t pay for them.

People always wanted to know what the *purpose* of the action was, but more often than not, Marissa could barely conceive of purpose, let alone explain *what* she had done. It was only years after stealing a car or after having a party at a private pool she had broken into that she was able to translate these bold moves into language, explaining the action’s purpose, but by then people had given up on listening to Marissa altogether.

So Marissa learned to wear a mask of silence and usually her silence was enough to deter anyone from asking too many questions, including Katherine.

The bus arrived, packed with people out shopping. It was too cold out to wait for another bus so everyone standing in the bus stop surged forward, hoping to be those few who managed to squeeze onto the car.

Once inside, the heat of the bus made Marissa ill and uncomfortable. They careened down the streets, spraying compact cars in a wake of slush and salt. A sharp turn caused Ashley to fall into Marissa; their hips touched.

It was Marissa's turn to whisper, "Your sister hasn't found out about the angel."

Ashley smiled, "You know she bought it on U-buy because it reminded her of the one in Australia. What story did she tell you?" She moved closer still and Marissa looked at her directly to see what Ashley thought.

"She told me she and this guy made love on a beach. He got her that angel to remind her of it."

Ashley laughed out loud, "You remind me of myself sometimes. You are too trusting and a little too innocent.

Give her a reason to hate you; then you'll both be free."

"I think I already have."

The bus jolted to a quick stop and Ashley put her hand inside Marissa's coat, around her waist. Marissa didn't move for a moment; she didn't even breathe. Eventually she coolly looked around at the other passengers. A woman was reading. A couple of young men talking about business problems. No one noticed the pair.

Marissa knew what a woman's desire looked like. It began with fractions of touch, mistouches that could easily be explained, but when Ashley reached for Marissa's cheek to brush a snowflake from the bridge of her nose, the beginning action was unmistakable.

A ding from overhead and the words, "St. Paul Street," interrupted their mutual recognition.

"Our stop." Ashley pulled her off the bus and the cold air was a relief in from the heat of the bus' interior. "It's my place here."

Marissa knew how it would end but followed Ashley up the stairs to her apartment despite the ringing of Katherine's voice. She tears people apart somehow. I'm not jealous. She is almost too beautiful and too perfect. Kind. Loving. Thoughtful. Witty. All of it. Here was a beautiful woman offering herself to Marissa, so she said, "I'm not going to stay. I should run errands today since I've got the day off."

Ashley kissed her lips, but Marissa would not allow herself to kiss Ashley back, "I thought you were beautiful that night when we all had dinner," whispered Ashley. "I know Katherine wouldn't let us talk because you thought I was beautiful too."

A man across the street whistled out of his open window at the pair. And Marissa was instantly nervous, wishing Ashley would laugh to say she was joking or do what other women had done: accused her of forcing them to kiss her.

Marissa could only take Ashley's hands, which were warm and around her waist, and push her away every so slightly. There were patches of ice on the sidewalk and light blue granules of salt that melted the ice. The water was beginning to seep into Marissa's shoes, but the cold had gone, and her cheeks were hot.

In comparison to other adults, there was something childlike about Marissa, an emotional weakness that was most evident when she was physically close to someone. A quality that made people instantly trust and wish to crush her in the same breath. She was not popular at parties or get togethers because as she had grown she wanted to know the answers to questions such as:

“Do you love him?”

Ashley gave a slight nod, no.

“Good then I feel okay about flirting with you,” And it was true that Marissa felt better now that Ashley said she did not love the Merchant Marine.

The question snuck up on Marissa, but once it was in her mind, she had to say it out loud, “What about Kat?”

Marissa remembered that first night she had met Katherine. To prevent herself from drinking herself to death Marissa had gone out of the apartment and did the most un-American, and the least polite thing a person could do, she crossed the hall and knocked on her neighbor’s door.

Katherine had answered in long pajamas that had clouds printed on them; the soft sound of classical music sifted behind her. Marissa offered her a drink and said, “Let’s drink to...death.”

“What about Kat?” Ashley now put her hand on the small of Marissa’s back and tugged her forward.

Marissa realized that Ashley was waiting for a response. “Never. Never anything with Kat.” Katherine had invited her in and began to talk about a chemistry test she was taking and how she believed that she would just have to be a lawyer since organic

chemistry made absolutely no sense. It's not just all particles and things being attracted to one another. It can't be just that. Somehow her tirade against chemistry had brought Marissa back into the present; Marissa was drowning beneath the weight of her past and impending future. The pair had been nearly inseparable since that moment.

“Never more than friends?” Marissa didn't answer, not even a shrug this time.

Her natural impulse to stay quiet melted others projections onto her and she used this to her advantage in this moment. These projections caused people to confess things to her. In airport bars, lawyers would tell her information about their personal lives, consulting her as their counsel for emotional affairs. Men on the street who bummed cigarettes would suddenly talk about how expensive things were and how the only thing that kept them running was the idea of sitting still at a desk job. Women would tell her secrets about their marriages. And it was all because Marissa was the stranger in every circle. After each confession, the people would try to validate themselves, to vindicate the ugliness of humanity is capable of. Marissa seemed to wallow in the ugliness to these people.

Katherine was the first and only person who Marissa had confessed to. At the end of Marissa's stuttering confession, Katherine had crossed the room and hugged her, holding her for a brief moment. Then Katherine had said everything would work out the way it was supposed to, yet she crossed her room and left Marissa listening to the soft classical music she had been studying by.

Something about how quickly Katherine moved for the door haunted Marissa. Katherine came back into the dorm room moments later, having gone to the bathroom. In the moment between Katherine leaving then returning from the bathroom, Marissa knew

that it would be her that would break and fracture as a result of their friendship, but she was haphazard and liked to push against people; it made her remember she was alive.

“Ashley. I’ve been friends with your sister for years.”

“Flirting is not what I would call this.”

“Flirting is all this can be.”

“Really everyone is just too cowardly to actually get to know someone else.”

Katherine loved Marissa but she kept her at an arms length. She micromanaged Marissa and pitied her more than anything. The love that Katherine held for Marissa was born of pity. Marissa had been drinking because the woman she loved at the time had left. Her family had pressured her to desert Marissa. And could Marissa really argue? What did Marissa have to offer a person other than extensive debt?

Katherine tried to console Marissa, but as they hugged Marissa had a cruel thought: You believe all those ugly impulses that you have are easily veiled beneath empty conversations about books or chemical reactions. The voice in her mind continued while Katherine comforted her.

You’ve never really lost anything because you’ve never really felt anything.

Katherine poured herself a drink of whisky from Marissa’s bottle.

Ashley now said, “You smile, say a little polite conversation while talking to an acquaintance and all the while your interior monologue is managing your reactions. Someone says something rude you have the choice to ignore it or react.” Ashley kissed her again, and Marissa gave in, letting Ashley lead her up into the apartment.

Marissa understood what the weight of a person's body can mean against another, what the weight of another person's touch could cost a person against the debts of loneliness. Loneliness which is a worse destiny than obedience to desire in this moment. After all, sex is a physical act and not something that could mar the soul.

The smell was stale chemicals and cleaner. Marissa's stomach churned over the smell; she swallowed heavily as she signed the roster. Even though there were roughly three hundred residents, the nursing home always seemed empty. It was Saturday Activity Day and it happened to be time for Karaoke. An old man shuffled through the hall way, pulling an IV behind him. Marissa breezed past him towards the dining room where a small speaker and microphone had been connected to a television.

The hum of the speakers resonated off the small wood floor, which served as a stage, and needed a good mopping. A group of about fifteen ladies were huddled around a few tables, surrounded by a sea of other, empty tables. Some of the ladies were dressed in the light pink suits of their day. One woman looked particularly disheveled at the table where Marissa's grandmother sat; her blue dress hung off her shoulders. Marissa knew that the woman in blue disliked speaking to anyone before her karaoke performance.

The woman in blue had once told Marissa that she had wanted to play flute, and to sit first seat in her high school, but her hands shook too much for that to happen. And she talked during rehearsals. So now she liked to imagine her actions before she performed them.

The woman in blue stood, squeezing her grandmother's hand, and walked towards the wood floor that served as a stage. Marissa's face was gaunt and more pale than usual. Something had visibly shaken her and she would not look her grandmother in the eye.

"You're here to play with the old maids," her grandmother said.

"That's right," Marissa hugged her grandmother drawing into her nose the smell of her, something that always comforted her, "I'm a little late," and as if to apologize, "I had to stop by Katherine's."

The male nurse pressed play on the record player; then he handed the microphone to the mousey woman dressed in a powder blue suit. A light jazz swung over the nearly empty room, ricocheting off the walls. A few of the more sprightly old women shuffled onto the dance floor and began clapping their hands in time with their friend.

"What happened to you?"

"I took this gift for the baby shower and I dropped it off at Katherine's house. Then just left."

"Baby shower. That why Katherine's getting married?" Marissa shrugged.

It was not quite that simple of course, but Marissa knew better than to attempt a long drawn out story. As if to drown out her thoughts, the music became louder and a few more ladies shuffled to the circle. The male nurse appeared bored in the corner, his arms crossed and his feet pointing out, bobbing once in awhile to the beat.

Marissa thought of the Buel's house.

The smell of meringue pie had wafted out of the kitchen door as Marissa stepped in and set the struggling terrier onto the floor. She slipped out of her shoes. The terrier ran happily back and forth, smelling each corner of the kitchen and occasionally yapping.

Standing defiantly and staring up at Marissa, it snorted and huffed then began the furious pacing again.

Katherine's mother hugged her and touched Marissa's nose, "Good to see you." She scratched at Marissa's nose. There was a hint of violence beneath her smiling face; it had been more of a slap than a sign of affection.

"Katherine's in the living room with Ashley."

"*How much?*" Her grandmother stared at her, holding her hand for a moment.

"How much money did you spend on the gift?"

The music changed to something slower, almost a waltz. The woman sat down and began sipping at their tea waiting for another fast track.

Marissa's grandmother was obsessed with cost benefit analysis of every purchase that Marissa made. Her grandmother lived in perpetual fear of overspending. It was one of the most frequent and the most tiresome of subjects between them.

Money always made Marissa want to have her grandmother closer to her. It seemed silly that she should have activities on only one day a week and then vegetate for the rest of the week. Why not stay with her and they could do all sorts of things together? "Do you really like it here?" Her grandmother shrugged and pointed to the dancing ladies as an explanation.

Her grandmother whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "I've the best voice here. And they know it. Each time they all watch."

"I know. Everyone watches. I watch you."

Marissa had on occasion tried to get her grandmother to move into an apartment with her, but her grandmother seemed to prefer the distance and the isolation that the nursing home provided them both.

“Almost time for my solo.” Her grandmother straightened her shirt and absentmindedly touched her hair, “But I might need a little tea first.”

Marissa stood to get her grandmother tea.

When Marissa had walked through the kitchen and towards the living room, she had seen Mr. Buel first. He was in the middle of his typical story. He managed to make every activity he did seem a little cloak and dagger. His hands were outstretched towards the young woman, stretched in a way that looked like he would choke one of them.

“Marissa!” he shouted. All of the women turned towards Marissa, except Ashley, who kept her eyes fixed on the fire place. Marissa sat in the chair closest to the door and farthest from the center of the room.

“Hello,” Marissa managed after a minute, but everyone had redirected their attention back to Mr. Buel. Although Marissa knew all of the girls in the room, they were nothing more than acquaintances. It was in moments like these that Marissa was happy to know someone like Mr. Buel because he made her feel like she belonged, like she was part of the group.

“I’m just telling them the dry cleaning story,” He offered the statement as a way into the conversation for Marissa, but she could only wink and nod towards him because she was bored of this story.

Mr. Buel’s favorite thing to complain about was the organic dry cleaners up the street from where they lived. His clothes came back smelling like cheap vegetable oil.

They had this residue. So far Mr. Buel had managed to not pay for the last three rounds of dry cleaning by making complaints about this fact.

Marissa chose two cups of tea and a few sugar cookies. She walked back over to her grandmother.

“I hope you didn’t spend too much money on the gift.” Her grandmother rolled her eyes. “Remember that friend you had in high school. You spent two hundred dollars on that necklace!”

“I didn’t spend that much then?” Marissa tried to remember Mr. Buel as he had been amongst everyone. She tried to forget the closet and the way his hands had rested on her shoulders.

“I don’t remember that.”

“I remember. You spent 200 dollars and about thirty cents. Better believe it.” Her grandmother sipped her tea loudly. “I couldn’t believe it. A necklace for a friend!”

“That’s not what it was.”

“How much?” Her grandmother smiled and waited, staring at Marissa.

“\$50. It’s not about the amount of money...”

“Nonsense. Money is meaning for most people, especially people such as the Buels. I wouldn’t ever let your father bring friends of his that I didn’t like to dinner. Some of his friends were free-loaders. And you can’t make a family like the Buels think that about you.”

“You’re saying I should have spent more?”

“They employ you.”

“But I’m also their friend.”

“\$100 is a nice, even number. Not too much, not too little.” Her grandmother shrugged as if this explained why Marissa should bother to give her friends money.

“I don’t just have \$100 dollars lying around.”

“I would have given it to you if you asked. What did you get for \$50?” said her grandmother.

Marissa gave the male nurse a look and nodded towards her grandmother.

Standing she helped her grandmother up, “Looks like it’s your turn to sing.”

On their way towards the stage, Marissa helped her grandmother shuffle forward. Her grandmother scooted her rump into the chair that sat on the stage. The other women walked forward and began to sway. The familiar melody, a hopping, lively rhythm filtered across the room.

Marissa got a headset for her grandmother and strapped it over her head. As she was adjusting the microphone to rest in front of her grandmother’s mouth Marissa heard her grandmother ask:

“What was it?”

And Marissa sighed, “A glass angel. Got it off U-buy”

“I hope it was hand made!” Her grandmother held her hand, gave a squeeze, and then pointed a thumbs up at the male nurse. She whispered with her hand over the microphone, “Thought the Buels weren’t very religious.”

Marissa shrugged.

Now Marissa left the stage and her grandmother sat quietly. She was getting to the age where she couldn’t stand very long and she liked to save herself to the very last verse.

“Cue your voices!” she screamed into the microphone.

The women cheered and Marissa’s grandmother threw her head back and put her arms in the air. She twittered her fingers skyward, waiting for the moment to begin.

“...I danced in the morning, when the world was begun...”

He had pushed her into the closet and held her by the shoulders, against the wood door. Marissa knew better than to move so she stayed still, in his grasp. Sounds of the kitchen filtered into the closet where Mr. Buel glared at Marissa. He took his hands off her shoulders slowly and looked down at his feet, embarrassed by the gruff nature of his act. The sound of an oven door opening and later the warm smell of lemon.

The older ladies were dancing. Marissa’s grandmother stood and began shuffling from one side of the wood stage to the other side, gesticulating in the air on occasion.

“Dance, then, wherever you may be...”

Mr. Buel smoothed her shirt over her shoulders and it was then that Marissa noticed he was shaking. His lips were quivering and she could not tell if it was anger.

“You’re such a nice girl.” He kept touching her shoulders. “A nice girl who hasn’t really had any breaks.” Now his face was close to Marissa’s. She could smell what seemed to be goat cheese or some other foul appetizer. “You ought to be able to find someone.” He stepped back, seeming in better control of himself.

“My girls love you.” Marissa nodded and he punched his hand into the wood door; she could only look at her shoes then, wondering if she would be beaten in this moment. Instead he spit in her face and turned to leave the closet, but not before handing her a napkin.

Marissa had left the house then.

Her grandmother crossed the stage and began walking through the tables. She touched Marissa's hand. Marissa knew then that she had reached the last verse. So she sang, softly with her grandmother. No one could hear Marissa singing:

They cut me down, but I leapt up high.

I am the life that'll never, never die.

I'll live in you if you live in me.

I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

And her grandmother bent slightly, meaning it to be a bow. The women all cheered and the male nurse came over to take the microphone from Marissa's grandmother. She had beads of sweat on her upper lip, and she plopped down at the table where their tea cups were.

"You should have spent more and on something better." And her grandmother sipped the last of the tea. From her purse she produced a pack of cards. Activity Day Marissa's grandmother was at her liveliest, having reserved her energy all week to cut loose on Saturdays.

As an afterthought Marissa explained, "I gave Katherine a letter too."

"A letter." Her grandmother shuffled the cards, "You look a little sad. What else happened?"

"It's complicated. I met her sister..."

"Remember my one rule, Marissa."

"But it's not about that. It's about Katherine."

"I don't want to hear about that."

But her friendship with Katherine was one of the only things she wanted to talk about; it might have been the only thing she cared to talk about.

“I wrote to her about when we first met each other in college and took her the gift.”

“No one wants to feel bound to you or that you need them. No one likes to feel needed.”

To change the subject her grandmother said, “I can’t believe that Katherine is getting married. She was quite a nice girl.” The she shuffled the cards again and began to deal them without asking Marissa if she wanted to play. They sat in silence for such a long period of time that her grandmother stopped dealing and looked at Marissa, “Are we going to play cards? Nothing more on that subject. Let’s just have a good time.”

And Marissa scooted her chair closer to her grandmother.

“We’ll cheer up with a game of cards.” Her grandmother assured her.

The deck had been split completely in two. Marissa put the first card down. It was a two of spades. Her grandmother threw a two of hearts.

“War already!” her grandmother chuckled.

Cowboy Chronicle

Cattle Roping

You. I said. You must understand why this is happening.

His eyes opened to see me sitting bedside. For a moment, he struggled against the ropes which tied him. Beneath his unshaven chin, I pushed the point of the knife into his skin to force him to look me in the eyes, but he faced the bedposts instead. Even while lying in his cot, I could see his muscles strained against the twine I had tied him with. I checked the knots on the twine, which appeared thinner in the lantern light than it had when this idea first took hold of me. The gag, a sock, seemed secure as well. Because the sock was tied too tight his blood seeped into the black fabric breath by breath.

Most of the Hands were busy tucking themselves to bed to prepare for another long day of barrel dodging and cattle roping, yet the low hum of evening conversation passed by the outside of the tent. A general, extended fear of discovery skated along the liquid of my insides. The low growls and the scuffle of dogs fighting over scraps. I focused on his breathing to steady my hand. A few of the other Hands were drinking or bedding women; their laughter could be heard in the distance. Those who would notice my absence wouldn't really care. Time has never been a problem for me. I have always had plenty of it. It moves so slowly in this flat land.

Using my knife, I cut the sock from his mouth. He worked his jaw open; then closed it. His tongue traced over his teeth before he bared them at me like a dog. I tried to contain a shiver. To scream, to show some resistance would have been simple enough for him to do, yet he simply did not move.

I wish that he had screamed. I would feel less guilty if he had fought me. Perhaps he believed the Hands disliked him enough to help me kill him. Whispers about the clown had begun to fill the camp that surrounded the rodeo and the outlying cattle farms. Some thought him evil. Others called him indifferent, but I knew he was a man born without an elaborate imagination. Someone who had trouble believing in physical reality beyond the present moment. Someone who cared little for the past. And even less for the future. It made him an excellent rodeo Hand.

You understand why this is happening? I asked.

Death happens upon us. He whispered. *We cannot know until it stares us in the face.* And he spit, some of it landing on his own chest.

What do you see then? And I pushed the knife further, just enough to start a small river. *What kind of death am I?* I asked.

You're just like any other death. He said. *Faceless to me since I'll be dead and I won't have to remember you. But you, you'll have to run.*

I pushed the knife up and felt it slide easily through his chin, cutting his tongue as it traveled through his jaw. It is my misfortune that the act did not truncate the last word he said. *Georgie.* My only regret is that he called me by the name my Pa and my adopted brother Billy used, and not by the name I asked him to call me: Junior. He said it with a hint of gratitude as opposed to the accusatory tone I needed to hear.

With a handkerchief, I wiped my face and the back of my neck. The dusk sun shone white through the yellow canvas of his tent. My head felt long and hastily drawn over the hangover that pulsed through me, yet I kept my grip on the knife without my hand shaking too much as I cleaned his blood from the blade.

Only after his presence had gone could I look over his tent. In the dusky light I could see a writing desk, a large oval mirror, and a small trunk that I would later discover was filled with garish rodeo outfits. Shirts made with American flags, handkerchiefs with polka dots, and pants that were tattered and pink. The rest of it was nothing more than socks and underwear. Nothing to identify the clown who had left so quickly.

The clown joined our rodeo the way Billy had. He simply appeared out of the flat landscape and made himself useful to my Pa. In Oklahoma there are three things to do: farm, join the military, or rodeo. For women, there are even fewer activities. They raised children or they taught them, which is often the same thing.

After the dustbowl, a mass exodus from Oklahoma to anywhere but here occurred. The few of us, who were too poor to move or who simply loved the flat, stunted landscape, dug our heels in to scratch out lives from the dust and ruin that remained. Wars and the Depression had sucked the young men out of the outlying towns only to spit them back, chewed and broken, and without hope of work. Rodeos gave hope to those who remained. They are a form of gambling against fate that few people, even severely Christian people, can resist. Rodeo is the only place a man could stand against the brutality and chaos of day to day life and have a fighting chance to live.

So my Pa began to make money as a bull rider to care for my mother and I when he was 17. Since the soil could barely hold crop and rodeos made the most money, my Pa scrapped and saved his prize monies. Once he had saved enough, he converted his father's farm into a rodeo cattle ranch. We raised bulls that were famous. True fighters that killed cowboys without remorse or reason. Our greatest legacy was Cypress the bull

and his son, who we branded by the same name. He was even more vicious and violent than his father. The dry, desert heat had made him only more tough and sinewy.

Although Oklahoma is flat, so flat you can see for miles on the scant cool days that are sometimes gifted to us by God, almost every day is filled with a dusty heat that chokes the eyesight. Often the dust tails that rise behind trucks as they speed along the road towards the entrance of the rodeo are the only way to notice someone's approach. Even if you can't see a visitor, you can certainly hear any vehicle bump over the cattle guard as it passes onto Webster property. With the clown, however, no one noticed his arrival until he stepped down from his truck wearing a sedate outfit of brown jodhpurs, a yellow button down shirt and a blueberry colored top hat.

I stood with my arms folded over the railing of the branding pen as I watched Billy pinch and tie the legs of a calf. Another Hand took the brand out of the fire. The smell of burnt flesh and a squeal. As the clown leaned against the railing, the Hands and I did our best to ignore him.

We were used to seeing men climb down from trucks that were rusted and covered in the pock marks poverty. Men, who arrived at the rodeo, were half broken and beaten by circumstances, which I was interested in conversing about, yet I was aware enough to know that my personal questions would be considered rude. My Pa never asked why they came looking for jobs or why they wanted to rodeo. He just put them to work or let them ride a bull. And I have maintained that policy.

Many men have died in the ring. Many men have lived. All have stayed here with us. Women and children began to follow the men from out of the flat lands. By the time I was a boy of ten a small shanty town of tents, much like the shanty towns erected

during the dustbowls, began to spring up around the yellow ranch house. My Pa and the Hands built a stone coliseum to seat five hundred. Most recently, circular breeding pastures and holding pens began to appear. The ranch with its circles of tents and pens radiated out from the yellow ranch house.

Our farm had begun to look less like a farm and more like gears of an old Swiss clock that my mother used to set ranch dinners by. More recently, the Hands have begun to make permanent houses out of tin because it is cheap. I preferred living in a tent because you're less likely to cook in the dry heat. Even the concrete coliseum now has tin over some of the common enclosures to shade the crowds. Time is kept by many forces here. But for me, it ticks forward during the infrequent rains. Only when a man is forced to stay inside and listen to rain pounding on a tin roof is he aware of how slowly time truly moves.

With a sigh the clown joined me at the railing to the pen, dropping his long arms over the railing next to me. I waited wishing, in many ways, that I carried a gun. Some of the men who came to the Webster rodeo were desperate, so desperate they often drew weapons.

We watched Billy hogtie calves in six seconds, perhaps less. My Pa could do it in five.

So the Conqueror can rope from a stand still. Said the clown. I measured the amount of cynicism in his voice and found none. *Difficult for most.* He squinted into the sun and held out his hand. *Name's JP.*

Here was a famous clown, I thought. A man who could command the kinds of crowds both Cypress and Billy could draw. A man much like my father. Famous and

beautiful in his youth for his independence, ingenuity and violence. He would become a rich man. I could see his nature tucked in his shoulders that were proud and narrow. He simply breathed rodeo.

Mmmhmm. I said. *Billy rides better than he ropes, if you believe that.*

I do. The clown grinned. *I do believe it, even if he doesn't have your Pa's blood.*

Blood isn't everythinig. I said.

You believe that? He asked.

I do.

Well that's cause a man like you has to believe that blood isn't anything. He paused and pushed the edge of his hat low, over his eyes. I wanted to knock his hat off his head, but I am a sensitive man. I'm simply lucky that none of the Hands were in earshot as they would have snickered at me. *I could be your barrel man or head clown. I prefer the latter.* He said

Bit over confident. I said. *It could be sign of an impending fall.*

The clown laughed. *Men like me don't die from the horns of bulls. Bulls may be killers, but so is any man. Hopefully I can outsmart a dumb animal.*

It's my brother who'll be riding and I don't want him hurt. I said.

You're not one bit jealous of Billy are you? He said. *You're happy being the lesser, full blooded brother.*

Men feel they can talk to me this way and I have never known why. Perhaps it is because I became accustomed to verbal and physical abuses by my father. Because I was raised in an abusive environment I have a tolerance and a patience that is longer than any man's, yet it does not mean that I have to put up with abuse any longer. So my

woman, Tabith, tells me. Yet, knowing this fact does not make action simpler. It only serves as another example of my cowardice to myself. I know in these moments why my Pa could barely bring himself to talk to me.

The clown clapped me on the back and tipped his hat in the direction of the Hands that leaned against the rail on the opposite side of the ring. Although they talked in low voices, one spit and watched. A few others turned from the pen to stare out at the shanty town. JP was not a popular clown. He beat a woman one too many times. The Hands of the Polk County rodeo found her sobbing outside his tent. Half naked and half dressed as a heifer. Some sort of sex game he forced her to play.

My Pa would tell me to steer away from you. I tried to inch out from underneath his grip. You're testing God the way Jesus says you shouldn't. One shouldn't jump from heights to see if angels might catch you.

Why not? Your Pa did. He said. We all can't be holy rodeoers. He mocked the sign of the cross. I don't believe in much, so I've no place to fall to. Except in front of a bull.

Makes me think I shouldn't let you rodeo. You've nothing you believe in. You know as well as I that the ring is where God judges a man's virtue.

Look. He whistled over to Billy, who continued to make tight loops with the cattle rope, over and over, making tight circles so the bundle would be easier to store. Our eyes did not meet, meaning Billy was giving me the choice to decide if I were to offer the job. Then he turned his attention back to me. Most have heard of me. Most know Cypress and Billy. This competition could make you money your rodeo hasn't seen since your Pa's death. The roofs of the coliseum are tin, Georgie. You need money.

Call me Junior. I said.

Georgie sounds better. Makes you less under the thumb of your Pa.

Did you know my father?

The clown ignored my question and continued. *It'll bring more money if I'm the clown.*

The rodeo makes plenty of money.

A Hand undid the rope on the latest calf. It bayed and trotted away. They shooed and corralled the animal into a series of shoots so it could be herded back to pasture. It went willingly enough.

I denied him again. *But, Webster rodeo is a family show.* I said. *You can't say nothing too violent or too sexed.*

I tell clean jokes. He said. He put one of his legs against the railing and aborted a spit as I might take it the wrong way.

I'm not a sensitive man. I said. So he spit black tobacco onto the blood red clay of the Oklahoma soil.

You're his son. You have his face, but those glasses make you look like an accountant.

I adjusted the wide frames and tilted my hat further down. Bothered by other men easily pinning my occupation to me. I'm an ass people love to label. Although I might look like my father, I can tell people are disappointed when they see me. They expect more than a rail thin cowboy with glasses. My arms are long and spindly, awkward. Only my face looks like my father. It makes me unpopular with the men. And they were afraid to be honest with me, even when we drink together in the camp.

Although I live with them I am still not a part of their group. And now, after living so long among the men as a teenager, I can not bring myself to live in the house with my adopted brother Billy.

The clown said. *Your Pa is the only man to ride Cypress and live. Saw him fall, but the damndest thing was that he landed upright, on his feet. Now there was a man who could control himself. I know Billy the Conqueror a little too. We used to be rodeo kids together.* He said. *At 15 Billy fell off after about three seconds, a short ride. Bulls want blood on their hooves and horns. They aren't defensive, but natural born killers. Clowns give the riders pretty seconds to crawl to safety. And I'm the best.* The clown leaned against the railing and there was silence between us. Then he tipped his hat towards Billy.

You can call my Pa Senior. I'm Junior. Billy is Billy.

He spit again then asked. *Why aren't you in the ring with Billy?*

I take care of the books. Although I did enjoy roping cattle, I could never do it in front of The Hands. Whenever I tossed the rope I heard snickers from them. Billy told me to ignore the noises men made, after all, in the ring it is the bull versus you and only God will decide who is better, more firm of character. I know I am supposed to concentrate on the animal when riding and not the rambunctious noise of The Hands or the crowd but it is difficult. I can only see myself falling from the back.

I am a man that refuses the ring. I said.

The clown laughed. *I wouldn't give up all this either.* And he cast his hand over the red clay we stood in. My family's ranch. The clown took in the town that was beginning to form around the yellowed farm house. *Beautiful here.*

The red dirt cracked from the lack of rain. A small cloud of dust kicked up as the calf Billy held struggled. He stroked its neck, whispered something we could not hear above the din and laughter of a few Hands that had struck a game of Old Maid at a table nearby. The whites of cows eyes circled, perhaps searching the skyline for buzzards. Although the animal was tied, it still struggled against the ropes.

I suppose you're hired. Welcome aboard. We shook hands. The clown had a grip that locked my knuckles up, made my hand go sore.

Take me to my tent. I need a shit and a shave. He said.

The clown then yelled over to Billy. *Conqueror!*

Billy nodded his direction. *Join me at my tent for a bite!* He pet his pocket and I heard what I thought was change make noise.

Maybe we'll get a drink of whiskey too. I offered. In the beginning, I always tried to befriend these new recruits. In the end, they never took to me because I am too wary and scared in the same way cattle is or my horse used to be. It was with the best intentions that I killed. His intelligence and apathy were too dangerous for this fragile world we were trying to create.

Dodging Barrels

No it's true. Bit the head clear off the snake. The girls snickered. I did not like the way JP leered at Tabith. So I placed my hand around her neck to feel the soft hairs there, and I traced my fingers from the edge of her chin all the way down to the delicate part of her neck, where the tendons aligned. Her heart pulsed too slowly from the drugs we'd injected into each other's veins. The clown called it spiderbite.

JP passed a flask of whisky. I reached over from my bed to grasp the bottle in my hands and nearly dropped it. JP sat facing the mirror opposite of my bed. When he told stories he often glanced at himself to see what he looked like. I suppose it was in an effort to practice his jokes and tall tales for the competition tomorrow.

I sucked at the bottle gratefully. Whisky burns the throat and will make a heart dry, but I sipped anyways. The type of drunk I sought included only sounds and smells. I did not want to remember the way things looked around me. I did not want to see, but only hear my friends talking, and smell the way women sweat when they danced together. The way pipe tobacco sticks to your skin.

We were sitting in the tent thinking of tall tales to tell each other. JP did most of the talking while we waited for Billy to grace my tent with his presence. Billy was not someone I loved simply because he was family. He was a good man who believed in God. And someone who cared for me in his way.

Yet even the cool breezes that passed through the tent were not enough for me. I wanted to saddle the horses and ride out into the green black darkness. Away from this. I wanted to speak to Tabith out in the pastures, make love to her in the clean air. And then when we were all alone in the morning she would kiss me as the sun rose.

I felt vomit rising as JP continued with tales. Cold mornings with crisp air that cleared the dry hot air and dust from the lungs was the one pleasure I would never skip.

Another time a bull busted into a ring and nearly killed six hands. I wrestled it with my bare hands.

Get out. I yelled in my drunkenness. *Get out.* This all I could muster because the half-light seemed to press on my eyelids, coaxing me into a stupor. I threw the wallet

with the vials and needles at the clown to punctuate my feeling. *Take your drugs with you.*

You didn't have a problem taking those drugs just a moment ago.

Well, I feel ill now. Get out.

I was sitting in the chair thinking these things when Billy walked in. Billy was short, red haired with bright eyes. His thin hips swiveled too much for my liking which meant that shortly behind him would be another woman. All I felt was a deep coldness as the pair entered the room. My balls fell into tight frozen knots.

Each moment the clown was with us, Billy was becoming someone I'd never seen before. Since JP's arrival he had talked about how after each rodeo he and Billy would spiderbite with my father.

Billy had always treated me as a younger, pesky brother, but once the clown arrived he treated me as an object. Something that kept the cogs and wheels running on time so he could make money. I have always understood that a person is an object for others. If you are not willing to use others, they will use you. From the beginning others took me on as a tool. My parents wielded me against one another. While my mother was living, she and my Pa would fight every day. Now that she is dead the memory of my mother has been immortalized. Billy pretended that she was a kind and thoughtful woman, but she never ordered him about the way that she had me. I was the obedient son. The one who would do anything for her, but it was never enough.

A soft blue line snuck up Tabith's arm. It was only my hand tracing veins as they softly pumped blood to her heart. In her ear I said, *Do you want to go on a ride? Away from here. From this.*

I'm having fun. I blinked my eyes and tried to listen to the camp sounds that I can usually make out all around me, but there was nothing. The camp was quiet and empty.

Would you rodeo? JP rolled on the ground as this question was asked. *Maybe a little barrel dodging?*

In the beginning I could not have known he meant me. I assumed that I had explained myself to him, but the clown was a man who would pick at your wounds. Made me feel less than me.

Haven't you heard what the Hands say? I said. *I've no talent for rodeo.*

Don't listen to the hands Georgie. Billy said.

The clown laughed at me, *Careful now Bill, the man doesn't like that name.* And Billy laughed, his cold blue eyes look at me as I stared at myself in the mirror in front of my seat. I saw my Pa staring back. My glasses had been lost and there was nothing to obscure the features that are so like his own once were. I can not always recall what Pa said, but I can always recall his morning routine. It is hard to ignore someone's morning routine as being separate from who they are. Every day Pa shaved with pristine care, moving slowly over the jagged ridges of his jaw. He flexed his thick roped tendons at himself, angrily staring at his own reflection.

I would expect for a man who appeared as thick yet graceful as my father did, that he would have hummed to expend energy while the morning filled with potential. I believe that the secret to Pa's riding was in the trust he built with the animal and in his ability to balance himself. In the ring there was an internal rhythm to Pa, a distinct beat that he seemed to follow. Yet instead, he acted in a way I would never have expected.

If left unfound, he would stare as if he had been looking into a lady's window as she changed, mouth hanging by the threads of his eyelashes, ogling nothing. He liked to arch his eyebrows and watch how the thick caterpillars wiggled over his face, how they changed who he was or maybe he blinked back a drunkenness I didn't know about. His eyes have always been blue and dead. The eyebrows remain alive, however. He was not a man to be completely trusted.

Hell I can only stand in front a bull. Or tell jokes to the crowds while the riders suit up, said JP.

Sounds like your star struck over my adopted brother. Billy wasn't paying attention, but with the woman on the couch. Maybe you should both go dodge barrels and leave me and my woman alone.

JP put his hand on my shoulder. *Come it'll be fun. We'll have a little friendly competition.* He touched the pockets of my shirt, perhaps to see if I was still breathing, his fingers reaching in to the breast pocket. My body went cold as I shoved his hand away. I stood up from the bed to pace. My hands felt limp at their sides.

I was just curious about the blend of cotton you might have, Georgie. The clown sat down on the bed next to Tabith. *Your man is a little uptight.*

She sat very still and watched me so I turned to begin a pace. The whiskey and the drugs fueled my disconnected qualities. I could only partially see the others in the light of the tent.

You can barely rope cattle. I yelled.

The clown didn't respond because it was true. He mocked me by flicking his wrists towards Billy as if he was roping cattle. There was something affected with his

wrists. His toss was exaggerated and bony. His thin hips shot back and his shoulder tilted forward. In the shadows his silhouette delicately mocked my own toss.

You don't do anything but tell jokes and look at yourself in the mirror! I yelled at the clown. *I ride my horse every day. I mend fences. I keep this rodeo running so Billy can have his fun.* Without a true reason, or perhaps simply to feel something real, I smashed my mirror that shone back at me from my nightstand.

Cold laughter and my heart froze for a moment because it is my own. Although I could only feel my own cold fingers, I could hear the sound of my pumping heart in my ears. I could not help letting a strange happy laughter escape again. On my way to the tent flaps I jostled JP very hard, shoving his shoulder forward with my fist.

Clown. His eyes roll back into his head. *Dickweed, I'm going to show you how to dodge barrels.* I spit in the man's face and push past him out into the night air, which half-revitalized me. He flew out of the tent flaps straight at me like a bull, hitting me square in the chest. I tumbled to the ground. His fist above my head. Some light spinning even in the dark. A deep sigh that might have been me as I saw only black.

Bull

Welcome. Welcome.

Even out in the fields a half mile from the rodeo coliseum I could hear JP's voice boom over the rodeo speakers.

No one noticed my absence during earlier events and I meant to not let anyone know that Junior was faint of heart. My least favorite being the calf herding. Five or six year old boys must wrestle a heard of calves to the ground. Most rodeos are using piglets

as the potential to harm the calves is high, but we in Tribbey stick to the traditional calf herding event. Parts of the rodeo disgust me. It is the worst event. Five and six year old boys must wrestle calves to the ground to get the five dollars out of the collar of the calves. And I was glad to have miss it. I only I could have told Billy good luck before his event.

The walls of the coliseum reflected a thousand eyes watching him, and although I cannot see the pitch I have watched my father stand in the center of the ring every week since I was a child.

A high shriek could be heard over the general mumbling from the crowd. Soon a woman in a burlap dress or perhaps a canvass skirt will throw a flower onto the field for Billy. It is always the same every rodeo, at first JP will not move to pick it from the manure and sawdust mix, but the crowd murmurs. Sensing that it would impolite to not do so JP will bend to pluck the flower from the pitch. A lone wail will from the lips of the woman as she holds her hands above her head and offers a prayer to the wind, swaying slightly. As if my father has touched her when he picked up the soft red petals. The crowds are so godless, so desperate to see good men blink out after a few seconds.

JP's voice shook through speakers that line the ring. His voice deafened even the clods of dirt that rose from Jasper's desperate gallop.

This flower represents the delicate constitution of mankind! It is beauty. It is perfection. Nature at its most superfluous!

A gust of wind will wrap around the flower and try to pull it out of JP's hands as he stands, head down, in front of the crowd. *It is nature, unthinking, blind, immobile, yet*

beautiful. The woman will stand and scream, trying to get the crowd to join the reveries together.

But we, we humans. We animals that can move. He pinched the stem of the flower and held it upside down now. *We have been given the power to judge ourselves. To see! To see what we're made of ...* He let these words die under the crowds scream and pointed to the bull.

...by pitting ourselves against unthinking nature.

Flowers tossed over the side of the pen, and began to fall over Cy's head. The bull spared the Hands only a snort.

IN THIS RING!

Complete silence now.

The bull becomes His will. A way of weeding out meek men.

A swift kick and my horse, Jasper, picked a steady canter. We loped through the fields of butter yellows and burnt orange, his hooves raining clods of dirt. Another swift kick and we progressed to gallop. The hot wind kicked a dust tail behind us as we traveled along the spine of the river. I did not want to miss Billy.

One of these men will battle with this bull, will have to dominate eighteen hundred pounds of furious anger and stay aboard for eight seconds. If he is judged to be firm, of good character, moral, he willlllll prevaiilllll!!

If he is not, this bull will SHAME HIM!!

The crowd chants, *shame him, shame him, shame him.* I dismounted from my horse and found the underground entrance to the coliseum.

JP the clown enunciates each word slowly to excite the crowd more, then he said,
Bring Billy the Conquerrrorrorororo!

The tunnel traveled as intestines beneath the rodeo coliseum. My father built this concrete building in the way the feudal lords had series of passages put into their castles for their servants. I am not a server anymore. This tunnel had always been the fastest way to reach the ring. During the smaller shows, bulls enter from this chute or hall, but Cypress was a bull people paid to see. 1800 pounds of furious anger is about the best, cheapest form of entertainment these people could hope for. Beneath the coliseum, I cannot make out their voices. It is only muffled yelling. And I am glad for it because I did not want to hear any more of the clown's jokes.

Using my master key, I opened the door to the tunnel. A cold draft escaped from the darkness. A chilly darkness that stopped me. I closed my eyes. The door at the end of the tunnel was open, and the false light of the fluorescent bulbs that lit the arena poured into the tunnel.

Outlines and dark shapes passed across the tunnel exit leaving me in temporary darkness. Hands blocked the light as they stood as a herd in front of me. I waited in the tunnel, pausing to get my lighter and start a cigarette. The flame illuminated the red clay that carpeted the tunnel floor. I picked up a silver dollar from the floor and pocketed my luck. The walls to the tunnel shivered as the crowds bounced and jostled against each other. Screaming their excitement the clown

The microphone rumbled. All The Hands and the townies were waiting to see Billy and Cypress. Then I pushed through the tunnel exit and The Hands approached the metal gates. Most of the Hands only leaned aside to let me through. Their displeasure

radiated like heat rises off of concrete this summer day. Most of them sigh or turn their eyes from me, and I wonder if some would have the gall to whistle low or vocalize a sign of disapproval.

I pulled out the beer snuggled along my leg and crack it open to cover over the cotton flower taste of the opiate I'd smoked earlier. I stood still in the shadows, away from the metal fence and the others, where most of the Hands mingle, waiting to catch a glimpse of the clowns, or Billy, or Cy for that matter. No one dared approach me.

I could see the clown in the center of the ring, JP pushed his toe around in the soft mix of sawdust and manure.

The clamor died.

One woman jumped from her seat and shook her hands above her, her head tilted to the sky, trying to start a furious wave, but no one moved in her section of the arena. She yelled at those surrounding her. Heads turned, but no one stood. Someone threw a soda, and it splashed all over her.

JP motioned to the clowns to release the bull as he dropped the flower. Like a military unit, those clowns fanned out of the dark corridors. Six formed a loose circle on the edges of the arena. Billy prepared himself atop the gates.

I struggled to see Billy hop over the fence and settle himself atop Cy, but I could not see him fully as there was a row of fences and gates between us. So I focused on JP instead. A man climbed down into the pen where Cy and Billy have been obscured by empty seats. He grabbed a hold of the cinch strap wrapped around the bulls' balls to pull it tight. The bull gave a half buck even in the enclosure of the holding pen. As I stood

behind the gates, I shut my eyes to hear the bell. A sharp ring and the sound of opening gates.

JP unlocked the gates to Cy's chute. The bull approached the arena and was trapped in the release chute where Billy waited to sit atop the animal.

JP wore polka-dotted trousers that are baggy at the crotch to ease movement, a thick felt hat, blue-gray, sat atop his head. On his face a red, red smile was painted. It turned slightly downward as he squinted into the sun. Shielding his eyes from the arena lights the clown stared in my direction. The air in the arena froze, mid breath as the crowd followed his gaze.

JP stood alone in the center of the ring the way each of us stands alone in the heart of our world. His arm dropped, signaling to the Hands. Cypress was released.

At first, Cy made only a few short hops to feel how Billy would toggle on top. But the hops turned to bucks because pain must have set in from the flank straps. Billy angled his left shoulder back and down to better balance himself as Cy's back legs shot out. His shoulders dropped forward and Billy's body dropped dangerously close to the horns.

There are many ways to die in the ring. Other forces act upon a rider besides the bull. The crowd has the power to ruin a rider through their belief in him. I have often found that people will only become the individuals you believe they are capable of. The moment a rider listens to the crowd he is lost. It's as if listening to the scream of the crowd can knock a rider flat. You can't be a bull rider and have pride. This is why Billy has won. People loved his personality. Yet when Billy fell forward crowd hissed disapproval.

Cypress stopped still for one moment; I have never seen a bull stop until the strap has come off. He stopped to gather breath and released a bitter scream that tasted of steel in my mouth. A snort and then a dead run to the guard wall. JP, the coward, ran from the bull to hide behind the guard wall clowns use for protection. The other clowns followed his lead.

Some feet from the wall of the ring, Cypress stopped in the space of an inch. A static electric stop before the final buck. 1800 pounds brought to an immediate stand still. The rest of the motion carried through Billy, who lost control of his hands. His shoulders slumped forward and he leaned over the shoulders of the bull. Like watching static jump from your finger to your knee. You see the spark as it moves from finger to knee as it moves so fast it can only be remembered as a stationary line between wall and bull.

Billy tumbled down the neck of Cy, bridging the space between Cypress' horns and the guard wall. Cy's horns dart through Billy's chest into the guard wall. No one heard the snap of Cy's spine. The bull crumpled to the ground with his horns stuck through Billy. Billy was pinched between the massive, now shaking head of the bull, and the wall. JP's hat emerged from behind the wall. He climbed out from behind the wall and landed in the dust beside Billy, who struggled.

JP tried to pull the bull horns out of Billy's chest, his efforts forced more blood out of Billy's wounds. I could not hear what they are screaming to each other. JP put his hand on the Cy's horns, trying to pull the horns free from the wood. Billy shook to death in the shocked silence of the arena.

All of us ran towards Billy then. I swear Billy tried to speak to me. His mouth moved to words, opening and closing like a suffocating fish. The horns had punctured his lungs. No sound escaped. But I imagined his words as if I could have heard his voice over the crowd's roar. I suppose there wouldn't have been to say than: Here I am dying, Georgie. That was only my desire to hear some final thought from Billy, some communication about the process, but there wasn't anything he said. He turned his face away from me in the last moment before he died.

Cypress ended in the bellies of lions that night.

Clown

Down the corridor, I walked passed empty horse stalls towards the end where Jasper had been stabled by some of The Hands. In the stall, I tried to slip the saddle onto the horse, yet Jasper inhaled, turning his stomach into a balloon as I tried to cinch the girth strap. The leather was stiff and cracked. It needed to be oiled. The more I struggled to buckle the strap in place; the more he forced his stomach out. Some horses do balloon their stomach to make the saddle loose. It is very dangerous to ride that way. If you take a turn fast, you can slide off to the side and into a tree, bush, ditch, imagine anything, and you'll spear yourself on it.

To piece the bull, my horse and I have to haul his body in sections. The crowds whad gone home home. The arena was empty and only the insect sounds of the cheap fluorescent lights reached me. The Hands ushered crowd from the coliseum so that the bull was alone in the ring.

In the back of the ambulance wagon, I had touched Billy's shoulder every few minutes, as if to reassure the body. Tabith wouldn't let herself breathe or speak. We sat in silence. Perhaps my woman believed that crying loud, hard, wouldn't do Billy justice. Or maybe she is like me, afraid that if you wailed, what you knew of the man could escape in the violence of your grief. And if your grief escaped, what would be left of the vicious yet strangely sweet rider other than empty images which would dim and distort over time?

On my way to the arena, I saw the clown sitting on a square bale, his back leaned up against a horse stall at the end of the corridor to the arena. His blue hat angled over his face, so that I can only half see his smiling red mouth of his make up.

Leading my horse down the corridor, I tried to make my steps sound as light as possible. If he slept, then I didn't want to wake him. I expected he'd have trouble enough drifting off for the next few months.

His foot tapped lightly, suddenly.

Georgie. Georgie. He whispered. *What are we to do?*

You want to help me with the piecing? I asked.

What clown wouldn't want to help you, he said. *Billy ought to have told you, I would take pleasure in dispensing such a kingly animal. Cut fifteen beasts now.* His smile, flat and firm, his lips thin. I extended my hand under the hat brim to pull him up off the bale. He jumped to his feet quicker than I would have expected. My hand goes numb as he extended his.

Neither of us apologized.

The clown said, *The first practice we had with each other he got stuck with the young bull's horn. It ran clean through his thigh muscle. JP had begun to twitch with anger. Billy always was like this. Stayed on for the full time or fell off before the gates had properly parted. He punched his fist into the palm of his hand. Lucky, very lucky then. He pet Jasper's mane. That time it wasn't my fault. This time either. He pinched his shoulders as if the gesture could piece Billy back together. I got behind the guard wall because the fight had just begun. I figured he could hold his own.*

Fights can last a split second. I said, slipping the bit into my horse's mouth. You ought to know that. A rider is judged before he hits the pitch, the length of time he stays on depends on his character, so they say.

He stopped in his tracks and watched me closely, very still. I could feel him concentrating on me, studying the way I stood. Afraid of the way JP's shoulders were angled back, away from his hips, in a stance that appeared to be relaxed, I turned my attention to the horse because JP's fingers give away an itching anger. The clown tapped his hand on his pant legs.

Easy now Jasper, I say. I jabbed him in the shoulder with a finger and told him to, ease off, with as much bite as I could whisper. I saved the yelling for truly important moments, no need to beat an animal as Pa sometimes does. They are easily shamed with resolute cadences, but Pa liked the fear he could breed in some of the pack horses. He didn't want the kind of horse Jasper was in the ring, so he beat Jasper trying to bring out the instinctual hatred that was present in so many stallions, trying to mold an otherwise docile animal with his fists, hoping it would become a fighter.

But some horses aren't meant for the ring. They are meant to graze in pasture and to fly when they sense danger. Jasper was simply ruined by Pa's attacks. Thus, I found myself drawn to the ornery and lonely horse who I saw stabled out past the tents on the fringes of the rodeo. He was curious about me, but spooked easily. It took me five months to get him to feed a carrot from my hands.

Both the horse and I were uneasy. He looked like he could kick me, his movements were circuitous, tight with anger.

Billy knows what happened, JP said, He knew it was only a matter of time before he died in the ring. JP grabbed the blue felt hat from his head and looked for a moment like he was contemplating shoving it into his mouth or maybe it is my mouth he wished to stuff full of felt.

I had one foot in Jasper's stirrup now, eager to ride into the arena and leave the clown. The horse shied from us both, a reed swaying away from me because he didn't want to be ridden, and away from JP because he smelled bulls blood on the clown. JP grabbed, tugging viciously on Jasper's bit, so that the horse's tail flicked.

I'm going to piece this fool for Billy; I'll do it with you, said the clown.

No, he was my brother!

JP waved his hand to say no. *I want to!* I yelled down the hall, but the clown has already opened his horse stall door, preparing to join me. Kicking the horse forward I went into the ring alone.

I knew I would kill the clown then. It is better to kill than be killed, especially with the clown.

I went into the ring and my thoughts washed from me. There was only Cy in the middle of the arena. The smell of death blurred over my vision. One of the bulls horns stuck through the wood, and his head hooks down. His nose in the dirt. Cy looked like a folded piece of paper when the crease hadn't been formed proper, so the paper makes an angle instead of laying flat. I hooked the lasso round Cy's head. Swinging my leg over Jasper, I tugged the rope taut and asked the horse to back up. Cy's head slid to the ground. Where I expected a distinct sound as the stuck horn was pulled from the wall – a pop, or a thwunk – there was only a slick sound that whispered through my bones. Jasper was twitchy, ambling and stomping the dirt with his hooves. Must have been the bull's death scent.

After Cy bucked, his back had snapped clean, killing him instantly. For Cy, a clean snap was fortunate. Otherwise, he might have twitched and stuttered. All he knew was one last vicious buck, lights out. In the very end, Billy had started to convulse, had thrown up a milky red, faded pink substance colored like stinging nettles blotting against white skin.

As I unhooked the lasso to pet Cy's thick neck. I ran my hands over his still warm body.

I tied the rope around Cy's back legs to straighten the body out more. Normally, Jasper dodged a trot. Usually, he flicked his tail fast and ignored my two taps to his gut. But today, he dug his hooves in immediately and strained against the straps. From behind us, a giant flop sounded. His body tilted from its triangular, upward position into a flat line with his hips and shoulders facing the wrong directions. The horses couldn't

budge him further than this. I would have to piece him here instead of out behind the barn.

From across the arena, JP sat astride a grey sorrel with two axes already in hand. He circled the arena, passing through the metal chutes to finally stop at the guard wall, which he unlocked while sitting on the sorrel. The whole while he controlled the horse with low tones and his knees, which suggested to me that this man was softer than some.

He dismounted, then tossed the pair of axes into the arena. One of the axes landed clean; the handle stuck up from the pitch. The other skid and bounced so that only the blade showed in the dirt.

From his pocket, JP pulled out a file and some oil to sharpen the blades. A few drops of oil scattered over the edge of the ax, he rubbed the file over its edge. The rough, angular scraping sound caused Jasper, not the sorrel, to bolt out of the arena, I tugged on his reins and brought him back towards where we were. JP motioned me towards him and took the ax from my hand.

JP took my ax from me to run the file against its blade, roughly, quickly. Taking my hand, he rubb my thumb along the blade and I felt it bite. I nodded my approval.

In sections, JP whispered. *Start at the base of the neck*. At least we wouldn't have to skin the animal. Lions wouldn't mind a bit of hide to bite through.

To slaughter an animal, you must begin by dismembering it in a particular order otherwise the meat becomes rigid and too thick to chop through. The head comes off first and in my opinion is the hardest part to separate. There are an incredible amount of tendons in our own body that attach our head, but Cy's head weighs almost a hundred fifty pounds with his horns and his skull so there is a forest that must be hewn through. I

brought my ax above the base of the neck and waited to gather strength. The first swing was always the most important.

When an ax strikes wood there is the pleasant sharp sound of the blade forcing itself through pectin. But when you chop flesh, there is only a sickening slurp sound as the blade travels through soft tendons, then a ring once you hit bone. Strange to think that flesh does not produce much sound or resistance to the piecing. Since cutting through a round of tendons, Cy's head began to relax out of its odd shape. His tongue, black, fell out of his jaw. Blood poured out onto the pitch from the base of his neck. Behind me I could hear Jasper becoming wary, sniffing the air, snorting out the taste of death. The next cut would be up to the bone.

JP is down by Cy's flanks, spreading his legs apart. Cy's back right leg had been tied to a hook on the guard wall, and the other had been lashed to the sorrel, which stands shaking a few feet away. JP pet his horses rump, which sent the beast a few steps forward. Cy's end was splayed; the two limbs pulled taught between guard rail and another horse. The more tight the muscles, the more pulled out of place, the easier it is to cut right through.

I swung at Cy's head once more, shoving my ax hard into his spine. The bone spat a chip out at me, and made a sharp rake sound that chilled me. Another chop through the spine. And another, the ax handle whispered in my hands from the strength of the blow.

The meat inside surrounding the stump steamed from natural body heat which hadn't quite gone out yet. I could feel it radiate off the stump where his head had been. The meat around the spine was black, almost. It would be too tough for even lions to eat.

A fighting bull uses up most of what makes meat tender during his last ride, making the flesh black since the muscles have sucked up more blood during the struggle.

A horse whined in the distance. JP paused mid-chop, wiped his forehead with the back of his shirt sleeve and grinned at me, then brought his axe down hard. The horses were pastured past the row of tents out by the old corral and the bulls. Another long, high-pitched echo carried over dust. I watched JP to see if he would react, to see if there was a tightening in his neck.

The clown grinned again, taking pleasure in the sounds of a chop followed by the jarring sensation that blazed along his shoulder blades. I could tell because he rotated his shoulders, stretching after the first few, full swings. His face looked bloody from the sweat soaking through his make up.

The blood made me sick and caused me to think about Billy. Something immediate about rodeo formed Billy into a sprung wire that tripped on every physical detail of life. I suspect it was living entirely in that present moment to survive a ride. The smell of dung dust. The taste of salt sweat. The bite of a rope chaffing against your skin as you hold on for dear life. Billy was constantly on, moving, fidgeting. JP has the same tense quality, but he can't conduct energy. His is a thicker substance that uses energy in dramatic and choppy bursts. Anger pockets itself in those shoulders, was the reason he is so stiff, and makes me question his worth as a clown. He'll probably never work clown again, only be someone like me – hauler and odd job man.

Billy had loved the thrill of rodeo not for the crowds, but for the physical exertion. He liked being driven into the dust with the animal, battling for a primitive element that no longer made itself known to most.

JP untangled the rope on Jasper's saddle horn and strapped my rope to his own saddle. His horse pulled Cy's head behind, driving a small wake as his nose was pressed into the ground. For a rodeo, most bulls have their tips cut to make them less sharp, but never Cy. His horns were as clean and as old as his bones.

I've chopped many bulls before that die in the ring or die in pasture. I've slaughtered horses too. Each has made me a bit queasy and uncomfortable as you could expect, but this was different. It felt closer to a funeral than a piecing. A funeral because a small congregation of animals gathered at the edge of the ring.

There were a few barn cats that were smelling the wind at the entrance to the arena, they scattered as JP exited the inner circle of the ring, the way the Hands did.

And a small pack of dogs entered the arena, all because of the smell of blood. Jasper lets out a worried nicker. The presence of these animals was nothing new. A rodeo attracts strays from all over. There are always left over scraps from the tables, or pieces of meat lying about from animals that had died, but I was shocked to see them surround Cy. His scent generally drove them away in fear.

My hands returned to the work of pulling out entrails and pocketing them in plastic bags. A scruffy dog whined at me as a piece of Cy's stomach lining slipped out of the bag and onto the dirt. Apparently, the dog thought these were scraps for the giving. I kicked at the dust to shoo it away and yell, *go on now!* It only trotted a few feet away and whined again, wagging its tail hopefully.

In another bag, from the pitch, I collected the ears, tail, and balls. Somehow it seemed fitting that I should bury these items up on the hill, for luck or out of reverence

for such a fine animal. If it were possible for animals to be judged, then Cy has been found worthy.

Forcing myself into the present, I ignored the way the blood dried on my arms and the way flies began to circle me. JP trotted out of the ring on his sorrel, dragging a second load of Cy's body. This time pieces of his flank and his massive shoulder drive wakes through the pitch. With only that sly red, red grin on his face, he turns away and passes through the guard wall, the metal fence, and into the corridor beneath the coliseum seats. The axe hung behind me as I waited to let it drop.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the mangy dog, circling us, whining. Chuckling at the dog, JP wiped his forehead with the back of his handkerchief then smiled at me. The blood had shellacked my arm hairs onto my skin and I wanted to claw at it, but knew that JP watches me.

The clown said, *Well, Georgie, we're almost done here. Then care to spider bite?*

I let me arms drop to my sides and shake my head no.

No you don't want to or no you don't know what it is. I shrug my shoulders. The mutt inches forward, scooting forward while laying down, inching as he sat. I stomp my foot at him.

The dog sprung forward and grabbed the plastic bag with Cypress' balls, tail, and ears.

I sprung forward to catch the dog. There was an image in my mind of me wringing the wretches neck, but JP held me back.

Let that dog alone. The bull doesn't deserve better. I shoved his hands off me and positioned myself for a fight.

The clown laughed and said, *Chop*. I stared at him hard.

We followed the line of his spine for the last piece.

Wire tough he looked.

The Pig Roasts

Despite the shape of his jaw line, Gabe just spit Joshua. The lines of his jaw were less angular than his father's were, whereas Joshua was hard, had edges even his razor would have been frightened of. I suppose the boy seemed a shade heavysset

Gabe stood by his half-sister, Judy. I stared at the girl, who had turned woman without my noticing. Surrounded by citronella candles, she sat away from the rest of the table. No one spoke to her. Instead of seeming frantic and wounded by her isolation, Judy relished the conversation around her, watching and secretly laughing. You could only notice her smile on occasion.

Joshua and his daughter, Judy, had not spoken in years. They went through the motions of phone calls, but nothing was really said. Much like Joshua and I continued to speak without really communicating every few months or so.

Often when sleeping in a motel, I would inhale the stale, solitary air while watching patterns on the television. The whiskey spinning the room, making it appear more evenly lit. It is when I am thinking of my family that abandoned me that I decide to call my oldest friend who had the strength to cast off his family.

I call Joshua more to remember who I have once been, than to catch up on what he is doing. On those nights, when Joshua feels guilty enough to talk to me, he tells me stories about his first family – the family that didn't really matter – the one that faded into the background of his affairs.

Most days it was difficult to believe that the other alternative history existed in this world still. That these characters I knew carried on separate lives in other corners of

the world. Seeing Judy made me realize that a portion of Joshua, his influence, his love, his very genetics carried on parallel to the reality he existed in now. He simply didn't acknowledge the existence of this other family whereas I was haunted by mine.

He had a new family, a new son, and wife. Nothing remained for me. I was not so lucky. I said this to Joshua when he called to invite me to this graduation party. He told me to stop being sentimental about my children and wife who had abandoned me because I had kept the secrets of an affair that he was having with my wife's niece. Some wounds are permanent, especially self-inflicted ones.

At the graduation party, the guests were drinking coffee or wine or they were dropping presents beneath the graduation sign on their way to the pig roast. The rank smell threaded the thick afternoon heat. It seemed Joshua had invited mostly clients and coworkers to the boy's graduation party. Gabe knew his father was a powerful man, but he couldn't realize what that power had cost a man like Joshua. I milled around the table filled with coleslaw wondering if Gabe recognized me, trying to catch his eye so that we could talk. I have a forgettable face.

Good to see you again young man, been years. I said and pulled a hundred dollar bill from my pocket and crushed it into the boy's crisp shirt pocket since I'd forgotten a card.

Now I winked into his brown eyes. Gabe paused to squint into the setting sun towards me; he gripped a plate filled with mountains of collards and potato salad.

Bill?

The one and the only.

His dark hair dripped with sweat, from the heat, and his cheeks looked flush, probably from the wine he sipped eagerly to tame the awkward silences that existed whenever he was around. Gabe was the guest of honor but no one spoke to him. He did not wear isolation half as well as his half sister, Judy.

His grandmother sat stuck to the spine of chair of her lawn chair. Her back straight and her thin shoulders pointing up. She pointed an accusatory, gnarled finger at the center of my forehead. You keep away from my favorite grandchild, his Granny called over to me.

The boy came to my defense quickly. He said, What about Bobby?

Bobby was dead. Had killed himself in a hotel room just a few months ago and both Joshua and the boy's mother pretended they didn't even know the boy had existed. His grandmother pushed me away again, and I just laughed while I pressed a flask into Gabe's palm.

In his ear I whispered, Come visit me over by the pig, and I'll upgrade you from wine to whiskey. Been a long time since we talked. With a stiff, sharp motion I clapped him on the back hard, and I was disappointed to feel him bend under my grip.

Everyone needs to be drunk at these occasions, not so much to cushion the unreality of the scene but to forget the all too clear and present atmosphere of oppression. There were stories being whispered as people ate the free food; stories that swarmed the tent the way the loud hum of cicadas pressed through the thick summer air did. These ideas and stories pressed in on the illusions a young man might have and there was Judy herself. She represented a past that Joshua could not talk about, but I was here to tell the history Joshua ignored. I am a part of that destruction.

Gabe paused at a divot in the lawn, waiting for his Granny to catch her breath as they continued towards the main tent.

I'm so proud of my eldest grandchild, I heard her repeat. Nothing but a soft sigh from the boy. Get us a seat at the table next to my boy Joshua.

Gabe was less comfortable in his skin than Judy or I was, less aware of the pleasures that isolation could afford. To me, pulled pork and potato salad tastes better to when I am alone. I chewed and listened to the conversation a couple of the Church Women were having behind me.

These women were aging, their facial features stark and unforgiving, while their bodies were ill-defined, amorphous things covered in carpet bags for dresses. Their conversation was stilted and dead, the type of conversation you'd expect from strict adherents to the Protestant religion.

That dress is nice, said one of the women.

Yes, cooed another, Gorgeous print. *Very* fashionable.

Very nice, the others agreed as a flock.

The pattern is one of the most *interesting* patterns I've seen on a dress. Not many people could get a dress like that!

Yes. Where did you buy it? Said the first woman.

I am reminded of corral filled with mares on my grandfather's farm. There is always an odd horse out the rest of the group will never accept. They nip and buck and kick it away from the circle, no matter how politely it tries to enter their ring. Sometimes these outcasts don't even try to enter the circle, they simply lonely enough to want to be

close to the group. Often the lead mare will run what I call the widowed horse away. And the others will follow.

Women are cruel to each other. They corral and pinch each other into corners through the use of language. It saddens me that women can be so cruel to one another. The woman who was wearing the print dress, kept rubbing the fabric against her knee; you could see that she was just now beginning to understand that the others were making fun of it. It made me want to shake them, especially these women, who are so close to death and should be kind to one another.

This was what it was like to be old in this American century. You are either ignored, cared for as a child, so that the only source of life left to keep you entertained was either observing the actions of the young people around you, providing a play by play judgment that no one listened to, or to sit and mock the weaker, more sensitive members of the group. Even in our old age, we humans are not kind enough to be accepting of another.

In my own family, the elderly become spiteful and more twisted with each passing day. My grandfathers once raised canes against each other after a Thanksgiving dinner. Screaming over something. None of us knew what.

Occasionally, I heard these women slap a few mosquitoes, but amidst all the slapping, and a few burps, I heard them speak Bobby's name and on occasion someone said, Linda...

So I turned to face the Church Women, not out of malice, but to defend the woman, who had been forgotten by the men who supposedly had loved her. We cast off Linda and her children as if they were replaceable.

I felt the need to interrupt, Bill here. Remember me. I put my hand on one of their shoulders and said, Remember? They did because they shut up when I sat down. And I enjoyed their silence.

I asked, Bertha, care for a little whiskey?

She shrugged, so I poured a little into a plastic cup, but she simply turned her head towards the other women, speaking as if I were not there.

I wouldn't accept anything from a man like him! One of them said.

I replied by pushing the wine closer to Bertha, Here the Lord intended you to taste a little of this. Why else would he turn his blood into wine? She scowled at me and I thought it too cruel to laugh at the old woman. God wants you to drink. Or at least he wants me to. Keeps me calm.

Gabe startled me when he said, I'll take some of that whiskey now.

Bertha pushed the cup I had set in front of her towards the middle of the table, but I snatched it up to put it in front of the boy. You can have Bertha's share since it doesn't look like she is going to drink any of it. No reason to waste whiskey.

Gabriel Mednick! Bertha's voice went shrill. You stay away from that man. Nothing but a bad influence. A bad man.

The young man stood next to me and said, He is a friend of my father's. I want to speak to him.

No, no. He isn't a friend to your father. All the women stared at the boy and he flinched beneath their eyes. He moved with an edgy purpose, almost a guilty twitch towards his seat.

The Church Women moved as a flock towards the inner sanctums of the outdoor tent, leaving us to talk.

I called after them, When you Ladies return, get me a little roast pig. I need a bit of a refill.

Now I turned to Gabe and whispered, Don't want to get too drunk these days; I might find one or all of them attractive. I slapped his knee for emphasis. If that happened I might turn Christian yet.

Gabe looked at me with brown eyes that were too innocent to be believed.

Now on Sunday they aren't going to leave me alone.

So what? I said. Gabe paused too long for my liking. I said, So how old are you anyhow?

22.

I laughed and said, Old enough to not be afraid of a couple of church ladies. They didn't teach you how to reason with the unreasonable at that fancy college of yours? I asked.

Gabe then seemed to concentrate, put his hand over his heart and said, The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself, all progress, therefore, depends upon the unreasonable man.

You never learned how to ignore the critics and remain unreasonable?

He didn't really respond, seeming to form words that wouldn't exit his mouth.

Choking on something? I asked and clapped him on the back hard. Well, they are nice women I suppose, but I bet in a rut they play dead.

I crossed my arms over my chest, shut my eyes tight then let out a low moan,
...ooh, stop!

Gabe punched me in the shoulder. Disgusting, he said.

I pushed his shoulder as a joke and said, I never pretend to be anything else, at least. With me, you know what you're getting.

My chair back tilted under my weight as I leaned far back into the seat, humming a little to change the awkward situation.

Where is that scoundrel father of yours? I said. Gabe motioned towards the house.

He interrupted my thoughts, Is it true that you and my dad wrecked a thirty thousand dollar car?

I wish someone could tell my girls who I was, explain *me* to them. For a moment I hesitated and thought of all the things Joshua had and all the people who he collected. He was as indifferent to each one as you and I might be indifferent to a pair of slacks that made us look fantastic.

I said, Believe the story your father told you or don't. I'm not looking for you to believe in me or the stories your daddy might have told you. What good would it do me? You're afraid of a couple of old women.

A few fire flies sparked alongside the tiki-torches that rounded the footpath outside Joshua's office.

I said, Why would your father lie about the car we wrecked? You know how he is about cars. I saw a row of pretty little things lining your drive, cherry reds and loose yellows.

Gabe said, My favorite is the yellow one. It screams as you ride in it. I laughed and the boy seemed offended so he defended himself by saying, I'm being serious; the sound of wind sliding over the car as you drive it, windows down. Unbelievable.

Those cars are suited in just the kinds of feminine colors Joshua dresses a car in. That way when he wrecks them, their deaths can be all the more colorful. You never forget something you smash that is so pretty.

Why'd you wreck that car in France? Gabe asked.

To see if we could. To see if the fifty thousand dollar insurance policy would hold up in France. And it did. Got to like French socialism and the benefits of carrying an American passport.

Gabe stared at me; he rubbed his hands together as if furiously praying, then asked, So you were testing out an insurance policy?

I sighed and continued, All right. Truth is I ran the car off the road. My vision was split on the account of drinks the casino had put in us to make us lose all our money. I wanted to see if it would hurt wrecking that car. It turns out all those safety features really work.

Gabe was still silent. At least he was hard enough to shut up and listen to me paint my version of Joshua. I cleared my throat and continued, We hadn't really thought the drive home to the hotel through. We were drunk. I don't know what else to say. My voice shook and the last syllable extended out and up like a question.

Gabe said, You were raised in the house with me. I have heard so many stories about you. I practically know everything about you, at least it feels that way. You were my dad's best friend before you moved to Mexico.

I only moved to Mexico because the federal authorities suggested, politely, that I might be better off there.

Suggested?

They took my passport away. Here take another swig of whiskey. I pushed him the flask. Truth is I have a whole bottle out in the car. Drink up and we'll refill it later. We'll toast. To success. I paused and held the glass higher in the air, To your success.

May you not make the same mistakes your daddy and I did! I said and gulped down the whiskey.

As he drank a spot of whiskey bled from the corner of his greedy mouth. I caught the drops with my finger and wiped my hand on my pants. Gabe pushed my hand away with a quick, violent stroke. I had committed a gesture of intimacy that one might do for an infant, but not for a young man.

The whiskey had gotten to me, and I tried to explain my mistake, Mustn't spill a drop you know. Bad luck if you're making a toast. Then, I pulled the collar of Gabe's jacket; he could now smell my rank breath. I knew he could. But then I asked him a question. Did you ever know Bobby?

I tilted my weight back to bend the cheap plastic backing of my chair. I nodded in the direction of Judy because I wanted to know the versions of the stories that I would tell that Joshua had fed this boy over the years. He seemed disgusted.

No way. Gabe said. No way! Don't even think you can do anything with her. She's my sister. Half-sister.

I know that, I said in defense but it was a waste of words. The two times Gabe had met me I slept with a few woman after a bender or two with Joshua and it was Gabe

who found me half-naked on his living room floor, still drunk from a night out, confirming all that Joshua had said about me.

It hadn't mattered that I was naked with a woman. I wasn't married anymore by then. And what did I care about what a sniveling six year old boy thought of me?

Haven't seen Judy since she was about ten. Besides, I like younger women than she, I said. And I took a long swig from the flask, the sip amplifying the summer heat from stomach to cheeks, and then I passed the flask to Gabe.

As an explanation to myself I thought out loud, I said, Because I just walked over to Joshua and asked where Bobby was tonight...

The cicadas let out an electronic sound that threaded and dipped through the night. Gabe listened for more, his interest with his half-brother caused him to reach for the flask out of my hand. He wanted to be able to blame the false memory of intoxication because if you can only half-remember something there is security in that indefinite quality. You can ignore truth and assimilate versions that are acceptable to you during the hangover.

I decided to tell the boy what I knew, Because those damned bugs ought to be shut out by some other noise...

The way Joshua tells stories, I was the one that couldn't sit still. I was the one who had the voracious appetite, which is partially true. I had a desire to grab life and destroy all my feelings because I was convinced not being able to feel was better than all the sensation of life itself. I couldn't stand the thought of true beauty. Try as I might to kill myself through drinking, the lord never took me. It's made me an atheist.

I paused to wave at one of the Church Women. You like stories? I asked.

Gabe weighed this question and cast a glance back over to the main table. His daddy had returned from the house, and he had gotten Granny a plate of food. Joshua laughed at either something a client said or something his mother said. The laughter was an empty and hollow sound that forced its way over to where we sat. Joshua and mine eyes met, and he held his glass in a toast.

Gabe raised my flask as a response.

Your daddy ever tell you about the last party he had? Gabe pushed me to tell him the stories no one else would.

I stared at Gabe, his soft jaw, his little belly of pudge forming a tire around his gut and wondered what kinds of things he did feel. What was important to him? Just as I was raised in the house with Gabe, he had lived with me in the various motels I had wandered through these last few years. Joshua and I kept in constant phone contact as I owed him money. The kid was the perfect son. He was boring and Joshua was determined to keep him that way. Never spoke back to his father. Never fought with other kids at school. Joshua wanted a carbon copy who was easy to control. Joshua knew that the reason he had never made partner was his untamed and violent personality. His primitive nature that couldn't be hidden regardless of how many fancy cars he owned.

What about that last party? The boy, as innocent as he was, knew there was something that had been kept from him; what details could I give? What stories should I not tell? I decided to wound Joshua.

So I said, I liked Joshua instantly. He was heartless and cold. His presence was always an element of chaos exercising itself through his ability to exist entirely in the

present moment without regards to his past or impending future actions. He didn't think or analyze; he just did.

The spirit of the old Joshua inflicted itself upon my memory. I felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh, to defend these stories with a self-deprecating laugh, but I continued. ...Joshua would invite me in to his house even if I interrupted sex. A true friend.

He was never violent towards me, except on the first day we met. He was a fresh young man straight out of college, making six figures for one of the best advertising firms, like you'll be doing.

DeVry, Dillon and Swanson brought me to counter bid on his work. Keeps young executives honest.

He had such a strut and the most perfect teeth you'd ever seen, teeth I just wanted to smash with my fist. In the elevator he made some comment about my work so I slapped him. He punched me right in the head, but I respected him for it. And we been thick since.

Joshua had chosen the room that most opened out onto the small field in front of his house as his study so he could work from home. He enjoyed this room because the red, early morning light filtered through the windows and across the columns of numbers that he was to decipher. There were piles of research. Somehow, in the fresh early light, he found these stacks of paper quite attractive because he felt power attached to the columns of numbers. He felt a little like a soothsayer or magician, interpreting and building theories out of complex number systems. He would glance out the window, hoping to see Linda rounding the path.

Linda changed him, made him distant from himself because she gave him a mirror to stare into. They were too akin.

In addition to the morning light, Joshua loved to look out the study windows onto the footpath that led from the garage entrance to the front of the house. The path twisted round past both windows of his study, so that Joshua could see when a package was being delivered or when one of the pesky Mormon missionaries went around to convert him to their breed of Christianity.

Joshua spent his morning hours racking his brain for slogans for the new cereal ad account. Being the youngest ad executive in the office, and therefore the closest to the target demographic, the account had fallen into his lap, in the same way Linda had the very first day she came to temp at DeVry, Dillon, and Swanson.

Consumers were so inundated with a variety of products that they no longer listened to the catchy tunes or the promises a product offered. Advertising was getting trickier, grittier, so Joshua could trust his base instincts, but he hadn't quite learned to do so, yet. Joshua still believed in the possibility of love, which is not what he had with Linda, but he was young and fooled by passion easily enough.

The trend Joshua saw developing in his stacks of numbers indicated that the more aggressive, pithy, and rude the advertisement, the better a product sold. The current slogan: Tasty Treats. Can't be beat! seemed a little too benign, a little too much of the 1950s naïvete.

He needed a slogan that would slap sense into a viewer, some slogan that wouldn't leave the consumer an option but to buy Tasty Treats. So Joshua ignored his

desire and once again turned to the columns of numbers which provided a breakdown of the top twenty magazine advertisements run in the last six months.

Dressed in large rubber boots, a thick oversized green slicker draped over her body, Linda rounded the footpath that lead to the house. A yellow sailing cap perched atop her head. The wind teetered the thing to and fro. Linda walked with a listless swagger towards the house.

His ability to see who approached his house gave Joshua that same satisfaction a minor Lord might have enjoyed. The satisfaction and luxury of being master of something, even such a small domain as a country house.

In the mornings, Linda kept to herself, not touching Joshua until the appointed hour of 11 a.m. The pair had agreed that 11 a.m. would suit both their needs. Joshua, the meticulous and industrious individual he was, needed to work on the cereal account and to work from 7-11 seemed deserving of a sex break over lunch. Afterwards Joshua could return to work with his mind cleared from sex. The few times when he and Linda had had sex before 11 a.m., Joshua was unable to enjoy it, thinking only of columns of numbers collapsing, imploding as papers scattered around.

Joshua loved to watch Linda put on his rubber boots and her rain hat, so she could inch through the woods, sliding through the forest with the fog, while he crunched numbers. He could watch her from the study window, mentally tracing her outline, watching her figure slide between the fall trees. She insisted on her morning walks, even when he needed her to be copying files or making phone calls from the house line.

When she came in through the mudroom, he went to the door to see her snake out of his boots and slicker, half-naked, and ruby cheeked. As she undressed in the mud

room, stripping down to only thong and bra, he tried to keep the rooting, snorting noises from squeezing out of his nose. Linda made him feel like swine. He felt metamorphized in front of her. His snout growing, his animal need lusting up his throat from that place between balls and ass.

Joshua could barely contain his need to spread her legs until the appointed hour of 11 a.m. and of course, this morning had been no different.

Linda approached as he retreated to his study. In one swift motion, he tried to pluck the string of her thong between forefinger and thumb to inch the thong down over her knees. But his hands shook, and the thong became curiously wedged between her two legs as she pressed her legs together, and pushed him away. He could not resist coming forward to put his hand on her shoulders.

Linda kicked him away again; she pretended to scratch out at him and hissed. Joshua always thought it odd that her pushing him away only drew him towards her more. From her part, Linda couldn't give two shits what a fellow like Josh might think of her or her sexual practices. And she meant for him to understand this by pushing her palms into his chest and threatening to scratch him with her nails.

She knew that he was used to getting what he wanted, so she disentangled herself from his kiss and embrace and began to unbutton her shirt on her own. Every time, he came forward towards her, she kicked out at him, giggling.

She would say: my terms.

Linda slipped the corner of her shirt off her shoulder, then batted her eyes at Josh. He was frustrated, and this turned them both on, but she needed him to be putty. Now,

she stood up, off the desk and let the thong fall on its own – gravity completing the simple action Joshua had over thought moments before.

She enjoyed the way Josh gazed at her and always had. To watch him watch her undress was too much like the unveiling of the Mitsubishi ad campaign Joshua had been Junior Executive on. Every step of the way, Joshua drooled over the car, chatting about turning radius, the cd changer in the trunk, etc. etc. This excited and childish form of Joshua disgusted Linda. To shut him up, Linda told him to buy a car so they could have sex.

The next week he had strolled into work, twirling a new set of keys and dangling them in front of her face.

Linda knew that the type of look Joshua gave her while she undressed was an instinctual and desperate desire to possess, by any means, her cunt. The more items of clothing that fell away the more Joshua would get wide-eyed and silent, his hands becoming less coordinated and shaky.

His feet slid forward over the hard wood floors, coming closer to her now. She let him stand close enough to just be touching her knees, his hands fell on her legs, then as if thinking better of this rough move, he trailed his fingers lightly up her left leg.

She grabbed his shirt, kissed him full on the lips, then jerked his head back by his hair. She bit at the base of his neck. Linda knew that her body was devilishly small, pixiesque or rather boyish. Her own boyishness turned her on more than watching Josh's chest heave or listening to those annoying small, delicate noises he made when excited. As she ran her hand down her breasts she was delighted rather than embarrassed by them. She knew that at 80 she wouldn't have breasts that dragged and sagged.

Breasts and bags under the eyes are what cause a woman to not age very well, after all.

My shadow skated across the wood floor, curving, and fluxing out of sight as I rounded the corner of the house on the footpath outside. A solid knock at the door made Josh stop and put his finger to Linda's lips instead of his own. From the front porch I could hear their voices.

Suddenly afraid of the large windows that lined his study, Joshua pushed Linda underneath his desk.

Do you really think this necessary? She would ask. And Joshua, because he was afraid would shove her down. Because of the way her wrist was being twisted, Linda would obey. Josh, as he pushed and pinched her into the space underneath his desk.

It was not odd for a senior partner to stop by to check up on the progress of the cereal account, but Joshua thought that I would have called to give fair warning of Elliot's visitation.

Joshua opened the door.

Package for Mr. Mednick. I smiled.

Thank God it's you.

I imagined that he would have hated to see me, but I could only see relief on his face. A true friend, as I've said.

Been expecting the package for a long time, have we?

Yes. Yes. Been waiting a long time. Joshua grabbed the package, clapped me on the back and brought me into the house. I'm always late with gifts, you know that Josh.

Well, let's go on a binge together then do a bit of exercise. I'd like a good pump. Joshua put his finger to his lips and I stopped short. Caught a burglar or a woman?

Woman. Linda! Joshua yelled through the house. Linda come here, there's someone I want you to meet.

Her muscular legs flexed out of his oversized shirt. A real woman. I smiled at her. She pulled at the hem of the shirt and tried to cover herself with it more.

So this is what you've been doing with the temp? I asked Joshua.

And Linda laughed while Joshua seemed embarrassed for one of the first and only times.

At first I thought she was this shy, thin little waif, the typical woman that Joshua wound up in bed with, but it soon became apparent that she had her claws in his balls, that's the way Joshua characterized it, and it was easy to believe because on the day I met her, even though Linda played coy and pulled the hem of her shirt down, I know she delighted in my gaze. She turned right around and waltzed up the stairs, turned around to look down the stairwell at us. Beautiful girl.

I stopped talking and Gabe was still for a minute.

Gabe gripped the flask of whiskey and took another shot. The rest of the guests had dimmed and the sun was quickly shuffling behind a pair of clouds.

You know I'm vegetarian? He asked.

Doesn't surprise me.

Vegetarian, but we got a couple of pigs for this thing. Gabe said, It was one of the first fights I had with Joshua.

Your old man is of a different generation. I said, You've got to give the clients what they want and he promised a good pig roast. You can't really roast tofu.

Gabe asked, But what about what I wanted for my graduation?

I asked, Don't you want to work with your old man? You got to meet his clients then.

Gabe shrugged and said, I don't know what I want. In a sweeping gesture he referred to the land and the cars and the perfect cookie cutter quality of this house.

Your surprised by this? I asked.

No. I mean. I knew that he... that he couldn't have just been along for the ride with you in that car in France and that all the wild stories of you somehow never included anything of him.

So he wasn't exactly honest, but never exactly lied. Gabe agreed. His eyes were filled with a few tears.

He has kept me at arms length and made me believe that life was always even tempered. Gabe said.

For the most part it has been even. But his life has its prices.

Gabe repeated, Prices.

Curious I said, You ever meet Linda?

I saw her once. He coughed and said, In a grocery store before she moved away. I was with my mother and she walked right up to me. Polite as anything, but then she spit on the floor.

Your daddy never made love to any woman. I said. He fucks them. So you'll have to forgive Linda for being a little angry with you.

He must love my mother though. Gabe insisted. I nodded a yes, but did not speak.

Disturbed by my own revelation I said, more to myself than Gabe, He must worship your mother. Thing is worshipping is not the same thing as love. There is fear in worship. Fear of loss, loss of face amongst all their friends.

Gabe insisted, He loves my mother.

You would know better than I. I haven't spent time with your father in years. Only talked to him on the phone as I move from motel to motel. Owe lots of people money and can't afford to pay any of the debts. Only man I ever paid was Joshua.

Any idea where Linda went? I asked. My heart was a little restless and I wanted to see her again.

No. None.

Did you tell Joshua?

We didn't. He sighed and said, Mom thought that the best thing.

Smart boy. I'm beginning to think you're smarter each moment we speak. Joshua is a hard man who wanted Linda to be obsessed by him as many women have become obsessed with him. She only wanted normalcy.

I sighed, My daughters will never have the poise you do. Here I am telling you ugly stories about your daddy and all you're doing is listening to it. But I don't have someone to do the same for me. Even if I'm a bad man, I want my girls to know the truth.

Gabe nodded towards Judy who was speaking, making the gestures of polite and bored conversation, a flat laugh, a barely visible snicker, and eyes that darted around, looking for someone to save her from one of the Church Women. Gabe assumed the

Church Women knew who Judy was and that was why she pressed his half-sister for more conversation. I knew the kinds of questions the Church woman asked.

And how is Linda? We all haven't seen her in a very long time and hope that she is doing well. Is she doing well? What is she doing? The woman continued with the train of her questions. Judy slowly stood up and started to back away from these questions, And we're sorry to hear about Bobby! What happened to him?

Judy shrugged and walked away.

The Church Woman was carefully trimming Judy's overly general responses for gossip she could whisper among pews before the service started this Sunday.

How is Bobby? He died all alone.

Everyone dies alone, don't they? Judy said.

Dead on the floor of his own apartment. So sad. No one to turn to, no one to talk to

Judy swallowed the last gulp of wine and said, 'Excuse me. I need a bit of refill.' As Judy walked away, the Church Biddy beelined across the tent to a group of elderly women congregating at the tent entrance.

Gabe had only seen Judy three times in his entire life, and each and every time, she was alone. He had only met her twin brother Bobby, once. Rarely, did anyone speak to Judy, and when they did it was always with a sense of hesitation. Even now, when I was addressing the memory of Judy as a child, I seemed barely able to speak. Then again, it could be the whiskey fueling the disconnected quality to this tale.

Why did Joshua end up with Linda? Gabe said. He brought me back to the present.

I began again, Joshua worked in the building a few blocks away from a pizza joint. This particular restaurant was found in the underground tunnels of the city, which had been engineered to protect the business class from inclement weather.

However, the only bad weather in that city was wind. The tunnels had the strange effect of clearing the streets in the sunlight and giving the impression that this was a ghost town. Usually, Joshua beat his family to the restaurant as his office building was one of the entrances to the tunnel system. Thirty minutes Linda sat waiting.

Thirty minutes of waiting was not something she did easily. Linda was perfectly content to make anyone wait for her for an hour or so, showing up without even an excuse, but when she waited she could feel the seconds ticking by, seconds that could be filled with any of the various tasks and errands she could have completed during the half hour she had been forced to sit in the back of this grungy cheap Italian restaurant that Joshua insisted they meet in every Thursday night for dinner. Like a family.

Linda could have, for example, picked up her new pleated curtains from the dry cleaners or stopped to buy the freeze dried coffee from the café down the street from this very restaurant. She choked in the monotony of being a mother. She shouldn't have been one.

Here is your tea m'am. The young waiter would have said, shakily setting the tall glass of lemon tea in front of the woman.

Don't be rude. Call me Linda. Listen, Chuck.

John m'am.

Whatever.

Linda flicked the four packets of sugar, shook them in her hand the way she had waved that pregnancy test four years ago. She ripped the tops off of all four packets and tipped them over into the tea. Here she paused and looked at the table.

Linda reached over to the apron, tied tightly round John's hips, stuck her hand into the middle pocket and said, Got any spoons in there John?

M'am, the waiter replied.

Linda! She said, You forgot my silverware. And bring the kids some Crayolas with one of those connect the dot things. John scurried away.

She tapped her finger on the tip of her cigarette for every other second she waited. It was not a conscious habit. It annoyed her that she had been seated at a table so far from the door and the other patrons. She didn't have anything to watch really, only a couple in the booth next to her, and they were waiting in severe silence for salads. The noise of pleasant dinner conversations drifted behind the pale of her cigarette smoke. There were four chairs, and lots of fidgeting and squirming from her own children. Linda ignored Bobby and Judy and fixated on the couple in the corner on the far side of the back room.

Linda preferred to be at a table in the center of the main dining room because she felt she could stretch out. The problem was that Linda was a woman who noticed things about herself when she was alone. She knew, for example, when she watched the twins argue that she wanted to do violence, and only the memory of Joshua's violence kept her from hurting her children. Linda needed to be distracted by watching others.

And she was in no mood to speak to the new pimply waiter who had seated them at this table, and in Linda's mind, the new pimply kid who'd be out of a job by tonight if

she had half a chance to speak to the manager, and the staff at this cheap, grungy Italian restaurant that she and Joshua frequented. For Joshua, the staff were babysitters that he could hire for a price of a ham and pineapple pizza.

John brought four spoons, and a basket of garlic bread. Linda stirred her tea furiously and opened her menu looking at all the appetizers for a third time, pretending to ignore John.

Don't forget the Crayolas, she called after him.

Linda sipped at her tea and slammed it down next to her. The slam quieted Bobby and Judy who sat quietly, tracing the strange lacy pattern of the white restaurant table cloth. The twins were sitting still, but the children, sensing Linda's growing anger, were now beginning the itching and tapping movements of stored energy.

Slowly at first, and casting a few glances at his mother, Bobby tapped his knife into the table top softly, beginning to laugh out loud at the sound the knife made sharply against the wood. He amplified the sound. And now took the giant pasta spoon from in front of his plate, banging that on his empty plate. Judy reached for the bread, but her brother viciously swatted her with his knife, the flat of the blade making an audible sound against her skin. He giggled as she cried.

Linda was watching the couple, the only other people in the room in the corner by the kitchen. She ignored her children, having learned that if she ignored them, eventually they would mete out punishment and adjust themselves. Eventually, they had to become bored with fighting; they took after Linda in that way.

Once again, Linda let out a sigh of annoyance and strained to look into the main dining room. Having been raised in a one room house, complete with dirt floor, and

filled with five other siblings, she felt less exposed in the middle of things rather than sitting on the peripheral, somehow. Linda watched the couple in the opposing corner, the young woman glaring back at her.

The young girl, who didn't look a wrinkle close to fifteen, slapped the hand of the thirty something dining with her. They were the only other couple in the back room. The girl slapped the thirty something away twice more under the table.

To the casual observer, it would have looked like she simply had been adjusting her napkin, but Linda clearly saw the smack. And she knew that the silence they chewed ice berg lettuce in was telling of the argument they were having. Linda could see how the girl shoved a piece of overly large lettuce and bit viciously into the bite, all the while staring at the man. These were prime negotiations.

Regina Charles, a young girl of sixteen, came out of the swinging kitchen doors wearing a small, red apron around her black shorts. She knew Bobby and Judy well, for various reasons.

Are you all ready for your usual pizza? She asked.

YES! Yelled Bobby, his voice knocking Judy out of her cry. Pizza and pineapple! He banged his silverware onto the table.

Regina Charles tussled Bobby's hair and said, No onions?

EW! Judy spit her tongue out and Bobby grabbed his throat making a choking sound. Judy mimicked her brother by banging her spoon, her eyes slightly red from crying before.

Regina Charles touched Judy's cheek. Gina! Regina! Said Judy. We love you.

No. said Linda quietly, then, No! We will be waiting for Joshua.

We already began the pizza.

I'm not paying for it, said Linda. I never ordered such a thing. Fire that incompetent pimply kid. He's a health hazard. I never ordered such a thing.

Listen, I'm sorry. I figured that since you always get the same thing and the children looked hungry that I should...

I'm not paying for the damned thing! Linda slammed her fist on the table. The children were suddenly silent. Bobby fidgeted and traced the lacy patterns on the tablecloth. Regina Charles stepped back from the table, her hands up.

Okay.

But MOM! Said Bobby. MOOMmmmm. I'm starving. Star! Ving!

Linda thrust the bread basket at him. Eat these then.

He selected the biggest, cheesiest piece and put it on his plate. Then he sprinkled a little red pepper onto the bread, dropping the shaker onto the floor. It shattered. Linda pulled another cigarette from her pack. She crossed her arms, turning slightly away from the table. Judy sniffled and wrung her hands on her dress.

Because Judy was unused to being second to her brother and because siblings, particularly these young twins, were fiercely competitive for their mother's attention – even negative attention—the tell-tall signs of an oncoming tantrum were beginning to cloud Judy's young face: lips stuck out, eyebrows bent, arms crossed, and a series of small shakes beginning with a few sniffles for good measure. Judy watched her mother to see if she would notice, but Linda stared at the smoke from the cigarette, vaguely trying out a few smoke rings here and there.

Soon she would belt out a cry that would go on until Joshua arrived. Judy was too much a daddy's little girl to allow her mother to console her. As if recognizing the child's distress John appeared with crayons and a few pieces of paper. Bobby happily crunched on his garlic toast. Linda tapped on her cigarette and waited for Joshua.

A pizza arrived at the table carried by Regina Charles, a grin across her face. Compliments of the house! No payment necessary. She plopped a heating pad onto the table, Careful kids, it's really, really hot. Bobby clapped his hands.

Trailing closely behind Regina Charles was John – too embarrassed to speak. Linda resented the intimacy that this pizza implied, resented the public dilemma that had suddenly fallen into her lap because Joshua had not shown up. And because that pert little young twig smiled at Linda in a way that made her want to chew on her stick arms and legs.

John walked over to the table with a pitcher of cola, plates, and a few napkins. He didn't ask how the pizza tasted, a fact which caused Linda to rethink her original assumptions about the pimply faced kid. At least he knew when to keep his mouth shut and could simply serve.

I walked in behind John and stood there looking at Linda. She was a beautiful, spiteful, fiery woman.

Joshua sent me, I said. And I watched her eyes flicker to the right, suddenly.

Regina Charles spun the pizza a little on the table, taking a slice then quickly cutting bite sized morsels for the children. Linda sat with a sour look on her face and stared up at me. Regina nodded and I shooed her away. Linda pulled another cigarette from the pack, and lit it.

He sent you? She asked.

I stared back at her. Joshua sent me to the restaurant to spend time with Linda while was out with another woman.

Bobby and Judy took the bite sized morsels and happily sucked and chewed on them while drawing.

I could only shrug.

And she seemed to try to suck that whole cigarette in one drag. She coughed from the smoke and I put my arm around her.

What happened between them? Asked Gabe.

He's my best friend Gabe. I'm telling you all that I can of the man. I don't know how else to describe Joshua.

I won't tell him, the boy leaned forward as his physical move would cause me to tell him more.

It won't matter, I said, He'll know. He's been watching us talk and watching Judy watch us too.

You sound afraid, he said.

Not afraid of him, but he is my friend. He isn't all bad, but not all good either.

What about that other party he had? The last one he had at the house? We've had plenty of parties, but always away from home.

It was like this one. Joshua loves pig roasts. He and Linda had plenty.

On that day, most of the guests had finished a plate or two of the pig that had been roasting all afternoon in the backyard. The musicians continued playing well into the meal, but then the music suddenly ended, and they formed a line by stacks of plates and

trays. Linda noticed that the violinist was less quick to suddenly drop his instrument. He lovingly placed the cheap and beat violin into the case, checking the locks on the case, then turned to join his band in line.

The rest of the guests were evenly spread out between the lawn and the tent. A few children ran among the tables. Joshua was in the back corner of the tent talking to one of the senior members of his company, occasionally Linda could hear his thick laughter slowly filter over to her. When she heard it, she glanced at him quickly.

Groups of people roamed in the vicinity of the tent in the middle of the back lawn, flushing a few of the smaller neighborhood dogs out of the brush. Giggling children were playing a version of hide and go seek using flashlights. They were friends of Bobby's I would suppose. He was always popular not loved really, adored, but not loved.

At Linda's table in the center of the largest tent, Sadie Walton and Bertha Wallace were giggling about the lanky violinist, laughing at his fork poised between the tray with potato salad and the tray of roasted pig, as if he couldn't discern between a cheaply done salad and delicious meat.

The musicians filled their plates with the darker portions of the pig and dobbing an extra coating of barbeque sauce over the meat except for the violinist decorated his plate with a heaping amount of potato salad, he might have been vegetarian but for a small morsel of roasted pig, something that made Linda smile and set Sadie and Bertha cackling. The violinist waved his hands in front of the family dog and stamped his feet into the ground, trying to scare DJ away.

DJ the dog had been sniffing around the set of pigs as they roasted all day and into the early evening. At one point he had even camped underneath the table, content to

believe that the table cloth somehow hid him as he lay in wait for any stray morsel that might fall from the table or a guest's plate.

Linda pretended not to notice Joshua fuming at DJ as she concentrated on rifling her fingers through her purse, claiming she needed a stick of gum. She enjoyed pretending she was blind or not blind rather, but that she simply was not allowed to look directly into her purse. Her fingers brushed over a comb, a compact, a little note pad, a few pens, change, a wad of something that felt a little like used gum in a wrapper.

Exasperated, he yelled across the yard, Linda! You really ought to lock up the mutt. If there had not been a crowd of people, he probably would have kicked the dog bloody. People listened to Joshua yell at his wife, and no one broke the look of rage on his face. Sensing eyes shifting in his direction, Joshua replaced his stern, angular look with soft laughter. He's incorrigible! Joshua turned away from Linda and she knew that he had given a command.

Sadie and Bertha would tell Linda that he had, and they tittered when they thought of how he dashing Joshua became when stressed. When Joshua was in their presence, he would casually put Linda down by making comments that pinched and prodded her back into a corner. Linda wasn't certain if women were drawn to Joshua to prevent being the brunt of his physical jokes or if his daring school yard bravado was simply sexy for her generation of women, requiring husbands to be a little more controlling.

Your dog won't give up will he, Linda? Bertha smiled sweetly and attempted a half-laugh, but it was difficult for Linda to not notice the timbre of accusation. Bertha had

an Irish-setter that had Kentucky bloodlines and an official paper stating that his was an undeniably superior pedigree.

Linda thought that Maximillion Cache – Bertha’s dog – was a freak of breeding. Sure, he was beautiful if you brushed him and his gait was easy and laidback. But when Maximillion Cache ran, his body had that cultivated bored gait that flowed so easily and fluidly, a gait that Linda secretly resented because of the calculated and predictable pattern to it. Linda always preferred the mutts with their bursts of wild energy, mutts that would run themselves dead before being caught. Mutts that chose you rather than be bought for a lot of money.

DJ! Linda said, cupping her hand next to her lap. Perhaps believing that he would get a scrap, DJ bounded over to Linda, so excited by the prospect of food that he tried to jump into her lap. Linda laughed and scratched behind the DJ’s ear, Good boy. Good boy! The dog plopped down and let out an audible sigh.

Linda watched the circle of men and women surrounding her husband. Joshua was good looking in a general, idyllic sense, but not overly intelligent. In fact, he was a little too business like, which meant that his sense of intelligence was based on a flattering, empty-headed mimicking sort of dialogue that Linda found disgusting to watch unfold before her. Joshua laughed loudly with some young twig of a girl – a slim girl of around seventeen with witty, green eyes, and pert lips.

Hello Joshua. These words drifted over to the main table.

Dashing and occasionally bold to the point of overstepping boundaries, Joshua tried to untie her bathing suit strings. Welcome to my den Regina Charles. He made a sweeping gesture of the grounds. Joshua offered her a bit of champagne from the bottle

he held in his hand. I won't tell anyone you're stealing a little champagne. He sipped a little. Fine stuff, but not great. And how is your uncle?

You know how Uncle Bill is, she said, and he says to play nice. I'm such a young thing. You know damned well what he does for fun and he's having a blast... her voice trailed so low it didn't carry over to Linda. Joshua touched Regina Charles on the elbow and led her out of the tent.

Her husband's illicit attractiveness and the possibility that he was having an affair was not a new idea that suddenly sprung in Linda's mind the way crops of women never failed to spring around Joshua in any moment.

Linda knew she was supposed to go to Regina Charles and call her a series of names that would blast her away. But as of late, the impulse for her to forcibly defend her role was less interesting than it had been even a few months ago. Linda wanted a man who would love her, but not smother her, who was wealthy, but not snobby, who was intelligent, and who wouldn't put her down. Dildos might be more pleasant. After all, Linda had always been able to follow internal monologues better than dialogues between these empty-headed people.

As Joshua and Regina Charles crossed the lawn, Bobby burst out of the brush, fleeing from a group of children in a game of hide and go seek. Bobby waved to the young woman as he loped across the lawn, yelling back to his friends. He leapt straight into her arms, and she twirled him around. Bobby let out his bold laugh. Sadie and Bertha were silent at Linda's table. All their criticism and judgment were devoted to watching Bobby be twirled by this woman.

The cook walked by and waved to Linda. He was busy carrying trays to the kitchen. He had a pan that he was taking to the kitchen of some of the meat that had already been removed from the carcass. DJ crept closer to the table. Linda took a drag of her cigarette. When she had finished the whole thing, she would call the dog over to her, otherwise, Linda was a woman who waited to see what would happen.

The musicians began strumming and tuning their instruments and the crowd seemed to speak softer. The young violinist angling to and fro with his violin stomped towards DJ. The dog took a few steps away and then vaulted onto the table, pulling one of the pig carcasses from the grill. DJ toppled to the ground and the pig carcass went with him. The other dogs, sensing opportunity, ran into the center of the tent.

Linda hoped that DJ would bite Joshua. She wanted to see him bleed, but he is and was a hard man who could survive all of that. I often think he would be harmed by losing his job more than any woman, child or dog of his could hope to hurt him.

Only Joshua was together enough to pull the dogs apart. Where he came from, Linda wasn't certain, but his hair was tussled, his top button undone. Regina Charles came running out of their house, banging pots together to get the dogs attention. They scattered. DJ stood very still with his teeth bared at Joshua. Slowly he put his nose down onto the pig carcass which was little more than tendon and bone. Joshua inched towards him to try to take the body back, but DJ growled and sprinted off, as best he could, with the hindquarters trailing between his wagging tail. DJ traveled to the side of the lawn and slipped into the bushes. Linda knew about Regina then. It was suddenly public.

What changed him? Gabe asked. His hands shaking on the plastic chair. My father is a good man. Gabe said this to ward off thinking too much about what he knew to be true.

A few guests were beginning to head down towards the end of the property where Joshua had built a bonfire.

Does a man change? I paused and seemed to reconsider. Then I said, At a certain point, Linda just gave up.

Joshua needed a woman who would fight against him always, and at first Linda did punch and prod him the way he needed to be. Or a woman who would surrender herself to him completely, a woman who pretended to be blind all along.

I tipped my head towards Judy then offered her a chair. She had appeared and I wasn't certain how long she had listened to me. She pulled a chair over from a table and sat down.

Because life had always been violent towards Linda she was drawn to Joshua. But the fight went out of her. I spoke, wary with Judy here. She wanted something simpler.

I waited to continue, wondering if now in front of Judy was the time to finish this thought. She thought he would simply accept her and all of her pain, but instead Joshua ignored her. There was little love in the family.

We children were the result of their lust, but weren't people for either Linda or Joshua, Judy said. We were objects to be wielded against the other. Neither wanted the responsibility for us.

Joshua was young, I said.

So was Linda, she said. I found myself defending Neither was that young. Judy couldn't look at either one of us as she described her family.

I wanted to ease her pain. To tell her that although her family had been broken there were still reasons that could explain the violence and the desolation that had occurred, They were immature, she said, Immaturity results in a little selfishness.

And of course, Joshua couldn't accept Linda. She was too much like Joshua. She saw him for who he was, ugliness and all, and Joshua can't stand the truth, I said.

I figured you were talking about Bobby, sighed Judy. Everybody wonders what happened to Bobby and Linda, and everyone speculates, including myself. Now that Judy had said his name.

We could only wait for her to continue.

In the dying light I knew that what Judy hated about her father was his infantile form of violence. Joshua found it difficult to believe that another person, especially a woman such as Linda, who needed him and who had loved him, could exist beyond his presence. She was a block that he clenched in his fists. Something to be thrown at others, something to make others envy him, but as lifeless as a hard wooden block. Judy might not look like her father but she was as hard as he was.

The theory of object permanence had never been learned by Joshua. He was like a selfish infant, gripping a block, not wanting to share it, and yet unable to believe that the block existed when it was out of his line of sight. He was that desire to not share, to own everything and that inability to see beyond self.

Judy stared over to the table where Joshua and Gabe's mother sat. Gabe's mother had flitted in and out of the house, refilling the ice bins, bringing fresh napkins, more

plates all night, but she now sat quietly with Joshua in a corner, his arm around her.

Prettier than Linda, but less intelligent. Judy studied Joshua, watching as the crow's feet around his eyes, winked at his wife as he let out a loud laugh.

Turning back towards Gabe, Judy extended her hand. Congratulations on graduation Little Man, she said, although I can't call you that now. Gabe limply took her hand in his and shook back, but he stared into her face. She stared back at him with her mouth slightly open; no other sounds came out. For half-siblings they looked more like twins than she and Bobby.

Judy shut her mouth and smiled at Gabe.

Seems like every time I see you, you have the same expression on your face, she laughed. Gabe shut his mouth, wincing as his teeth scraped over his tongue. Your face freeze when Joshua locked you out of the house or something? She delivered the line with a laugh that was meant to wound.

Gabe cleared his throat and stuttered out, He never did that.

Well, he always had a sense of humor about Bobby and me. Judy pointed at Bill's flask and took a quick sip. You both want to take a walk down along the river. She put her fingers to her lips to mimic smoking, then put her finger to her lips in a long, shhhhhhh.

She set out on the path that lead from the back yard through the gulley to a small river that ran through the back of the suburban development. There weren't any fish. It was a man-made waterway meant to collect all the water feeding into the low-lying valley.

Gabe tried to follow his half-sister, but her strides were long and she covered the ground quicker than he thought possible. Her steps were determined, but silent, only breaking a few twigs here and there.

The sound of chirping frogs began to mute out my wheezing as I heaved my thick limbs over fallen trees and logs; I could suddenly make out the moon reflection, shaking on the water. Gabe stood on a small ridge that buttressed right up to the river and scanned the shoreline. Judy sat on a log, tracing the sole of her shoe over the top of the water, nearly submerging her shoe.

Judy appeared younger than she should have in the pale moon light, which washed out the stress lines from her skin. Or perhaps this vitality she wore, in this moment next to the river, was simply an expression of freedom from the entire scene we had all left behind. From her pocket she pulled a packet of cigarettes. She produced a hand rolled joint from the pack and pushed it towards Gabe, offering a lighter.

Gabe had smoked a few joints with his friends during high school and his freshman year in college. These were quick, lightning round puffs and passes, then quick stubbing of the butt. He had never really enjoyed a slow smoke. That much was evident. He lit the end of the joint, watching the fire catch. The very tip burned off and landed on his pant leg; he wiped it away while he tried to hold his breath.

He felt his lungs began to shake, but he fought his instinctual need to cough, and he slowed his breathing down. Somehow he managed to hold his cough, then he politely gagged into his hand three times. He must have felt unsettled so he passed the joint to me.

We've a champ here Bill, said Judy. I nodded and took the joint, smoking greedily and causing the flame to fire up the shaft.

Judy looked out onto the water and absentmindedly took the joint from my shaking hand. She clutched it like a cigarette, no desire evident by the way she casually put it to her lips and sucked a few quick puffs, her eyes still cast towards the center of the river. She offered it back to Gabe and I, but both of us put our hands up. The pot settling in made Gabe chuckle slightly. Judy was dead silent as she flicked the butt into the river.

Everything would be so much easier if you just slipped away...she said.

We waited for Judy, this young woman who had been so close to death, who had seen her own twin killed by this history I recited. Grief lends a certain clarity to memory. And although I told these stories casually without being able to face my own past I am reminded of Bobby at that party, crying as Joshua slapped Linda square across the face because she had spit on my niece, Regina Charles. And what did I do but watch these details unfold? What did I say to Joshua to stop him?

Judy concentrated on the rippling waters out a few feet from where we stood.

Everything would be so much easier if you simply slipped away...she repeated.

Gabe looked at me and I shrugged as if to say, maybe she's gone a little crazy since Bobby's death.

Your father, Judy turned and looked at Gabe, said that to my mother when we were hiking.

She began her tale, We had gone on our yearly vacation up in the nether regions of NY where it is cold during the summer, where black flies like to suck at the corners of your eyes. We could go camping and hiking all anyone wanted. Bobby and I liked this one trail that started at chimney rock on the base of a small mountain.

It was only a day hike that took about four hours to complete, but at the base of the mountain there was a chimney that had been built out of a natural cave by park services.

We breakfasted before setting out from the chimney rock, which is on a peninsula between two roaring rivers. You can't hear much. You can't speak too much because of the rushing noise of water over rock. Bobby and I loved that place. We scrambled over rocks and slipped on peat moss, falling into the glacier cold water. Sometimes when your father wasn't watching us, she looked hard at Gabe, Bobby would leap into dark rust colored pools. I was too frightened to do so, so I was lookout for Bobby.

But, Joshua and Linda stayed at the table longer than usual. And Bobby and I had hiked the chimney rock trail plenty of times. We were eager to be up on the cliff, surveying the pine tree valley below, and happy to be alone as children are wont to do.

Bobby, in particular, loved to jump and run along the edge of the cliff at the top of that mountain. He was always the acrobatic type, and not afraid of death in the least. Being young, I was less afraid of death then, but I had a healthy dose of fear, whereas Bobby literally would do handstands on the edge of the cliff, so that something as benign as a gust of wind could knock him over, and off the cliff to a death seventy-five feet below.

Joshua was afraid of heights so he always kept us well away from the edge, which is why Bobby and I, realizing that Joshua and Linda would take their time before ascending the trail, raced up the mountain. We had a great sense of competition. Literally, we ran up the trail that day. Joshua and my mother didn't arrive for an hour, carrying a knapsack filled with bologna sandwiches and chips.

When Joshua and my mother arrived, she had a bloody nose and he had claw marks down his face. We sat along one of the ridges on the cliff like a family, and there was a landing about ten feet below, so Joshua felt a little more secure.

Bobby and I were throwing rocks at the chipmunks, picking wild blackberries and eating them, sitting as close to the edge of the cliff as Joshua would allow, we were being children – wild.

And Joshua said, Everything would be so much easier if you just slipped away. Linda stood and slapped Joshua, moving quickly away from the edge. Joshua stormed after her.

Bobby was always more aware than I about what was going on. For example, he knew that Regina Charles and Joshua were sleeping together. One afternoon as we were in Regina Charles' house, watching HBO, a channel we were never allowed to see, and chewing on Junior Mints. Bobby told me, after we heard a muffled succession of screams from the next room that Regina Charles and Joshua fucked. We never told my mother since Junior Mints and HBO were contraband in our home. Linda never said anything else to Joshua, she simply walked away. Bobby and I, seeing Linda continue down the path on her own, raced over to her, and passed her on the trail, oblivious.

And he said, Everything would be so much simpler if you slipped away. I didn't understand it at the time, but Bobby did.

Judy! Gabe asked, why didn't you tell anyone about it? Why didn't you and your mother go to the police? Why are you at this party? It's true? You're not just trying to piss me off? Why did Dad invite you?

I'm his daughter. No getting around that. She said, You wanted to know about it.

Judy shrugged and tapped out a cigarette. She handed one to me.

Well, it never happened did it? She said, defending Joshua as I had and continued, It's not like Linda fell off the cliff that day. She didn't even die. She's still going and living on. It's not like it really happened.

But it had happened to Gabe in the theatre of his mind. The smoke causing him to hear Joshua yelling and screaming. Gabe watched Joshua, and remembered the first time he had met Judy. Judy was seated around the dinner table and she said, Linda. Joshua rose from his chair and physically dragged Judy from the house, slapped her and left her crying on the front lawn.

Joshua yelled out, I told you never to mention her name. It upsets my wife!

Gabe's mother had cooed to him, soothed his tears from the outburst. Gabe had teetered away from Joshua until his father had scooped him up and blown on his belly, something that caused Gabe to laugh, and all was forgotten.

Bobby killed himself, said Gabe. He killed himself because of Joshua, didn't he?

No, Judy said, no.

She continued, Bobby was planning on killing himself since about age five. Because he was such a drunk is why he died, not Josh. Judy looked at Gabe dead in the eyes. When Josh and he fought, Bobby would scream, Why don't you just kill me then? He would scream it so loud into Josh's face that Josh would back away and leave the kid alone. I could never tell if it was some kind of strategy or if Bobby really didn't care how he died. Judy stood up.

Wait. I want to know more.

Some things can't be accurately retold. Tears were in her eyes.

But I've wondered about you since I was a child, since that night you came over for dinner and...Because I want to know, said Gabe.

Judy said, Yea, well, I've wondered about you Little Man, but some things can't be retold only recast. I used to wonder what was different about your mother. I used to wonder why Joshua was gentle with you and violent with us. But there's not an answer.

Why did you tell me this? Gabe asked. I listened to the sound of his voice and watched the girl. She looked like she would cry.

Because you're more like your mother than Joshua. Because most people would want to know. Because I know you want to know. And it's not like anything really happened that was too horrid or too wrong. We live in America, after all. The rest of the world's problems are much more real, more pressing than my own.

Gabe nodded his head in assent. Aren't you sad?

Judy shrugged. Joshua is his own man. He just happens to be my father. She stood up and ran her hands through her hair, People set their own course. She patted Gabe's leg, Good luck on your first day of work with Joshua. She walked away, her image giving way to the shadow of the trees.

I unscrewed the whiskey bottle only to realize we had drunk all there was. Gabe threw the bottle in the river. We watched the vessel sink.