

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:

THE BRIGHTENED

Ian Patrick Miller, MFA Creative Writing, 2004

Thesis directed by:

Maud Casey

Department of Creative Writing

The general concerns of “The Brightened” lie with a family and their lineage of violence which permeates its generations through oral history and blood (figuratively and genetically). The family issues are further magnified by another set of beings which inhabit the “body” of the family members. These beings deal in a world of color and sound, where the images of the outer experiences transcribe themselves in a larger “spiritual” text. The core thematic concern is the relation between the “outside” world and the “inside,” and where these two positions interact and relate, whether metaphysically or in the violent designs of a dying world. Moreover, “The Brightened” is a work of language, where language can overtake plot device and character development to further the narrative progress of the prose.

THE BRIGHTENED

by

Ian Patrick Miller

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair

Professor Michael Collier

Professor Howard Norman

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Part I

Viral

On The Days I Say I Love You

Hot Meat 75

The Bleeding Of Company C

Viral

It is spring, but still feels like winter. Streets like muddy ash. The work I once did continued on somehow without me, and I spend most of my days with a lot of time on my hands. I try to practice self image. I stand as still as I can in front of the mirror in the garage, taking one good look at myself a second at a time, encoding the particular ticks that have made me this person, a person I do not know, a person who wants to be forgotten, tossed from the car window, left for dead on the banks of a sewer drain. By lunch I am looking the part pretty well, hands and shoulders in the right place, the right look on my face, even my breathing is ugly. And right when everything is about perfect, one move away from being absolutely the most disagreeable person I can be, I will anticipate the moment and fuck it to hell. My face goes slack, my shoulders soften, and once again I am the old mild-mannered me, the one you see pausing on the sidewalk to listen for the sound of cars passing in the street.

Then my wife gets sick. The doctor thinks she has the new viral infection, the one that appeared in the north last fall when the waterways of the cities bubbled with unclaimed body parts. My wife lies awake every night bleeding from her eyes. There is a bucket of it beside the bedside table.

Once, I had a job listening to fish. It worked about the way I thought it would. I sat on an aerated metal chair—holes drilled into the seat for no discernable reason—with my ear wedged into a plastic cone and the plastic cone set against the glass of the fish tank. There were a lot of things that sounded like air inside the tank, or rather what air sounds like underwater, sounds the Fish Listening Advisory Committee called bubbles,

or bubbling. The active theory behind the project was that the fish talked inside these bubbles, and that somehow the air inside their breath was a language that would explain our language if only our ears could decipher it. I had no qualifications. Neither did the Fish Listening Advisory Committee.

I make a promise never to bully my wife into getting better. But two weeks ago there comes this new kind of medicine the doctor seems pretty sure about. My wife has a bad feeling about it, but tries it anyway to make me feel better. The instructions sound important, full of hard consonants and Roman numerals. “In short,” the doctor explains, “we think it will work.” It doesn’t. In fact, the medicine makes her sicker than she already was.

The worst job I ever had was in a knife factory. Every night I fell asleep and dreamt about the light of meat lockers, the sound of leaking water, the smell of underground walls, puddles and table saws, the sound a blade can make against a person’s bones, and the hot smell of it, like burning hair or rubber. My job was to press initials into the handles of the knives. Most everyone seemed to be named Jim. Or J.I.M. I imagined whole companies of Jims roaming the nations highways in search of bone and muscle tissue, their basements full of hung bodies and sheets of skin, face masks and flesh jackets. Eventually I had to quit the knife factory because my reflection in the mirror started calling me Jim.

Before my wife and I married, we took picnics on this big open hill where a construction company that refused to hire me was building huge, new homes based on stilts. Our favorite house was never finished. It stood there, month after month, fragmented and skeletal with big slabs of wood lying everywhere like giant chopsticks.

We picnicked on the top floor, looking at the rest of the homes littering the valley. We decided, over paper cups of wine and cold cuts, never to build our own home because it would turn out just like this one, never completed, standing alone on the top-flat of a hill outside the city. We live in the city now, in a small apartment with a window ledge.

Some days, when the clouds rise and the wind comes across the sound, the trash on the sidewalks will spill into the streets, muddy and trampled, weather-soiled with a late spring and a winter that has stayed far too long. Greasy wrappers and napkins fill the air. There should be a season for eating.

When I was a kid, I made gifts for myself from the butcher paper my father brought home from Building 75. It was difficult work, the paper always so greasy with pig blood, the smell of pig blood, the left over pieces of them gumming up the scissors. But once cut, the stiffness of the butcher paper made great monsters. Dinosaurs and evil robots were my favorite. Sometimes they battled. The dinosaurs always won.

My wife and I had been married three years. Our favorite restaurant was downtown. We took our anniversaries there. One day we decided to have lunch. It was raining. We both had colds. We ordered the soup, which was always very good. Mine was too hot, which surprised me, the boiling insides of the vegetables coming alive on my tongue. I held my mouth as my wife licked her finger and stuck it into my soup. She looked up at me and said, "I'm cooling it down for you, baby." I think about that lunch all the time.

Today my wife tries to stick her wet fingers into an electrical socket. Neither one of us knows if it will work for sure, but I try to stop her anyways.

I spent the last days at my last job talking to a blank computer screen. Robots did not turn out as smart or evil as I expected them to be.

The buckets of blood my wife bleeds from her eyes look very black in the streetlights. Every night I empty the buckets from our window ledge. My wife always was so afraid of heights.

Once, when we were on vacation in Florida, my wife asked me if I had ever been skinny dipping. I never had, but lied and told her eyes, "There was this party in high school where I finger-banged my best friend's girlfriend in his parent's Jacuzzi bathtub." When I got done telling the story, my wife would not speak to me. When we got to the beach I undressed by myself in the sand and went running into the surf. It was very warm. On the way back to the hotel, a raccoon ran in front of the car. I jumped and choked myself against the seat belt. I was still naked. The raccoon caught itself in our headlights before scuttling into the woods, which were not nearly as swampy as I thought they should be. The raccoon had sharp green eyes and a huge, powerful ass. After all my years in the city, I had never seen a raccoon. My wife pulled the car over and told me to get out. But I did not want to get out because that thing was on the other side of the road, hiding in the canopy, waiting to claw out my eyes. My wife was screaming at me. "Get out! Get out!" she screamed. I kept shaking my head no. It got to the point where I wished the raccoon would just come out from the woods and eat us both.

And then you find yourself in the bell city of love. One of the hundred thousand amps of horsepower love and nervous dreams. Set to fire in this crowded outpost on the loose shore of the Puget Sound. Caught in a sky of black caged crows and white sand birds.

On The Days I Say I Love You

Everyone I know here is in love. The poets with the Poetry Grounds. The nurses with their warm telephone voices and the waxy tile hallways of their free clinic. Out of work journeymen with their taverns. Mud-beaten sidewalks. Mossy Lungs. Women and their babies dead inside them.

All the high school kids are white and in love with crystal and slammed down Chryslers. They love their names—Their D-Nutz, their Tricky, their P-Killa, and their Method. They love their white rags. They love their skinny limbs and their fingers, the way they twist into what they mean.

Everyone is in love with handguns and clothes hangers. Large cannon rifles. Empty concrete porches. Black puddles instead of water gardens and ponds.

I live as a boarder in a five bedroom house. Children run through the grass dead lawn in cloth diapers. There is no where else to sleep.

Three misplanted skyscrapers figure the sky in paragraphs of three, and a damp tunnel finger-locks the Police War Post with The Bells County prison. To the east is a lake named Scaggs where little boys cook up bricks of amphetamines the size of steamer trunks, and little girls are found tied in windowless vans.

This was the place where Washington Timber ran the last of its mills into the ground—A starving labor clapping what little they could from their lives into the air.

The color of sawdust in the street, the raw trunks of firs and cedars spoiling in the rain, and the packs of Gray Wolves who'd finally returned after being starved north a century earlier.

Then there was quiet.

Then change.

I woke up here one day. My name was Dresden. I was twenty eight. And everywhere, all at once, was the sound of love—ringing all over my body and pouring from my mouth in bone water.

1

It doesn't feel like fifty thousand wood screws heated into one steamy mass and then poured through my eyes. It doesn't feel like lead poison. It feels like tongue fever. Spots appearing all over my mouth like new teeth, but not exactly teeth, as no one can see them but you. And all the time I am saying "you" instead of me. "You" instead of I.

"But it's so simple," I say to the nurse on the late afternoon telephone. "It hurts. I mean, that's it. It just really, really hurts. I open my mouth and everything, everything hurts."

—"No, I'm not trying to cause a problem, I promise. But I need another exam."

—"I know I just had one, but you see things have changed. That's why I keep calling."

—“I understand. Funds are tight. Being a free clinic would do that. So how about this, just the bare instruction, okay? Stripped down, no frills hands on the job? Scratch test. Lift the cover. Grab your nuts. Wait, I’m sorry, I mean my nuts.”

—“Wait! Please. Please, just tell Dr. Poolbelly that you, I mean I...”

—“Nurse! Please, goddamnit please, I just need to talk to him. Hello...? Nurse? Nurse, I can still hear me, I mean you... I can still hear you breathing...”

Shit.

(continued)

It’s not like I’m asking anyone to stick a finger up my ass. Just look at my tongue, the pulsing speed bag pulsing bone fluid in my throat morning, noon, and night. Just a pair of hands on my skinny chest.

I call The Bells Free Clinic every day. Seven times before noon and then another four, or more, or less, depending on how much I’m drinking. When I start drinking. If I’m drinking at all.

Poolbelly MD doesn’t have time for me. At least that’s what the receptionist keeps saying on the phone. She says I’m clogging up the lines and I must stop calling. Stop calling, she says. Please, for the love of God, stop calling.

What she doesn’t understand is that whenever I hear her voice I know that Dr. Poolbelly looks just like my father. And so, out of consideration and respect, I call the receptionist “nurse.” I’d call her mother, but she told me if I did she’d have the cops yank all my new teeth out with cable chains.

Still. Her voice is soft tissue. And there are so many times I want to say, *But you are a free clinic nurse, and I would wash the brittle from your hair, form your hands back into your fingers.*

But she doesn't care.

Maybe if she could see where I live. The stains on my bathroom mirror. The days I pull my fingers across my skin, searching for that vein that leads back to you: the sickness in I—teeth, tongue in my mouth.

It's not my fault I fell in love with Peter De Vine the first time I saw him—running through the mushroom fields above the bell city of love. And like these teeth, it hurts.

The hair on my right wrist is thicker than it is on my left. And my eyes have always been beautiful sharp pools of green, but lately I can see the color of grey creep into the ciliary muscle. And the spots... The spots on my vision, not "in" my vision, but "on," like beads of yellow oil in water—hippo on hippo.

But nurse says that's normal.

Normal? I can no longer focus on two things at once, like what's in front of me and the life I'm leaving behind. I cannot reconcile the difference between my reflection and my shadow. As if I'm looking at the reverse of myself in darkness. It's my eyes, I say. My eyes.

Nurse says it's simple: I need glasses no one can make. She says I need to drink black tea and smash my telephone with a cinderblock. Then she hangs up. Not even three o'clock in the afternoon.

And it hurts to scream obscenities into the dead line of the phone. It hurts to not mean the things I scream.

I'd call her mother if she let me. And if we had knives...

(continued)

If I can get to the root of you then I can fix me. And the root of you, the sickness in I, is tongue fever—the new bone sprouting over my mouth like the taste of oranges or cum.

Everybody knows the bones that line the tongue. Everybody knows the gums that hold the teeth.

What I can't explain is that the tongue has a fever, and the teeth are afraid.

2

Every Thursday, Peter visits the Poetry Grounds to trim back the hyper-green flora. The Grounds are where I take apart words and put them together again, though I'm always being told they're the wrong words.

When he finishes with his blades and shovels, his hands caked in prime grounds of spattered fungus and Corsican mint, we go for a ride in his '67 Firebird, snorting sharp needles of crystal meth from the crevices in the leather seats.

Peter's muscles run from his neck through his shoulders and down his stomach. Everything twitches beneath his t-shirt as if tied to a string. His nipples are always hard because the windows are always down, the cold wet air rushing all over our bodies.

“You hear that?” he’ll scream over the ancient throat of the car. “That’s the sound of fifty thousand horses!”

I think it sounds like gravel.

And I’ll try to kiss him, but I always miss, or I don’t miss, but miss the moment, and I’ll sit there with my hands twitching, everything rattling in the car like we’re inside a storm.

We park in different places. Sometimes making it up to Scaggs, the lake always sunken into a ravine of burnt out trailers and turned over bathtubs, half melted and green. Other times we catch a rim, a black rock ridge, a glacier, the broken husks of Douglas-firs, fields of snapped spine cedars, old snow, dirt crow sky. And while I cut the crank into a fine filth, Peter chews his bottom lip and squeezes his dirty fingers into the shiny blackness of the dashboard.

It gets dark. But all the lights in our eyes are on. And we’ll chase each other through the dark woods. And we’ll fall on each other. And breathing, Peter will tell me how much the land matters. “It’s everywhere,” he says, “and all at once.”

(continued)

Peter De Vine is not just the best running back The Bells has ever seen. Peter is also my best friend in the entire world.

Why?

I made a list once. Last week, actually. The day I met Dr. Poolbelly.

It was morning and I was in a tavern that doesn't like poets or faggots or little white gang bangers. I was at the bar and unwanted. Unwashed and totally unwanted. The concrete workers rolled up their sleeves and their muscles creased into knife play. The barmaid cleaned my beer glass with ash from the cigarette plates. And they turned down the lights so I couldn't read my books, verses that keep you, the new teeth in my head, from turning my mouth out. Flesh chunked as broken curb.

But try explaining that to a barmaid whose breasts are so heavy she can make steel from the fires that pour from her nipples.

I saw it once, I swear.

It was the slaughterhouse boss who made her do it—Smashing glass, kicking the foot of the bar, demanding to see those amazing breasts. “I said bitch show me those fucking tits.”

Finally, the barmaid had enough. She wiped her mouth with the bar rag, smiled, cracked her neck, came close, and raised her shirt. The tavern filled with golden light as she unhinged her bra and filled his glass with molten lead.

The slaughterhouse boss drank—Burning his hand, his lips, his tongue. When he was done he turned to me, his eyes the dead water of a salt sea, and said, “Goddamn boy, you'd think it'd taste like milk, or maybe blood.”

(continued)

So it was last week. It was morning. It was dark and no one cared. I closed my books and gave the barmaid a five-dollar bill, asked her for something to write with.

The pen she gave me had a sinking hula dancer in its shaft. It was metal and plastic and “Lava Rocks!” was written in the blue sky behind the dancer. The only dry bar napkin I could find said “Whiskey Ice,” and the new teeth in my head had me thinking love. So I began with these things, moving them in front of each other and behind each other, splitting them apart until I was writing

—One: Against Bellingham last September, you rushed for three hundred and seven yards. Not even the fog knew what to do with itself. The streets were quiet until morning, as if disappointed with itself under the light of the donut shop. Then the underlight brightened and the whole town looked blue. That night you dropped acid on the docks downtown and felt nothing, only the light from the Bellingham stadium still thrumming under your skin. Your hands were cut and bleeding. A pair of blue panties hung from the rearview mirror. And in the light it looked like the Cascades might drop right off into the darkness of the Sound. And in the fog were the drowned men on the decks of the outer ships, huddled around the stern, trying to break apart the clouds by signaling their light to shore.

—Two: When I first saw the city of Los Angeles it was from a hill, on a bus at night. And I thought if God dragged a black paint brush across Nebraska’s pale fields, the stars wouldn’t look like those flat boulevards.

—Three: Later, I left the Olympic Peninsula on a ferry. I slept with my head against the window and did not watch the rain fall onto the Sound or those islands no one lives on, and I dreamt of you riding under the gas light of stars. You had a baby in your hand made from the marble of your skin, and the water that poured from your rib washed

the driver clean of his face. When the gears fired like train tracks, you looked out the window and did not see the tree laid across the road.

I'm sure it started like most things in The Bells. A bottle...

Another.

Things and sounds filled the air.

The barmaid's face was bleeding, but her nipples were calm as coals when she pulled the large handgun from her cash register.

3

“Okay, what about flash burns?”

It's nearly lunchtime and nurse is placating my cancer.

—“You know, from like a gun blast?”

—“No. I wasn't shot. I was cut, but that wasn't until later. Don't you remember? All those people shot up and bleeding? God, I wish I knew their names. One looked like an Earl. Any Earl's with terminal gut wounds?”

—“Wait! So like this huge gun, this massive hand cannon, gives off a charge, a flash, right? And I think it was this flash that gave me cancer.”

Nurse hangs up. Says salami is more interesting.

But I decide to keep on. Ride until I get the operator. The dial tone punching a pitch I've never heard before.

I tell the dead line about the barmaid. Her hands, how scarred and heavy they were. The way the flesh on her face opened, and her gun... I wish I knew its name. I'd frame it.

I wish I knew its model. **White Tunnel Special. Elegy Automatic.**

Maybe I'll make a list of names. Learn how to work with steel. Smelt it in the fire of the barmaid's breasts. Call the gun **Flash Burn Cancer 20-20. Witches Howitzer.**

Or maybe I'll call it your gun. Name it **Teeth.**

4

I had to continue Peter's list at The Bells Police War Post.

They put me on a bench.

I still had the hula girl. But "Whiskey Ice" had been roped off by police cars in the angry island of the shooting gallery.

A concrete worker was sat next to me, bleeding from his mouth into a large paper cup. I thought his blood was perfect. Perfect in the way I've always found blood to be, a slow stream of ribbon as warm as a fresh bath towel.

The concrete worker's head slumped to the side. The blood in the cup poured onto the floor. There were things in his throat that sounded like sleep. I wiggled the cup from his hands and shook the rest of his blood out behind the bench. I tore the cup open and wrote

—Four: *The story I have to tell doesn't sound like a story at all. It has the bad sound of numbers. Like when my math teacher slapped the chalkboard with her ruler at those of us who slept. She got so frustrated she brought in pots of coffee. I was seven. I thought the coffee tasted like old people's teeth. Numbers and teeth, like the first time I saw you running across the mushroom pastures. Fresh cow shit in your hands. You fell on your knees talking to it, telling it how to grow. How to feed you. Open your world and drown it in orange, the pixels of heaven, the heaven of heaven. That's what you said—The heaven of heaven.*

—Five: *We talked about the drowned men on the outer ships. You couldn't shake their light. You were never dropping acid again. And then you closed your eyes and laid on your back. I thought of my father then. How he said there was a serpent (come on, you promised no more serpents) like a dragon (no dragons either), living beyond the maps of the sea, where the world flattens until it loses its voice.*

“Serpents” and I was running out of cup. “Flattens” and the worker’s blood sucked dry hula’s salt. “Voice” and there was metal, a sound caught inside the wail of sirens and glass. The War Post filled with helmets and shields. Other things starting. Sounds. And again...

Beatings.

The concrete worker was pulled into pieces. The sound of fat slapping fat. Cold floor and my jaw, wide and naked. My teeth in a Vegas chorus line of *They'll be wearing mama's undies when they stumble home from the pokey—do-da-dee, do-da-dee!*

They took my clothes, threw burning lye on my body. Checked my deepest cavities for weapons.

Eyes seared closed, mouth jammed open. A lot of dragging and kicking. A lot of concrete and puddles. A fast rushing of something opening... Bells County, general population.

(continued)

I'd forgotten about Tricky. But Tricky hadn't forgotten me.

Shivering with the lye like it was some kind of chalky rain and the storm and the bars and the ceiling so high, so underground, crows were caught in the upper grates. I was told to urinate on the back wall and if I had any cigarettes I might be able to use the hole in the middle of the cell. Men huddled in corners, while four white kids circled the center like tall dogs. One of these dogs was named Tricky, and the names of the other dogs were D-Nutz, and P-Killa, and Method.

Tricky wore a white tank-top. Bleary tattoos covered his arms and his shoulders. He smelled like sewage. The skin on his face was yellow. His teeth were bad. Everything felt very bad.

"I don't fucking believe it," he said.

I turned around, looking for the unbelieving thing. I couldn't find it. "I'm sorry?" I said.

"Look at this sorry bitch motherfucker."

And again, I looked around.

“Lose something?” he asked, smiling, his eyes on a slant—Or if not on a slant, then there was something horribly wrong with his nose and lips.

“Actually,” I said. “I can’t find my pen. I had one, or borrowed one, or bought one, and there was some paper too, or a cup, or…” I looked at Tricky and I suddenly remembered that day on his couch, a smoking glass bong on the coffee table, drinking a glass of milk to sooth my throbbing throat, while his mother, or not his mother, but some other woman, hummed to herself incessantly, and there was something on the television, something that was supposed to be funny, but wasn’t funny at all, and there was someone cutting something apart on the dinning room table, there was laughter and coughing and something crying from the basement… “Nevermind,” I said. “I have everything I need.”

It felt like the entire cell was laughing, or if not the entire cell then just the boys, the dogs. And it was echoing, and before anything else happened, Tricky jammed two fingers into my neck. His voice very hard. “Hard” being the space he put between each word—“Do you know how much motherfucking money you owe me, Dresden? Huh? How much? How much money do you owe Tricky?”

His fingers grew into my jaw and his voice tightened, the spaces grew harder, the words smaller and smaller, and if I could I would have written

—Six: The story with numbers continues as steam, how it lifts, the grass thickening in the sun, with the cattle gathering down the slope as white sand birds make a desert in the sky. I told you my name. You talked about the firebombing in Germany and all the tons of human bone-meal that must still be buried in the ground. I talked about

angels and the poet Larry Levis who said if I ever saw one in North Beach Love, I was to keep my cakehole shut about it. We watched the cattle graze and you had hope for good mushrooms. The heaven of heaven, I said. You looked at me and touched my face and said you'd been waiting on something like me... The red aisles of my gums bursting with new bone.

“You know me, Dresden. You know how Tricky does it. How I chop motherfuckers into steaks. You know how I own The Bells, motherfucker. You know how they ring.” And he hit me across the face. And I could hardly hear or feel, my jaw so full on pressed fingers and Tricky, his words so quiet.

“I’ll rip you apart, bitch!” And he shook me. And there was the taste of blood. “You hear that? You hear that, huh? That’s the sound of blood in your ears, motherfucker! You like that? Listen to this, you dumb faggot!”

And then my face was on the ground. My mouth naked. My rib cut wide with all those crows still caught in the rafters.

(continued)

I may have owed Tricky a rib, but there were people who didn’t think so.

Under the tunnel’s rust-colored light and through its black trench puddles, the Penitentiary Guards took me out by the arms. I was given my clothes back. Muttered apologies for the lye, the confusion at the tavern, and later at the War Post.

The ambulance had a glass plate for a ceiling. I watched the sky all the way to the free clinic. At my side was a polyester suit talking money. “Hear me, boy? Cold hard cash.”

I couldn't see the suit's face, only the sky dripping various candles of grey and black pinstripes—the sun hidden in a furious pale fist. It's the land that matters, I thought. Everywhere and all at once.

“The Bells owes you, boy. And not just you, but a whole lot like you. Believe me, I know. I seen it. Daughters and sons. Women and children. They say this city has lost its way. Goddamn right it has. Lost our way, too. Lost it thanks to all this... All this loss of way.”

There were things in the sky. Circles of white sand birds following the glass plate, my eyes, and my rib. The white sand birds were making a desert in the sky.

These are the days I say I love you.

“What's that, boy? What'd you say? Shit boy, I'm talking money here. You understand what I'm saying to you?” Whispering. “Me and you, we'll own The Bells. Hear me? Own them.”

I closed my eyes, ribs gasping, closing, the blood and bone and teeth and

—Seven: On the days I say I love you we shake and our faces break apart like the cold features of snow, while the story goes on like this... The grass is tall and wet with the swollen, sour taste of the mushrooms. And after, with the rim of the world lifting, the grey rock ridges, the teased surface of snow and orange afterglow glow, the heaven of heaven, salt water sea, the flat eyes of the drowned men widening at the light of the

shore, I reach for your hand, and you my neck. And holding, we count bruises, yellow and black, yours so different from mine, and somewhere I hear my father calling my name from the mouth of a snake.

(continued)

Dr. Poolbelly has my clothes cut from me and dark dye is dumped across my side.

Things like newspaper and plastic are shoved into my rib wound.

And I'm thinking about my teeth, and I try to open my mouth to show him how many there are. To show him how wrong it all looks...

“Quiet, kid.”

Other things are starting now. Tubes. Vacuums. “He’s dropping! Dropping!”

Everything is measurements and depths.

Everything has a plunging number.

Lights twist calves and snap bones. Cicadas of straps and rubber sheets. Liquid, air, and blood. My blood, I'm sure. I've never seen eyes look at me like this. So collapsing.

5

Poolbelly MD has a face like a Sunday morning pancake. His hands are even better. But his words... Can't beat them.

“How's the breathing, kid?”

“Just fine. Thanks for asking.”

“And the pain?”

“Never better.”

“I’m signing these release papers this afternoon. But I want you to call if there’s a problem. You can ask for me personally if you want. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“Blood in the urine. Sharp kicking pains. Anything out of the ordinary.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good.” He smiles. “Anything else, kid?”

“What about all these new teeth.”

“Yes. Well. There’s nothing wrong with your mouth, kid.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe me, kid. I’m a doctor.”

I smile. “Yeah, I know. Poolbelly MD.”

He writes something on a chart. “That’s right,” he says attaching the chart below my bed.

He stops and stares down at me. The color of his eyes change. Something in the dark harbor of his hands come to rest on my chest. There is the taste of salt water in my mouth. The circle of ships on the outer ring blink, signaling their lamps to shore. It’s my

father, I know it. I can see him now on the deck of one of those ships, pulling rope in from the water. And he's looking at me, and we're the same.

6

The boy's name is Jeremy. He's six. His family lives in my house. They share a bedroom on the bottom floor, all four of them—Jeremy, his sister Stephanie, Judith and Jackson Campbell.

When I get home Jeremy's tricycle is upturned in the muddy lawn. It's raining. Jeremy is wearing a red bathing suit bottom that belongs to his sister Stephanie. His chest is small and white.

Jeremy is eating a caramel apple on a stick. I don't feel so hot. Occupied and feverish. Jeremy's jaw is slick with maple. So are his hands and neck. He's sitting on the front step. He watches me get out of the cab.

"Hey alligator," I wave.

"I told you," he shouts. "Quit calling me alligator."

The cabby lays on the horn. I give him my last three dollars. The cabby is an old man with a bad face. Pock burns cover his cheeks and there's a tattoo like a vagina and a hunting knife on his neck. He squeezes the torn bills in his fingers, spits, and pulls out fast, slamming down over the curb and peeling in the wet street. Now it's just me and Jeremy in the bottom half of his sister's red bathing suit, eating a caramel apple on a stick.

I hold onto my side as I move up the walk.

Jeremy tries to launch a brown chunk of apple spit at me. But it's too heavy, stringing out over his chin and onto his chest. He laughs.

“Look what I did, Drezy.”

“Anyone ever tell you what a dirty little kid you are?” I say.

The step is cold and the wind pours rain all over our bodies. Jeremy's nipples are tight little punches of plum. Cold blues the corners of his eyes. Across the street are crumpled tract homes where white kids in white rags stand on car hoods practicing their fingers, belts loose, black stocking caps pulled over their eyes. A grey and white Chrysler thumps “Kill,” while potbelly girls hold glass bottles, their heads moving with the music, their stained bed sheets hanging wet from wire lines. There is the sulfur smell of homemade crank and tina. Exhaust from street races. The sky is thick damage.

“One day,” I say, “somebody's going to burn this place to the ground.”

Jeremy jiggles his torso viciously, watching the brown drool trail from his chest to his stomach. “I'm going to be a dancer when I grow up,” he says.

“You better grow up fast.”

“Hey Drezy, you want a lick of my apple?”

“No.”

Jeremy chucks the apple into the muddy yard. He breaks into giggles, wiping his hands on the papery gown they gave me at the clinic.

“Where you been, Drezy? The dumpsters again?”

“I'm not saying.”

“But why?” he screeches. “Come on! Tell me. Please?”

“Why should I? What have you ever done for me?”

Jeremy thinks for a moment. “You can call me alligator.”

“Promise?”

“Just not in front of Stephie-smells. Okay?”

“Deal.”

“Deal,” says Jeremy, wiggling his naked little legs. For no reason the front wheel on his tricycle begins to spin.

“But first,” I say, “you have to tell me if my football player friend came by to see me.”

“You mean number 32?”

“That’s right. Number 32.”

“Huh-uh,” shouts Jeremy. “Yesterday.”

“You’re sure?”

“He gave me half his soda.”

“He did, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“Mama and him wanted to have a talk.”

“A talk?”

“Mama talks to everybody.” Jeremy laughs. “Everybody but you, Drezy. She says you’re a weirdo.”

“Where did Peter and mama talk?”

“Where mama talks to everybody.” He smiles.

“On the bed with the door closed?”

“Yep.”

“Oh.” I stare across the lawn.

“So are you going to tell me or what?”

“Open your hand,” I say.

And when he does, I spit into his palm.

7

It’s tomorrow night. Nurse hung up hours ago. Judith and Jackson Campbell are throwing glass at each other again. Calling one another whores. And sluts. No good cocksuckers. I’m in the upstairs bathroom, watching the stains on the mirror. Turning the faucet on and off.

The phone has rubbed my ears raw.

Later, the phone operator will tell me I need a head device. She says I will never have to worry about irritation again.

Later, I will sit in the bathtub while the phone operator goes on about stars. Special stars, like you and me. I won't tell her how dirty the tub is, greased in a yellow pig skin.

She'll be from Texas. I'll imagine her life as hot whiskey showers and stone bacon men. She'll own a painted doublewide across the way from an oil field. And before her shift every night, she sits in her kitchen, drinking black coffee and orange juice, watching the sun set over those big driving cocks.

And I'll tell her how it's the land that matters. It's everywhere, I'll say, and all at once.

And she'll laugh because she's never heard of anything so ridiculous in her whole life.

The land? The land, she'll say, don't give a fuck what we think about anything.

But I won't believe her. I won't. I'll hang up the phone with her voice still in my ears and walk outside, passing all the glass and broken furniture downstairs. And in the street there'll be a fist fight, the sound of fat slapping fat. There'll be bottles, the sound of bells, and there won't be a single star in the sky, just a blackness over everything and all at once. But inside my mouth there'll be such a brightness that everybody will stop everything—even you—to witness the light coming off these bones.

The wall is wet from rain and the rain stains look like the legs of upside down dinner tables. The parking lot is black asphalt, spattered with the bleach grains of seagull shit. Green moss and grey moss grow between the parking divides. The pickup trucks and small foreign cars are busted bones of metal and rubber and rust. Cloth diapers and empty cartons of shotgun shells clutter the dashboards. Below the lot is the city, short buildings and wide trash-strewn streets that chase and fade along the grey saltwater shore of the Puget Sound. From the hill you can watch cars stopped under streetlights. You know neither one has moved or blinked in weeks. And you know the city is named after bells, though there is never a bell to be heard. In the silence you can hear the rain and you can hear the groans that come from the building behind me—The dirty cries, the gas steam heaves, and the men, the killers, who truffle in and out of its meat doors, coughing into their sleeves.

Hot Meat 75

These are the men who do not think about the images of the city. Stapling shut the ears of its prisoners, electing four-fingered demons to its ministers, siphoning the freshwater supply, all the while cranking the public pulse on enough filthy crank to power Canada for a week.

Call it death metal. Call it The Bells electric. Call it burning white heaps of pig flesh. It's all the same to us up at Building 75.

The men call me the Old Dark, for I have been their custodian, the drug manager of their blood-hearted projects for so long, for so many fat and idle years, that to them my name is as old as the dark.

In exchange for what I give them—the bubbled vein of no sleep—the men pay me with their ears. Bullied every which way by the things I say. Slaughtering pig sluts. Abuse blackness is the language tongue of my work. Slopped over and cooked again, seared black and tasteless as our days. Murdering meat swine fucks.

My work is to be owned and deal with it. To stand here, day after day, above the city of bells, at the doors of hooked meat, dealing the hot drugs, whittling the little light in me to nothing. I cash the paychecks and I listen to their complaints, their wives and their kids, their trailer stains, their leaks. Every complaint a story. Every story a back story. Every present tense an ear stapled shut.

Do you hear that? I ask them. That’s the sound of no one listening.

But they say I shouldn’t complain. They say I’m lucky they left me a mouth. They say it was them, and only them, who gave me a tongue, gave me language, left me lips to push them open, spilling the hot white smut of their hearts to the floor.

Fingers

Building 75 is where the men slaughter pigs—The babbling brook cry of pork.

Steve. It’s his job to give them skins. Skin. Digestible sealant Yum Dogs Industry Meats calls its “Company Snap.” Flesh juice. The slathering secretion between little teeth, the afternoon “mommy please!” snack, and midnight tummy ache.

The problem is Steve doesn’t believe the flesh is ever real. The juice, he thinks, It’s just chemical.

Steve's best friend Leo hates the job. But the job loves Leo. Turns his fingers into a pair of god hands. Emperor at the altar. Slow wash of the executioner. He's so good they call him "The Roman"—For it is Leo who mashes the cartilage delicious soft, the broken hooves maple apple brown, makes the juice juicy in Yum Dogs Industry Meats. The **40-inch Caliber Gash Dog**. The **Polka Terminator Dog**. The **You Won't Eat This Sausage Dog**. Even the **Little Lady of Tiny Town Dog**.

There are days when the sea of Leo's talents make the back of Steve's head swell.

Last week, while pureeing snouts for the new line of pork mustard, Leo nearly sliced off both middle fingers. Cut the fingers deep, right to the bone.

He held up his hands in the hazy yellow light of midday factory heat, watching the blood gush from the middle of his flesh-gloves, and howled like a baby—Dropped to his knees and howled: "Fuck ass Yum machines! Fuck ass kids and their goddamn pig snout mustard! Blubbery doughy-cheek discharges! Mustard fuckers!" His voice choked—for Leo is a civil, orderly man not use to such tongue abuse—and continued quietly: "...I'll give you mustard, you little shits."

Men are hurt all the time in Building 75—Heads caught in pig bolts, and cut clean from the swing of the overhead blade. But because it was Leo, the Big Boss called an ambulance right onto the floor, right under the roof—The men looking up from their vats, their eyes creamed over with waxy gristle, the fat fog of juice meat rising.

Steve rushed over to hold his hands over Leo's chest as Leo coughed and opened closed his eyes again and again. Leo's skin felt so hot. His chest hard and moving. "I'll

give you,” Leo whispered. His tongue white. Blistering. “I’ll give you.” The ambulance blurred.

The men stepped back, their arms heavy with fat—Pork and other. The lights fogged in the dirty steam, the popping fresh fried double grease dip, the sirens and exhaust and dripping belly stains. Tears welled in Steve’s eyes, salting his meat charred face. He was nearly convulsing when he felt Wanda reach out—pink-chipped nails chewed to the quick—and take his meat gloved hand.

Wanda. Leo’s cousin who works in the office and munches on butter toffee candy all day. All day long—Extremenachocheesechips, blue cherry soda, her sticky orange smacked palms pawing through the time sheets and gut charts, knuckles stained from smoking, jaundice yellow eyes, pale clay lipstick. Leo and the other men call Wanda “Swamp Ass,” but Steve calls her butter. And whenever Steve catches Wanda shifting her small purple belt around her enormous rayon pants, he thinks, There goes my butter toffee butter. Butter Butter Butter—All day butter.

The loose turkey skin on Wanda’s face shook and quivered in the circling emergency lights. Gaping at Steve. Unbelieving of what she was doing. Her squirrel eyes blinking. Steve spellbound in her hand.

“I’m not meaning to touch you,” Wanda stammered. But the ambulance croaked as it lurched into the parking lot, causing Wanda to flinch and grip Steve’s hand tighter.

Leo is always telling Steve what he’d give people. “I’ll give you a punched time clock. I’ll give you a paycheck.” And Leo is always saying how “Industry Meats is no place for love, my friend. No place at all. Stephen? Are you listening to me? Good.

Now will you please help me with these intestines before they really start to stink. Thank you.”

—

It is the sound of Ittering Tyttering Tum that keep these mutteled voices from completely darkening my head. Whickering blackened tongue. Slap whack it around, teeth work and tell—It’s all they let me have. And trust me, with all this screaming, slaughtering squeals, I have to have something.

“Make up some talk, Old Dark! You’ll be alright!” says the Big Boss.

The pig fuck, what would he know about “Alright”? Fat and idle, so bored and black by the stories of his employment, the work of his killers, all my black thuckering secrets which are only secrets because no one listens to a word I say—Outside the walls of Building 75 the city has risen a Satan to its council. On and on Old Dark, pay me no mind.

Fuckering Bicker Thocker, humming the men to work and ushering them home to their soiled beds, all day every day, with nothing left but to wander their processors, their blowholes of hissing steam and bright alarms, their leather straps bound and hanging from my neck, while my fat gargles on and on.

Eyes

The night before Leo comes back from the hospital—his middle fingers ridiculously bandaged in loose papered gauze—some angry people break into Building 75 and

dismantle one of the processors. What they do is take apart the gears and spread them on the floor. Spell the word “MURDER.”

“Hippies,” Leo mumbles. “I’ll give you murder.”

Steve doesn’t know the first thing about the inside of processors. I’m just a skin man, he thinks, Insides have nothing to do with me.

Leo and Steve stand in front of the wrecked processor—Tall as a condominium, the gears pouring onto the floor like a tide, Steve’s scalp breaking into nervous columns of red helium swells, itching and confused. He wants to faint. He wants to run away. All these insides, what they pretend to grind, spit out and chew, pallet after pallet of rip package Dogs—It’s not real, Steve tells himself, Metal doesn’t smash pigs like this. It just sounds that way. Just acts that way. Fake swine and chemical juice. Remember, Stephen? Fake swine and chemical seams.

Big Boss calls down from the great skylight of 75: “Good to have you back, Leo my boy! And just in time, I might add!” He claps his huge hands. “Now let’s have it! I need every one of my processors up and operational! Counting on you, Roman! You know what to do! Crank those washers! Blow out the engines and get me moving! I got Yum waiting! Yum—It’s waiting!”

Leo nibbles at his bottom lip, reflecting upon his damaged middle fingers. He sniffs the bandages. “They’re already getting ripe,” he says. “Already beginning to turn.”

Leo looks around at the vast smoking expanse of 75. “It’s the air in here, Stephen. The condensation of spoiling blood. The worst part is, we’re constantly

recycling it, making it worse. We breathe it in. We breathe it out. We breathe it in.”

Leo shakes his head. “There’s nothing to be done about it.”

“Blood?” Steve asks suddenly with a shake.

“Yes, Stephen. That’s what I said. Blood. Well, spoiled blood that is.”

“But... How can there be blood, Leopold? Pigs bleed, but we have no pigs in here. Not real ones anyway.”

Leo says nothing.

“Isn’t that right, Leopold? No *real* pigs in 75?”

Leo unstraps a large wrench from his belt. He pulls down his black eyewear.

“Fire up that torch, Stephen. We have a long day on the ceiling.”

A large yellow caged bucket drops from the overhang to lift the men atop the broken processor.

“But Leopold?” Steve stammers. His eye sockets chilly ratchets of nervous heat—
—Ill itchy cold sores.

Leo opens the bucket and then stops. He looks back at Steve. Steve sees his own reflection in Leo’s black eyewear, and underneath the eyewear are Leo’s eyes—Blunted sideways with scar tissue, the flat form of his chin and black stubble, lips cracked, mumbling ache, Why Why Why?

“I’m sorry,” he says finally. “I must have meant something else. You’re right, Stephen. There are no pigs in 75. Not real ones anyway.”

Steve blinks.

“It’s like we always say, remember?” Leo says. “—We make the swine *fake*.”

Leo steps inside the bucket. Steve blinks again.

“Hey!” Leo says as cheerfully as he can, raising his large wrench, trying desperately to grip it with only three fingers and a thumb. “What happens if we don’t make the swine fake?”

Steve smiles and picks up his blowtorch. “Somebody’s gonna make it real!”

“That’s right, Stephen.” The men close the caged door. “Somebody’s going to make it real.”

—

Like history, I work seven days a week. Every hour on the minute within the ear beat of every man inside 75. Outside the walls of Building 75 the city chains our wives to telephone poles, while our children lay around eating candied apple skulls. Because it’s what I push, these words and my little tied baggies of crank—Our hot cure for sleep.

If they say it is the Old Dark who sells the meth, the crystal, the lye, the ether and lithium metals into the collapsed veins of The Bells—red phosphorous cold remedies, the blinking hot medicine for cauterized ears and eyes—they are right. Like the Big Boss says: “Stay awake, keep the work!” He pays me well to barb and wire men’s hearts on those snowy river banks of dirty skunk—Seven thousand pounds of crushed white amps a month and all the bacon Vegas can eat.

I pray for these pig fuckers and all the reasons they need and need.

Ears

Steve was raised on a pork farm in Northern Idaho, where he didn't hear a sound until he was six years old. Not that he was deaf. Simply chose not to hear. At least that's the way Doc C explained it.

“The boy... Well, the boy doesn't want to hear so he ain't hearing.”

“Give it straight, Curtis,” growled Steve's father. “None of this nanny-fucking around.”

“His membranous drums don't seem to be responding to sound waves, Carl. Yet the membranous drums are, in and of themselves, just fine.”

“Now just what in the holy cunfuck does that mean?”

“Means what it means, Carl,” said Doc C. “Boy CAN hear. He just AIN'T hearing.” Doc C smiled and folded his arms across the Red Cross medical apron he always insisted on wearing during times of war, no matter how inconsequential the war appeared to be.

The name of Carl's pork farm was Bacon & Sons. Carl was a large filthy man who spent much of his sixty one years smelling like pig shit, stained in pig blood. Steve learned at a very early age that when a man has to spend his life in shit and blood, he tends to make the ones in his care very miserable. And although Carl was not necessarily a man of misery, he was a man of the foul and wretched. And although Carl was not without love for his two sons—first Steve and then Jessup—he did believe in a hard tablet of discipline and physical doctrine he called the “Gut Instruction.”

Carl thought up the Instruction as a way of getting Steve to hear—Or at least respond to what he supposedly “already” heard. This is how it worked: Carl settled on his knees and took hold of young Steve’s face—Feeling his thumbs over Steve’s ears, into the pockets, around the lobe. Steve’s face was, of course, miniature to that of his father’s. Carl had drizzly pores, a ham neck, a flat scabbard nose, cooked bacon cheeks, and a dripping pornographic mouth—All of which was accompanied by a general smell of unwashed damage. Under these conditions, Carl held his son and held his son until silence became something they could eat. Then Carl opened his mouth and screamed, pulling close as if he intended to tear the young pink flesh right off Steve’s face. Naturally, the idea of having his face torn away by his father’s terrible yellow teeth, made Steve howl and howl in only that way the youngest of children can howl—“There you little shit,” Carl yelled. “Hear that! That’s fear you little bitch boy! That’s cuntfucking fear you’re hearing!” And again Carl set his mouth against Steve’s face while Steve howled and howled, batting his eyes down against his father’s black hot breath and tongue—Lick lick licking.

Months passed like this. Every day Steve’s small peach face became another fantastical meal for his father. Every day his throat ached more and more with sound—The howls, the high pitched cries which tore into his ears, hollowing out a place, a pocket where Steve believed such a terrible thing must live forever.

Then one day it stopped.

On the morning of his sixth birthday, Steve stood on the front porch taking in the wide yawn of the country. His belly was full on syrup and grilled ham, a bowl of mashed bananas, four cups of OJ. He rubbed his tummy and watched the sun break across the

high stretching ridgeline and the white haze which slumped on the family's twenty acres, the short frost-tipped grass and the farm of trees that rose beyond the barbed fence line. And—And something else. Something Steve had managed to keep from his ears all his short life.

The barn.

Hooks in the barn.

Claws on the hooks.

Gears running from the claws.

Gas engine and blades.

Saws.

At six years of age, Steve stood gaping on the porch in the hard winter light of a birthday morning, listening to all the pigs in his father's quick and hurried butcher. While the screaming inside gave way, and everything in Steve became quiet—even the outer slaughter.

—

The Bells is a sound without beginning or end. The ringing of them everywhere and nowhere at all times. Chiming across the glacial plates of the city, shattering the tops of the hemlocks and rusted fingers of pines. It is a sound of coming and going. Leaving and entering. Exit. A door shut. The inside of a room. The color of wet walls. The color of puddles. The sound of water coming down.

The sound is a grey pulse of brackish rain, the grey birds crying over the shore, the dirty bay, the blood-gutted harbor. And it was here I began to speak those first words, Outside the walls of Building 75...

In the early years of the structure—the skeletal pillars and mold of steel pools, the strapping bolts, the container seams—I practiced my speeches, while the sound of The Bells sounded to the paving of streets, the palm of buildings, its prison and highway and strange killings, stretched blue waistlines, jiggling jaws. The closet cries of pork. The sound of ears closing down. Stapling shut. Industry firing up. And our eyes.

Gut

Every Sunday, Leo and Steve have to clean out the unused guts.

What happens is that an ocean of grease—seared snouts and a sound like boiling tar—is pushed from the gates, the vents of Building 75. Leo and Steve wait for it to hit the parking lot, grey grease sloshing onto the pavement. There they shovel the hot swine, the bloated birth smell, filling metal drum after metal drum—Rusted barrels that say Industry Meats: Yum Waste.

But today isn't Sunday. Today is Friday—Leo wishing it was still Thursday, wishing he was still laid up in the Free Clinic with his fingers gently wrapped in gauze so clean and white it might have been silk, morphine flowing like a song through his veins... But no, he is here instead—Big Boss calling for his Leo, his dear, dear Roman to “Get a goddamn move on! Square those wrenches! Fire that torch! I got Yum waiting! Yum—It's waiting!”

For the last hour and a half Steve has been sucking on his lips, his hands wound tight into the handles of the unsteady blowtorch, pretending he knows what the hell he's doing, and wondering how long Yum will wait before it quits, just walks away?

Stuck between the gears, the shafts, the terrible gaps and teeth of the processor, Leo is trying his best not to curse the shitassfuckhole world he was born into. Unwrapping himself from the pulsing metal, Leo peels back his black eyewear and stretches out his arthritic torso.

“Hold up a minute, Stephen. I need a break.”

Steve caps the torch and feels the dull ache in his shoulders and arms. Pock burns smolder in his meat gloved hands.

“Holy Christ in Heaven,” sighs Leo, “will you just look at this mess.” The downward crumbling machine. “We've seen our share of problems, haven't we, Stephen. But never, I mean never, have I seen anything like this. Damn hippies. I don't think even the Good Lord Himself could fix this.” Turning his eyes up to the honeycomb rafters, the tarry dread ceiling, ears dripping sludge greasy pig cries. “Perhaps,” Leo says, “if we could ask Him, just this once, to come down and give it a try... ?”

Then suddenly a Holy Silence descends upon 75, the men pulling up from their toil, holding themselves straight, staring down at the slowing convoys of calming blood. Leo closes his eyes, mouth half open, his mouth mouthing Yes Yes Yes... But then he hears the popping, the snapping of knotty knees, and he can picture her worried fat mashed hands nervously mauling her horrible rayon blouse. Leo opens his eyes and

looks down to the floor. Sure enough, there stands his cousin Wanda with her frightened blackened pumpkin seed eyes. Throat clicking.

Leo shakes his head. “I hate it when You do that to me.”

But Steve is so happy he drops the blowtorch against his legs and begins to desperately wave his arms hello.

Wanda stares up with her worried low hum groaning. “Oh no. How did this happen? Processor 17? Oh it is. What are we going to do?”

Leo steps back, continuing to shake his head, muttering, no longer caring if he remains civil—“Cock-knocking swamp ass.” Sliding back into the machine. “Baggy polyester whore bucket.” Settling once again into the metal and the sound of his wrenches—Turned oil flesh.

Smiling so hard his cheeks hurt, Steve climbs into the yellow caged bucket and swings towards the floor. He pees his pants a little and has to shove his hands into his pockets to pinch off the head of his cock, his fingers squeezing into the cold flesh paste that fills his work pants—watery bolts and yellow scabs of pig brittle Leo will never have the chance to bleach white—and tries to whistle, but his lips are hopelessly sticky. Steve steps out of the cage and begins to approach his butter, while Wanda rocks back and forth on her radiantly white orthopedic shoes and weeps into her tire-sized chin—“This is awful. Oh. How could anyone... What did they do? What *did* they DO?”

Steve doesn't know what to say. All he can think is, We'll give them murder, and, Don't worry, baby, Yum can wait—It *can* wait, at least for a while. So, without

hesitation, Steve blurts: “No matter how hard I try, I can’t make skin as beautiful as your skin.”

Wanda stops. Looks at Steve and wrinkles her nose. “What are you talking about, Steve?”

“Your skin,” he says. “I’m talking about your beautiful butter skin.”

Wanda shudders, pressing her fingers into her rotten cauliflower ears. “I don’t – ”

“No! I mean, not... No, not like a Yum Dog,” Steve yammers. “That’s not it at all. You’re so much more beautiful than anything here. That’s what I mean. And if we could just—” Not chemical, he thinks, I would never make you into anything like that. You’re my butter. You’re my perfect all day butter. My beautiful butter butter. If you could just see that. What you are to me. What I could make you become. What you could make me become. Who we could be if we could just—“Touch!”

Wanda shakes her head violently, her dead blonde curls batting against her face. She unplugs her ears and wraps her arms across her swollen abdomen, pushing her chin into her neck and her neck into her lips.

“I told you, Steve,” she commands. “What did I say to you? I said I’m not meaning to touch you. Remember? That’s what I said. I said I didn’t mean to. It was just that Leo was hurt, and you were... You were... Oh! I don’t know, Steve!”

“Goddamn you, bitch,” Leo yells from inside processor 17, where he has been patiently listening and imagining all the thoughts Steve was thinking—How many times he’s listened to Steve chant Wanda’s name as he prepared the Yum Dog skins, over and over, Wanda Wanda Wanda, as if it was magic, or even the secret name of God. “His

name is STEPHEN! There's no dignity in Steve! Now leave the poor man alone and get your swamp ass to work!"

"I hate you!" Wanda screams with more force than Steve (though not Leo) ever thought possible.

"I'll give you hate, bitch!"

Steve blinks as Wanda humps her chest up over her arms, stomps her foot once and kicks around, waddling back towards the office—Shuffle slide style over the flattened entrails on the floor.

—

I was once in love with the light of The Bells, never believing for a moment that young dark could ever become Old Dark, sharp dark, a greasy drug dealing spittle of sputtle, some mishap of afterbirth, a burp of sludge fuel. I dreamt the light of the city was the sound of slowing traffic, the sound of wind between the crumbly bark of trees, the sound of sand. But the buildings were given numbers, and 75 rose, pumping its flesh ash across the air of the city, until the walkways were covered in the remains of skin. And the city became skin, and the skin didn't feel like sleeping. It couldn't hear the sound of night over the dry humping of amphetamines, the twitching of nervous eyes. Employment dropped, and the lines grew longer.

And now, with the sound of one long day, The Bells is nothing more than a headstone on an ossuary of pig bones. Where on it the Old Dark plans to etch, Outside the walls of Building 75 we're still standing in the same place of freezing. The place of

pretending. The place our throats fill our lungs with the coming ash of the coming fire.
You slaughtering sluts.

Instruction

Jessup was born when Steve was seven. Like all good children, Jessup's hearing was perfect. This reality filled Steve with a happiness he believed would never end.

As a baby, Jessup held his small, small hands to his fat plucked cheeks. Pulled at fingers. Let loose thick silver spools of drool when he spoke. Squirreled with delight when he received response. This, Steve said to himself in awe, Is love o love o love.

Like all good children, Jessup grew into a boy. An unfortunate boy who could not handle the systematic disembowelment of swine.

One Sunday after church, Carl took the boys into the slaughter pen, where he hoisted a freshly caucasianed grey patched pig into the air. The pig was tied by its back hooves with a rusty chain, squealing and flailing its neck and chest, the chain straining, the wood beams groaning and groaning with the kicking weight. Jessup plugged his ears. Steve, being deaf to such sounds, knew better. And with the pig going on with its last confused gasps, Carl began the instruction—"Okay boys, here you have the swine. That there's the anus. And here's the throat. Between here and there is the gut. Now this is important, so listen up. Gut's what counts, boys! Gut puts food on the table and keeps your mother happy with her new drapes and faggotyass couch covers. Gut paid for my Daddy's, your Grandaddy's, birthright. Gut makes way for more gut!" Carl took a moment to wipe the wetness from his large jowl, staring down at his two wide-eyed sons.

“It’s the heartbeat of this nation. Do you hear me, boys? This is the most important thing you’re ever going to learn. *INSIDES count*, you little bastards!” Carl began to jab his sons in the bellies with the blood-stained handle of the knife. “Hear me? Insides keep you breathing, you little cuntfucks! *BREATHING!*” And with that, Carl turned, took up his knife and cut the pig “Anus to throat.” When the hot white guts sloshed on the cracked hay floor, Jessup ran from the slaughter pen screaming.

Months passed like this. Just like this.

After each Sunday Instruction Steve had to stay and fill the water troughs, throwing in the so many pounds of feed to the snort huff-huffing and bumping strain of pig noses. When he was done Steve would brush off his hands, watching the imaginary color of pig remains fall from his palms, and trudge back to the house. Outside the door to the kitchen, Steve took off his boots before pattering through the silent ticking of the dinning room in his stocking feet. His little brother would always be waiting for him in their room, hiding beneath an overturned cardboard box.

Steve and Jessup’s mother was an addict of the 24-hour TV mail-order circuit. Every week she watched and phoned-in for hundreds of country housewife gems—cherry grime chicken cookers, bean steamers, yellow duck rugs, clapping monkey alarm clocks, glass roosters—which arrived in huge cardboard boxes from places the boys had never heard of. Ash Home, Kentucky. Polyframe, Mississippi. Tea Cup, Arizona. After everything was removed and stored away, Carl would give the boys the biggest of the boxes to play in. “Here you go. Have fun.”

Steve, especially tired from having to disbelieve the repetitive Sunday slaughter, took off his flannel and hung it on a nail at the end of their bunk bed. Stretching out on

his back, he smelled the pig shit on the pillow covers and comforter. He heard his little brother breathing underneath the box.

“You alright?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Jessup said from inside the box.

“That’s good. You still scared?”

“No.”

“That’s good.”

“Stevie?”

“Yeah, Jessie?”

“Do you hate him?”

“No. I guess not. Why? Do you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Stevie?”

“Yeah?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because why not, I guess.”

“Because of what he does?”

Steve was quiet for a long time. Either thinking or not thinking, he wasn't certain.

"Stevie?"

"Yeah?"

"You wanna come inside my box?"

"Yeah," he said. "Okay."

Three days ago, the day after Leo cut his middle fingers, Steve's father died of complete gastronomical failure. Belly came right through his toenails. Right out the pores in his face. At least that's the way Doc C explained it to Steve.

"Damnedest thing I've ever seen Stevie. There's nothing in medical science that can explain it. At least as far as I know. You should have seen him, he was like a slug cut wide open." Doc C coughed. "I'm sorry. I tend to be overtly graphic. Too much combat, I guess. I hope you understand." There was a long pause. "Stevie, listen, there's something I think you ought to hear from me. I know it's going to sound... Well, forced, I guess. But Carl loved you, son. Both you and Jessup. I know what kind of man he was. I served with him. Even then he had a way of doing things. I ain't saying he always did things in a humanly fashion, but a fashion nonetheless. A fashion of loving. And a fashion... Well, there were other fashions, too. But he loved you, son. He certainly did."

Bone

Lunchtime. Leo and Steve sit atop wrecked processor 17 sharing a cucumber sandwich.

“You know, Stephen, I’ve been giving some consideration to this whole thing with your father.” Leo pauses to chew before handing the sandwich to Steve. “I think you should go. I really do. You know, it’s like this—One of the last rites to becoming a man is the burial of his father. Personally, I found papa’s funeral very therapeutic, to say the least. And I don’t see any reason, given the circumstance, the same wouldn’t prove true for you.”

With his mouth full, Steve asks: “Can I bring Wanda?”

“Can you what? Where?”

“Idaho, Leopold. For the funeral.”

Leo snatches the sandwich from Steve’s hands and bites down hard, closing his eyes—Jaw mashing the bread and salt and cucumber. “No.” He shakes his head.

“Absolutely not.”

“But why not?”

“Why not? Are you kidding me, Stephen? Why would you want to bring that... That *thing* with you?”

“Because I love her.”

“Jesus Christ.” Leo stands up and hurls the rest of the sandwich off the platform, the two halves of the bread pulling apart, the cucumbers spilling out over 75’s gut strewn floor. “What the fuck do you know about love?” he yells. “Huh? My cousin’s a fat slobbering cheese-smacking dyke—That’s how much you fucking know about love.” Leo’s head falls back with a snap, mouth open. “Oh God, Stephen. Why do you make me talk like that? You know how terrible it makes me feel.”

Steve stands up and shoves Leo with his chest, but only because Leo is standing so close. “Well—Fuck you, too. I don’t believe you, Leopold. Like— ... Like how you always call her Whore Bucket and Horse Face. Who made you God of everything anyway?”

Leo’s shoulders collapse—He’s looking at his bandaged fingers, the thick carpetry mess of oily blood and machine waste. He holds up his middle fingers and Steve takes a step back, the squeegee of the flesh coated platform—Grey matter grease swine. “I want you to look at these things very carefully, Stephen. Do you see?” Smothered in malted big bone, gear springs and marrow. “Good. Now why don’t you tell me about suffering. Go ahead, hotshot. Let me have it.”

“It’s not so bad,” Steve mutters.

“Not so bad? You blind fucking retard! I’ll give you not so fucking—” Leo tries to make a fist, but his hands drop to his sides. His chin drops to his chest. “Shit. I don’t know what I’m doing. You’re right, Stephen. I don’t know anything, Stephen. Look at me. I’m still here. Fourteen years. Still right here.” He looks up. “What the fuck do I care? Everything’s fake to you anyway. The swine. The meat. She might as well be, too. So go on. Get out of here. Ask her. You know where she’s at. The swamp ass cunt. Ask that flesh cancer bitch for her love.”

“Do you mean it, Leopold?”

Leo turns away from Stephen, pulling his black eyewear down over his face. “I’m cursing aren’t I?”

Hearts

Steve finds Wanda where he knew she would be—Crammed in her purple compact car smoking cigarettes, eating fried chicken hearts, battered oil, the squeeze of ketchup and mayo and her mouth going Glump Glump Glump. Over it all—The muted whine strain of country music: *love's sweet / country treat*.

Steve takes off his meat gloves and taps on the window with his bare knuckles. Wanda jumps, crumbs falling, mayo hardening on her sea lion lips. “Christ,” she says, her voice muffled behind the glass. “Steve—Stephen. What is it?”

What to say, he thinks, Say. Make your skin. No. Your skin crisp digestible sealant, we call it Company Snap. No! It's not like that. Like. Something soft. Like all day butter. Butter toffee butter. Something like—“Your skin looks like a knife peeling across a tub of margarine, baby,” he says. Delicious creamy yellow.

“What?” Wanda shouts. And frowning, she shoves her shoulder into the door. “That's it!” The door popping open—*Love's sweet country treat / plum peaches in the Georgia spring / O how I love my baby / my darling peach of country treat*, following her into the grey sweltering day, the stacks of 75 pumping flesh ash into the bay of the city below.

“That's just *it*, buddy. I want you to hear me good, because I'm saying it once and never again. I want you to leave me alone now,” she says, her white rayon pants wet with grease. “I never meant to touch you in the first place, don't you understand that?” Suddenly shoving Steve in the chest, strong and hard, her face twisted up like wet cardboard. “You just... I don't know—Looked so sad, and Leo was hurt... I never meant

it—Okay!—I never meant it!” Her hands—greased chicken hearts and skins—clawing at his face, her white orthopedic shoes raking at his legs. “What am I to you anyways? Just another swamp ass, I bet. Isn’t that right, Leo? Just a fucking swamp ass!” The concrete cold, the cool wetness on Steve’s blistered skin. And outside the walls the wire lines drip over the 7 & 5, the city and the heavy woman and her medically responsible shoes going slump slump slumping over his chest, the prescription rubber tearing at the skin under his vest and body armor, tearing his hair, the hot meat and her voice—Whose name is she screaming? Lee—Leopold? And her voice: “Didn’t mean it? We’ll see who didn’t mean it, Leo. Watch me not meaning it.” Stomp stomp. “How about that? Fuck you, Leo!” Stomping. “I’ll give you cock. I’ll give you big fat cock, baby.” Spitting, the taste of deep oil on Steve’s lips. “I hate you! Hear me? I hate you, Leo! Fucking hate you!”

Necks

“Stephen! Stephen!” Leo shouts from the ceiling of processor 17.

“Wait, wait—Just wait there a minute, Stephen. Hold on, please. I’m coming right down.” Leo quickly shuts the bucket’s caged door. He hits the floor hard—Rolling, slamming his fingers inside the cage. “Fuck motherfucker! Shit—I didn’t mean that. Stephen!”

Ittering Tyttering Tum.

“Okay, okay, I’m here—What’s up? Hey, where are you going? Come on, Stephen. What’s up with the blowtorch, buddy?”

“Don’t call me *buddy*, Lee.”

“Hey, okay. That’s fine. The processor is back here, man.” Leo chuckles. “Hey! You know what happens if we don’t fix it? Right? Hey, Stephen, can you hear me?” Leo reaches out and takes Steve’s arm, blood running down Steve’s neck and face, the cargo doors of 75 opening, the grey light of the day pouring in, releasing the smell of burnt hair and skin, the bad vats of blood and waxy gristle into the outer air.

“I’m going to cut her open,” Steve says. “She’ll love me when she has the Instruction, Leopold.”

“Whoa! No! No, Stephen. That sounds like a terrible idea. What did I tell you? What did I say about her? Come on, try and say it with me: My cousin is a *swamp ass fucking...*” Leo steps in front of Steve, ripping off his black eyewear. “Stephen—Stop. This is not the way.”

“Trust me. She’ll understand the Instruction. Everybody does.”

“Wait!—Please. Stephen. I mean it. Look, there’s something else. This thing... Something I haven’t told you about.”

Steve pushes Leo aside. “I know, Lee. Don’t worry. There’s only one thing that matters now.”

And the bells of the city sound through the gates of Building 75.

Slump.

“You’re fucking wrong, buddy. It’s not. Not even close. There’s one other thing, and not what you think. It’s much bigger than that. You have to believe me, Stephen. It’s more. Much more than Wanda.”

Slump.

“There’s nothing bigger than her.”

Slump.

“Well... That might be true. But yes, there is. Just this one thing—Something you can’t possibly know about because I’ve been so careful in keeping it from your ears. Something you will never have if you walk out that door. I promise.”

Steve turns.

Fat wears me thin. And ideas wear me out.

Leo smiles. “Swine, my friend. Very real, very alive swine.”

Steve stares. “Real?”

“Yes, Stephen. Kicking and slobbering.”

“Breathing?”

“Breathing.”

“Squealing?”

“Like a motherfucker.”

Steve looks down at the blowtorch in his bare hands. *Insides keep you breathing, you little cuntfucks.*

“You want this. Think about it. All these years...”

Steve blinks.

“Yes. Bring the torch. Follow me.”

Steve follows Leo outside the walls of Building 75, across the parking lot, the pool of his blood on the pavement and the tire marks and the sky stretching over them and into the city where we wait under the streetlights, waiting for the sound, waiting for the bells to start ringing, waiting... Walking farther into the caverns, the systems of chemical seams and young dark and Old Dark, opening onto a sound like gurgling bells—
—One hundred thousand pigs screeching under a ceiling of fluorescent lights, crushed together in mud and shit and metal wire and snort-huff huffing at the cracked hay fingers on the floor, their flat formless eyes and rounded pig jaws, the yellow slaughter tags in their bitten ears, and the sound, the sound, the squealing, black watery eyes, grey saltwater shore, peeling back from their white red skulls, the wood beams croaking and straining overhead, the kicking weight, the sound of chains dragging, wrapped to the hooves, bones, and hoisting, hoisting, squealing, until there is only the sound, a sound like shearing skin, sloshing, a sound that wears out even the dark, the light, the cries, the smell, and the sound. Jumping in—their fat bodies smothering his legs, tearing at his flesh smacked garments—Steve takes hold of a live swine, yanks back the neck and sets his blowtorch to blaze.

—for J.R.L & J.J.

The C stands for Combustion. Like tattering string and tissue. A bloody mess all over your nursing apron, and would-be mothers running around screaming, their stomachs burst open like giant plates of watery spaghetti.

The Bleeding Of Company C

My name is Annie Linn. It sounds Asian, I know. But I've never even eaten Chinese food. And to be completely honest, up until a few years ago I thought ginseng was a fancy type of shampoo.

I've been a Free Company nurse for the last twelve years. Being a Free Company nurse means you work in a Free Clinic. Which means, among other things, you get paid in piles of dog shit and have to help anybody who comes in needing it. No insurance? That's alright. Don't speak English? That's okay. Pregnant and ready to explode? We'll deal with it. Or at least pretend to.

I am thirty-four. I'm married but I have no children. I'm short and fat and have a pair of cheeks that look like pink silver dollar pancakes, but I have the most gorgeous red curly hair you've ever seen. I know, a red-headed Annie—how corny.

My husband Brad and I moved to The Bells from Port Angeles so long ago we can't remember what Port Angeles looks like, not the names of the streets or the dump next to the cemetery. Our parents died in the same warehouse fire and we just figured what the hell. We bought a car for eight-hundred bucks and headed north.

The Bells just sort of happened. We woke up here one day in a one-bedroom apartment with jobs and pillow lines etched on our faces, the alarm clock blaring like disaster.

Now we got this thing called the Night Bleeds. Women and their babies are leaving this world in great burps of goo and blood, and nobody knows what to do about it. The police can't stop it. The doctors can't save you. And us Free Company nurses are worthless as prayers, holding up bloody sheets to God as if to say, "Now don't you think we've had enough?"

Little over a year ago, the Night Bleeds appear out of thin air like an itch on your arm. In the beginning, everyone stands around blinking, nobody wanting to be the first to admit there's something seriously wrong. Then people start demanding answers. Then they start throwing rocks and bottles. Now they're trying to burn the city down. Just the other night my cousin Jackie got her back window smashed out by a cinderblock as she was driving to the store for cigarettes. When she got home her dog was on fire. Her favorite holly bush dug up and used for kindle. Poor Jackie.

There are protests, too. In the mornings they gather outside the Free Clinic with signs and banners and oversized digital photographs of the things we can't seem to fix—stomachs blown apart like pussing yellow and red popcorn bags, blackened fetuses, charred off baby faces, and mothers all bloody ears and eyes.

We watch them from the big coffee room window. "It's almost like they blame *us*," says Bibiana.

“They do blame us,” says Betty Karr, the head nurse of the Women’s Clinic.

“Goddamn right they blame us. Wouldn’t you?”

“It’s not our fault,” says Bibiana.

“Since when did that ever matter?” says Betty Karr. “They send us their sisters and their daughters and their mothers, and they get back a bucket of burnt bacon. Who are they going to blame? The bucket? The bacon? Please.”

Bibiana shakes her head. “That’s disgusting, Betty.”

“Disgusting! That’s a laugh.”

“I just don’t understand why you have to put everything so... Cruelly.”

Betty Karr claps her hands together. “Because I’m a realist, bitch. Okay? That’s why. None of you Free Company nurses seem to get what we’re up against here.”

“Oh, we get it, Betty, we get it,” says Judith. “So why don’t you spare us the dramatics.”

Betty Karr tosses her cup of coffee to the floor and storms out. “Sluts.”

“Cow,” says Judith.

Bibiana covers her chest with her arms and closes her eyes.

I don’t say anything. I blow on my cold cup of coffee and watch the protestors.

Sometimes, in a dark secret place way deep inside me, I know what causes it. I know where it came from. I know where it’s going. And sometimes, I think we deserve it. Asked for it. You know, had it coming.

Dr. Poolbelly wants us at the Clinic seven days a week, on-call twenty four hours a day. Most us have just given up and taken to sleeping here. We drive each other crazy, but it's probably for the best since our "home-lives" feel like cold slices of cheese pizza and floor stains. Speaking personally, I haven't made love in nine months and six days—make that seven. I know it's for my own good, but that doesn't stop me from missing it any less. I miss the sounds. The way Brad chokes and groans like somebody's trying to shove a pipe down his throat, but in a good way, like he's trying to fit every bit of me into himself. I miss it for other reasons, too. I liked it to like it. And I think most of us would agree there are few things to like about this life, and when one of them gets sick and is taken away, then the few become less.

In the beginning, Brad tried to dog the severity of the situation. He'd say, "Babe, you know this is just one more way the Christian Right is trying to make us forget about fucking." When that didn't work, he promised to wear a condom. "We can even do it under a pickup truck, just like in high school." Poor Brad. I tried to explain to him what they look like, how the smell of them fill the entire Delivery room until you wake up screaming from dreams about it. But that's the worst thing about Combustion, you just can't explain it. The smell. The mess. And all that blood. God. You'd never believe the amount of blood.

Brad's a good man and he loves me. Sure, sometimes he acts like he doesn't, or acts like he doesn't love me the way he used to love me. But I know he loves me because he respects the decisions I make, and has even stopped trying to change them.

Some of the ladies aren't so lucky. Like Sarah. Sarah says she and her boyfriend Sandy are careful, but we know better. We shake our heads and Sarah looks down and

says, "Sorry, but it's so hard. Sandy and I are in love, guys. It's not like anything else in the world. I mean it. It's magic." We know. We've all been there at one time or another. And we feel bad. We do. We never had to deal with nothing like Night Bleeds when we were Sarah's age. I know everyone says it, but things were better then. Not like it's ever been easy.

Then there's Bibiana. Poor girl. Bibiana is about the sweetest thing you'd ever want to meet in your whole life. Out of all the new Free Company nurses, she's our favorite. She's young and beautiful and full of a clear-eyed somberness that just breaks your heart. All she wants is a baby with little baby hands and little baby feet and a little baby mouth. Bibiana and her husband Reverend Isaiah moved to Bell City this past spring, right when the Night Bleeds were hitting their stride. Rev. Isaiah serves as the head pastor at Cascade County Prison. He took over after the last pastor, Reverend Williams, was skin and hung from the rafters in the big prison uprising last winter. Rev. Isaiah is a strong and caring man. I can't imagine him of ever being scared of anything. It's the way he walks I think, very straight and upright, as if he's got a two-by-four inside his cloak. He talks with incredible gentleness too, but you can tell he'd rip your head off if it came to that. Betty Karr thinks he's a self-righteous prick, "I've never met a man with such a God-complex." Sarah says she doesn't know what that's supposed to mean. "All I know is that he carries Jesus in his heart. You can tell by the light in his eyes." Me, I think Rev. Isaiah is all that and then some. My! What a fine-looking man. Sometimes I imagine him and me in one of the storage closets, loosening his tight collar and his shirt and his pants and the dirty whispers we say into one another's ears. But of course I'd never do that because I think the world of Bibiana, and the rest of the ladies

would hate me and call me a slut, even though they'd just be jealous. Even so, on the real bad days I close my eyes and think about that storage closet and Rev. Isaiah and what's sure to be his big pulsing shaft of God and what life would be like without Combustion. But then I wake up and my nursing apron is covered in would-be mother blood and baby blood, and I swear to God it just doesn't do a person good to dream anymore.

Anyway, Bibiana is the greatest and we wish nothing but the best for her and Rev. Isaiah, even if she can't make it a day without completely breaking down into sobs and hiccups. Bibiana is from Kansas and I guess things are a whole lot different down there. She says that in Kansas people are considerate and nice, and there are entire days when you do nothing but lay in the shade and count yellow flowers. Nothing, she says, like it is up here in The Bells, with all the rain and snow and muddy ice and riots and gangs and Bleeds. She cries that all she wants is a normal life. Live like a normal woman. Have babies and a home where no one throws burning bags of garbage on your roof. Poor girl. All we can do is sort of stare at each other and nod and rub her shoulders as if we can possibly imagine what she's talking about.

Little over a year ago, right around September, Betty Karr comes running down the hall, her paper gown all jiggly with her fat and stethoscope. Betty Karr runs so funny, think charging rhinos, that it takes a full minute or so before we see how she's covered head to toe in blood. And God, is she screaming.

Betty grabs me and Sarah and tells everybody else to gather up as many towels and boxes of gauze and rolls of suction tape as they can find. "And hot water! Whatever you do, do not forget the hot water!"

Now, not that I'm a picture of delicate slender or anything, but Betty's really big and she runs the way you'd imagine an old-fashioned waffle iron to run. But that day, Sarah and I had trouble keeping up, sprinting as we were back down to Delivery.

Betty's breathing hard, and keeps muttering nonsense about tigers and claws and diseases from Africa and eradication, and pretty much losing her goddamn mind by the time we reach Delivery where I see a sight I pray every night I'll someday forget. It's everywhere. Blood all over the machines and the doctors and the Women Clinic bitches. There's a whole Delivery room full of people covered in red globs and black tars of flesh, and in the center of it all is this poor woman blown open like the ball of New Years confetti in Times Square. But more than anything, there's the smell of it. That awful smell. Like the pig stadium in August, sweltering and suffocating, slaughter and shit. A stuck on you sort of smell you remember in dreams. Like sulfur or rotting eggs, but a whole lot worse.

Sarah faints. I get sick. Even Betty has to lean away and stagger back out the door.

Afterwards, we're sitting around the long tables in the coffee room picking our nails and trying to fit our minds around what happened. Dr. Poolbelly wants to know everything, every detail, every shred of action, but the doctor who was in Delivery is new and really shook up on account up on account of the pregnant woman exploding and all. The new doctor's hands won't stop shaking, and he keeps snapping his fingers. He can't talk very well either, as if he's forgotten how to take words from his brains. All he can do is say how doesn't know. "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know," just like that.

One thing everybody knows about Dr. Poolbelly is that he's a very serious man. And like most serious men, he doesn't like people crapping themselves on his watch. So it isn't much of a surprise when he hauls off and smacks the new doctor across the mouth. Pop! And though it's been a horrific afternoon—all of us smelling like sulfur and crusted head to toe in pregnant blood and guts—the look of shame bubbling on the face of that new doctor makes us all sort of laugh and giggle and feel just the tiniest part better about things.

If being sweet was put on a scale of one to ten—ten being Bibiana and eight being Sarah and the rest of us somewhere in-between, even Betty Karr on certain days—then Judith would be a big fat zero.

Judith is the biggest slut bag you'd ever want to meet. She blows everybody, and I mean *everybody*, just to blow them. It's really disgusting. It's a shame too, because you can tell Judith was very pretty at some point in her life. And not just pretty the way we were all once pretty, but swimsuit pretty. Her husband Jackson Campbell is a very fine-looking man, too. Not Rev. Isaiah fine-looking, but fine-looking enough to make you wish Judith didn't blow everybody just to blow them.

Judith says she has a good excuse. "He knocks me around like a piñata," she says. "He's a rotten son of a bitch who's going to get what's coming to him." And I have to admit, the sores around Judith's mouth make it hard to argue otherwise. But Betty Karr says the sores around Judith's mouth aren't from getting smacked. "They're rabid herpes," says Betty. Which makes a lot more sense to me. But then I think if Judith does have rabid herpes, then maybe Jackson is really beating on her for being such

a slut bag, and that isn't right either. It's like Betty and all the Women Clinic counselors say, "Nothing gives a man the right to hit a woman, ladies. Nothing." You can tell that a few of the Free Company nurses, including Sarah, don't really believe that, but I believe that, or maybe I believe it because I know if I ever did take Rev. Isaiah into one of those storage closets, Brad wouldn't hit me. He's not that kind of man. Although, Brad might make me tell him what Rev. Isaiah tasted like, or take pictures the next time I cheated on him. I don't know why I think this. I just sometimes get the feeling this would be the case if I was a slut bag like Judith.

So every night the riots are getting worse, the protests dropkick dog-burning violent, and all Judith seems to care about is the size of the janitors and maintenance boys she hides away with. It's repellant. It's like every time I get up to find a mop bucket or something of the kind, I hear Judith in the closet going crazy on some meat stick. It's gotten so bad that sometimes I don't think Judith is going to make some kind of Gomorrah-like fury fall from the sky. But maybe that's just me and my crazy mixed-up mind. I don't know. Everything's so upside down and backwards these days. It's so crazy that I don't know what's inside me anymore, as if somebody in there has turned off the lights.

The other day a group of protestors try to burn the Free Clinic to the ground. Imagine, after everything we've done! And I don't give a good goddamn if we can't seem to fix anything, it's the thought and the hard work and the sacrifice and the hours and hours we spend in here going insane in all this blood and guts that counts! Sure, we could just say screw it, go out there and behave just like them, fucking and sucking on everything we see and then a few months later come back in here and explode all over the

goddamn place. But no. No, we're trying to help. We lock our legs from our husbands and sleep on cots and fantasize about what it'd be like to be in a mop closet with Rev. Isaiah in a world that's nothing like ours. I swear, it'll never cease to amaze me that no matter how shitty things get, it can still get shittier.

All we can say is thank God for Dr. Poolbelly. He chased away those protesters and their gas cans and blowtorches with his little black clipper machinegun. Even caught a couple of them in the ass, right across the back of the thighs. And we just left them lying out there, right out there on the front lawn bleeding to death. We don't feel the least part bad about it either. They should know better than to mess with Dr. Poolbelly. Nobody messes with Dr. Poolbelly. Nobody. You want to burn this Clinic down? Then you got to do it through him. You got to do it through us, too.

Times like these I think Dr. Poolbelly is the bravest man I'll ever meet. Then sometimes I see how the stress is wearing him down to nothing. Dr. Poolbelly has always been something of a talker, but lately he's real quiet, and there are these big dark bruises under his eyes. Whenever he sits down he puts his head in his hands and doesn't look up, even if you're talking right at him. Poor man.

Then there are the cameras and reporters.

At first we think it's going to be a hoot to be on TV and all. But it turns out that the news you watch at night is just one dumb question after another. The questions they ask are always the most obvious, and they never have an answer, but the reporters ask them anyway and we have to say we don't know, or can't comment, and the whole thing just leaves us feeling bad and ignorant. They pick and pry. *What's life like in The Bells? Do the Bleeds have anything to do with a sexual practice specific to The Bells? How did*

we come to live in The Bells? On and on and on. Even small stuff, like where we shop, where we eat, do we drink the water? Water? I wish somebody tell me what in God's name does water have to do with exploding babies? Then after being so rude and pushy, making us feel small as peanuts in shit, the reporters have the nerve to go on TV and make us look like a bunch of lowlifes who actually deserve what's happening to them. They say we're part of a growing socio-economic class of displaced people who, unbeknownst to them, have come to settle a Death Capital.

"Death Capital," says Betty Karr in the coffee room. "That's a laugh!"

"What does it mean to be displaced?" asks Candy, a new girl who transferred up from Seattle last week.

"Oppressed," says Betty Karr. "We're slaves to a power we can't see."

"They make it sound like we're thrown away," says Candy.

"We are," says Bibiana quietly.

"Just like cats or wolves," whispers Sarah.

"You got it all wrong," says Judith, smoking a cigarette. "All that crap they talk about—displaced, disenfranchised, dissociated, whatever—it all means the same thing. Homeless. We lost our homes. We weren't kicked out of anywhere. More like we set something down and weren't able to find it again. That's why we live here in this shit hole. We got nowhere better to be." She inhales and exhales.

Nobody says anything. We're all sort of staring at Judith like it's not really Judith but somebody who looks a whole lot like Judith. "Oh fuck off," she says finally. "Just

because a lady knows her way around a dark storage closet, doesn't mean she don't have a considerate brain."

And we all look at each other and laugh like we haven't laughed in a very long time.

This morning the mayor goes on TV, and with a lot of throat clearing, a lot of this and that, a lot of that and this and this and this and this, he tells the peoples of The Bells to refrain from all forms of sexual relations. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the elective, this is for the general state of health in this time of crisis."

The folks who live in The Bells disagree about a lot of things. What buildings to burn. Where to throw rocks. When to shoot guns. But one thing nobody can understand is how we elected a big fat retard to mayor who says things to the "peoples of The Bells" that anyone who knew two bits about the "peoples of The Bells" would know we'll never do what that fat bastard says, even if the sun goes black and the Cascades glacier red with blood.

But there's something different about this morning. This morning there is a massive American flag behind the mayor and a squad of soldiers in black goggles, holding big black guns that are much bigger and much blacker than Dr. Poolbelly's little baby clipper. And speaking of Dr. Poolbelly, he's nowhere to be found. For the last six months Dr. Poolbelly has been sleeping in his office on a sand-colored cot he brought back from his last tour in the Gulf. Every morning he comes into the coffee room to have a cup of tea and a raisin bagel with a little plum jam. But no one's seen him this

morning. Not even Betty Karr, who's done nothing but complain about sexual genocide since the mayor's speech.

But we're all feeling a little lazy, lounging around the coffee room, even though the stale smell makes my nose itch. Maybe it's around nine or ten and everything is quiet, when suddenly we hear this huge rumbling from outside, and rushing to the windows we see the biggest tanks I've ever seen gathering on the front lawn. Squads of soldiers, just like the ones who stood at attention behind the mayor on TV, are piling out of the tanks and jogging into the Clinic. We huddle behind the door and we can hear them gather in the hall. They aren't saying what they want. No general announcement or anything. Somebody, possibly Candy, whispers, "Annie, take a look."

Besides the black goggles, the soldiers are wearing gas masks and holding the biggest, blackest guns I've ever seen. Even bigger and blacker than they were on TV. And I've always heard that was true, how real things look more real in real life than when you see them on TV, but I didn't know it was a fact until now.

I get the feeling the soldiers want us to stay put in the coffee room. They're shuffling in doorways and gesturing to each other with hand signals and boxed coughs. Then they start lighting cigarettes through the holes in their gasmasks. Cigarettes? Right there in the hall with a sick woman behind every door? The fucking cocksuckers, "Who the hell do they think they are?"

And just when I'm about to go out there and give them a piece of my mind, big black guns or no big black guns, Bibiana grabs my shoulder and says, "Annie, no. Don't you dare."

I start to go anyway but Bibiana squeezes tight and says, “Annie, please. Think about it. They won’t hesitate. They’ll kill you. I know they will.”

I think about Dr. Poolbelly, what he’d do in my shoes. He would probably try to run the soldiers away with his little baby clipper, even if he got mowed down in the process, split in half like a broke bottle of ketchup. And I think about what a broke bottle of ketchup looks like, and I decide Bibiana is smart and probably right, and I step back and kneel down beside the empty water cooler, feeling dizzy. My palms are sweating and for the first time in a long time I wish I could have a real shower. I wish I could see Brad. I wish I could talk to him. Hold him. Things like that. Then I hear one of the pregnant women screaming and there goes Betty Karr, storming out of the coffee room with a bang.

Betty Karr may be a first-grade bitch, but God bless her, she’s one hell of a care provider.

The soldiers start yelling. Sounding scary and muffled and a little funny through their gas masks. And Betty’s cursing, “Listen jackass, do I look like someone who gives a shit to you? These women are my care. They’re my patients. Get it, fuck face? Hey! Don’t test me, buddy. I’ll seriously fuck you up.”

The soldiers yell something else, but louder now and less funny.

But Betty keeps keeping it on, “Hey! Get your hands off me! You motherfucker, I’ll kick your teeth in, don’t think I won’t.” Then she laughs, but not in a kind or funny way. No, it’s mean and angry, just like the boys who used to ride their bicycles around the apartment complex with handguns stuffed in back of their jeans. “I know what you

are. You're National fucking Guard. What? —Can't pull nothing but stateside duty because you shat yourself the last time you woke up in the Gulf? I bet that's it. And now you think you can just come in here with your guns and your gas masks and ski goggles and HEY! Get your fucking hands off me! Hey!"

Judith starts giggling. So does Sarah and Candy. And it is pretty funny, all of us jammed against the coffee room door listening to Betty Karr give those soldiers Women Clinic hell.

But Bibiana is worried, saying how she's seen these things go very bad before, and that if she can just get to a phone she could call her husband. "He'd get us out of this," she says. Judith and I sort of perk up at that idea, but then I think now's not the time to be thinking those kind of things, and out in the hall it sounds like Betty's in some serious trouble, and like a crazed pack of hounds we go bursting from the coffee room, kicking and screaming.

But the hall is filled with soldiers, their guns jammed to their shoulders and the sound of their breathing through the blow holes in their gas masks, and I can hear the screams of would-be mothers behind the doors in the hall and I think I hear one of them burst because I smell that dream smell, sulfur or rotten eggs, only a whole lot worse. And soldiers are dragging pregnant ladies from their rooms, their hair all greasy and sweaty, some looking so tired and used up that they can't do anything but stand against the hallway walls, swaying back and forth, hospital gowns covered in dried spit and coughing blood, black tarness stuck on their lips and chins, their eyes black like shriveled fruit. The soldiers are yelling at everybody to shut the fuck up and stay calm, and Bibiana and Sarah and Judith are trying to help Betty to her feet, and then I see how she's

been shot up, blood pouring down her big legs and her white nursing shoes, and one of the Army men hits Bibiana in the face with the flat of his big black gun and Sarah screams and jumps on his back—

And I don't know what happens, but I'm running and there is this sound like summer thunder when you're driving north to The Bells, how sometimes you can catch the glance of the sun on the North Cascades and you swear that you just died and went to heaven because life is so open and your husband is sitting next to you, maybe with his hand on your knee, and there's some song on the radio that goes like this and that, and you've never heard of nothing like Combustion or Night Bleeds, and all you know is that pretty soon you'll be fat and old and watching movies on the couch on Thursday evenings, waiting for your husband to get home from work so you can make love to him like you sometimes love to do.

Part II

Murder & Other Dreams

Tender

The Gloom

So You Want To Be A Lady Terrorist

Inscription. Page One. *The Book Of Most Things*—— “What we know to be true and evident of all things while *Inside*.”

Here are the documents that are at once the explanation and the goal of our continuing lives. Pages and pages of federal mandates, fictional digressions, poetic manifestos, oratory rhetoric or dialectic prose—depending on the kind of Job you choose to be Inside—which will tell you what to expect, and what is indeed missing. Simply, the task of your life will be to fill in the blanks, and pray that one day—with diligence and patient eyes—we may achieve The Book Of Everything.

Murder & Other Dreams

“But you know her biggest fear?”

I shake my head as Tammy lights the image of a cigarette and exhales.

“I mean, it keeps her up nights, I swear to God. She’s scared to death that some morning, as she’s showering, she’s going to slip and fall and get stuck.”

“Stuck?”

“Wedged in the tub.”

“Jesus,” I say. “She’s that big?”

“Do you want to see a picture?”

“Not really.”

“But listen, that’s not the sad part. What’s really sad is the way she sees herself down there, crammed in the bottom of the tub, mashed up in her own skin like some kind of lumpy pillow. She has herself convinced no one cares enough to find her, and for days

she'll just lay there like that, fat and naked, waiting to die. She imagines herself on the cusp of life—cold, hungry, like finally losing weight—when she hears the knocking. It might be the landlady, or a co-worker she owes money.” Tammy leans her image across the image of the table. “Now the dilemma... Does my poor Rachael dare cry out for someone, anyone, to save her life?” Tammy sighs. “You should really see the way this thing plays out in her head, Jakob. It’s fucking pathetic. So there she is, right? And the local news is camped outside with cameras and lights and reporters, and her mother’s calling her name from the curb, and a bullhorn is barking not to worry, an emergency dispatch is already on its way, and Rachael’s screaming, God she’s screaming, ‘Just leave me! Just fucking leave me!’ But of course they’re not going to leave her, not these brave firemen with their goddamn sex-cut shoulders and thick-ripped abs, come to hoist her fat ass out of the tub with rubber hoses and something like a giant shoe horn.” Tammy covers her eyes. Her cigarette smolders between the fisted image of her fingers. “God, the looks on their faces are so cold and repulsed. They’re disgusted, Jakob. Absolutely disgusted.” She shakes the image of her head and pulls on her smoke. “Anyway, Rachael’s decided if the shower thing ever does happen, she is never, no matter what, ever crying for help. She’ll die there, she swears. And it kills her. It kills her that if it comes down to it, she won’t have the will to save her own life because of the way she looks naked.” Tammy falls back into the image of her chair. “Which, I admit, is pretty damned awful.”

“What a mess.”

“Totally.” Tammy finishes her cigarette. She jingles her vodka and ice. The image sounds like quiet talk in a diner somewhere else. “So that’s my report from lonely

white woman hell,” she says. “How about you? You look...” She smiles. “Well. Haggard and dirty, but well.” She reaches out her hand and pats the tabletop. She looks at me with those beautiful purple eyes of hers. As of now, the only reason I came back was to see the image of those eyes again.

I take her palm and try on the best image of a smile I got these days. “Thanks,” I say. “I think.”

We don’t say anything for a while, just sort of staring at each other, moving our fingers together and apart. Then, with the image of a tundra, Tammy says, “Do you even miss me, Jakob?”

“Miss you? You know I miss you.”

“Do you though? Really?”

I give her something like hurt and concern and confused, but I’m not sure how it comes out. Maybe impatient. Maybe blank. “Baby,” I say. “Let’s not get into this. Not right now.”

Tammy closes her eyes.

“Look,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? Why are you apologizing?”

“I don’t know. I’m just... I’m just sorry, that’s all.”

“Well, don’t. I hate it when you apologize. It makes me feel like you never mean a thing you say.” She looks down at the image of our hands and removes hers. She

moves her face into the image of just forget it, the image of moving on. “So tell me,” she says.

“What’s there to say?”

“Don’t ask me. Just start.” She smiles. “Is it all that Jakob hoped for? The big bad desert, the terrible bloodthirsty men, the killings, the slaughter, the drama, all that marvelous drama?”

“Just like the brochure promised, babe.” I take an image of my beer, and feel the sound of sharp bubbles on my tongue. “Yeah,” I say. “Guess you could say I got what I asked for.”

“What’s the bastard’s name?”

“Deacon.”

“Just Deacon?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s weird.”

I shrug. “Not really.”

“So, what’s he like?”

“Outside the fact he’s completely fucking bananas? It’s complicated.” I tighten the image of my lips. “Some of the shit he’s capable of—I swear to Christ, Tammy—it’s hard to handle.”

Tammy looks at me funny, like she can't really believe this is me saying what she thinks I might be trying to say, but happy about it all the same. "But you knew that going In. It's what you trained for, baby."

"I know, I know. But..."

"Second thoughts?"

"No. Not exactly. It's just... I don't know. I wonder about my motivations. I wonder if I'm really the right guy for the Job."

Tammy lights the second image of a cigarette. And there is something in her so happy that it's about ready to burst right through the table, tear off my robe, and suck down on the pasty image of my skin. "Really?" she says, exhaling.

I fold my arms and look across to the far corner of the bar. It's dark. The television is off. There is no one else in Roberts. Except for the bartender, Mark, and he's the image of deaf.

"I was such a pompous fuck in school," I say. "I thought I had all the images figured out. The color of every color."

"Writing checks your ass couldn't cash," Tammy says smiling. "As your dad would say."

"Yeah," I say remembering. "Perhaps he was right."

"No," she says. This is the image of a tap dance around an imaginary plate of knives. "You weren't that bad. Really, you weren't."

"I don't know."

Tammy lifts her drink to her lips and blows across the melting image of the ice.
“Besides, I bet you’re exaggerating.”

“Hardly.” I scoot the image of my chair closer to the table. “You know what Deacon and I did the week before the desert?”

Tammy shakes her head.

“We’re in southern Illinois, right? And I mean, this is like any other day, too. It’s just a day, you know? Nothing special about it.”

“Go on.”

“We see the fire the night before, maybe a mile away, maybe two. We get close before dawn, count out like fifteen or twenty of them. Couple of wagons. Three, maybe four families. Horses. Children. The usual shit. But none of this interests Deacon in the least. Numbers never concern him. It’s the color of white that counts. We go in slow, calm, as calm as a guy can with a couple ears strung round his neck. And they take us in alright, a bit nervous, but they’re not panicking. Right away, he can see they believe in powers higher than themselves. A small girl takes the reigns of his horse and she leads us to water. A family feeds us, and when night falls the entire camp plays music, hymns, and we just sit there, listening. Deacon watches their faces across the fire, watches the flames play on their features. He never says a word. When they’re asleep, we slip outside the perimeter of the wagons, pour his satchel of oil in a circle around the camp, box them in and strike a match. We wait on the other side, knowing once they realize they’re trapped they’ll make a go for it. And when they do, we shoot them in their legs and their stomachs as they come through.

I finish the last image of my beer. I cough on the sound. “He starts with the women,” I say. “He cuts out their vaginas in honor of what the army did to his mother’s tribe in Alabama. We stretch out the skin in the bright light of the fire. The screaming is... It’s just screaming, that’s all. We do the men next. The children last. We lay their genitals side by side in the grass before riding west. And looking back I could see the large black birds already circling over the hot smell of their flesh and cries in the dim light of dawn.”

I rub beneath the empty socket image of my eyes. “The color Inside doesn’t change once, Tammy. Purple and solid, pulsing. Nothing else. Not even when he dices up the babies.”

And she’s the image of utter disgust. “Oh my God, Jakob.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I know.” I flick the top of my pint glass, and the image makes a dull sound that surprises me. “And while it’s terrible and all, what’s really frustrating is that I’m sure I’m doing it all wrong. I’m... distracted.” I put the erect image of my elbows on the table. “I’m writing. Yes, I’m getting it down in the Book. But nothing more than the specifics of what happens. The operation of the action. Nothing of its depth or significance.”

“Maybe there isn’t any. Maybe Deacon’s just a sick fuck of a whack-Job, and that’s all there is to it.” Tammy’s the image of concern for my well-being. “Maybe you should get out of him, Jakob, before you know what.”

“That’s like saying Rachael is a big fat monster—nothing else going on—and you should quit her before you become one, too.”

She's the image of bent over a barrel. "Okay," she says, "I'll give you that. So what is it then? What's wrong?"

"Remember you're Inner Sensitive Environment partner in school? That sniffly kid with the weird patch of hair on his right cheek?"

"Robbie."

"Yeah, Robbie."

"Robbie Nelson."

"Right, whatever."

"So?"

"Well, it's Celestials like Robbie who have me distracted."

"What?"

"They're the ones I think about while Deacon does his killing."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, but it has something to do with the color—the color Robbie must see Inside the end of his Jobs. I can only assume it's the color of fear. The color of oh shit, the color of God please fucking help me. But I have no vision of it, and that's the problem. I mean, what's it like to be Inside one of those prairie women? Or her child? A small little something left behind, diced up and bleeding, shit in its pants... What's the color of shitting your pants? I can *see* they're terrified, that's easy. But what's the color of terrified? Maybe it's not even the color of terror, maybe it's the color being

somewhere outside the body, elevated, looking down on their physical form from a detached sense of self. A detached sense of self? What's the color of that?"

But what I'm not telling Tammy is how much I enjoy it when Deacon goes, as I like to call it, fucking bananas. I mean, the color of it... It's brilliant. Nothing in the Book of Most Things could have prepared me for it. And I was lying about his colors. His colors don't just change, they fucking erupt. First there is the color of the gun in his hands, which is like the color of water, the color of a river, a current—boulders, fish, bears, small prickly things picking along the bottom of the stream, and the crushing feet or paws or claws of the larger animals, the color of predator, and the jerking color of little fish swimming out of the way. The color of nails, of razors, knives coming down into the water and going out again, wet and dripping, wet fur, brackish water and blood, the color of a satisfied mouth, the squelch of teeth, the feel of teeth, the color of fucking teeth! Oh, it's fucking fantastic! Better than the image of a huge pulsing erection. Better than the image of a thousand orgasms all tied together into one long rope of cum, one long train of jizz, one long scream hurtling through the night, waking the neighbors and the dogs, turning on the streetlights where once they were dark. It's the color of ripping open a lover. Right down her seam. It's the color of collapsing into her seam, drinking her seam, sleeping in her seam. It's the color of waking with her blood still crusted in lumps to your teeth, so that when you play your tongue across the lumps, the blood begins again, fresh in your mouth and on your tongue. That's the color Inside Deacon. Bananas. Fucking bananas.

Still, I can't help but dream about what the other color is like. If only to heighten the sense of my own.

Tammy draws on the third image of a cigarette, scratching the tabletop with her long fingernails. This, I take it, is supposed to be the image of visibly disappointed. And I know what she's thinking. I know how she's picturing the image of my tongue, swollen hopelessly in the image of my mouth, clogged with explanation and apologies. She knows I overstepped myself. She knows I got carried away. But what she doesn't know is that the words I might have once tried to say to her in comfort, in retreat, don't seem to be there at all anymore. I try the image of my mouth and it is the color of dust. I readjust the image of my body, but the color doesn't change.

“And our dream of a body,” she says. “What's become of that?” And it looks as if the color of her image is going to fracture, slice into a thousand pieces and pierce me with promises I've just broken, things she believed I once meant. But then everything in her collapses, goes blank, and she says, “Just forget it.”

“Tammy,” I say.

“If you even fucking apologize, Jakob, I swear to God.”

I hold up the image of my hands. This, I think, is the under-light of clouds before thunder.

“Just what the fuck was that, Jakob? What—what in the hell are you trying to tell me?”

“Tell you? I'm just talking, babe. That's all.”

“Talking?”

“What else?”

“You're talking like you're talking right into the Book.”

“That’s not true.”

“Bullshit,” she says.

“I’m just telling you what Deacon’s like Inside. The same as you told me about Rachael. I mean, that’s all we’re doing, right? Just talking.”

“Talking?”

“What else?”

“Sounds like colors to me,” she says.

And I’m back to the color of dust.

Tammy grinds her cigarette into the amber image of the ashtray. She finishes her drink and calls for another. I switch from beer to vodka to make her feel better—let her know I’m still on her side—but she doesn’t notice. Or if she does, she’s not letting me have any of it. She strikes the image of a light, and lets the match burn down to her fingers.

“It must smell awful,” she says to the blistered image of her fingertips. “It’s bad enough when it’s not on fire.”

I smack my lips against the straight image of vodka and ice. It tastes like nosebleed. “This shit,” I say, “is what’s awful.”

Tammy shrugs. “You get used to it.” She drops the dead image of the match into the ashtray. She lights another and then a cigarette. “You get used to a lot.”

“Yes,” I say. “You do.”

“Gee,” she says. “Thanks.”

And I'm the image of are you fucking serious? "Oh Christ, Tammy."

Tammy closes her eyes and breathes in deep. "Alright," she says quietly. "I'll stop." She raises the image of her glass. "There's too much of this at the end anyway."

We make the image of two glasses touching.

We drink, looking at each other. Looking at the table. Looking to the darker images of the bar. Mark comes over to ask if we're alright. We say yes, thank you, the drinks are great. He's glad.

"So you're really serious about this guy," Tammy says finally.

"This doesn't sound like a truce to me," I say.

"My truce, my rules, my questions."

"Okay." I lean back and crack the stiff image of my knuckles. "I don't know, Tammy. Aren't you?"

"Rachael? Oh, Rachael's just... She's just a Rachael. There must be a million of them."

"Everyone's the same in the end."

"I suppose."

"How does she get it anyway?"

"She's on this big suicide kick right now. And while the thought of it is always with her, like her ugly underwear, she'll never do it."

"Are you sure?"

“The Book says cancer. But it’s pretty vague.”

“Vague is good.”

Tammy smiles. “Rachael’s one for the resume, that’s for sure.”

“There you go,” I say. “That’s something.”

“God, doesn’t that make me sound horrible?”

“Can’t think of it like that.”

“No,” she says drinking. “You can’t.”

And in the sudden image of laughter, Tammy says, “God, Rachael—sometimes you just kill me.”

“What?” I say in the image of relieved to talk about something other than me or us.

“Oh, I just remembered this thing she does. It’s so funny, but sad because it only happens when she’s really depressed, nearly manic. And I don’t know if it’s supposed to be some kind of internal therapy, some kind of unconscious safety mechanism, or what. But if anyone ever catches her doing it, forget cancer, she’s going to be committed.”

It’s a stutter dream, explains Tammy. And like all stutter dreams, it repeats itself in different forms and shapes Inside Rachael—a merry-go-round of sounds, the jackhammer of speech stuck In her, shaking her flesh walls with the difficult days of childhood, the sound of her classmates (Say it again, junior! Say it again!) running circles around her when she spoke, taping pictures of pigs to her locker, which was so ironic because Rachael was actually skinny, even high school. She was pretty too, sort of—

straight white teeth, blue eyes, nice blond hair—but her breasts were small and her legs wormy, wrong in all the wrong ways, says Tammy. It wasn't until later, in the years after graduation, when her stutter slowly melded into her throat to form a single clear tube for speech, while the fat crept under her skin and stretched her tight as a balloon. And so when Rachael remembers her stutter dream, she remembers the color of her bones, the color of endless legs and sleek arms, delicate shoulders, facial features. And when the dark gloom of her fat colors her Inner walls, the sun of her lungs dropping off from view, the dark sea of her mind holding sway over her bright pink heart, Rachael will take off her clothes and stand in front of the mirror, watching her skin jiggle as she breaks apart her words in one long crack-up of stuttering speech. Her skin just goes crazy, says Tammy. It's like a fucking earthquake In there, the sound of words vibrating the colors into a messy heap of memory, flipping Tammy about like some kind of lost surfboard, the Insides like combat—the colors of high school mixed up with the colors of the tire swing, mixed up with the later colors of college, mixed up with the color of the night she ate three large sausage pizzas and a quart of caramel ice cream, mixed up with the afternoons in her sun-drenched bedroom, seventh grade, crying to her pink walls, curled in her comforter with salty cheeks and skinny skin, the color of her phone never ringing, the color of no friends sounding all around her, like the color of no one to talk to but herself. And it was the color of her own voice, over and over to herself, that finally cured the stutter dream. In the empty space of her room, the color of her speech evened itself out, as she became her own best friend. She took herself to dinner, bought herself steak and salad and bread, enough for her and the other self who kept her company—the other self who shared her secrets, her laughter, and her body through the night—while her flesh

grew fleshier and fleshier with the color of two bodies growing together. Now Rachael dreams to separate herself, reform her stutter and divide her body in half again. The color of regression and division, says Tammy, especially done naked, is the color of walking down a flight of stairs backwards. “You’re careful not to trip, but the whole point is to make yourself fall and break.”

Tammy is quiet, her image still in the candlelight Mark has set on our table. The ice in our drinks has melted, and the image of condensation glistens on the glass. “How’s that for Inner Environment?”

“It’s something,” I say.

“Probably boring as hell to you.”

“No.” No, I think, that’s not it at all. But isn’t it strange, how we have become connected to these people, as if the image of our own lives has somehow faded into these alternating colors of flesh and memory and experience, all happening at once, a rush of events so fast and furious it’ll take two or three of us over the course-life of one Job to get it all down.

There’s this tunnel Inside Deacon where the shadows of his fathers live, spitting their lead-poison into the greater colors of him. These fathers are the ones who raped his mother over several hours, while her tribe was brained and burned—the sound of children on fire, the sounds of flesh torn from flesh, the sound of gunfire, and the absence of birds in the sky, while the river that flowed by the camp continued, as it had for a millennia or more, even as their bodies were dumped and their limbs discarded. This tunnel is where many of the Inside colors succumb, whirling down to a precision of utter darkness, a

black paint drip of mud and pitch, fucking and infecting the arteries in and out of the tunnel, carrying its lead-poison to the rest of the body. But while it is easy to watch these colors infect Deacon, it's just as easy to ignore them and see the other colors blooming, the ones that like to burst at the give of someone's skull, the hard push of his knife between a woman's thighs.

It's true what the Book of Most Things says—eventually all colors bleed into one, indiscernible from the other, without origin or cause, simply a flowing river of consciousness and action. And it's in this melt where I best like to watch Deacon dream. His dreams are either terrible or suffocatingly dull. They are either the dripping bone night horrors of a mad man driven by a tunnel of fathers and rapists, or long glancing tribal chants over a sheet of wood that might be the board of a table or the underside to a canoe. But they are dreams nonetheless. And I'll sit there, watching the colors melt, wondering if I wouldn't give it all up—Tammy, the Celestial—for just a chance to be something out there, floating Outside, weightless and orange on the twitching lens of his retinas. Maybe, I dream, I could be the bear that lumbers down to the stream. Maybe I could be the black bird circling over the blood-stained grass. Maybe I could be a single ash from the body of a small girl, rising up into the desert sky. Maybe I could be the fire that burns the body. Maybe I could be the fire.

“What are you thinking about?” says Tammy.

“I was thinking about what you said. It's interesting,” I say. “It really is.”

“Yeah right,” she says.

“I mean it,” I say.

But she's the image of dismissive. "Forget it," she says. "I was just talking."

And this is failing. Both of our images melding away from the other, as if the image of the bar itself is disappearing.

"Remember," I say, "the Skylark?"

"Of course I do."

"Remember how you'd scream?"

"I wouldn't call it screaming."

I laugh. "Oh, it was screaming alright. Do you know how many times the old man almost caught us because someone just couldn't contain themselves?"

Tammy's the image of blushing.

"Shit," I say. "There we would be, in the chest cavity of that fucking used car salesman. That poor, pimply bastard, pumping out useless paperwork left and right, drinking openly from that bottle of Wild Turkey he kept in the lower drawer of his file cabinet, his heart going thump-thump-thump, while you and I tore the image of our skin off. Remember when he'd actually make a sale? How his chest would contract and his pulse would quicken, as impossible as it seemed, an extra notch, and we would come so hard together. Remember? You'd be panting in my ear, "Make it a Skylark... Make it a fucking Skylark..."

"I just liked the sound of the word."

"It set your insides on fire," I say.

"Sex," she says. "That's all it was. Good sex."

“Bullshit,” I say.

“What was it then?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Love?”

Tammy looks at me with the image of a gravel pit. “Do you know what the Book of Most Things says about love, Jakob? It says that love is transference. It’s a vehicle of emotion or expression. No different than flowers on a grave, or a shotgun for that matter. It’s interchangeable, Jakob. And fleeting.”

“You don’t believe that, Tammy.”

“I believed you wanted to marry me, Jakob. That’s what I believed. I believed you wanted to have a body with me. I believed you wanted to live Outside all this. I believed the shit you fucking talked. All the checks your ass couldn’t cash.”

“Then come with me,” I say before I can stop myself and the image of a big mistake bursting through my face.

Tammy throws her drink on the floor, shattering the image of glass. “You don’t fucking want that and you fucking know it!”

“Tammy—”

“Don’t you Tammy-fucking-me, buddy! Do you honestly think for two seconds I’d be able to live Inside that crazy fuck?”

“Tammy—”

“If you say my name one more time, I swear to fucking God.” But she stops suddenly and drops her head.

She looks down for a long time. Then, “I’m tired, Jakob. I’m going.”

“Don’t,” I say. “Just... Just wait, will you?”

“Alright, Jakob. I’m waiting.”

But I can’t find one thing to say. Everything is covered in dust and sand, the colors of the desert. I hold my hands out in front of me, but the color refuses to change.

“That’s what I thought.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

She shakes her head. “Don’t,” she says. “Just fucking don’t.”

“I am. I’m really sorry.”

And something inside her releases, her purple eyes redden, and there is the image of a car turning away down the street, the color of trampled leaves, the color of someone standing in the middle of the road with their arm raised, raised to the invisible fumes of the car, waving at nothing. “You were going to marry me,” she says. “We had a plan.”

“I do,” I say. “I want to get married. I want to get married to you, baby. We’ll get bodies and we’ll live Outside just like you want, and we’ll never have to do anything like this—”

“No,” she says. “You won’t be the same, Jakob. Not after this.”

And again, it’s the color of dust.

Tammy lights the last image in her pack of cigarettes. She exhales. “You know that, too, don’t you? I mean, look at you. You’re skin has even darkened.”

“It’s just the dirt,” I say. “It’s the desert. It’s dusty.”

Tammy ignores me, smoking her cigarette, knocking her boots beneath the table.

“It’s funny,” she finally says, “how the Book can tell us most everything but the things we really need to know. It’s almost like we don’t count.”

She smiles—the image of tears stuck in the long image of her eyelashes—and folds her head into the crux of her arm, holding the butt of her cigarette over the side of her face. Her cheeks are very smooth and pink. Her flesh has always been so pink. And I’m thinking about the Skylark as she suddenly stands up. She touches the tabletop with her fingertips and she’s gone.

Mark comes over and gathers the image of the glasses, shuffling the broken shards on the floor with his shoes. He blows out the candle, and gestures not to worry as he bends over to pick up the larger chunks of glass from the floor. He sets our glasses on the bar, and dumps the ashtray, along with the broken glass, into the garbage. He goes to the corner and turns on the lights, and begins to hum the image of a low unorganized note I can barely hear.

My room Inside is wet and small. The only light is the fire in the corner refusing to burn out. There is a desk, a chair, and a bench where I sometimes sleep when I’m tired of the gushing, blood-soiled floor.

I pull my notes for the week from my pocket and stare at them.

Before returning them to the Book of Most Things, I consider, for a moment, throwing them into the fire. But I know it’d be a useless gesture. My notes, the very

ones I hold now in my hand, already exist in the Book, appearing the moment I wrote them, untouched as the Book remains untouched, always there, everywhere at all times.

My father told me that when he was young he called the Book “The Monster.” That’s how afraid he was of it as a child. He said my grandfather would stand over It for hours, sifting through the sheets and pages and bubblegum wrappers, trying to find his next Rotation.

“Your grandfather,” my father once told me, “was a lot like you. He believed there was a perfect Inside somewhere. A genius, a moralist, a family man of political office, yet humble and gentle and courageous. Some kind of androgynous over-being.” My father laughed. “Oh, and he’s still out there, you’re grandfather, somewhere, hunting down his man.”

My father is right. The Book is a monster. Weeping stacks of pages and stone tablets, scrolls and newspapers, cardboard and piles of sawdust, dirty rags and socks, sandstone and finger paint, computers and typewriters, the tanned skin of every animal ever to walk the face of the earth, from the I Age through the V, black scribbles from the covers of porno magazines, photographs of bathroom stalls, jagged chunks of graffiti, leather, silk, wet-T shirts, napkins, whole rolls of toilet paper—whatever we can find to write on, it’s all there, Inside, and with me wherever I go.

Deacon begins to stir. The ground is hard. We crossed the Rio Grande two days ago and his boots are still wet. His feet are swollen and bleeding. His teeth are coming loose. The dream roads are thrumming with body parts and melting like the edges of a burning photograph. His father tunnel is churning in hot coals of color and smoke. The sun is coming up. Sometimes this goddamn desert makes me sick.

I walk to the edge of my room, where I watch his lungs expand with the smoke of the father tunnel.

Somewhere bears are making their way along the ridges. They are looking for bones in the valley. Deacon rises. He reaches for his shotgun. He loads two shells and sends both into the clear morning air.

And it's amazing to me. It really is. Each color and movement so different from the next. Unblinking and unplanned. While the image of my writing just goes on and on.

My father was a mute point. His name mute. His face mute. His body a tube of transference, a platform from which to light the things of the past. He brought the dead back to the living. The dead passing through him as though he were a door of spirits, as if the dead matter wholly to the living, the light which to explain my difficult life—until the sound of that brightness took me down for good.

Tender

In the spiral of our family. Days before you and I were one. A drizzly season where the sky gave us everything but the sun. My father said it was high time I knew you. My grandfather, Deacon Summer.

My father showed me your shotgun. Her barrels were long even tongues of charcoal, her stock brown, and she had stains I knew would never leave. My father said her name was Tender. He said she slept with you every night, and in the morning you and her talked in languages that sounded like hammers and stone and sky, from the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico, through the badlands of Oklahoma, and back to where it began on a Lutheran farmhouse outside Meridian in Mississippi.

I was fifteen. I was a hunter, and within that blistered pore grew my bloodlust. I killed Roosevelt Elk. I killed Mountain Lion. I opened their bellies and tasted their red heat. I wore their skins, and when I mounted an unclean goat's head on the wall of my bedroom, my faceless father sat me down and brought you to my ears. He squeezed it in like caulking, hoping to seal off the bad things in my head. And when I didn't believe him, he took me to a place called Serenity on the Hill.

Serenity wasn't on a hill, and the outer concrete walls were riddled with holes and cracks. The grounds were muddy. Bodies lined the hallways in removable beds. Some were asleep in chairs.

On the fourth floor, in a shadowed room, was a bed of collapsed sheets. There was a smell like cooked cauliflower. The walls looked wet. The ceiling yellow. The woman in the bed was very old, her face smashed and folded. She had only one eye, the other closed in a yellow squash of skin. Her vein-torn hands rose from the sheets when my father said, "It's me."

With her hands suspended, the old woman turned to my father. She smiled and said, "Time?"

My father brought me close. He pulled back the skin around my fingernails, showing her the stains of animal blood. "You tell me," he said.

The old woman sniffed and lowered her hands. She turned her head and looked at the ceiling. Her mouth looked very dry. And when she opened it sand filled the room.

Three years later, my father kills himself with your gun. He is seventy-one years old. You have to help me pull Tender from his mouth because my mother has fallen in the kitchen and her head isn't moving.

This is how life works until it doesn't anymore. You were born in Alabama, 1832. I was born on the far coast. I live in a small peninsula town where no one says its name, only how it's rusted on the Olympic side of the Sound. My father did it in the

garage with the lights on. He sat on his green camping cooler while the rains came through the open windows.

My mother doesn't wake for the next five years until the day she leaves the house and goes for a walk. The police pick her up. She is covered in dust. They ask her questions, but she refuses to sit upright in the back of the squad car, the dust falling from her face and hair, covering the hard plastic seats like ash. The police call her address and we say: "You have the wrong woman, sirs. Our mother is still here, lying on the kitchen floor."

This is how life works until I am married and have a son. A boy. Jonah Summer.

We move from the small peninsula town, north across the Sound to a smaller city, a place called The Bells. I start a landscaping business. You help me get used to chicken shit and wet barkdust, and things go as well as they can. I keep my wife in a box. You and I aren't sure what this means, but we're constantly told it's true. "You keep me in a box." That's what she says.

You and I don't say anything. I cut strip steak for dinner and let the smoke of the meat fill the kitchen. I inhale the seared flesh and I think about you. I want to believe you smelled something similar, that all flesh burns the same. But I know this probably isn't true.

We listen as Jonah tells his mother to shut up. "You don't know what you're talking about, mom," he says. "A box? I don't see any box."

The neighbor's dog has some sort of cancer. It's missing a leg and half its lower belly from operations. Rubber tubes stick out of its back. The tubes are different colors

and you wonder if we suck on them, if we would taste different organs. Lately, this is the way you've been making my mind work. I don't like it. Sometimes you and I drink beer from the back porch and watch the dog sulk around in the rain. It sniffs at the mud and the sparse but tall patches of grass. Sometimes it rolls and it howls, the tubes wet and muddy. Sometimes it just stares at us and then lies down, its grey eyes always on us. You and I drink beer. You and I drink beer until the day Jonah stones the dog to death. He starts with the rocks he finds on the edges of the driveway and ends it by crushing the dog's skull with a cinderblock.

And all my life I told myself I was doing the right thing—the right of all possible things.

I had been waiting for the right moment. That's what I say to myself. I say: I always planned on telling Jonah about you.

I know. I'm a liar.

I would give my lungs if I didn't have to explain this—crawling back into the reason behind it all (if that's even what it is)—the dog's broken body, the muddy lawn and littered rock; the gut-strewn timberline that rides across our family with shotgun shells and artillery hail, accidents in the kitchen and skulls: the bone open like shifts in the earth.

Besides, you promised me. You said I'd be the last one—that the lust dies with me. That was the deal. Our deal.

I'm talking out loud. Jonah is sitting on the bed as I stare into the mirror on top of the dresser. I watch my son's nose run. I look at the small dots of blood on his cheeks and lips, the greasy tufts of fur and grass on his face.

"Dad?"

"Dad, are you okay?"

I put my hands over my face and sit next to Jonah on the bed. Look at our son. He turns fifteen next month, and the only thing I truly know about him is how much I love him. His pearl black eyes, his cropped hair like husks of blackened corn, the shallow of his neck, and his skin olive and spiky as vinegar. And always, the name I chose for him. *Jehovah prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah up, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights.*

"Dad, what is it? Dad?"

Gently clapping my hands against my thighs, I stand up. It's still raining and the light that fills the bedroom is the color of white brick. I pull the shades and take a matchbook from my pocket, striking several of my wife's candles. I tell Jonah to close his eyes. I bend down and reach beneath the bed for the footlocker where you and I keep Tender.

Maybe, I think as I open the lock, all that matters is that Jonah survives the digestion of the world. A thing that neither you nor my father could do.

At the end of the nineteenth century the southwest was made up of territories not yet states and no longer Mexican. Trains ran freight and human cargo to the Pacific. Towns

were built along the way for the production of rail ties, for the laying down of tracks, for bourbon and pussy and bareknuckle gun brawls in the thin silt and yellow rock. And on the last day of your life, you spat blood through the doors of a tavern and spoke Tender to the man crying behind the bar.

When her echo died you closed your eyes and listened to the liquor cascade down the shelves. A hard southerly wind sounded like glass in the street behind you. You swallowed the blood in your mouth and went over to check the man's body. Bone and blood and fingers swirled in a pool of whiskey behind the bar and splintered wall. There was broken glass and hair and teeth. There was *always* broken glass and hair and teeth. You waited, listening for something. Then you wiped your mouth and left the tavern.

Outside, the air hurt. Boulders and pop-hills, the damaged skyline of shackled roofs, looked orange and full of brush and cartilage. Out there was the color of dead and dying things. Out there was the color of where you had come; out there was the color of where you had to go.

There was one street. Seven horses lay dead in it, as did a few chickens and a single goat. The tavern was at its north end. Across the street was the church.

You were a short man. You had small hands and a thick neck and your stomach was flat. You wore a woolen scarf to keep the blowing silt from filling your lungs, and your hat was almost a sombrero. Inside your jacket was a journal. It listed the kills and the places of the kills and what the kills felt like. The journal was old and worn, its pages yellow, the edges of the book curled and soft. You were also growing old, older than most of the white men and the white women you killed now. But you were still hard and brown, your skin far from the color of death.

What were you thinking then? Were you thinking about the pastor who'd found you as a child, or your mother in the back of that wagon, bleeding you into the world? Were you thinking about the burn pile you'd soon make of the bodies in the store, the bodies in the factory and brothel, the man in his tavern? Or were you thinking about the church and the white girl sitting on its steps? How the white girl had been there all day, how you saw her before you went into the store and after you came out of the factory, from the velvet shades of the brothel—how you were looking at her now, as she waved to you from across the street...

You stepped off the porch into the sun and wind. You felt the heat in your body and a wetness in your lungs. The sand lashed across your eyes, whipping your woolen scarf. The horse nodded and stomped impatiently in the yellow sand. You loaded Tender with two shells, touching the last six in the pocket of your long jacket. You breathed through the wool. You climbed onto the horse and felt pieces of your ribs crack and swim. The horse creaked, old and tired, but still solid—a thick Arabian you'd been riding since Clear Basin when you watched the sky rip down its center and drop blood on the earth.

The white girl waited for you to cross. She waited the way she had all morning and into the afternoon—a single finger stuck in her mouth, her dirty white blouse tied in knots atop her shoulders. The late sun was on her cheeks and her naked legs snaked with broken veins. Her feet were bare and shone pale against the charred steps. The church was either being built or burned down. The white paint was peeling and wind sick. A quarter of the roof was gone, the western wall licked in charcoal, and there were boards in piles—bones in the garden dust.

As you got close, the Arabian twisting slowly and blood filling your mouth, you saw the white girl's left eye: sealed like an ill-sliced navel, the flesh sour and crowded with the valleys of a burn scar. The girl had been brightened.

Jonah slides off the bed and takes a drink of water from the glass on the dresser. He studies his face in the mirror. I think I see him smile. And I wonder for a moment if that's not your smile, the quick sideways work of the lip showing up on my son's face.

“What's a brightened?” Jonah says.

“It was something they did to keep the girls around.”

Jonah touches the corner of his left eye. “Where would they go?”

“They were taken,” I say. “Lost in card games. Sold for horses. You have to remember what it must have been like to live in the bottomlands of the southwest. Especially with all those trains running by.”

“So they were hurt?” he says.

“If you had been my daughter, I would scar you. I'd cut off an ear, or slice your chin down the middle,” I say. “The girl's father stuck the tip of a hot iron poker into her eye.”

Jonah moves his fingers across his face, from his left eye to his ears and his chin. He nods and moves away from the mirror.

I fold my hands.

“Then what would happen to me?”

“You’d stay here,” I say. “And there’d be nobody who would take you away.”

The horse stopped before the church. You were shaking. Blood was moving beneath your skin and there was a pounding that sounded like your heart in your ears. The white girl took her finger from her mouth slowly, the spit drawing itself along the fingertip. She smiled, her left eye squeezed in its flesh. “Well,” she said. She stood and put her hands behind her neck, rocking forward on her toes and stretching to the sky with her chapped elbows. “Rather nice day,” she said. “Wind’s a bit heavy. But quite lovely otherwise. Don’t you think?”

You closed your eyes and opened them. Your mouth was swollen and heavy. The wind was shard glass and the white girl was saying something about your name.

“Only right. Don’t you think, mister?” She smiled, smaller this time, her face straight, serious, her eyes dolled with black mascara, the dust like paint on her cheeks. “The least you can do, mister.” She made a circle with her mouth. “Considering what all I can do for you.”

You raised Tender from her saddle holster. You tightened the scarf around your mouth.

“I know about that scarf, mister.” The girl cocked her head to the side, her yellow hair flapping across her shoulder. “Sure do. It’s a piece of your mother’s blanket, right? Given to you before she passed off?”

There was something that made the girl step back and raise her hands. “Don’t take offence, mister. Please understand.” She knelt a little at her knees. “I’ve been waiting for today. I’ve been waiting a long time.”

The pounding in your ears beat and stopped and beat.

“Knew you were coming out this way for me. I knew you wouldn’t leave me out here to live like this, in all this filth, chained up like some muted whore. I knew you cared about me, mister.”

You watched the girl open her mouth. You watched her teeth click. She closed her right eye and put her hands together, she looked up at you and she smiled and said, “My name is Coral, but you can call me Ms. Summer.” She gathered her dress and leapt to the top step of the church. She spun on the balls of her feet and danced to the porch, showing you the broken veins at the base of her ass where the bruises turned green.

“The girl—” Jonah says.

“Yes?”

“I don’t know. She makes... She makes me tired.”

“What does?” I say.

Jonah turns back to the mirror. He picks up the wet dish rag on the dresser and begins to wipe the blood and grass and fur from his face. “Her eye,” he says. “It’s like that dog.”

“What about the dog?”

“Its cancer. Its tubes.”

“The dog was dying,” I say.

Jonah sucks his thin lips into his mouth and says, “Yeah, I know. That’s what I mean.”

Tender grew heavy in your lap. The girl kept talking. She had seen everything, sand shattering from her left socket. She knew about it all, her gums swollen with white spots. How your mother was gang-raped, and the way you were born in the back of that wagon, the scarring and the bleeding. How the Creeks were starved out in Mobile Bay, and how you ran away and was found by that Lutheran farmer. And how, when you were strong enough, you killed the farmer, stole his horse and rode west to kill everyone and everything but her.

Your breath stuttered. You leaned over horse and let the blood go from your mouth. And looking back up, what did you see? The brightened? Or the day itself, breathing in all over you? How all the days had been breathing, and at night when you’d wake with water leaking from your ears and the sound of bone in your heart and Tender stock still beside you, as the black clouds shifted in front of the stars though there was never any wind once the sun died. Those were the days you rode along a ridge and believed the desert was changing, that maybe the ice had formed the land differently than it had one hundred miles back. But horizon remained horizon, and sand always whittled down to silt and blew into you, stuck in the fibers of your mother’s wool and the cracks of your eyes.

There was blood spreading down the right side of your leg. You slipped Tender from your lap and held your finger to her metal and wood.

The girl closed her mouth. Again, she took a step back towards the double doors of the church.

And then, as though something had become very clear to her, she said, “Alright. You do what you have to. But you can’t really hurt me like you did the others. You can’t because I’m like you, Deacon. We belong to each other, no matter what happens to me.”

You closed your eyes and opened them. You swallowed the blood in your mouth and you raised Tender.

Coral Summer licked her wind-split lips. “But don’t think I didn’t try,” she said. “Because I did. I told them what was coming—a real Creek Indian warrior riding all the way here from Alabama. I said you were one hundred years old. I said your eyes were like lighting, and you made bullets right from the sand, and there was nothing that was going to save them when you came to kill.” She cupped her hands and howled, not like a child or even an animal, but like something born out of water, something from below. And in this voice she kept calling your name.

You would have shot the girl in the face with both shells if the wind hadn’t suddenly torn between the tavern and the church and drowned her voice in desert nails. You choked and buried your mouth deep into the wool. There was the smell of blood in its gaseous pool above your belt, moist and metallic. And was it different this time—milky and sour? Could you feel the hot spike soup of your insides, nothing solid

anymore, nothing in its right place? Was everything different now, finally so close to it, that place you'd always chased—the catacomb, the wet cave? Were you trying to hang on, just a little longer, just until you could turn away from the white girl and return to the store and take from it the bodies of three children, one priest, two women and four men... You had to do the same with the workers at the factory and those in the brothel. And when their bodies were piled before the church, you'd take the man from the tavern and what remained of the liquor. You would start a fire on the porch of the church, and from that fire light a torch and then the bodies. Their smoke would bring forth the night and with it, clouds. Clouds that would shift as you did across the tabletops of the desert, the landscape of cavity and hole and rift, the places of void and exit—the places you had become.

But as the wind fell again into shards, the sand swirling back onto the ground, you heard the white girl coughing. You lifted your eyes from the wool and watched the girl wipe at the dust tears on her right cheek. She spat black on the charred steps, and stared at her bare feet before raising her head to the half-burnt cross hanging from the face of the church. With her fingers she massaged her left socket and looked back at you. She folded her arms across her stomach.

“Don't look at me like that,” she said. “I know what you're looking at. Don't look at me like that.”

She sat down on the top step, hugged her knees and rested her chin on her kneecaps. “Everyone called me a crazy whore you know, for what I said about you. They threw bricks and rocks, too. Daddy, he tossed me out. Said I could burn on the stake for all he cared. Useless anyhow at seventeen.”

Coral Summer held her hair from her face. “They said you was just a crazy sonuvabitch. Crazy as bitch shine. They said they’d cut you into pieces and send your bones to the governor of Alabama, and they’d be heroes then, make all the papers back home.” She smiled at you. “But they didn’t know, did they, Deacon?”

You started to feel the blood in your boots. You started to...

What was left of anything? Your eardrums pounded with the sound of your heart. There was the rank smell of the dying Arabian, the horizon closing down on itself, the lose feeling of Tender slipping from your hands. You cocked one of the hammers and pulled into Tender, sending a shell at the ground. You didn’t see the girl jump, and you didn’t feel the Arabian jerk and yank. Blood was moving beneath blood. You closed your eyes. You heard their voices. You heard *They’d cut you into pieces...* You heard *But they didn’t know, did they...*

They said *Help* and they said *No* and they said *Please, God no please, Please help me, Please not my boy, Please not my wife, Take me, Take her, Take what you want and spare us our lives, Have mercy, Feel Christ, Christ save us, Christ redeem us, Remember me Lord, The Horned Beast never forget you, The Fires of Hell never forget you, To the Pit of Damnation and Gnashing of Teeth never forget you.* They said so many things. But what you really remembered was the way their collars turned wet. You remembered the way they hid behind bags of flour and the way those bags burst in great white breaths. The way whores shouted and covered their dresses, the way they ran up stairs and under tables and behind velvet curtains, the way they’d draw knives from their garters and single shot pistols from their long boots. The way the Chinese held their guns against their coal-black cheeks and the way they covered their eyes, the way metal rang sparks

and bolted cups poured fire, the tiny tears of steel that sprang up and vanished, the parts that fell from the walls, the rail tracks and hammers clanging to the floor, the things that fell beside and on top of them—and children, the way they just stood still and waited.

Yes, you always remembered the voices, the gutturals. The way people said the name of *God* and the name of *Mercy* and the names of *No*. You remembered the sound after it was over. The way things came into their places.

Sometimes it would take hours before it was only you and the wind again.

Jonah lays his head in my lap. Tender is beside us on the bed, and he keeps reaching across to touch her barrels. The bedroom is getting dark fast. My wife is home and I can hear her moving things in the kitchen. I can smell my wife's cherry and sandalwood candles burning on the nightstand. The rain has stopped and I can hear it drop from the gutters, across the windows and spittle against the ground. The bedspread is damp. On the dresser is the dish rag, the blood and hairs and grass wadded together like wet fur. Something drops in the kitchen. Clatter. I hear my wife yell. Indistinct. Even ordinary. As if it were her easiest voice.

My father once told me, a few months before he died, there is little difference between a family name and a family's story. He said the story and the name are very close to being the same thing. So close, he said, that once you tell the family's story, you have spoken the secret name of the family and torn away a piece of yourself where that name was kept.

“Sometimes,” he said, “the hole is almost more than you can take.”

I had no idea what he meant until now.

It was the sound of your heart beating in your ears that opened your eyes.

Coral Summer walked down the planks of the church. She reached out and touched the Arabian. She put her hand against the dying horse's muzzle, the sound of its noise and the girl's voice indistinct against the wind. You felt Tender and the shell left in her second chamber. You felt tears running down your face, soaking into the wool that still held your mouth. Blood moving beneath blood, above your skin and warm against your feet. You raised Tender and the Arabian shook its head. The girl looked up. She smiled and made a quick half circle in the dust with her toes. She turned back to the church and climbed the steps again.

You held out the gun—your ribs hot pieces of coal in your lungs—the barrels wavering between the girl's dirty porcelain shoulder blades. You knew you would not be able to write what'd it feel like to kill her. You knew as soon as you pulled the trigger you'd fall from the horse and die there on the ground—the fire never built, no sour ash to welcome the night. And lying there, coughing and bleeding, the sun would go down and the wind would quiet. The horse would buckle and drop to its chest. The dark clouds would come.

And as it had begun—from the Creek containment in Mobile to the banks of the Mississippi, the Lutheran's farmhouse to the black steel trains and blood rivers—the wind took the girl and your body and your drumming heart, and the land was bathed in purple. It was all you could see. Coral Summer's face, brightened and pink, her flesh

scar and sand all full with plum. You could even taste it in your mouth. It wasn't blood, you were sure of that. Plum. A little ripe, but clean and wet. The girl came forward and raised her hands, and her knotted blouse rose with her shoulders. "Here," she said. "It's what you want. Taste it." Her skin was as white and dead as her voice. "See," she said. "All of them dead but you and me." The sand became a rope, and the wind dropped you on the ground. The girl uncovered your mouth and peeled away your mother's wool. She worked open your coat and sucked down on your ribs, her mouth dripping plum, running down her jaw and neck and her face and her brightness—so much so, it came from your mouth in rolls of curtain.

When it was done, Coral Summer picked Tender from the ground. She dusted off the gun and brought it to you. You took the shaft and pushed it against your lips. You looked up at the brightening—all full of dust and plum skin. You opened your mouth to let Tender taste all that had been lost: the name the girl had given you and released upon the world.

Jonah is sleeping, his breath heavy and warm in my lap.

I move him under the sheets and kneel down beside my bed. I put my lips to his cheek.

I brush my fingers through his thick black hair and whisper in his ear.

I ask that my words will not be his words. He is free, I say. There is no more responsibility. "It's taken care of, I promise." As father and son we are through.

I kiss the side of his mouth and raise Tender from the bed. I close the door and leave my son to sleep.

The garage is cold.

The rain is falling again. I pretend for a moment the rain is coming down the way it did when I was fifteen, marching through the ferns and between the giant white trunks of the cedars in the Olympics, the rain pouring through the thick mossy canopy. I close my eyes and imagine the slow hunt, the sharp resounding end, the hard stick of my knife and long belly pull, the hot wet flesh and its deep metal taste.

Enough. It is enough.

We bolt the door and open the windows. We leave the lights on.

With the gun in our hands, we sit on my father's green camping cooler. We place Tender's shoulder square on the floor, finger her hook—open our mouths. And for the first time in years, there's only one thing that fills my head.

Then one day Jonah Summer wakes up believing the dead can talk. It's not his fault really. What he has seen sure looks like the talking dead. But the dead don't really exist, at least not the kind who walk around and answer questions. It was just me, or the image of me, stumbling from Inside his lungs while Jonah was huffing too much pipe glue in a U-Pull-It lot north of The Bells.

My face is pointed, tall and pale. I'm bald and I've taken to wearing a hood for kicks. I don't have any eyes either, so it's easy to see where Jonah might get the image of an apparition.

Jonah stays awake now at nights, peeling back the broken leaves of his bedroom window blinds, watching the yellow light in the street, the cold damp sidewalk and the puddles in the neighbor's gravel driveway. He's waiting for me to return. Or not really me, but the ghost. Not the ghost of me, but the ghost he imagines to be me, who is really just me all cranked up on blue PVC glue.

The Gloom

In his club dream

It's night. Jonah is sitting in a club where he's come to meet a girl he knew a long time ago, or not so long ago, but the last two years have been hard and confusing, and Jonah feels thirty, when in fact he turns seventeen at the end of next month.

To keep his hands from shaking, he lets the girl do the talking. He concentrates on the basics. Nodding his head. Tightening his fingers. Cracking his shoulders. These things help him in situations like these. Situations where it feels his skin might fold away from his body like the blades of a fan.

Her name is Maria. Maria-something-black hair, short dress, old, older than what he remembered. She has a heaviness in her that is trying to off-load. Things to do with things. Things Jonah can't really handle at the moment. He nods again and jabs at the melting ice in one of the red floozy drinks on the table. His eyes hurt. They really hurt, raw and boiled at the fabric like a steaming dishrag, and when he swivels them in his sockets they're like these loose, boggled hinges. They feel like toys. He can actually hear them creak. And then there are the monsters, the dark and painted, the dyed and branded, shadows of techno light and swinging chains and blue black hair, moving sideways and deeper in the horns and metallic quakes of The Dark Room.

Maria says it happened last year, after Jonah had left The Bells for Port Townsend. In reflection, a very bad idea.

She tries to explain. She shakes her head, tucks her hair behind her ears. She tried telling him sooner, before it got too late, but once it got too late she just didn't have the energy. Her brother is dead now. So is her son.

The Dark Room is a club that smells like hot lights in the summer and a rotten beer cooler in winter. It's underground, hidden behind a paint factory in the industrial belly of The Bells. Jonah sometimes finds himself here. He's never sure why, the color inside confused and jumpy. And this girl, this Maria, who he guesses he came with and he guesses he knows, or knew, won't stop talking about the way metal bends. About steam. Oak trees in August. Collisions.

Her baby held on for a couple of hours, but the blood in him just ran out. There was little to be done. He was only seven weeks old. Maria shakes her head and says something in Spanish. Or maybe not Spanish, but English. It doesn't matter, really.

Jonah gives the girl a cigarette and he wishes he had some cocaine to make her feel better. The green pills are starting to warm the Inside of his chest and legs, the color of rusted metal and light. And since he's fresh out of coke, he's thinking about glue, the burn feel In his face, the blind light and rose of diamonds.

"I can't shake it," she says. "And it makes no sense, you know? But there he was. Just lying there, all tied into those machines... The sound of it." She shakes her head. "God, he was so fucking white. I couldn't believe it, Jonah. I just couldn't. It was like glue. I swear to God. My baby looked just like glue."

Glue?

"Yeah. Fucking glue."

Then everything gets small, smaller than it already was. The colors flip go, and Jonah bends over the table, laughing, pounding his fists, upsetting drinks, spilling stuff. That's what I'm talking about, he thinks. That is what I am talking *about*. This girl, he thinks, this girl *knows*.

His fingers are trembling and he's pointing to the girl.

Yeah, he says. Totally. Let's do it, he says.

Maria holds up her hands like she doesn't know what to do.

The green pills bloom and fill his loins, his thighs, the rushing of green water, his tongue numbs and so does his chest. And man! Is this good fucking shit or what? His vision narrows and lifts, his eyes screaming, and it's all so funny. Everything is so fucking funny.

Maria is crying. Her face bent forward and shaking. Her fists clench and unclench. Her lips part and close.

Jonah stands up, his head a hundred feet high. He unwraps a watermelon candy and places it in his mouth. Feels good. He looks at the red drinks on the table, pushes a cocktail straw into his mouth, knocks once, twice on the metal tabletop, and he's out of here. Maria says his name. Something about what he has been through. And she's sorry. She's not asking him for anything. But he needs to know. He needs to know motherfucker, that it was his, too. It was his, too, as the horns of The Dark Room get louder and louder.

There's a lot of smoke, a river fog moving Jonah to the core of the club. His face is hot. Glass breaks. He bumps into metal tables. Spills drinks. Gets pushed and punched on the head. Someone calls him an asshole, says he's going to die.

You're going to die, thinks Jonah.

In the lungs of The Dark Room are a thousand people chained by their arms and waists, holed in the fog, the thick steam chewing at their naked bodies. And they jump. Chained they jump to the horns and the black-boxed drums, the caged throats splintering the ceiling, the broken violins and confined piano voices. Women pretend to shave their chests with silver blades, and together the thousand raise their hands, shafts of disco light splitting their spread fingers, and three nights ago there was an edge to a razor blade that cut up three grams of angel dust. Jonah remembers being outside. Inside. On the hood of a car, a Chevrolet. He woke up in the trunk, and it was night again.

Sometimes, when Jonah's so cranked up on angel dust that time does strange things and days dissipate into afternoons and afternoons into mornings, I'll wander Outside to smell the air. It is just as dirty, and it's always raining. There's not much to do. Life was different Inside Jonah's great-grandfather, the young III Age, the landscape cut deep in colors and cliffs, its animals and rocks and horizons clawing across the earth in scars of orange and purple. But the drugs are better now, and we don't have to kill so many people, which is nice. Still, there is an emptiness I can't quite place, and all the cars are so boring and square. Sometimes I miss the old days. Or perhaps I miss the way I was in the old days, not that there are really any "old days," just days that feel new because the future isn't here yet.

Jonah lifts his eyes to the thousand. Lifts his hands to his mouth. He shouts. He jumps. Among the thousand. Chained and jumping.

Then he hears it. Rafael's voice. Thick and bubbled. And Christ, he can't believe *that* right now. It's just the pills. It's just these pills, he thinks. He's never buying from that diseased cocksucker again.

Rafael looks like me, his face like my face—pointed, tall and pale. But he has a scar now, running from one temple, across the nose and to the opposite ear.

Jonah is trying to calm himself down. It's not working. The color Inside is very brown. He's asking for help, but what can I do? If I could feel surprise this would be it.

But hasn't Jonah seen this before? In the junkyard, the U-Pull-It lot? Doesn't he remember? But no, it can't be that again, he thinks. That was something special, he thinks. This, this is just like a demon brain circuit or something, a snapped fuse, a break

in the cord, the first hit of crystal after so many hours of drinking. But what... If? What if it's here to finish the job? And he wants to touch it. But the colors in his hands are so cold.

Rafael asks Jonah's name, and then says it. He asks if Jonah was talking to a girl about her baby.

Jonah tightens his throat. He remembers the color of confidence, the color of *not-taking-nobody's-shit*. "Some bitch was talking to me about something," he says.

Rafael laughs. His mouth smells like the shelf of a warm refrigerator and a bowl of chicken water. Then he threatens to take Jonah apart piece by piece. String his guts from the rafters, play with the sinew in his kneecaps. And Jonah pisses himself a little. "I'll cut your tongue out, cocksucker," says Rafael, and I halfway believe him.

"Tell me about the girl, and don't lie because I already know." This is true. Rafael knows most things.

"Look man," Jonah says, "I don't know anything about any girl. She was just, you know, some girl, some chick who said she had some glue, but she didn't have any glue, so I just like got up and came over here."

"She didn't mean that kind of glue, cocksucker."

"Well, shit man, how was I supposed to know the difference?"

Rafael grabs the back of Jonah's neck with a slap and growls, "That's the problem."

In his dog dream

Inside is the sound of a dog. The color of a dog. The color of a dog split in half, its head crushed into the muddy ground. The color of the cinderblock is grey, chipped grey, crumbling grey, etched stone grey, chalky grey. The color of the blood is the color of blood. The color of the grass is wet. The color of the wet is cold. The cold is all over the yard. The yard is the color of mud. The color of the mud is torn, ripped from the earth in patches and potholes. Jonah is standing in the yard. The color between his hands is the color of something dropped. The color of drop is the color of the cinderblock. And the fur that is now glued to the corner of the block is the color of dog. The sound of dog is air. And the sound of air is silence, with maybe the sound of rain coming down on the fence between his and the neighbor's yard.

In his car dream

It's been raining all summer. The streetlights are bright and burn against the black puddles of the asphalt. Steam rises from Jonah's arm. The night smells bad. Across the street a group of men douse a tire in gasoline and light it on fire.

Rafael lets go of his neck. "My name is Rafael."

"Little white for a Mexican."

"Not Mexican," he says. "Cuban. As I was for a short while."

Jonah looks at Rafael and then his car, a chopped down Euro sports ride with gold-spoke wheels and wide racing tires. It's good to see some things haven't changed.

"Nice car," Jonah says.

In the pale of the streetlights Rafael smiles, the skin stretching down his bare head, the scar across his face, his eyes like two olive pits, his lips white and bloated, cracking.

“I know you, don’t I?”

Rafael thrums the image of his fingers on the car hood. “We’ll see,” he says.

We begin through the north industrial piers, passed the darken beasts of the meat factories and the black pools of pig waste, the rising road and ice-pick lights. The dying bloom of amphetamines color and tickle Jonah’s throat, and he giggles, scratching his arms, searching his eyes around the car nervously. The streetlights blink across the long windshield, brightening and then darkening Rafael’s face, his eye sockets and his scar deep and pink and knotted. The car is moving too fast to tell where it’s headed. The blooms shutter and then disappear, leaving no trace of warmth in Jonah’s chest, or sweet swell in his throat. A slow, dull ache festers in his bones, and everything hurts. His throat hurts. His skin hurts. His eyes like the worn fabric of a used dishrag.

When Jonah first saw me in the U-Pull-It lot, he asked if I was his father. Jonah looked a lot sadder on the Outside, sunk in the broken vinyl of those late-model bench seats, the cans of primer and blue PVC glue on the stripped and rusted dash, than he did on the Inside, where the color was like the color of a hot air balloon ride, traveling below the saucy afternoon clouds, above the jagged terrain of dirty glaciers and flooded streets, the sound of flames filling a cheerful parachute. I asked if I looked like his father. Jonah was quiet and then said, No. “Not really.” Well, I’m not, I said. Sorry. “Oh,” said Jonah. Then, “Well, what the fuck are you?” Not your father, I said, and I went back Inside his lungs. But in truth, or maybe not truth, but something that might resemble it if

we ever find out what we're really made of, I was Inside Jonah's father for all forty-six years of his life. So in a way, I am his father's ghost, or as close as his father will ever get to become a ghost. I nearly went back Out to explain this to Jonah, but the primer had made me woozy as usual, and I laid down, wrapped myself in the upper color of his intestines and took a nap. In reflection, a very good idea.

Jonah hates the way Rafael is driving the car. He speeds through red lights, grinds gears, takes corners too wide or too close, and he's smiling, grunting slightly as he works the pedals. In school, Rafael studied the color of stock car racers. After graduations, he worked Inside the hell-bent fucks who drove the African Death Match Circuit in the late IV Age. But I heard he grew tired of the short Rotations and the smell of exploding metal, the color of so much desert and dried blood, and so he moved on Into more contemplative endeavors, like Sudden Infant Death.

"You want me to slow down?" Rafael says flatly.

"Do what you do, man," says Jonah. "It's not my world."

Rafael laughs. "Meaning, *this* is *my* world?"

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever you say."

It is quiet.

Then, "Look man, all I know is that this isn't my fucking car. This isn't my seat. This wasn't my fucking idea. I've got nothing with me being *here* and you being *there*, so... Fuck! Why don't you just tell me what the fuck is going on!"

Rafael is silent for a moment before he starts laughing. Really laughing, slapping the steering wheel he's laughing so hard. For our senior arts project, Rafael and I went

Inside an improv group from Buffalo, New York. The group was on tour, performing at the University of Nebraska for alumni weekend. They did several skits concerning goats and toilet paper and screw drivers, before a disinterested, near-empty audience. I didn't think it was as funny as it could have been, but Rafael was laughing so hard his Job vomited right there on stage.

“Oh shit,” gasps Rafael. “She never knew you were so funny.”

“She?”

“The girl.”

“What girl?”

“In The Dark Room.”

“Oh,” says Jonah. “Fuck.”

Rafael smiles. “Yes, something very much like that.”

“Who are you, man?”

“You don't know?”

Jonah closes his mouth and looks out the speeding window. The car is very quiet. His stomach feels like razor blades, but the color Inside his head looks worse.

In his girl dream

It doesn't begin. The color suddenly there. Clicking her gum, flipping the pages of a magazine on her bed, the color of her panties always blooming Inside, white and blue and

black and silk and cotton and night. There is the color of ache, the color of too much fucking, the color of never coming so hard in his life.

In history, the class with the color of a broken thermostat, they study Vikings, a clever introduction to piracy. Their teacher is the color of clever, the color of graduate student, the color of black horn-rim glasses. The teacher is the color of talking with the whole body, waving arms, jumping on the table, clapping his hands, exaggerating his mouth, using a yard stick to properly demonstrate the way you could gut someone so they lived for hours and hours, the color of screaming as you raped their family and burned the farm.

Jonah is the color of no attention span. But later, on her bed, he listens to her talk about it. The color of what it must have been like to live on the sea, stopping when needed for supplies and sex by the color of any means possible.

She is the color of wanting to know more, the color of what changed?, the color of how it ended and why it had to happen. She is the color of believing in love, that all things change by the power of love. She is the color of belief. She is the color of believing in him, that he will never change, the color of permanent, the color of fate, the color of promise and of kisses and gentle touching and rough touching and afternoon orgasms. The color of fluids. The color of blooming.

In his cloud dream

The clouds have broken and we are in the farmlands. The moon is high. Pale blue light casts itself on the road. Long empty fields ride with us and somewhere there are

mountains in the dark, a tunnel valley leading out of the country, into Canada and the Arctic. Jonah has often felt that the sea might soon collapse and the coastline will be much further east from here. But right now he doesn't feel anything. Except for his skin, which is porous. And his eyes, creaky as floorboards.

“Roll down the windows, will you,” Jonah says.

Nothing.

“Roll down the fucking windows, man.”

The air is sickly sweet, and leaning from the car, Jonah coughs into the roaring wind a bloody syrup that explodes on the backside of the spoiler. The colors Inside are dripping and splattered, a rushing paint of reds and pinks, but the windows roll up anyways.

Atop the next rise is a large hospital. It is lit up like an airfield, and if Jonah knows anything, anything at all, it's that he doesn't want to be there.

Rafael slows the car, pulling in front of the emergency gate.

“Get out,” he says.

“Yeah... No, I don't think so. I'm alright.” Jonah holds up his hands. “Really, I'm good.”

The doors open and Rafael points to the hospital's large glass entrance. It is very bright, like a bright mouth.

Jonah closes his eyes. Then he looks over at Rafael. The color Inside is the color of sudden panic.

“Look man, you don’t understand, or maybe you like totally understand, but... Man, I can’t go in there. Not like this. Not like me. Not the way I am. They’ll cut me into pieces, man. You know they will.”

Rafael says nothing, his eyes sitting there like two black orbs.

“Don’t you get it?”

Nothing.

“Goddamn,” Jonah says, screwing his hands into his face. “Do you even know how fucking black your eyes are, man?”

He swallows and looks down at his palms. “Yeah. Sorry about that.”

Jonah nods his head. He tightens his fingers. He cracks his shoulders. “Okay,” he says. “How about this—do it yourself? I mean, that’s why I’m here, right?” Jonah points to the bright mouth. “Don’t let those fuckers have all the fun. Do it yourself, man. Take me into one of those fields, stomp me until my teeth fall out, take me apart, piece by piece... Whatever, I don’t care. Just... Man, just don’t make me go in there.”

“You say this, Jonah, as if there’s a choice involved.”

“There’s a choice, man. There’s always a choice. Free will, right? You heard of free will?”

“No,” says Rafael. “I haven’t.”

“Look. I’m sorry about the girl. I didn’t know what was going on. I thought... I don’t know, I thought she wanted to huff some glue, man.”

“She didn’t.”

“Well, yeah, I know that now.”

“Well,” Rafael says, mimicking Jonah’s voice, “now is too late.”

In his port dream

It’s a large vessel. Oil tanker. Something large, larger. The day is the color of strange. Is he sleeping? Has he slept? The vessel is moving so slow that the moon comes on overhead, as do the stars, and the ship blows its loud horn. The horn echoes across the water, but is silenced against the shore’s bulbous light. The ship comes into the large light of the harbor, the salt water breaking against the ship’s rusted bow, white and soapy. There is the color of a man waving his arms from the stern, as if in preparation for a dive. And the color of the man does dive, right from the side of the ship. This is the color of surprise. Jonah runs to the edge of the dock. There is the color of rudders and engines to suck the man beneath and chew his body to bone and blood. This is the color of seagull food. But the man is swimming. And he’s coming closer. Closer. Closer. The color of his teeth shimmering across the color of a dark harbor.

In his emergency dream

The hospital lights are terrible, the color of amateur pornography and chicken water. They hum a high pitch in the tops of Jonah’s ears that he has heard someplace else. The walls are the color of bodies lying everywhere. Gurneys of skin, empty clotheslines, bed sheets, blank paper, charts, dates, names, numbers, beeping, abandoned computer screens, chains, the color of disrepair, the color of prayer, the color of no one listening,

the color of no one speaking, the color of an old man lying on sheets of yellow newspaper, the sound issuing from the cord in his throat like the sound of hushing. The color around the old man's neck like the color of liver, of lungs. We pass a line of waiting women. They all hold babies. The babies are grey and naked, hanging from the arms of the women like straps of flesh. The women are bleeding from their heads and hands. The babies are the color of no sound.

Rafael grabs the back of Jonah's neck and steers him into the color of the brightest room.

His eyes snap shut, squeezing hard against the brightness, water breaking from the seams, until slowly they adjust.

Rafael is standing over a metal box at the center of the room. Inside the box is a baby. It is naked and grey, like the others. Its hands and feet are patterned with veins and purple bruises, its eyes closed and black. Rafael reaches down and touches the child's foot. He touches its belly and nose. He covers its tiny, pebbled genitals with a blue hospital sheet, tracing the skin around the child's eyes with his white fingertips. The child has the same scar as Rafael on his face, but smaller, from the temple, across the nose to the opposite ear.

Time goes.

And following, Rafael says: "You don't remember him, do you?"

Jonah doesn't know what to say. The color Inside is the color of a washed chalkboard. The color of new chalk, whole and ready. The color of waiting, anticipation.

Rafael looks down. “It was stupid of me to bring you here.” His hands are shaking and there is something like water on the pink stresses of his eye sockets. “I thought maybe it would mean something, for you to see him. That it could change what happened. But there is nothing, nothing to change.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know,” says Rafael. “Fathers never do.”

In his gloom dream

The color of suicide is the color of close thunder. It is the color of wakening, waiting for it to happen again, breathing into the side of the pillow, counting the seconds between each flash. The color of suicide is the color of it not happening again.

Jonah’s mother wants to know what the hell is happening. She’s in the kitchen with groceries strewn everywhere. “What’s that noise?”

“I don’t know, mom.”

“Well, I’m busy. Go look.”

“It was probably thunder.”

“It’s not thunder,” she says. “I was just outside.”

“It could be thunder,” Jonah says under his breath as he slides off his parents bed where he was taking a nap on his father’s pillow.

Jonah checks the rooms in the house. Everything is fine. He follows the back hallway to the garage. The garage door is blocked with something. He has to use his shoulder.

What Jonah sees is the color of television, the wrecked jaw bone, the wet pieces of meat on the unfinished drywall, the color of fake, the color of not happening. Even the blood is blacker than what it should be, spreading out behind his father's green camping cooler, filling the cracks in the pavement, sidling next to the stains of motor oil, while the colors Inside spin and fall, rise again before falling deeper, the color of a suspension bridge, the color of breaking, the color of spinning down into a waterfall of cliffs and plum.

Later on, when Jonah is living below the docks in Port Townsend, he will huff glue and remember it like this: The gun on the floor, the head open strangely, the feet kicked up, the mud on the bottom of his father's boots dry and mossy, his ankles propped on the edges of his camping cooler and the handles of the camping cooler hitched open like the short wings of a large primitive bird. He will remember the color Inside as purple. Plum trees sprouting and ripening and rotting and falling and creaming into the dark ground, and streams of plum water running down into a plum river, flowing out to a plum sea. And Jonah will wonder why he didn't move. Why he just stood there, watching the pool of blood and the meat on the drywall, the sloshing feel of plum rolling Inside him. He'll remember the smell of the garage as the smell of fireworks and mothballs. A damp smell. And he'll remember the sound of humming, a high pitch whine that could have been the noise of the gun still hung in the air, or the sound between the raindrops smacking the dirty windowpanes, the pause of weather, the stillness

between the outer water and the glass of the house. Or perhaps the hum was the sound of no more breathing from the smoking hole in his father's face.

In his future dream

Rafael is the color of letting it all go.

“I lived Inside your boy for seven weeks. I wanted to feel his Sudden Infant Death. It was not nearly as enlightening as I imagined it would be. In fact, it was horrible. So horrible I can't get a hold of myself. I've been walking Outside for I don't know how long, trying to figure out just who I am, how I got here, and how I can get back. No one can tell me anything I don't know, but still. Something has changed. Something is definitely different inside me.”

Jonah has no idea what this thing is trying to say to him. But I do. I know exactly what Rafael is talking about. The Jobs wreck you. They cut your face. They take apart your being. They run out your love. Like Tammy. I haven't seen Tammy... I don't even want to think about it. It's the color of never coming back. And the color of never coming back is the worse color of all. She was the only thing that ever mattered to me. And I'm hearing terrible rumors about her now, how she's taken up Job after Job in rape victims, making strange notes to her father. As if I'm doing any better. Look at me. Just look at where I'm at.

Rafael is crying, a feeling he must have affected, like the scar, from the child.

“There wasn't a moon,” he says of the car accident. “The stars lit the sky like pollution. They weren't just pinpricks in the canvas, they were something nuclear. And

then there was the tree. I didn't think he would feel anything. I thought this death would be without consciousness. How scared could a baby be of death, I thought, having already been so close to something just like it. But everything came on at once. The color showed through and he saw himself, strapped into the back car seat, while his mother reached for us, the car smashing, the bones in Maria breaking... He watched it. He watched everything. He heard everything break apart, in him and his mother, all at once." Rafael looks down at Jonah. "The sounds of it made his heart explode. The Inside of him closed down and it spit me Out. The next thing I know is I'm crawling around on the ground with the sound of it happening again and again, a feeling like the color of guilt brightening ever dark space I have."

If I wanted to talk about Lazarus's suicide, I'd have to start with the color of it. I'd have to say it was like an alleyway in the rain, full of metal grates and open electrical boxes snapping in the drainage, puddles and trash and dark figures hawking at me from behind doorways. Needles. Old bullet casings. Things that chased me down. But this was nothing new, really. The color Inside Lazarus was always like this. Even when he was sleeping, he wasn't really sleeping. There was the color of a narrative Inside him that refused to tone down, a constant projector of body parts and massacres, burning corpses, thick meridian milkshakes. The violence Inside him drove him Out. But the pure white of the shotgun blast cleared away all the other colors. The brightness ran everything else to blank, cut the reel of his life for good.

Jonah reaches down and touches the child's face, places his fingers across the scar on its nose. The skin is cold, but not meaty, not distant. There is a softness to it, something of Maria, nights on her doorstep, outside her window, under her four-poster

bed, zipped up together in a torn sleeping bag, making love while her parents watched Spanish television in the next room. The way she said her name in Spanish and her letters after Jonah's father died, the ones he read and the ones he just threw away unopened.

The color Inside Jonah changes. The ceiling and the flesh walls take on different tones from each other. There is a purple sky where Jonah remembers his father, long afternoons in Lazarus's old pickup truck, the truck cab always smelling of wet earth and pine needles. Afternoons spent by playing with the little ancient things kept in the cab, the garden snips and hand axes, the bamboo ties, the musty work gloves, the tattered pieces of flannels and crusty t-shirts, the beer cans and plastic water jugs and empty cigarette packs. On some days, Jonah believed he could build a second father from all the loose material of his working life, reform his face with the muddy, discarded use of his labor. Jonah spent so much of his time beside Lazarus in the quiet, watching The Bells pass by the windowpane. He didn't want to disturb his father, because Lazarus looked so busy behind his eyes, controlled in dreams Jonah couldn't reach in and touch. But Lazarus loved his son, the color of it blooming Inside him whenever they rode together. Me, I liked watching Jonah react to his father in all the wrong ways, misread situations, involve himself poorly, doing the things a boy does when he has a psycho for a dad. Like when he killed the neighbor's dog with the cinderblock. The dog was dying by the color of cancer, and Jonah hated how it limped around, howled and scratched itself, nipped at the tubes and its stitched-up skin. He would often find his father on the back porch, watching the dog walk around in the rain. And so Jonah decided his father must also hate the dog, he decided he would kill it for his father. But Jonah didn't think

the cinderblock would make such a noise, or the dog would go down like that into the muddy ground. It didn't feel the way he thought it would. There wasn't the color of relief, nothing that resembled mercy. The color was dark and shrouded, ugly. And the color felt permanent. Jonah couldn't stop looking at his hands and the block and the dog and the blood and fur and mud. And now if he remembers it, it confuses him. And he has to spend a lot of money on drugs trying to forget, like most things, the color of its existence Inside him.

“But there is something I want to tell you,” says Rafael.

Jonah looks up from the child.

“And you will not understand it, but I want you to listen.”

Jonah nods.

“If you knew what I know, then you would know that you will remember this moment for the rest of your life. Or not really remember it, but imagine it over and over until it takes on so many shapes and forms that you won't be able to tell if it is happening to you now, or if it happened to you in some other memory of your life, that was not really your life, but a life you somehow remember anyway. It will be like your time in the Australian desert, years from now. You have been in the car for days, staring out the window since dawn and now it is afternoon. All is flat. All has been flat. There are impossible trees, beaten and shrunken under the sun, with small flat green leaves growing from them like islands on the sea. The land is orange and the girl driving tells you things are not as dead as they look. But all you feel is dead. You feel as if the whole of your life is like these trees, growing from the hard bitten earth as if there could possibly be

anything worth living for. You fall asleep believing this, and when you wake you are upon the salt beds... Beds of bright eyes laid flat across the orange land. You will want the car to stop, but your mouth isn't moving. The eyes stay for many hours and when night falls you can still see them. And when the morning comes again, the salt is gone, but what you have seen isn't. The memory and color of them are bright. Dead, yes. But bright as the stars when there is no moon, the light in constant dark, shimmering across the harbor inside you, brightening the dark places, the places you have put away from yourself—your child, and Maria... Reflecting off their faces in your mind, and the color of your heart.”

In his ghost dream

The color of the house is the color of dark, and everything outside the house is dark.

It is the color of Sunday afternoon, and Jonah has long convinced himself that his mind belongs to the stereo because somewhere he remembers promising it to hear that song that did that thing. But his legs were like broke. The carpet had him tight. And Christ, didn't he just need to hear that song one more time! Once more is all it would take for sleep. But the color of sleep never comes.

It gets dark. Darker.

And now, flat on the floor in his bedroom, clutching onto his ghost knife, imagining what must be moving in the streets, Jonah cannot remember the color of his eyes, and something feels caught behind him like an accident on the highway when he's just a passenger on the express bus. The trees have fallen black and the carpet is taking

him faster. There is a color like the smell of wet dog, the taste of it blooming in his mouth. The edges are soft. His skin bursting. And he's crying, he's crying out. God, he's crying.

But here I am, I want to say. Touching your cheek. Crouched in your closet. Lying next to you on the floor, listening each time you repeat and repeat your father's name.

So You Want To Be A Lady Terrorist

Something I wrote down on a napkin while my husband was still alive: “They were having sex. After it was over he made coffee and sat on the couch before going for a jog. She stayed in bed and pretended to sleep.”

I kept the napkin. I keep most everything I write. I don't really consider myself a writer. More of a collector, I guess. Thoughts, images, moments. A keeper. A keeper until I lose the things I'm trying to keep. Which, when you boil it right down, makes me a stone broke loser.

Right now I'm in the process of losing two things. First, my son. Second, my freedom. Meaning I'm on my way to jail, and fast.

I could blame the Lady Terrorist Club, but that would be avoiding the facts of the matter. I detonated the bomb. No one held a gun to my head. It's like Ci-Ci says: “Free will. What a bitch.”

Yeah, sure, I was in pain—am in pain—but try explaining that one to a jury of widows. Just as well to say it was Lazy's fault. I can see me now: up there in front of the judge, trying to explain myself, referencing my dreams like some kind of dime-store psychic... Visions of my dead husband, his bloated face and mouth, cooking in my head and bolting me awake at night with my eyes on fire. And it's true. Every night I have these visions of Lazy in hell. There aren't any flames like you'd expect. More of a green-hue foam that hisses from his skin. And shaking, I'll pick up a piece of paper and pen from the bedside table and write something that goes like this:

10 things I've failed in no particular order.

1. Cooking. What an atrocity. Lazy did his best not to say anything, chew and smile, wave with the ends of his fingers as if his mouth was full of salt and vinegar, but I always knew. For Christsakes, I burn cheese. All the time. It smells like hair and human flesh. Sometimes I wonder if we're not made of it.

2. Lists. I forget to make them. Which is a problem because I can never remember what to bring, like the vodka and salami, or the quiche and bourbon. If I do happen to make a list, I'll often write the wrong thing down. I'll bring Dickels and Saltines instead of gin fizzers and cheese puffs. This really makes Lara mad, because whenever she has to drink Dickels her nose breaks into honeycombs, and everyone goes around calling her "Queen Bee" for the rest of the evening. Lara cries in great collapsing whoops whenever people make fun of her, even in the most remote and playful ways. Some kind of childhood hang-up, says Ci-Ci. Of course Lara blames me completely, and depending on how much Dickels she drinks she'll try to hit me. Once, she attempted to stab me in the eye with the point of an olive spear.

3. The weather. It rains here, all the time. I think it's my fault. Which is of course totally ridiculous. Or is it?

4. Molotov Cocktails. I can't make one right to save my life. Ci-Ci says it's because I'm afraid I'll set myself on fire. Maybe she's right. But I hope not.

5. Writing. After three courses at the community college I remain unconvinced. I end sentences too early. I misuse commas. And my periods look funny, even if I'm typing.

6. Work. I used to. Don't anymore. Haven't for months. Hell, I can't even remember what I did. Something to do with data retrieval, perhaps.

7. Lazy. My husband. He's dead. And apparently in hell. After spending seventeen years of your life with somebody, it's pretty much impossible to escape feeling guilty about that one.

8. Fuck. I say it too much.

9. Movies. I'm like a child. I can't sit still. It doesn't matter how many buildings explode, or how many people die. It doesn't matter if it's really romantic and glossy and swooning with lots of sex, or if it's one of those heartbreakingly realistic art house flicks about modern rural life in the South. Even though I've never been to the South, it looks so depressing on screen—all those lonely tires and patches of tall yellow grass and rusting machines and bare trees in winter and glass-strewn ravines where the kids go down to play and screw, while all the bare branches clang in the slow wind and everything looks dead. I can't stand it. And when I get up to leave, Ursula looks shocked and asks where I'm going as if she's never seen me storm out of a movie theater before.

10. My son. Jonah.

And I'll lay there in bed with paper and pen in hand, staring at the light and the shadows, the still blackness on the wall and above the windows, and I'll pray to God to see Lazy's ghost, just so I could know he's alright, or at least know the green-hue foam that hisses from his skin doesn't hurt as bad as I imagine.

Eventually, I fall back asleep. Or I don't fall asleep, but lay awake there in bed, staring at the light and shadows, writing things down, waiting. Or I don't lay in bed, but get up and make coffee and sit at the kitchen table where I spent so many hours after Lazy's death. And Jonah eventually wakes up, or comes home from wherever he's been, and he'll stand in the doorway of the kitchen and we'll stare at each other, and sometimes he asks if I'm alright, and sometimes I ask if he's alright, and our answers are always the same.

Yeah, we say. Sure.

I can never write anything without drawing a case of dynamite, or something very similar to dynamite, in the blank spaces of the page. The drawings are too concentrated and consistent to be doodles. Something's going on. I read somewhere that when a person suffers a loss, they will sometimes feel a great sense of affection for the intangible, like ghosts or moonbeams, or maybe something not so intangible, like dynamite. But since I don't know anything about dynamite, I must be falling in love with the intangible idea of dynamite, which is so out of style it's romantic.

I thought as soon as I became a Lady Terrorist they'd give me a ski mask, a cord of rope, a bundle of dynamite, and send me off into the night. But like everything else in my head, it doesn't work that way. No one uses dynamite anymore. And every time I bring it up, Ci-Ci looks at me like I'm crazy.

Often I'll draw pictures of dynamite when I don't know how to end something. I'll be writing when all of a sudden everything stops and I've drawn a picture of a building set to blow sky high. And then I look at what I've written and see how it has no beginning and no end. The words are just sort of there. Like oxygen.

I wrote this on the back of a beer coaster the other day: “Sometimes I don’t think I know what it means to be a woman.”

It’s true.

When I first started attending meetings, I felt completely out of place. I never knew what to say. I didn’t understand the ritual. All these women. All this talk. It was halfway through my second week when one of the Sewing Sisters lurched up to me, dressed horrifically in a purple blouse with bouncing pink tassels, and announced: “Oh my God, Lannie! We’re so happy you’re here. I just want you to know we all think you’re simply marvelous. The best. We’re so looking forward to your pledge and candidacy.”

And I blinked. And she looked at me expectantly, her mouth half open, her makeup like cheesecake on her face. And I said, “Are you kidding me?” I laughed too loud. “I should be thanking you.”

That’s what I said. That’s all you can say when one of these drunk, teary women feel the need to slobber their blathering—albeit misplaced—sympathy all over your shoulder pads.

One of the first rules if you want to be a Lady Terrorist, or even a Sewing Sister for that matter, is you must wear shoulder pads—awful heavy padding of nylon, what feels like steel wool stuffing, crammed between your blouse and bra strap.

I made a big stink when I found out about this.

“But that’s the point, Lannie,” explained Ci-Ci. “You’re not supposed to like them. They’re meant to look atrocious.”

“My mother wore shoulder pads,” I protested. “Like forty years ago.”

“Now come on, Lannie,” chimed Aunt Ruth. “Is that really fair?”

“Fair? My mother wore shoulder pads a long fucking time ago, on a fashion planet that looks nothing like ours. I think that’s a very fair objection to the whole idea.”

Aunt Ruth and Ci-Ci glanced at one another and walked away.

In the mornings when I drink coffee in the kitchen by myself, I think about jail and all those bad prison movies about women in jail. I imagine myself in something like a torn bathrobe—all hot and bothered, wrapped in chains, gang-raped repeatedly by the guards and their nightsticks. But then I think it’s not going to be anything like that. I imagine it to be a whole lot of silence and bright balls of guilt that boil inside me day and night. I think about what’s going to become of Jonah. And I drink coffee and smell the collar of the yellow robe I wear until I feel the need to get dressed. After Lazy died, I gave all his clothes to the Salvation Army. Everything but this ridiculous yellow robe. I couldn’t part with it. I guess his smell is trapped too deep inside the furry yellow fibers.

Most days, Jonah sleeps until noon. Or he comes home at noon from wherever he’s been. I wish I could say he takes after his father. But he doesn’t. Jonah is just like me. He even looks like me. Black hair, brown eyes, sharp features. It’s worse than looking in the mirror every time he drags his wasted figure into the kitchen, wobbling in front of me, reeking of booze and cigarettes—and he has to be stoned on something to get his eyes so big.

Thanks to the Lady Terrorist Club I can't say anything. I've lost all right, as my son likes to remind me. "Why don't you go blow something up, mom." And I tell him it's not like that. But he knows better. He's a smart kid.

If you wanted to join... Well, before anything you'd come for a visit without any strings attached. I would wait until you had at least four cherry wine spritzers before I told you how my husband of seventeen years shot himself in the mouth with a shotgun so old and ancient it shouldn't have even fired. I would wait until the eighth cherry wine spritzer to tell you it was my son, at the tender age of fourteen, who found his father in the garage, and how I could do nothing but sit down in the kitchen drinking bourbon until I woke up in the hospital with my husband still dead and a look on the face of my son I know I'm going to live with for the rest of my life. And you would stare at me with watery eyes and you would say you don't know what to say. And I smile and wipe my own eyes and say it's alright. I say I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. And you say, "No, don't be ridiculous. I'm glad you did, because... Well, I didn't want to say anything, but I know what it's like, Lannie. And it's so good to hear that somebody, I mean you—It's so good to hear you talk about it because I haven't been able to, I don't know, ever since..." And I tell you it's alright, "Go on, please. We're in a safe place." And you smile and tears break from your eyes, and maybe you break down completely and start sobbing, and you tell me how your three sons were driving back from some damn club in Seattle, strung out like cats on a wire, so hopped up on crank and cough syrup they didn't see the logging truck overturn in the storm, the bare wet trunks of firs spilling on the slick road, crushing the car and all your sons beneath. Well, your husband just couldn't handle it. The worthless son of a bitch. He up and split with his bottle and

his chainsaw and his pick-up truck and your dog Murphy. He told you he'd be back, that he was just headed up north to find work. But you knew there was no work up north. There was never any work up north. And I'm holding your shoulders, keeping us both standing, and I say, "What we need is more cherry wine." And you nod. And we drink spritzers until we pass out together, heads on each other's shoulders in the lobby of the Days Inn. And in our sleep we covenant your induction into The Bells Sewing Circle & Lady Terrorist Club.

Last Sunday, Ci-Ci and I drove to the building I bombed. It's just a big torn up crater with raw iron framing reaching up to the sky like tortured fingers. And Ci-Ci quotes her favorite line from the Inferno that goes, "And I fell, as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell."

"What does that mean, anyway?" I ask.

Ci-Ci looks at me and smiles. She says, "You don't know?"

We look back to the crater, the bulldozers moving all the tons of busted concrete and blown dirt. There is no proper body count yet. We did it at night, so it can't be that high. "Probably twenty," says Ci-Ci. "Maybe ten. But that's okay." She smiles. "It's the structure that counts." And I nod my head. And I feel Ci-Ci looking at me, and I look at her and I say, "What?"

"You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

Ci-Ci laughs. "You don't recognize it at all?"

I look back at the crater. "How could I?"

“You used to work here, sweetheart.”

“Oh.”

Wednesday night is Planned Assassin Night. For the last six months, Aunt Ruth has been trying to get one of the ladies to assassinate her former or current boss. So far no one has stepped up to the plate. “And to think you’ve brought men like this into the world, ladies. Men who have repaid your womb with slavery.”

“Let’s not mince words here,” says Ci-Ci. “We are about control. We are about take back. We are about getting our lives in gear. Yes, it sounds extreme. Committing murder is hard for most of us to fathom. But if the gift of life is indeed in our natural and ordained control, then why not death?”

A few of the ladies will look at each other and nod their heads. A few random applauses. But then the booze rolls out and everybody forgets the whole thing.

This Wednesday, Ci-Ci comes up to me and says, “Aunt Ruth and I would like to talk to you.”

I’m pretty loaded, but I follow anyhow, knocking over a tray of crackers and cheese on the way.

Aunt Ruth has a room in the Days Inn. It’s on the top floor, the seventh, and it overlooks the parking lot and Red’s Seafood Extravaganza, home of the dollar-ninety-nine jumbo margarita. The parking lot always seems wet to me, even on the rare occasions when the clouds break and the sun comes out. It’s hard to know if Aunt Ruth lives here or not. The room is in pillow mint condition, without any sign of it ever being visited by a body, or at least not by a body like mine, one that drinks and pisses and eats

and shits and sometimes throws the vulgar from its guts. Above the queen bed is a map of the world. The colors of the continents vary—pink, blue, red, and yellow. Greenland is green and Iceland is white. Africa and South America look smaller than they should. The United States is orange, the northwest section of the country circled deeply with black pen: Lady Terrorist property.

“Thank you, Ci-Ci,” says Aunt Ruth.

Ci-Ci nods and backs into the shadow of the entertainment center.

Aunt Ruth smiles and looks at me. “How are you feeling, Lannie?”

My drink is empty, but I don’t say anything. Aunt Ruth gets upset if she thinks you only show up for the community booze. “Great,” I say. “I’m having a wonderful time.” I raise my plastic cup, shaking the ice.

Aunt Ruth nods her head. “Of course. This is family, is it not?”

I suck at the booze-glazed ice in my cup. “Uh-huh.”

“Right. Well, have a seat. I—we—have something I think will be of great interest to you, Lannie.” Aunt Ruth stands up and walks to the window. She drags her fingertips along the thin white undercurtain, looking down on the parking lot where I hear several of the Sewing Sisters or Lady Terrorists screaming hysterically.

Aunt Ruth is probably sixty. She is slender and her eyes are bright and her hair is white and the blood vessels around her temples have broken into marvelous shades of blue. Her fingers are long and the veins in her hands stick out like bones. I hope I look half as good as she does at that age.

“Please Lannie,” she says without turning from the window. “Sit down.”

“Sorry.” I plop on the bed, noticeably sloppier than I intended.

“It’s been sometime since we’ve talked. Since your project, I presume?”

“Something like that.”

“I’m sure Ci-Ci told you we’re all very proud of the job you did for us.”

“Oh,” I say. “It wasn’t much.” I shrug my shoulders. “I just pushed a button.”

Aunt Ruth sighs deeply, closes her eyes and then opens them. “I’m certain Ci-Ci told you how proud I am of what was committed for the cause.”

I look at Ci-Ci.

Ci-Ci nods.

“Sure,” I say.

“Good.” Aunt Ruth turns from the window. “You have distinguished yourself, Lannie. You have raised yourself from the ashes, torn off your arms and replaced them with wings.” Aunt Ruth comes close. “Tell me, how does it feel?”

“Feel?”

“Becoming a phoenix?”

“A phoenix?” I laugh. “That’s, um, that’s a little ridiculous, don’t you think?”

Aunt Ruth sits next to me on the bed, placing a hand on my knee. “Why? Why is that ridiculous? Are you so frightened of the ceiling you wish to eat plain dirt for the rest of your life? Or have you relinquished your possibilities because you still hold on to those patriarchal notions of limitations and mortality—their false, decapitated sense of

reality? Do you still believe ‘their’ limits, Lannie? Even after all we have given you? All you have obviously learned?”

I don’t say anything.

“What we’re saying, Lannie,” says Ci-Ci from the dark corner of the entertainment center, “is are you ready to take this to the next level?”

I scratch beneath my shoulder pads violently. God, they really itch, and when I get home my back will be all sweaty and there’ll be two red humps like lobsters on my shoulders. Torturous fabric. And the color of lobsters gets me thinking about the time Lazy and I went crabbing on the Oregon coast. Not really on the coast, more like at the mouth (or was it the end?) of the Alsea River. Waldport. That’s it. We got up early and drank Salty Dogs before wobbling down to the dock and tossing a basket in the water. It was cold and raining. We bought a case of beer, and by mid-afternoon we were laughing so hard we forgot all about the crab basket, which was okay because one thing led to another and I finally pushed Lazy off the dock and into the freezing salt water. I thought he was going to kill me. But we were both laughing so hard, flailing horribly, trying to pull him back onto the dock, that nothing mattered. Then he started shivering, and we were still laughing, so we left everything there on the dock—the empty beer cans, the bait, the chicken thighs and pigs feet and stinky dead perch, our basket still far under the water—and drove back to the Motor Motel and showered together and got under the covers and made love so thickly our skin stuck together. Later, I remember being hungry, and I wanted to go back and check on our crab basket, even though it was like midnight. *We must have a gazillion of them by now*, I was thinking. But Lazy was fast asleep. And I remember trying to wake him. Pinching him. Sitting on his chest. I even

held his nose. But one thing about Lazy, once he was out he was really out. And like always, I tried to follow. I wanted to sleep the way he did, but I couldn't. I never could. I got up and went to the desk and pulled out some motel stationary and I wrote down a few things. They didn't make any sense. And after a while I was just drawing explosions, big bursting scribbles of black ink and scorched earth.

“What do you say, Lannie?”

I look at Ci-Ci, and then Aunt Ruth. “I blew up a building,” I say. “I don't think I want to know what the next level is.”

“You're frightened. I understand that,” says Aunt Ruth. “I was once very much like you, Lannie. Scared, abandoned, hurt. I woke up one day with more than a few lives. I had a past, and pasts of pasts. I looked in the mirror and I saw six or seven women staring back at me. Three husbands. Five children, all of whom either lived in state's custody or some other kind of goddamn correctional program. I was forty-three. My vagina was dry as chalk. I drank. I smoked crack. I didn't eat. What little sleep I got wasn't sleep, rather a slow roast inside an oven of dead babies. I was squatting in an abandoned paint shop in Aberdeen. I had pneumonia, and the only real comfort I could take was that I knew there was nothing left inside of me to get sick. I was a wasted figure, Lannie.”

“But,” says Ci-Ci.

“But,” continues Aunt Ruth, “I found something in me I could lean against. And once I found this post, I was able to look around and see many more like it. In fact, I saw I was a virtual coliseum of foundations. All I had to do was pick one and build.”

“And build we did,” says Ci-Ci.

Aunt Ruth smiles. “And build we did. You see, Lannie, each one of my Lady Terrorists is a post. You are the foundations to a new world. The coliseum is rotten and decayed. The blood which was once spilt here has all but seeped into the ground, evaporated into the air. All that’s left now are the ghosts who wander the posts—scared, abandoned, hurt. But another coliseum is being built. There will be fresh blood to spill. The ghosts are looking up at the posts—wondering, hoping, praying...”

“Lannie,” picks up Ci-Ci, “what we’re saying is we think you have the right stuff. You’ve displayed initiative, guts, but most importantly, complete and total hatred.” Ci-Ci steps back into the light of the room. “We have something for you, Lannie. If you’re interested. It’s something big. Really big. Imagine: One single action, undertaken by you, can complete the first floor of the coliseum.”

And yes, part of me is thinking this is totally ridiculous. And part of me just wants another drink. And part of me just wants to get up and leave and never come to this place again. And part of me wants to confess my crime. And part of me wants to keep on drinking until I forget my crime, or at least convince myself it was just an extension of my well-warranted pain. Part of me wants to go home and pack my bags and gas up the car, find my son and leave The Bells forever. Part of me wants to move to Canada and live in the woods and fish and hunt and chop up logs and build fires and watch the cold move across the sky. Part of me wishes I was never born. Part of me wants nothing to do with any of this anymore. Part of me is so fucking sorry. And part of me just doesn’t give a shit anymore. Part of me says fuck it. Fuck it to hell.

When I get home I find Jonah waiting for me on the couch. There is a very strange look on his face. The blue light of the television is caught over everything. The white carpet looks green. The shadows on Jonah's face are yellow and blue. I ask if he's alright.

We need to talk, he says. "Sit down, mom."

In a minute, I say. Oh God, is my head wracked. I've got a headache that'd drop a donkey. I need a drink. And waiting for me in the kitchen is a fresh bottle of gin and a tumbler of half-melted ice. Jonah is a sweet kid, and somewhere I know he must love me, but I get his point loud and clear, the little fuck. I fill the glass and drink it. I fill another and feel better. "What's up?" I shout from the kitchen.

"My birthday is next week."

Jesus Christ, I whisper.

"I'm turning seventeen."

"I know that," I shout back. "You don't think I know that?"

"Easy mom," he says. "I'm not saying anything."

Yeah right, I whisper. And drink.

"Just hear me out, okay?"

What he tells me next could have happened anywhere. He could have found me early on a Sunday morning, face down on the living room floor. I could have been in the kitchen, bawling my eyes out. I could have been trying to start the car in a paranoid fit, the car coughing over and over. He could have found me holding a bottle of America's

Cupp, watching the television. He could have not found me at all. He could have just left. He could have written a post-it note saying he was leaving and never coming back. It would have all worked out about the same in the end.

“But baby,” I’m crying. “I’m trying! Oh fucking Christ, don’t you see how hard I’m trying?”

“Mom,” he says. “Mom, listen to me. Just—hey, come on man, please... God, will you just stop crying for like two seconds.”

We’ve been at this for a half hour. In typical fashion, Jonah began deliberate and defiant, slipped into a reluctant sympathy, and now he’s just struggling to console his poor broken mother who’s hysterical as a loon. He must think I do it on purpose. His father sure did. But I swear I don’t. Once it starts, it just starts and there’s nothing anyone can do about it.

“Fine!” I scream. “Lay it on me! Come on, I can take it. Just say it, why are you doing this to me? What’ve I ever done to deserve this kind of... abandonment?”

Jonah throws his head into his hands. “Jesus, mom.”

“Don’t you ‘Jesus’ me you little fuck. You think you’re the only one here in pain, mister? I could teach you a few things about pain, believe me.”

Jonah stands up. “Forget it,” he says. “I can’t handle this. Look,” he grabs his jacket off the back of the couch, “it’s like I said, I’m giving it maybe a month and I’m gone. Okay? I hate this town, I hate living here—I don’t even go to school anymore. I’m losing my mind, I swear to God. Everything is so...” He looks around and shakes his head. “Fucked.” He opens the front door.

“Over my dead body you leave this house before your eighteen!”

“Later.” Jonah slams the door.

“Over my dead fucking body!” I collapse into the door and wail and pound my fists on the carpet and slam the back of my head against the doorframe.

When Jonah was little, maybe four or five, he loved to go outside and stare up at the tops of the trees. One day I asked him what he saw up there. He looked back at the ground and began to shuffle down the sidewalk. We walked a few blocks together, but he didn’t answer me, stopping ever so often to look upwards—his little jacketed arms stuck out at the side, his face full of wonderment, his eyes focused and wet. Back in the house, Jonah got up into my lap and told me he was looking for where it all stopped.

“What do you mean, sweetheart?” “The end,” he said. “I’m looking for where it ends, mommy.”

And I’m destroying the kitchen. Or it’s not me, but somebody who looks a lot like me. Smashing gin on the floor, kicking ice cubes and shards of glass, throwing coffee cups and plates and placemats and empty bottles, and screaming fuck, and blaming Lazy for everything, “I’m not taking the fall on this one, you selfish fuck!” And I want to know what I ever did to deserve a life like this? I pick up the phone and slam it back down, pick it up, slam it down. The wallpaper is so sick and peeling, and there’s dried crusted dishes everywhere, dry ketchup on the counters, a jar of empty mayonnaise, filthy window ledges... The utility room smells like mildew and piss, and it’s fucking freezing cold outside, rain and cold mud ground... Lazy’s garden is smashed dirt and mud clods—torn up stalks that crag up from the earth like pieces of thin, broken metal—and it’s not really me on my knees tearing up the lawn like this in big soupy chunks with my fingers.

The neighbors moved out months ago. The evergreens are dark and must stretch forever into the darkness. And like everything else, the fence is broken.

I get mud everywhere: the counter and the couch, the rug, the lamp, the desk, and the pen and the paper. *And did she take comfort that even in death she could blame him for everything?* Yes. The hell she did. One morning she woke up to find several women staring back at her in the mirror. They looked slightly different from her at the time—dyed blonde, bruised faces, black eyes and necks, makeup too thick and purple—but there was no doubt, they were all reflections of her—reflections of particular, though unspectacular, stages of her life: lived and unlived, yet to be lived. And in the space between the mirror and the wall, she found more of herself being born, built right out of the plaster like clay molds. They formed at an amazing rate. And she wondered if she would really live so long? Or had she already done so? She wondered where she could possibly keep all these selves and not lose them? A coliseum, she thought. A coliseum of mirrors—each a trap of its own life, a trap of its own past within a past: a past of pasts. The coliseum would be huge, a magnificent feat of architecture and will. At its center would be a track of horse-beaten mud and blood, bodies of herself clawing for the gates, lions moving between her bodies, their jaws stained brown. The air would smell dead, just like a quiet movie of quiet death. There would be no dynamite or dangerous sex or great thumping explosions unsettling the concrete into a hail of molten rain. There would only be the flat formless mist that hangs over pastures in the South. And there would be the riggings of a dilapidated shack on the outskirts of the county, its windows broken, the glass shards of the windows circling the inner grounds around the shack, and the stones that broke the windows would lie inside the shack. Also: the chair and the desk and the

girl who sits all day at the desk writing—writing a coliseum of mirrors. Or in other words, the girl writes nobody—a reflection of reflections.

And I'm crying. And the lines fade outside the page into evaporated pictures no one can see. Like oxygen. Or the end of oxygen.

I wake up beneath our bed, next to the footlocker where Lazy kept the shotgun. The gun is gone. But its coffin is still here.

I have to give Aunt Ruth my answer today. "Take the night and think on it, Lannie." And stumbling to the bathroom I'm laughing about how much thinking I got done last night. I can't see straight and the sour piss I take smells like vitamin C and asparagus.

There's a message on the machine. It's Ci-Ci. She's coming over.

I throw on Lazy's yellow robe, make a path through all the broken dishes and glass in the kitchen to get some coffee ready to brew. I think about a drink. Think better of it. I try scraping some dried mud from my hands and arms. I give up and weave into the living room.

I'm half-way asleep on the couch when I hear a knock at the door, and with it the smell of burnt coffee.

Three police officers. They're all wearing helmets and face shields. Two handguns apiece, strapped to each hip.

"You'll be taken care of," promises Ci-Ci through the thick plastic glass that divides me from the rest of the world. I'm still wearing his damn yellow robe, my arms and hands battered like fish with dried mud.

“They have nothing on you,” says Ci-Ci. “And if they do, you’ll be protected. We have more Lady Terrorists on the Inside than you can possibly imagine.”

I close my eyes. Fantastic.

“Lannie, are you listening to me?”

I nod.

“Do you believe me?”

I shrug.

“About last night. What we... proposed. Did you have time to think it over?”

I open my eyes and lean forward. “Get me out of here and I’ll do it. Whatever you want, I’ll do it.”

Ci-Ci smiles. “Consider it done.”

The night we blew up the building... Rather, the night “I” blew up the building, I was hammered out of my mind. We started drinking early in the basement of the Days Inn, next to the mops and buckets and rusted industrial sinks. Sometime before—I never found out when exactly—the building, supposedly my old place of employment, had been professionally wired with enough explosives to sink it straight into the ground. The details, I was told, were unimportant. We were drinking very expensive gin, which tasted just like any other kind of gin to me, yet another example of my flat, unassuming life.

“There’ll be a switch you click twice in your palm. Very rapidly, like banging two spoons together,” explained Ci-Ci. “No dynamite?” I stammered. Ci-Ci shook her head. “If it helps, Lannie, you can certainly think of it as dynamite.” “Thanks,” I said. Then Ci-Ci offered me some black face paint, and I looked at her ironically, and we both

started laughing. But I figured what the hell, how many times does a person get to do a thing like this. Donning black face paint, Ci-Ci, myself, and Ursula, piled into a rented Cadillac and drove to the Position, a few blocks from the building. Just as Ci-Ci said: two clicks, like clapping spoons together, and boom... I distinctly remember the sound of shattered glass. Naturally, the ground shook and the night became hazy with clouded debris. The attention in the press was phenomenal, but after a week it went away. No one stepped forward to claim bodies. Of course there's a continuing investigation. But these sort of things happen all the time, and well... It's just one of those things—it's not like when I'm caught, and rotting in the can for the rest of my life, anyone's going to sleep better, because bet your ass there'll be something bigger and badder to worry yourself sick with at night.

Do I feel guilt? Yes. But I'm paying for it. And I know—oh God, more than anything, I know—that I'll always, and in all ways, be paying for it. And it's not just the building; it's like Ci-Ci says, the building was a structure, nothing more, nothing less. In fact, the crime itself means a lot more to Aunt Ruth and Ci-Ci and their organization, or whatever-the-hell they call it, than it'll ever mean to me. What matters to me is the heaping wreckage of my life. And I'm sitting here now, on this cold bench, with all these desperate-looking ladies staring at me, and water leaking down the walls from somewhere, and I know there is no particular place in my life that I can look back on and say, "There! If only I could go back and fix that!" Meaning, if I could do it all over again, I'd do it exactly the same, not because I wouldn't change anything, but because there would be nothing to change. I could do it all over again a thousand times and I'd still be right here: hungover as shit, waiting for Ci-Ci to post bail so I can go home to my

broken house and continue whatever it is I'm continuing. It's like when I woke up in the hospital after Lazy's suicide. I remembered nothing, the edges of the room thrummed around me like heartbeats, my vision was bleary and confused—my mind a boiled soup of tissue and memories. In all ways I felt like a completely different person. But the facts of my life, the specifics of who I was and what I was facing, had not changed. My husband was dead, and my son... Well, there was just that look on my son's face I will never shake. It's like when I blew up the building. I was so sure I'd undergo some kind of radical transformation, become this crazy Lady Terrorist thereby jumpstarting all the stagnant bile in my life. I thought I could turn everything around, birth something new and wonderful from that smoking wreckage. But nothing changed. Nothing could change. So, in actuality, guilt is a mute point. Guilt is the feeling that things could have been different if you hadn't been so stupid or so selfish or so absent-minded or so hateful or so goddamn self-destructive and careless to the people you love. For me, the inevitability of my life and my actions is as reliable as my face in the mirror.

Bail's posted. I go home.

Ci-Ci kisses my cheek in the driveway and says she'll call later with details.

Whatever.

Inside, the house is immaculate. Everything sparkles and smells like vanilla candles. Lara and Ursula are in the kitchen, drinking light beers and talking. They're utterly filthy. Lara is wearing a dirty red bandana that holds back her long brown hair. And Ursula, usually the queen of fashion among us terrorists, is decked out in a sleeveless cotton t-shirt. Both of their arms and faces are smudged deeply in grease and grim. When they see me, they both stand and exclaim: "Lannie!"

“Ladies...?”

Ursula runs up and hugs me. She smells like glass cleaner and Pledge. She holds me out by the arms, like the proud parent at the graduation of their child. “Ci-Ci told us all about it,” she says. She shakes her head, smiling so fiercely I think her mouth is going to break. “I’m speechless, I really am.”

The kitchen isn’t like crystal. The kitchen is like the shining reflection of crystal.

“We all pitched in,” says Lara. “Myself and Ursula and Janice and Jackie and Betty and Kate, and even some of the new girls like Annie Linn and Judith Campbell.”

“You mean the absolute world to me,” says Ursula.

I don’t know what to say, so I say, “Thanks.”

She hugs me again. And then Lara hugs me and whispers in my ear, “Listen, I’m so sorry about all the stupid misunderstandings we’ve had in the past. It was my fault. Really, it was. I’ve been so hateful towards myself. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. But everything is so much better now thanks to you. I love you, Lannie. I really, really do.”

“That’s okay,” I say wiggling away. I hold up my hands, backing out of the kitchen. “Look, this is wonderful. I mean, it’s amazing. I’m... I’m speechless. Truly, I am.”

Lara and Ursula smile at each other.

“But—and I don’t mean to be rude or anything, because I should really be taking the both of you to a bar right now, seriously, I owe you ladies some drinks—but, as you

undoubtedly know, I don't have a lot of time... And, well, have you guys seen my son anywhere?"

Lara and Ursula stare blankly at me.

"Jonah? My son?"

They shake their heads as if they've never heard his name in their lives.

And I'm nearly out the door when it strikes me that I really shouldn't be so rude, and I turn around and say, "Hey, thanks guys, I mean it. Thanks for... Wow, I mean it's amazing. Everything looks—It looks great. Thank you. Drinks, drinks are on me for a very long time." Lara and Ursula just stand there at the edge of the living room, blinking. I look around again, as if I'm really appreciating the scenery, and with nothing left to say I turn and slam the door.

The sky is a big bowl of pig brains, but at least it's not raining. I must look like a complete mad woman right now. Lazy's sloppy yellow robe, twice my size, and dried mud all over my hands and arms like I just crawled out of living in the woods with bears. But there's no time for anything else. In a few weeks we'll be lucky if there's any sky left to complain about.

It's freezing, and I pull the edges of the robe tight around me. Then I hear something from behind. "Mom? What the hell are you doing?"

"Jesus! Jonah, you scared me."

He looks me up and down and smirks. "I scared 'you,' huh?"

"We need to talk," I say.

He shoves his hands in his coat pockets. “Alright.”

“God,” I say. “Look at you. You’re exhausted. Where have you been?”

“Forget it,” he says. “I’m fine.”

And again, I consider what a fine mess inevitability and I have made of things.

We walk in silence, the sound of his boots and the sound of my slippers on the damp pavement. We pass under a bridge where there’s a trail into the forest. There’s a creek somewhere back there that floods in the late winter and sometimes shuts down the road. Lazy liked to fish it, even though he was like the worst fisherman in the world.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said last night.”

Jonah looks at me.

“And you’re right. It’s best you leave.” These words come off my tongue like blades on concrete.

“You mean it?”

“Trust me, if I could have it any other way, I would. But there is no other way. Everything is such an unbearable mess. And I’m sorry about that.”

“Mom, it’s not your fault. The reasons I need to leave have nothing to do with you.”

“Be quiet, please. I have to get all this out before I change my fucking mind.”

Jonah looks at the ground and shoves his hands deeper into his pockets.

“You have an uncle. My brother. I haven’t talked to him in years, but knowing Zeb, he’s still alive. I have some cash, and I want you to take your father’s life insurance,

all of it. You lose like twenty-five percent if you take it now, but fuck it, who knows what's going to become of tomorrow. I want you to use it and get out of here. Do you hear me?"

Jonah stops walking. "What is this?"

"What's what?"

"This. Why are you doing this all of a sudden?"

I run my hands over my face. "I'm trying... I don't know what I'm trying to do, baby. Ever since your father died. It's just that things. I don't know. Everything is so..."

"Fucked?"

I laugh, kind of. "Yeah. Exactly."

"Look," I say after a while. "Take a year. One full year. Bus, train, it doesn't matter. Fly, for God's sake. You'll have enough money to get anywhere you want, anyhow you want. This is still a beautiful country, and look at you, look at what an amazing kid you are." I hold up my hands. "This isn't a life, Jonah. This is no life at all. Everything that's happened here is what happened here and there's nothing that can change that. What you need isn't here anymore. I doubt it ever was." I hug my son suddenly, almost violently, and tears are coming out of my eyes, but they don't feel like tears, in fact this doesn't feel like me at all. This can't be me doing this, just letting him go this easily. No way. This isn't me. This can't be me.

The room is freezing. Aunt Ruth and Ci-Ci wear hospital smocks. When I ask why, they say "Ritual."

“What,” I say surprised, “this isn’t the first time?”

“No,” says Aunt Ruth, “you’re the first.”

“But not the last,” chimes Ci-Ci.

The two women look at each other and say, “A ritual has to start somewhere,” like two athletes slapping fives.

They assure me that everything is fine, and though I’m taking the initiative, every precaution has been made to ensure the success of the procedure. “Soon,” promises Aunt Ruth, “you’ll be the most dangerous woman on the planet. A true model of our terrifying potential.”

The room is cold, but it doesn’t really concern me. I take off my clothes and lay on the table. The doctors, who have said nothing up until this point, roll up my sleeves and swab my forearms with alcohol. My body and mind are completely absent of fear. What is there to be scared of? No guilt, no fear—so goes the argument. Everything is moving the only way it can. Forward.

As consciousness begins to loosen, the thought of Jonah walking away from Bell City fills me with such a feeling I feel like I might burst. If Ci-Ci knew, she would say it was just the painkillers, but I wouldn’t believe her. It is my son I am feeling. I can see him now, bending over his new backpack, carefully wrapping up his clothes, polishing his boots, preparing his tickets, his black hair shining under the light of his room, and his eyes so bright and ready for this new life. He closes the door, and walks to the sidewalk. He takes one last look up at the trees, and like always he can’t see anything. But this

time, he doesn't need to make out the end because there is no end. There is only a continuing. And he smiles and looks back at the ground and begins walking—

As darkness envelops me, I realize that Lazy's not in hell, or maybe he is in hell, but the green-hue foam that hisses from his skin is not some kind of Satanous torture, but is actually the weight of this life leaving his body. He is being released from the poisons of his life, like I am being released. And as the virus begins rushing through my veins in thick globs of red streaking pain, I feel my son, walking as he is, away from all this.

Part III

Talking Tower Babel Blues

Nobody's Big Goodbye

I woke up on a plane to Australia in a story not at all about Australia.

I was sleeping—or not—on the spokes of an egg beater. There were the pale walls of a pale kitchen. A pair of yellow rubber gloves, the kind used to wash beneath the toilet seat and scrub the blackened gum from under the disposal. The gloves cranked the egg beater faster and faster, so that time, which spun on the outer spokes, left me sprinting the center track, screwing me a wheel and returning me to where I was going.

Talking Tower Babel Blues

After my father's funeral, my mother sat at the table in our yellow kitchen, picking at a plate of fist-sized sub sandwiches she bought at the supermarket in case anyone stopped in to pay respects to the old man. Her face was flushed and swollen, marbled like cooking steak fat. The skin around her eyes and mouth was red. She had cut her hair that morning before the service, and it looked as if she'd done it with a pair of dull scissors and a misshaped ruler. Her hair no longer covered her ears, and her bangs stuck out like brown nubby pencil ends. She drank bourbon from a paper cup, lacing her fingers in shreds of iceberg lettuce all afternoon.

I heard the plate of sandwiches hit the floor around five. At seven I went into the kitchen for a glass of water. The floor was squishy and cold like worms. The lights were off. I imagined myself slipping on a slice of tomato or slimy cut of ham, striking my head on the door of the pantry. It wouldn't have hurt, but I would have cried anyways. Or maybe I would have pretended to be unconscious, snoring like my father whenever we rented movies.

My mother's voice was louder, fuller, than what I expected. "I want you to promise something," she said.

"Yeah?"

More bourbon hit the cup. "Promise you'll throw me the biggest bash this town'll ever see when I kick it. I want streamers. A parade. Elephant rides. A river of booze. Bonfires. Lots and lots of bonfires." She slammed her hands on the table. "Like a Viking."

"A Viking?"

"Exactly."

I didn't say anything.

"Just like a Viking," she said. The kitchen ticked. Something in the stove turned on and off. My mother pushed herself away from the table, stumbled, knocked her bottle to the floor, cursed, and wobbled off to bed.

There was a tremendous slamming and thrashing in the bedroom, a lot of delicate things breaking. The door swung open. "Remember," she called out, "lots and lots of fires!" Then the door slammed shut and I just stood there in the kitchen, imagining myself crying.

In my dreams the story is—as it is with dreams—different. There aren't any fiery wings or talking floors or dancing lamps, no clowns or monkeys or naked women. All that happens is that my mother jumps on the kitchen table and announces, "Get the guns out! It's going to be a motherfucking war!" And then everything flashes white and I wake up.

Years later, I'm living below the second tower of Babel. I'm living here by series of accidents I can't seem to order, as if their memory in my mind is as arbitrary as the circumstances which have led to this ending of the world.

The tower is on a farm. The farm is on the Australian plain. But our story has as little to do with the Australian plain, or the whole of Australia for that matter, as either the farm or the tower. It's just a tower. And it's just a farm. A collection of people who have decided to live out the end of their lives as best they can.

We have a mother, and she takes care of things as most mothers will. We have a father. A drunken German who lurches across the plains, hurling his glass bottles into the air and announcing his name, which changes daily, depending on his mood. The father is the only one who can keep an accent. "My husband is a monster," says our mother, "and this is why he's allowed his accent. Nothing but monsters are permitted the guttural sounds of their lands."

We have names, but they don't matter. We come from different countries, but this matters less. We are here by circumstance and chance and luck and as a last resort. Most of us have little left. Some have even less. While others can put their arms around the whole sky and bring down the wind in a crash to the earth. We are alone and together. We are connected and alienated. We are surviving.

The rules of the farm are straightforward, if not deceptively simple. 1) You come from nowhere. You disavow any knowledge—past, present, and future—of any place that might be construed as "somewhere," such as a continent, country, state, county, city,

or town. Neighborhoods are alright to remember vocally, but never name-specific, like streets or landmarks. Example: “During the summers, we drank malt liquor outside slaughterhouse 75,” is an unacceptable way to speak, even if everyone can remember cheap booze in a chunky parking lot outside a slaughterhouse named after numbers. 2) Lose the way you talk. According to our mother, the tone of sound issuing from the hole in our faces is an unnecessary, vulgar display of nationalism. Better if we plant flags in the yard and hold a war. After much deliberation, our mother reluctantly decides that English, believing it to be the “flattest” of all languages, will be the central language of the farm, as most everyone, except Pablo, speaks it fluently. We hold a funeral one night for the other languages. We pour gasoline in random patterns on the grounds around the farm, as the German stumbles out with a match, singing some kind of smashed version of My Country Tis’ of Thee, which sounds Finnish, or Dutch, not that I’d know the difference. The fire goes up and the sky glows orange, and that’s the end of languages. Pablo cries, but our mother comforts him with small hushing sounds and kisses, and sure enough, Pablo is mouthing, in a broken sort of way, three lines from “Lear” by week’s end. 3) Respect and remember the culture from which others come. Shakespeare, Cuban dance, African drums, fabrics, barbeque, creation myths, crepes, pancakes, and other such “native items” or cuisines are essential to the formative elements and cooperative health of the farm. Just because we have forgotten the names of our countries, quit—for most of us anyway—our native tongue, and dull our accents with “American-mouth flattening” techniques, our mother believes it imperative to retain the “fruits” of our respective cultures. However, team sports will not be considered “fruits.” The same goes for popular music, television, or comedy, anything that could be called “style.” In fact, most

of the things we truly miss about home, are eventually, in one way or another, decreed to be very “un-fruit-like.” 4) Guns. As English is the reluctant language of the farm, guns are the reluctant tools. Our mother believes the “new” world will turn out much more dangerous than the old “modern” one, which got far too “new” for its own good anyhow. We train daily with high-powered assault rifles and grenades on a salt bed a few miles north of the farm. The highlight of my day is watching Yvette, a dark-skinned Dutch girl with tiny bones, huge breasts, black spiky hair, and tattooed eyebrows, let loose on a mounted fifty-caliber over a barren stretch of white, crystallized earth.

The fifth rule goes without saying. You work on the tower. You work on the tower or you leave the farm, going at it alone, erased for good as a human being.

At night, we are allowed to sleep where we like. Most of us take comfort by the fire, set nightly by the German on a variety of flat hilltops outside the farm. It’s always nice in the evening, after dinner, to wash up and walk out into the brilliant stain-yellow light and watch for the first lickings of the flame. You have to worry about snakes and spiders, the variable of scorpion, but our mother is teaching us if we don’t hurt them, they won’t hurt use. We are trying very hard to believe her.

The German is my favorite. He’s loud and hairy and gross, and he reminds me of home in all the right ways. But his voice makes everything sound new, chalked on a playground of new meaning. His favorite word is “fuck.” And everyone laughs when he says it, dancing as he does over the fire and screaming, whirling his arms in helicopter motions—his voice full of stories with long dim wars and dragons and disease, mounted oxen, mud and cannons and white hospital sheets. Huddled, dirty-faced stories about people just like us, forgotten and new in the world, clinging to what little they can against

the darkening of some unknowable sun. And when the story gets too serious, he screams “fuck” and everyone rolls over everybody else, laughing, coughing into the fire, and sometimes kissing, holding onto each other under the careless stars and through the smoke.

The second tower of Babel is made of wood and sand and water and gravel. It’s supported by huge stones Pablo and I haul in from the lands around the farm. Pablo drives the stone tractor while I sit on the back, listening to him hum over the battered diesel engine. Pablo’s hum is a slow, steering sound—full of purpose and refrain, at times cheerful, but mostly sad and lonesome. Pablo is always smiling. He smiles, looking up now and then at the sky, at the sun and the bright, nearly neon, blueness. I like Pablo because we never have to speak to each other. Whenever I see a stone I think might work, I jump from the tractor and point to it. Pablo smiles and nods his head. I wrap the chain around the stone, securing it against the chalky white dirt that comes off its skin. Then I shoot my thumbs into the air, at which point Pablo jams the gears, and either the stone moves or it doesn’t. If it doesn’t, the tractor cries out, the tires yelp, the body bounces, Pablo slams his hands against the steering wheel and turns back to look at me and the stone, smiling. The stone makes deep ruts in the earth behind us, and I have to work with a hand shovel to keep too much ground from piling up in front of the stone. If we come to a slope, I unchain the stone and we roll it down the hill, and if the stone isn’t lodged between two sunburnt tree stumps, or wedged impossibly into a dry creek bed, I chain it back up again and we continue. I think a lot about the Egyptian and Mayan pyramids during these hot, vein-snapping days. I’m pretty sure they were built by aliens.

On a good day, Pablo and I manage two stones before lunch, and one more in the afternoon. The stones are piled around the base of the tower by the stone crane, usually operated by Eric or Oscar, two Swedish brothers who like to jump dirt bikes on the weekends. The brothers built a jump track, complete with water traps and sand traps, hay barrels and barbwire, out behind the farm. They call it The Eliminator, and are always thrilling us with their death-stunts, taunting the girls with their “homegrown” double back flips. On Saturday mornings, you can hear the brothers pumping each other up with high-pitched tire grinds, filling the clear air with orange dust and the smell of chain oil. Our mother watches the brothers from the kitchen window, nodding to herself with a deep satisfaction at the advantage those bikes might some day give us all. We gather around the track with beers and pancakes, or crepes, cheering, waving bandanas, some of the girls shirtless, the names of the brothers ironically scrawled across their chests, screaming for a “Kamikaze” or “Snakehead” with their newly flattened accents, Pablo and I smiling and drinking quietly, eating our dust-syrup pancakes. Sometimes I imagine the bikes exploding in mid-air, pieces of bone and fabric splattering across the sky like some kind of macabre firework—jawbones and kneecaps, livers, spleens—lungs open and flapping as a pair of butterflies over the track, and white ribbons of intestines. I hate these kind of thoughts. They remind me of home in all the wrong ways.

We begin work at six in the morning and quit by one-thirty, five days a week. At two in the afternoon, we pile into the German’s camouflaged school bus for the long, sweltering ride to the salt bed. The salt bed is a short distance away, but the bus is old, its shocks worn to dust, touching off on each rock and dip with vibrating steel wheezes. It’s a miserable trip, but the German always has cold beer for us in a giant metal ice chest he

soldered into the back where the emergency door used to be. We drink and laugh, practicing our flat English and sometimes signing, our songs sounding like bored sighs, affected and toneless. Our mother arrives at the bed before us on her dirt scooter. We find her trooping between boxes of ammunition, waxing the guns, checking their levers and buttons, clicking them hard and fast, loading them with long, sharp bullets that look like post-industrial jewelry that might have one day sold in the most expensive boutiques in lower Manhattan.

It's the last Monday of the third month. Yvette is tossing grenades. Pablo is down on his belly, practicing the sniper kill. It's my turn on the fifty-caliber, and I'm approaching it, not liking my chances. I don't trust the fucking thing. And if a piece of metal can think and feel, then the gun couldn't think or feel less of me. It almost seems to sense the weakness in my joints, my lack of shoulder and elbow strength compared to its hard artillery and loud sound. I'm positive that if it dreams, then it dreams to break me, toss me from it and stomp me into the salt of the beds.

Our mother is yelling instructions, "Jonah, you must grip it like a handle, like a shovel, like a small thing! You must give it something to expound! So give it hell!"

I nod and stomp my boots on the platform. I grip the gun, leaning over the sight, shoving my shoulder into the gun's socket. I close my eyes and squeeze. The gun whirls around, and everyone takes cover. Fortunately, the height of the mount sends the bullets safely overhead, though I do manage to tear several holes in the roof of the bus. I scamper to my feet, knocking my head on the butt of the gun and falling back down again. Yvette dusts herself off. Pablo smiles. The German is laughing and kicking beer

cans across the ground. Our mother prepares her comfort face, wiping the anger from her mouth in great sweeps with her fingers.

I look at Yvette, but she's readying more grenades in the salt. I step down from the mount and hang my head.

Our mother comes over and feels my arms, testing for muscle. She raises the sleeves of my t-shirt, examines my biceps. "I think you're faking it," she says.

"What?"

"You can't be that weak. Not with all the stones you and Pablo bring in."

I look up at the fifty-caliber, black and long against the fading sky. I'm nothing compared to it. "I don't know what's wrong with me," I say.

"Maybe," she says. "Maybe not."

Our mother tightens her lips and checks her watch. "Go wait by the bus now. Have a beer. My husband will tell you a story. You and I, we'll talk later."

Another dream I have is where my mother and I will be taking a walk in a wide garden. The garden is important because my father, before he shot himself, owned a landscaping company and might have built a garden very similar to this one. It could be his garden. And sometimes I am sure it is. Sometimes I can see where his hands have broken the earth and planted a shrub or flower, whose names I never bothered to learn. The flowers are always purple. The path through the garden is brick. There is the sound of water. It could be raining. My mother and I are speaking, but it's not really words, but the sound of words, the color of words, if words had a color. And sometimes they do. Sometimes

the color of our words are like the blank space in a letter between the last period and the signature, or the break between the greeting and the body, the space of the date, hanging there above it all like the mark of a moon. The colors of my mother's words are red and wet. They fall from her mouth and lay on the brick like puddles. Then everything flashes white and I wake up.

That night, I volunteer for watch. I rest in the gun turret below the tower, watching the German's fire on a granite plateau to the west. My head is empty. I play with the safety of the .22, a gun so small and light in my hands it might as well be a parade baton. The land is orange and yellow. The edges of the sky pulse with twilight. The patches of dry, heaving grasses look pregnant. I'm waiting for our mother. She might come, I think. She might not. Maybe she knows I'm punishing myself. Maybe she doesn't care.

I hear something crumble from the tower. I jerk around, holding the .22 between my thighs like a basketball. Small bits of gravel travel down the side of the tower. Something darkens the upper work platform, where the wood beams stand out from support walls, before escaping into the sky.

"Gophers," our mother says from behind. "Believe it or not, they're learning to fly."

I spin around, the gun still between my thighs.

"Please," she says, "put that thing down, Jonah. I don't feel like losing an eye."

"Right," I say, jostling the gun to the floor of the turret.

"Now, stand up straight and let me have a look at you."

Our mother checks my teeth and eyes. She looks up my nose. She makes humming noises, the sound of notes being checked off in her mind. She feels my neck.

“Well, you don’t look insane,” she says. “Do you feel insane?”

I shrug.

“It’s not the virus, that’s for certain. But it’s something.” She stands back, folding her arms across her chest. “I see it every day, the way you carry yourself around like your shoulders are broken—a lost and vacant look whenever we’re practicing on the salt bed.”

She sighs. “Whatever it is,” she says, “I’m not the one to tell it to.” She looks at me flatly, as if the color of my skin is slowly, but predictably, changing. “Isn’t there anyone you can talk with? Yvette? How about Pablo? No, wait. Probably not Pablo.” Our mother considers. “Yes. Yvette must do. I’ll arrange it.” She looks over the edge of the turret. “Now, where’s that damn fire...”

I wait for Yvette in the basement of the tower. It’s cool and damp, and it feels good on my stone-blistered, sunburnt skin. I’m nervous, squeezing my fingers together so hard my wrists are going numb.

Yvette is beautiful. And not just beautiful in that way I find all women beautiful. But beautiful like I’ve never seen before. Like the first time I tasted hot cheese. I mean really tasted it. Stringing from my mouth, my teeth sinking into the butter grilled bread, and all that gooey goodness like jeweled coals on my tongue. That’s what the color of her skin does inside my brain.

Yvette is sweating, her brown skin burst with water and salt. She smells like campfire. When she sees it's me, her tattooed eyebrows jut up at a sideways glance, but she sits down anyways, Indian-style on the dirt floor, opposite me. I have no idea what to say.

"Let me guess," she says, "you don't know what to say?"

I nod.

She lights a cigarette, blowing the smoke upwards into the tunnel of the tower.

"Ever wonder why we're even building this stupid thing?"

I shake my head.

"Shit man, I do. All the time, I wonder. Then I think, I say, 'Yvette, this motherfucking place is goddamn creepy. Get the fuck out while you still can.' But then I think, fuck that. Where else am I going to go?"

She looks at me. "So that's what's wrong with me. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I don't know," I say.

"Right. You don't know."

I want to tell her that it's the truth. I want to say... I want to say things to her I'm not supposed to say anymore. I want to use names. I want to talk about the life I'm supposed to be forgetting, my country and my city. If there was ever an American accent, I want to use it. I want to tell her about the society of terrorists my mother joined after my father did on a rainy afternoon in our garage, how it took everything there was to

take in her life. I want her to know I left home when I was sixteen, shaved my head and stole a tattered leather jacket off a sleeping gutterpunk outside The Bells bus depot. About the sunset I saw wedge the Pacific from a cardboard box on a hillside outside Astoria, Oregon, and how I was so hungover in Albuquerque I broke apart a bathroom stall with my bare hands, earning me two weeks and a bunk in a Bernalillo County jail cell. How I later fought a man with a knife over a musty sleeping bag on the banks of some nameless river in southern Utah, how I had to open his chest to keep him from killing me, and then stay up with him two days and nights to make sure he didn't bleed to death, and how the river looked so green at dusk, the desert burst in colors I'd never seen before, the sky tortured and flushed like fallen leaves. How the man refused to go to a hospital because he didn't trust "them" doctors, and I didn't blame him, he looked like the kind of man a surgeon might want to put down the way a vet puts down a rabid wolf-dog. I want to tell Yvette how the sleeping bag smelled like urine and river water, and when the man looked as if he'd live a little while longer, I took the bag and hitched my way from Utah to Wyoming. I want to tell her about the canyons and the mountains and the sky reigning over everything like an ocean. I want to tell her about the trailer homes and my uncle Zebby who said they were not really trailers but a family, A family of renegades and rebels and don't you think you can fuck with us, cause we'll pickle your ass in car battery acid and send you packing out the canyon with a live grenade for your mama! I want to tell her how Zebby laughed with all six of his teeth over warm cans of Coors, how Zebby only drank Coors, The banquet of beers, and how when Zebby laughed he slapped his chest as if he were having a heart attack, or his lungs were filling with some kind of thick, beer-soaked mucus. How he always wore the same shirt, an

aquamarine tank-top he bought in Tijuana for twenty cents, Two fucking dimes, brother!

I want to say how everything about Zebby was life, how his face was pockmarked and his hair skinny and greasy and slicked back into a filmy wedded braid, and how he wore a red bandana because his favorite country singer did the same, and how he barbequed everything he ate and ate everything he barbequed with salsa, which he swore was homemade, though I never once saw anything that even slightly resembled a tomato, store-bought or otherwise, the entire time I stayed with him, and how he kept this salsa in big plastic jars marked “Mayo,” the salsa green and slimy, but how I never said anything, always eating it politely, because Zebby was cool and loved me like the boy he never knew his sister had. More than anything, I want to tell Yvette about the damage in my head, the soft smoldering dreams that leave my chest seized, the long drain of blood slowly creeping across the concrete, seeping into the cracks, the bits of brain and skull stuck on the unfinished drywall of our garage, and my father’s body, his jaw wide and deep, the cavity thick and black, and the gun, ancient, frail looking, gripped stiffly in his hands. More than anything, I want to tell Yvette that none of this matters anymore. We are living in a new world now. We have new concerns. We have a tower to build. We have new lives to live and protect. More than anything, I want to sink my mouth into hers, and hold her there, until I can feel her life in my life, until even the darkest parts of me are colored with the brightest parts of her. But instead, I just sit there and spit on the dirt floor.

“You know,” Yvette says, “it’s true what our mother says about you.”

I look up at Yvette. “What’s that?”

But Yvette just grinds out her cigarette and leaves.

In the morning, I beat Pablo to the tractor. He looks worried, and I feel bad that I might possibly be winning at something.

“Last night,” he says as flat as he can.

“What about it?”

“Last night. There was bad talk of gophers.”

“Gophers? Not again.”

He points at me accusingly. “You saw.”

I hold up my hands. “Hey,” I say, “I don’t know what I saw.”

Pablo shakes his head and gets on the tractor. There’s no humming and the day yields zero stones, the ruts in the earth too deep, the stones too big, the tractor too tired. We even break a chain.

That afternoon, pacing between the black guns glinting in the sun and salt, our mother tells us a story.

It sounds like this: “These are the riots of Sydney. Bondi Beach to be exact. You could not see a thing. No stars. No moon. Just an aura of green haze that gave a strange, nightmare shape to the oval darkness, the light of the helicopters passing over your body, your eyes and nostrils swollen with choke mustard. And you are trying to think. You are trying to keep your mind on the events happening around you. But it is so hard. And your mind slacks into memory. You remember strange things, like the taste of chocolate, the names of obscure and distant family members, words you once learned in school. And there is one word that keeps coming into your mind, a philosophy, a way of life you somehow remembering believing in. Fatalism. And you think, though not really think—

more like remembering what it must have been—what happens if fatalism is no longer a pessimistic delusion, or the nightmare of some unhopeful event, or even the dystopian theory that might one day come true if the monsters of the present are allowed their awful lurch forward? What does it mean if the world turns out to be as sick and terminal as the fatalist in you has always believed?”

We all look at each other. We know our mother can sometimes talk like this.

“And you see the things happening around you, the cries and screams, the broken glass littering the streets like translucent sand crabs, the sound of helicopters, and you know the modern world is dying. It is dying in the city. It is dying over the whole of Australia. It is dying inside of you.”

Our mother holds up her arms, gesturing across the salt bed and the mounted guns.

“The modern world,” says our mother, “was about choice, or the choosing of sides. Some of you, believing to be progressive or apolitical, decided not to choose. Instead, you practiced in the chaos afforded you. Meaning, you believed their no discernible side to choose, as if the snow or ice could choose the mountain or avalanche. But such academia is over. The new world divides itself in much simpler terms. On one hand, there is the land.”

Our mother tamps her feet against the salt.

“On the other, the tower.”

She demonstrates back over our heads to the farm and tower.

“I don’t think I have to remind you how sick the land is. We all have stories that sound like the same story. But what many of you still don’t understand, and I see this clearly, is the importance of Babel, the elevation it requires, the possibilities, and yes, even the hope. It is a modern thought, but it has always been man’s striving to rise above the earth where he was once cursed as a snake. The first time he tried, it was for selfish, prideful reasons, and God punished him with language—arguably the greatest injury to ever befall him. Language built the modern world by dissection and violence, crippling what little chance we had for global community, universal effort.”

Our mother smiles.

“But the new world changes that. Does it not?” Her smile gets wider. “Each and everyone one of you change that.”

Silence. Then suddenly our mother begins to clap. It sounds strange and hollow in the hot, stagnant air. We look at each other and then at the white ground. The German spits.

Our mother stops. “Okay,” she says. “I can see that still you need more faith.” She tightens her lips. “That is fine. That is just fine. Faith will come again, children. I promise you that.”

I dream of drives in The Bells. The truck cab always smelling of wet earth and pine, the heavy smell of PVC pipe glue, and stale cigarettes. The cab filled with what seems to me ancient things, garden snips, hand axes, bamboo ties, crusty work gloves, tattered pieces of flannels, dirty t-shirts, crushed beer cans, empty water jugs, the plastic splattered in

mud, everywhere mud. Even when it's raining—the color of rain always purple or red, falling down from the dark sky like neon—my father rolls down his window and props his elbow on the ledge, holding out his can of beer in the colorfully damp winter air. He steers with the other hand, a cigarette jammed and smoldering between his fingers. Sometimes he talks to me, but like my mother, it's just the color of words falling from his mouth. And there is silence, which has no color at all. In the silence there is *The Bells* passing in the street. When I get older I drive, while my father, after drinking, sleeps—the flesh of his face rattling between the vinyl headrest and rusted doorframe, a cigarette burning to his fingernails. *The Bells* is the color of a small city, and in some dreams I take my time through the streets, dreaming how the city will change, how its streets will grow and its buildings will grow, its lights brighter, the people somehow cleaner. But then I speed up, dreaming the city won't change, its stoplights crooked, its pavement cracked, the seagulls hungry and crying all morning and into the late afternoon, the Puget Sound glowing below the hills like a giant grey orb, the evergreen islands pricking its salty cloth, and my father's Ford rattling and snapping over every pothole. The color of the locals is the color of hard drinking, standing stiffly around the streets with their heavy, chapped hands buried deep in their pockets. The color of denim jeans and Carhart jackets and logging boots, the color of flannels and stocking caps pulled over their hard eyebones. The color of them leaning against the wet concrete walls of the machine shops and auto body shops and paint shops, scratching their faces and spitting across the black puddles hopscotching the broken asphalt. The color of their slow, formless eyes searching across the cars as if the cars are meant for them, to run them down or take them away. The color of watching sky. The color of watching traffic lights. And when the

heavy rains fall, they color their way back inside the bars, or to the employment lines, or home where the color of them stare at the color of their hands, remembering how they once had to pick concrete or machine grease or paint from the color of their nails. While the color of my father goes on dreaming past them all.

Nightfall. The horizon pushing its last parts of purple to the edges of the plain. While faith, yes faith, descends upon us—the farm and the tower—in a full-frontal assault of teeth and fur and spit-seething rampage.

Oscar's the first to see them. "Gophers! Gophers!" he screams, nearly slipping back into his accent. I can tell by the constricted look on his face he wants to curse in Swedish.

Eric and Oscar go running after their dirt bikes, as the rest of us hustle into position. Pablo and I dive into the northwest aerial-artillery turret, knocking our heads together in the bottom of the hole. Pablo rubs his skull and smiles at me.

"What I say? Gophers."

"It's not my fault," I say, picking up the rocket launcher.

"Fault?" Pablo asks, genuinely confused.

The gophers break through the cyclone fence in one great screeching heap. I don't understand why they always insist on going "through" the razor wire. The fence is only a hundred yards long, and built at a strange, awkward angle in front of the farm. It doesn't even protect anything, and could be easily avoided. It's almost as if the gophers feel the need to demonstrate time and again how tough they really are.

The perimeter lights up. Tracers, flares, landmines, claymores, you fucking name it.

And I really shouldn't be doing this right now, but I'm thinking of Yvette and her little baby Uzi, her bright green eyes blazing, the small bones in her face shaking, her skin sweating. Pablo's feeding me shells and I'm letting rockets go in the blind, shell after shell into the center of the perimeter. The gophers are screaming, clawing howls against the fire-bright sky. The walls of the tower reflect the artillery, and the tower does look brilliant, strong. "Phallic," my mother would call it if she were here. And she is here, her face out there in the night, beside me in the turret, her paper cup of bourbon, her pleas and complaints, her ridiculous promises, the look on her face the day she let me walk out the door for good like the color of giving up.

And I shouldn't be doing this either, but I'm wishing I could see her again. Really see her. Together on the collapsible porch of her brother's trailer, beneath the Wyoming skies, listening Zebby go on with his adventures in Australia, when Australia was just an island and not part of the world. He made me promise I'd go. He said it's the way I'd imagine space to be. He told me about the Great Ocean Road, and the Twelve Apostles rising out of the sea like giant sandstone fingers. The tour guide wouldn't let Zebby swim between the stones, so he just pulled a cord of rope from his pack, nailed up recoil and rappelled right down the motherfucking cliff face to the beach. If he hadn't been so damn excited, he'd seen the stairs. Nobody could believe it, man. Far fucking out. Well, the tour guide just lost it. Screaming at him about sharks and blue belly Jell-O fish, or whatever. But Zebby didn't care. He was stoked. He stripped butt-ass naked and went for a nice long swim. He looked up at that big Aussie sky and lost the name of

everything. Because that's what happens when you travel as far and hard as Zebby, you lose the name of everything.

And here I am, losing the name of everything—gopher screaming and Pablo humming some kind of broken battle hymn he learned God knows where, and the rocket launcher going thump-thump-thump.

Somewhere I hear the German laughing and cursing. But that's impossible with all the explosions and soaring dirt and gopher blood-curl. Pablo's slapping my shoulder in a congratulatory manner, but we're running out of rockets, and I don't think I've hit a thing, and I have no idea if the battle is about over or just beginning. You can never tell with gophers. Are there reinforcements? Are they suddenly going to come bursting from the ground? It's happened before. Or will they drop in from the dark sky? We've seen squads of twenty-five, and companies of ten-thousand, or what felt like ten-thousand, streaming through the perimeter in a furry hail of teeth and nails. They're after the tower. Gnawing at the wood supports, climbing the stones to the upper tiers. And let's not even talk about their taste for blood. After the last battle we were picking up limbs for a week—a hand here, a calf there. It's like the German says, "Gophers will fuck you up, buddy."

A low lying wind sweeps across the farm. Orange dust comes in from everywhere, sucking my mouth dry, stuck in my eyes. Pablo is coughing and spitting. And we're officially out of ammo. I turn and collapse on the floor of the turret. If the gophers keep this up, everything will be lost, pending there's still something worth losing.

Pablo sits next to me and scrubs my head. "It's okay," he says.

“No, Pablo, I don’t think so.”

The last clear thing I remember hearing is the sound of Eric and Oscar racing around the compound on their dirt bikes, the M-16’s strapped their handle bars barking hotly in the night. And grenades. I hear lots and lots of grenades. And there’s a taste. A taste I remember. The smell and color of wet dog.

I never dream it right. The dog dream. While my dreams never have a reason, they retain a logical sense. There is color and sound and motion, and these things feel very much the same as they do in the outer world. But the dog dream is different. It runs backwards. It has no color. It’s not white. It’s not black. And sound... Well, the sound is... There is no way to say what the sound is like as there is no sound, and yet entire sound, filling everything at once, coming in from all corners of my mind, the image of the dog and its blood and the block with which I crush its head, buried totally in sound. As if sound is all that matters, when it should be color and motion. It should be action. I should see the neighbor’s yard, and their dog limping around in the rain, its cancer tubes stuck out like gear springs from its back and stomach, the shaved patches of skin and hair, the half-closed image of its eyes, and its mouth, open and lapping, sniffing at the ground and howling. But what I see is just the sound of all these things coming at me at once, as if in symphony, shoved into a single instrument of noise and violence. It stutters, it shakes. There is the sound of my hands. The sound of the block. The sound of weight. The sound of lifting, the sound of letting go, the sound of falling, the sound of wet stuff collapsing, the sound of white and white and white, until finally I’m awake, kicking at the sheets, pulling at my skin. The smell of dog all around me.

Pablo shakes me awake. It's early morning. Everything smells like a firework and spoiling meat. The ground is charred black, but the tower is still standing upright, the bodies of dead gophers all stuck in the slats of its walls.

Our mother is taking a headcount. She has several bandages on her arm, one wrapped around her left thigh.

We're missing nine, including Eric and Oscar and their dirt bikes. This is something new, gophers have never taken prisoners before. A search team is requested. I raise my hand when I see Yvette forward. Pablo smiles and joins us.

The farm has a five-year surplus of medical supplies, ammunition, gas, food, water, and enough booze to comfortably sustain its fifty six residents. Make that forty seven. Our mother has been stockpiling for a decade. Everything is kept underground, stored in metal-walled caverns to protect against anything that might try to dig its way in. She "acquired" three oversized US Military-issue Internationals from a platoon of Special Ops who'd lost their way to a remote "research" compound in the Northern Territory. The driver's seat is even on the left hand side, searing a deep pain of homesickness in my belly that's completely ridiculous considering the circumstances.

We load up one of the Internationals and a camouflaged Army trailer with enough hardware and fuel to overrun a township of militant gophers. Or so we hope.

What I imagine is a spare space in the desert that is coming alive, bubbling from the ground, and we're surrounded to the horizon with blind eyes and the smell of our own blood.

Our mother halts us and examines us—the two Canadians, Amy and Andy; the Brazilian, Cue; the Haitian, Rico; Yvette, Pablo, and me—like she’s never going to see us again. “I cannot spare any of you or this vehicle,” she says. “But I hope you must understand that the new world demands that we at least try.” She considers each of us, as if re-composing the color of our faces in her mind, before she turns and walks away.

The German stops us at the western gate. He’s in bad shape, a map of claws and rigor and strain running all over his body, his lips cut and bleeding, his left eye nearly torn from its socket. His neck is bandaged, as are both his ears. He smiles and lays his hands on the hood of the International. Yvette gets out and gives him a long, gentle hug. They stand there for some time, holding, swaying back and forth.

“Good luck,” he says finally. With tears in his eyes, he smiles. “Give ’em fuck.”

Yvette drives. Cue sits in the highchair mounted on the elevated fifty-caliber. Rico rides shotgun with a grenade launcher pinned between his legs. Amy and Andy carry AK-47’s. Pablo and I are in the back, in the bucket seat behind the fifty. Pablo has a long-range rifle with a sniper scope. I’m packing a pistol and a shotgun, a weapon I feel suddenly, strangely comfortable with.

Trails of dead gopher body and blood spill out in every direction from the farm. We choose west since the concentration of escape mounds and slaughter is the greatest. West also happens to be the quickest way into the desert, the place our mother believes the gophers congregate and train.

Most of the landscape in Australia changes slowly, abiding with the size of the country. But the farm is located at such a latitude that the plains give way quickly to the

flat, orange and yellow wastelands of inner mass. Impossible trees with small green leaves, beaten and shrunken under the sun, dot the surface like crucifixes. And what feels like hours, it's all we see.

“Look alive, fellas,” Yvette shouts over the engine after a while. “This place isn't as dead as it looks!”

But all I feel is dead. Something dark kicking inside me. It's a mirror out there, the dry and dead land passing us. I'm dead. Dead as these patches of gopher fur and pillars of escape mounds, abandoned as these trees growing from the hard bitten earth as if there could possibly be something, anything, worth living for.

Suddenly the sky in the desert opens into something—I don't know what—something I've never seen before. As if a knife is being brought across the belly of the atmosphere, spilling a black line of blood from the ceiling of the sky. Yvette slams on the brakes, and we sit there, stunned, no one speaking, watching this blood-something pour down a few hundred yards in front of us. The splashing is incredible.

Cue fires the fifty caliber. The sound is deafening. He stops.

“Tell me what to do,” he whispers. Or maybe he whispers, “Talley come on me Scooby Do.” Sometimes a voice can get so flat it can sound like anything. This, our mother says, is a goal. Only when language is completely consistent can it be made malleable, universal.

The sky seals closed. The blue returns, and the fallen lake of blood curls on the yellow ground. Rico gets out of the International and approaches it, the grenade launcher pressed firmly to his shoulder.

“I got you covered, Rico!” screams Cue.

“What are you doing?” shouts Yvette.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?” Rico calls back.

“Wait,” Yvette says. “We’re coming with you.”

Pablo looks at me. I shrug and jump from the back, pumping the shotgun on my way down.

The lake of blood laps against the small rocks on the ground. It looks like God spilled a milkshake sunrise. But it smells of flesh and skin and burning bones. Which makes sense, I guess.

Yvette surveys the land. She pulls at her bottom lip. “I’ll get us around it.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” says Rico. “Did I just hear you say that?”

“Shhhhhhh,” Yvette says slowly. “Calm down, Rico.” She raises a hand. “Just—
—”

“Cool it?” offers Andy.

“Yes, thank you, Andy. Cool it, Rico.”

Rico looks at Andy and then Yvette and then he starts laughing. “Yeah sure, whatever you guys say. I’ll just ‘cool’ my heels beside this giant puddle of FUCKING BLOOD!”

Andy bends down and touches a corner of it. He stands up, holding out his red stained fingers. “Hey,” he says, “it’s warm. 97, 98 degrees I’d say.”

Amy touches his arm. “I don’t think you should have done that,” she says.

I look at Pablo. He's not smiling.

"Hey!" screams Cue from the International. "Hey guys, what's going on? What's happening?"

Yvette looks up at the clear blue sky and then at the edges of the lake. "We keep going."

"Fuck that," says Rico.

"Fuck you, walk back," Yvette snaps.

She looks at me quickly. "You. I want you up front with me."

It's not really the time or place, but there's a definite stiffening in my jeans.

She looks at the shotgun in my hands. "You sure you know how to work that thing?"

"Yes," I say. "Absolutely."

Yvette is driving as fast as she can, following the lake's edge as it continues growing outwards. Once, I found my father in the kitchen drawing on the walls with a paint brush and a bowl of blood he'd drained from three pounds of sirloin. He sensed me behind him and turned. What is it, he said. I asked if he was okay. He looked back at the wall. I'm fine, he said. I'll be done in a minute. Just after I get this last spot.

"It's not ending, man!"

"Shut the fuck up, Rico!" screams Yvette.

I look at Yvette. I can tell she's grinding her back teeth because all the veins in her neck are tensed. She has very nice teeth.

Yvette suddenly glances at me and winks. This surprises me, and I have to grip the stock of the shotgun to keep myself from falling from the International. I cough and pretend to study the progress of the lake, shimmering like the giant eye of some buried monster.

“You okay, trigger?”

“Yeah man,” I say. “I got it handled. No big deal.”

Yvette lets out a little giggle as she cranks the International to the right and we go spitting up an elevated stretch of ground where the blood has reached a high watermark, coming to shore against the orange rock of the rise.

Yvette glances back at Rico, flashing him those pretty teeth of hers.

“Don’t give me that look, bitch,” says Rico.

“You got a small fucking dick, Rico. You know that?” laughs Yvette.

“Fucking cunt,” says Rico.

“Careful, fella. You just might slip into that dirty nigger dialect of yours.”

Rico mutters something and then shuts up. Cue starts to laugh a little. Then Amy and Andy are laughing. I look back and Pablo’s smiling again. And we’re all laughing now, even Rico.

“Nigger,” he says. “Anyone know how long it’s been since some bitch has called me a fucking nigger?”

Yvette jams the gears and the International continues bouncing through the desert, everyone feeling just a little better, smiling and laughing, the lake of blood boiling below us for now.

In my first Australia dream no one will talk to me because I'm an American. I drink every night by myself at a place called Pinchers Coast, a bar built right on the beach in Coogee. When I stumble out at closing, late and stinking, colored homesick, it is all I can do to keep myself from stripping and running into the dark ocean water, treading past the waves until the sun creaks across the infinite body and the tide retreats, the Pacific casting me far from anything that might resemble the world. I try to dream within my dream of what that place might look like, that unnamed nation beyond the seas. But the dream within the dream looks just like the dream I'm already dreaming. There are the Dutch, a fierce drug-devouring disease that floods the hostels and the streets and the night clubs, fucking and sucking on each other with their too-tight jean jackets and stupid haircuts. The British who carry themselves like the color of a people entitled to the spoils of the country solely for the disinterested purposes of their holidays, lounging on the beaches in their bleach white skin, complaining about things like the heat of the sun, the color of the sand, the warmth of the sea. There is the color of Swedes and Norwegians and Italians. The color of very mean and exclusive Italians who throw private parties in unsuspecting bars where I suddenly find myself, having to back out with as many helpless hand gestures my drunk American ass can express. The Swedes and Norwegians are the same color as the Finns, but they're constantly making fun of each other in ways I can't understand. There's always a good-natured German who'll drink with me, and

smash bottles with me, and scream with me in a language that isn't a language, but a primal cry of laughter and pain and un-serviced hate and unsaid homesickness. There are white South Africans who won't shut up about guns and street violence and the usurpation of their nation by a bunch of criminals who manipulated the story of their rightful arrest, capitalizing on their nigger pigment, to gain international sympathy and control of the presidency, all in order to satisfy a thousand-year-old tribal blood lust that threatens to tear apart the whole damn southern tip of the continent. It's hard to understand the Afrikaans, but their stores are good, their faces so red and serious, their eyes watery and bodies frail and shaking from hot nights stalking the downtown streets of Johannesburg with high-powered assault rifles and flamethrowers. I dream about English girls and Brazilian girls and girls from New Zealand who like to dance close and never mind how drunk I get, or when I stumble off to bed, not that they ever go to bed with me, for every heartbreakingly bright morning I wake up alone in my dirty hostel bunk on the fourth floor of the Coogee Beach Hotel, an open flat I share with sixteen other boys and girls, each as lost as I am, each without a reason for being there, half-naked in the morning sun, the blinds long torn off the windows, and clothes from every nation strewn over the floor like mounds of dirt, or stinking piles of strange, sleeping animals. And I stand there on the shore, dreaming over the dark waves crashing into the sand, all the sharks feeding out there somewhere, and it saddens me that even in my dreams of dreams the world doesn't change. But then everything flashes white and I wake up in my bunk on the farm. And lying there, staring at the wood slats crossing the ceiling, the bodies of everyone sounding off around me, I know my Australia dream is a lie. The color of the world has changed. Even if it is to the color of ending.

Amy sees them first. She reaches up and taps Yvette on the shoulder. “Up there,” she says.

Eric and Oscar. The brothers impaled on stakes, their eyes gouged out, their guts slit, their insides spilling all over the desert floor. We stare up at their parch-skinned bodies, blistering in the sun. Again, there is the smell of burning bones. I look back towards the lake of blood, somewhere far behind us now, but surely moving forward, seeping its way across the desert like a stain.

Yvette turns off the engine. The sudden silence hurts my ears.

Pablo is the first one to start shooting. He steps from the back of the International and lays on his stomach, sets his scope, and pulls his trigger. Whap! Whap! Whap!

Amy and Andy kick up their AK-47's.

Rico launches a series of grenades which burst on the ground several hundred yards away.

Cue lets go with the fifty.

And Yvette pulls a flamethrower from the camouflaged Army trailer. She fires the torch, scorching the gopher mounds that pepper the ground around the poles.

I can't seem to move. Soon, I think, they'll stop, any moment they'll get tired and quit, realize what a waste of ammo this is. But there is no stopping. When someone runs out of bullets, they hustle to the trailer and reload, as if we're caught up in the biggest firefight of our lives.

Then suddenly the ground crumbles away and gophers rise up from under the International. They're flying. It's a low clumsy fly, probably a lot closer to falling than flight, but there they are—in the air by sheer use of will, or whatever it is that drives gophers to be gophers.

Cue drops dead a gabble of gophers with a burst from the caliber. “Feel that motherfucker! Feel that!” he shouts, and I can tell his voice is happy to have something to shout about. I slide over, turn the key and yank the International forward so Yvette can torch the ground where the gophers are launching their assault. We form a circle around the International and start dropping gophers from the sky.

The dog didn't belong to me. I would stare at for hours in the neighbor's yard. It was full of tubes, and a sad grey look that drove me inside out. I don't know why I decided to do something about it. I picked up a rock. Then another. I broke its back haunches. Then its shoulders. I crushed its skull with a cinderblock. The color of its blood was all over me. When I turned around I saw my father standing on the porch. He had a beer in his hand, with the look of very dark on his face.

We try to cover Andy as he makes a break from the trailer. Amy's screaming. And I'm out of shotgun shells. I'm a poor shot with the pistol, and there's a funny smell coming from the fifty. Andy goes down, dive-bombing gophers smash his face. Amy jumps from the International, pulling a knife from her vest. Andy's face is bloody, but he's not crying out, and somehow he fights his way from under the gophers, Amy and Andy standing back to back, kicking and swatting at the hurling balls of fur. Yvette screams, “Duck!” and lets out fire, blasting the air with flames, circling our position and clearing the ground.

It's quiet. Again, the silence sears in my ears. And there's that taste again. Like the smell of wet dog.

My forearms are warm and rubbery as a rope burn. Shells litter the ground. Andy collapses, holding his face. Amy cradles him, and I can hear them crying to each other. Pablo looks up at the sky.

We knock down the stakes and remove Eric and Oscar. They're bodies are very stiff and it's not easy work. There's a terrible sucking noise as we wiggle their bodies from the poles. I find two trench shovels in the Army trailer, and Pablo and I get busy digging a grave. The ground is hard and it takes several hours, the day glowing low.

"Someone say something," says Rico.

"A prayer," says Cue.

"Were they even Christian?" asks Amy.

"Swedish," I say.

"Brothers," says Pablo.

Then Pablo falls to his knees, puts his mouth to the ground and says something in his language, some kind of Spanish, and while no one looks at each other, I can tell everyone is shocked to be hearing it.

"Sorry," he says as he rises. "I don't know how else to do."

Andy moans. We wrap his face with our t-shirts, cool down his body with what little water we brought. His bottom lip is going to have to come off. He's lost a lot of

blood. Yvette finds some morphine and puts him to sleep. Amy curls up beside his body, running her fingertips along his softly rising chest.

It's quiet. The sun goes down.

"What now?" I ask.

"We don't have much," says Cue, meaning ammo.

"Big waste of it," says Rico.

I tighten my lips like our mother, and nod.

Yvette looks at the graves and then the sky. "Do we even considering camping?"

"Can't much drive through the night," says Cue. "God knows that sea of blood is somewhere out there waiting for us."

Rico sighs. "I'll build us a fire."

Yvette breaks out two unopened bottles of American whiskey. "The German said we might need these."

In a few hours Andy is awake, hazy but conscious. He asks for a cup. Amy holds the liquor to his mouth, and his face shakes as the whiskey dribbles down his exposed gum line. Rico stokes the fire with gopher bodies.

They may be back tonight. We know this. We also know there is not enough ammo to defend off another attack. We know they'll take us apart slowly. They'll erect stakes. Impale us. But we drink anyway. Amy tells Canadian jokes, most of them have to do with talk shows and poop, and Andy tries his best to laugh without his lower lip. Rico does a Haitian dance. Cue, drunk off his ass, grinds him nasty-like from the front.

Pablo beats the ground with two sets of gopher bones. Yvette sidles up to me and puts my head into the crux of her neck.

“Let’s go,” she says.

We lay a tarp on the ground behind the trailer. She takes off her clothes and I can see her perfectly in the star and moon light. And except for the black spikes on her head, there is not a single hair over her body and her skin is brown and wet and tastes like dirt and salt and ash and gunpowder and flamethrower gas and whiskey.

“Everything is so smooth,” I whisper.

“You think I have tattooed eyebrows because I think it’s fucking cool?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I do.”

She puts her hand over my mouth and runs her tongue all over my face and neck.

The last dream I have is of Pablo. He’s the color of writing a letter home. This is the way I like to read it.

“Father and brother, this is the worst holiday ever. There is no light. Everything surfaces. I know the name of nowhere, and that is the only place I know. Once there was a city. An ocean. Sometimes the ocean was grey. Sometimes it was white. Sometimes blue. There may have been other colors too, but I never saw them. Now there is the sun. There is the desert. There are plains and flat stretching valleys and granite ridgelines, and these places look very different from the places I have been, but could be the same somewhere else. There are girls. There are boys. There are the things that happen. We call it action. Then consequence. We like our names. Names for the land. Names for

God. Names for beasts. There are the names of the girls, names of the boys, names for water and sand. But I no longer believe in this names, father. Every name was once a country. And our country is dead. Its name erased. Unwritten. Spoken to no one. The way sea spray is spoken to no one. In a place called Babel.”

Then everything flashes white and Jonah Summer is being eaten alive. There is only the color of his insides pouring all over him. And he tries to get up and run, but the color is so strong, the sound so complete and total. The ground has broken into parts as his body is torn in sections. The color of his right foot, his right big toe, his toes paired off, the blood of his feet seeping in with the color of the ground, the color of his hand (he can't tell which one), the color of his scalp, the color of his eyes, the color of his neck, the color of his nipples, his ribs, the color of his knee caps, the unknown bones breaking against the rock, the burning color of bones.

And as the color of what is left of him is being hoisted into the air—the camp below him, Yvette in pieces on the ground, Amy and Andy and Rico and Cue and Pablo all destroyed, their faces gone, their bodies open and spread—there comes the color of laughter, the color of thoughts rolling out of him, last things flashing, his mother and father, his uncle Zebby, a certain dog beaten into the muddy ground, the sound of bells.

And it's funny, it really is, because as the pole enters Jonah Summer's body, his inner colors brighten, and he's back at the tower, working yet another stone in place.

And those left to mourn the world stand at its edges, tossing off tablets of paper into the smoldering pyre below. On one of these tablets is a story you might have read. On another could be your story, if you have a story, written and falling, failing into the lower towers of the burn like cheap newsprint.

Nobody's Big Goodbye

I should stop saying "image." Tammy and I have bodies now. Actual bodies. The feel of bodies. The feeling of having a body. We have lost the Inside color. Lost our image, malleable and transferring. Everything is immediate now. Sticky. Less subjective, more urgent and pressing, and yet so far (so far) away.

It was Tammy's idea. These bodies. And if it wasn't for the persistent image of my guilt, the constant color of owing her some damn thing, I'd have never gone along with it. Honest to the Book. Never.

When I write it down for good, I'll say a body, above all, is leaky. A thin sheen of plastic wrap holding back waters as great as ever in the world. The color of the water is brown and clear, salty, full of farts and dribbly digestive fluid, secreting from the escapable places, the seams which connect the limbs to the rest of the limbs, the source of the torso like the color of a marble city fountain, the center from where the water forms and bubbles out.

Of course it doesn't help when you have a body like mine. Torn open and exposed, hanging, tied together with string and wire and whatever else I can find to keep the toes and fingers and arms and calves in place. My neck held on with razor wire, the

barbs sunk deep enough to keep my head from wagging off, plopping to the ground like the color of wet clay.

Many of us (those who think it's a brilliant idea to abandon the Ethereal for a leaky frame of shit and blood) take on the shape of our final Jobs. It's a sentimental gesture, and like most sentiments, it feels empty being in something that no longer exists. And it's strange, to be inside a body without being Inside—for it's "my" body now, not Jonah Summer's, even if Jonah was the one who made it a body to begin with. And while I have to attend to its functions—eating and drinking and excreting (functions I've spent lifetimes watching, but never performing)—I feel completely removed, as if my purpose for being here has lost all direction, all meaning.

And all the time I am dreaming of Jonah Summer, as it remains uncertain if I'll have another Inside to occupy. It's like they say, Once you go body you never go back. When in actuality, there is a long time between now and the next line of Rotations. Anything can happen. For instance, I could suddenly retire, disappear into gas and vapor like the wasted breathing of a sleeping dog. Or perhaps the human amoeba will refuse to reconfigure itself proper this time, and the new Insides will be unfit Employment. Maybe time itself will end and the sky will fall, everything collapsing in a greasy after-shit of suction and space fart. Who knows (who knows).

The apocalypse, per se, did not "surprise" Jonah Summer. He had felt the presence of its coming most his life, so when it did finally meet him on the deserts of Australia—ripping him piece by piece with its teeth and claws and animal rigor—he was ready for it, or at least as indifferent about it as anyone could expect. But be certain, anticipation and his indifference did not equate to apathy. In fact, Jonah cared very

much, and he fought with what little he had (so little) to keep the world alive for as long as allowed. Yet he knew it was only a matter of “when” before he and everybody he loved would lose and be swallowed whole by the momentum of the closing world. And perhaps that was the strangest thing. Though Jonah was fighting for its preservation, he subsequently understood that its exact continuance (since continuing meant the hastening of its conclusion) would destroy him.

This is the way I feel about the color of love. I believe its sound as much as I no longer hear its ring, at least not in the way it once sounded in the image of my ears. And I suppose that is what happens when you fall in love with Tammy like I did. You can never expect to recapture what has escaped to the outside, burned thin, headed into a dark wood never to be heard from again. And you have to sit in this empty shell-shocked building waiting for the sound of the lights to turn up. But the lights can't sound. So you do what you can to get used to the color of that darkness.

Tammy is washing herself in the wading pool at the center of the building quad, her long red hair wet against her shoulders. The pavement is broken on all sides of the pool, but the water is still somehow clear, and the sound of her skin looks marvelous in the yellow light that pours into the quad. Her nipples bubble and harden, and she knows I'm watching from the southeast tower, so she takes her time, slowly moving her hands and smiling to herself at how the sores on her body are beginning to heal.

I have to hand it to her, she really knows how to pick a body.

And this is how I best like to watch. It feels like I'm back Inside, close from the closest of all possible places, yet still able to observe, take note, checking off each movement and twitch. I don't have to involve myself if I don't want, but if I choose to scream I'd be heard. This is the feeling of quiet participation. This is the color of pretending to be home. But suddenly I have to piss really bad. And removing myself to a dark corner, I open my rope and let the demands of this thing spill.

When Tammy is done washing, I meet her for lunch. We picnic on the north bank where we can watch the bears return to the streets of the city, picking through the buildings for whatever they happen to find worth clobbering. Sometimes the bears get lucky and a screaming sound breaks apart the day, or a surprise of gunfire which makes my heart (such a feeling) jump, or a scatter of Night Bleed children bursting from the holes of the buildings, battling into the torn streets and running for God knows where.

The bears lumber slowly, not caring if the afternoon sky looks like a sinking jet plane, not caring if the ground is steaming with bones and oil and earth fire, or if the air smells like burning hair. They sniff under abandoned cars. Reach up for charred evergreen branches. Knock over dead firs and pines. Break off signposts. They seem to be enjoying themselves, these bears.

We eat the last of the bread and butter for lunch. Tammy feeds me a piece, the butter salty on her fingers. I'm trying very hard to save the color of this flavor. But how do I save a color?

"Tell me," she says. "What was the last moment like?"

I don't say anything. I chew and look down at the streets and the bears.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll go first.”

Clapping bread dust from her hands, she says, “My Job, Stephe, was making her way through this huge field of glass, or what she took for glass, when it was really something else entirely.” She waves her fingers suddenly. Tammy really enjoys having fingers. “Anyway, Stephe’s fingers were bleeding. Her whole body bleeding. When somewhere along the way she gets the idea that this glass is like God. She sees them like His jewels, His tears, His jeweled tears. And she’s scared, but filled with this great bursting hope. The color was amazing, Jakob. She saw that Yes her life had broken, but everything in her was still alive inside these pieces of God, alive in His tears. All she had to do was fit His pieces together, somehow touch them all at once, and presto!—she would be connected with every part of herself at every moment in her life. Every memory, every piece of her past, would be with her again all at once.”

Tammy looks over and sees I’m not overtly impressed.

She shrugs. “It’s a pathetic gesture, I guess,” she says. “But it was important to her. Everything was very important, and very beautiful, to her in the end.”

“That’s nice,” I say.

Tammy reaches over and touches the razor wire holding my head to my neck, my neck to the rest of my body. “Did Jonah feel anything like that?” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say. “He was sort of busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Being eaten.”

“Eaten?”

“That’s what I said.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

I shrug.

“God,” she says. “By what?”

“Gophers?”

“What?”

“Guess you sort of had to be there,” I say.

Tammy looks down the bank. Then after awhile, as though she’s thinking now of something else, she says, “Funny how the end of the world was just like another one of those things, like so many other things in their lives. Random and cruel and ridiculous, but totally—completely—important all at the same time.”

She stops to chew at the sores at the corners of her nails.

“I wonder,” she says spitting, “what decides the details that go unnoticed, and those that—I don’t know—seem to make all the difference in our memories?”

There’s a bear down there with a nice piece of leg in his mouth. He tosses it up on the roasted hood of a car. Sniffs at it, then turns around and rumps away. That, I think, is the difference in our memories. It’s what we see. Not what happens. And in the end, the two have as little to do with the other as the randomness of a severed leg and a car hood. While the bear of memory has better things to do than remember.

A body of my own is alright. But I miss living Inside people. Fuck it, I miss people.

I know, I know. Damn, I know it. The earth is an innate sphere, healthier and geologically happier without the weight of homo-sapiens trampling the life from its blossoms. But life is so boring (so fucking boring) without the color-television of humanity wrecking the color of havoc.

So to forget, I bury myself in work. Recounting my Rotations in chalk. Sketching notes for my eventual report.

My working title is a little long. Busy. Perhaps “ambitious” is the better word. But who’s really around to play the critic? “For Everyone Dead, Dedicated to Everyone Alive. ‘And since everyone in the world is dead, and will be for another thousand years—give or take a couple—then this book is for everyone and dedicated to no one. Amen.’”

At the moment, I’m out looking for eyes. I do this whenever I feel “blocked.” Eyes, like words, are getting harder and harder to come by. So many open pits of empty skulls, cracked and smoking in the ground, the smell of them like rain on hot summer pavement. We’re running out of ice, too.

I find a pair of brown eyes and a pair of blue with tints and spikes of green. Together their sound is like two pieces of hollow blocks knocking. I cut some cloth from my robe, wrap the sound up tight, and bury them deep into my dirty bucket of ashy ice. Then I kick the two empty heads into a stream of churning lava, the blackening color of burnt skin, and go looking for Tammy, the bucket swinging at my side.

At night we climb to the burying hill and dump the eyes, along with the ice (what’s left of it anyway), over the edge of a dark glacial crevasse. We don’t know how

long this glacier will last. We don't even know what it's doing here. But it feels right to us, and we hope it stays around as long as is allowed.

Tonight we crawl down onto the glacier to feel its cold sound sing on our backs. Tammy looks up at the image of the sky, listening to the sound of dark stars.

"I think I see something," she says.

"Really," I say, getting ready to hear this bullshit again. "Where?"

"There. Don't you see it? Right up there."

"Yeah," I say. "Sure. Right up there."

"Liar."

Okay, but what am I supposed to say? (No, Tammy, I don't see a goddamn thing because there's nothing left up there but puke blackness, a great nuclear disappointment of virus and lost space. And besides, what stars may have once been were long gone by the time we got here, meaning you are—and always have been—staring at an illusion, the lost color of light, the sound of one hand waving goodbye). Is that what I'm supposed to say? No. No, I'm going to tell Tammy what she wants to hear, and maybe (just maybe) I'll get some sleep tonight.

She leans her head on my shoulder and licks my collarbone. "The ice sounds so good," she says.

"Hm."

She undoes my robe and wraps her hands around Jonah's cock, or what's left of Jonah's cock.

“Remember,” she says, “when we were kids.”

Of course I do. It was the only time I wanted this more than she did.

“How it used to be,” she says. “We couldn’t keep our hands off the image of each other. Your tongue was like fucking water to me. Nights dreams inside your mouth. And your hands,” mumbling now, “your fucking hands.”

She starts after my neck, sucking on the tattered strings of my ears, and after we fuck on the ice we’re back to staring up at the dead night sky. I can tell by the sound of Tammy’s breathing that she’s disappointed.

“Let’s have a baby girl, Jakob.”

I close my eyes and push myself down the glacier until the damage of my head is level with the bare image of Tammy’s feet.

The image of her breath is sweet on my chest, like the quiet banging of a screen door. Her hair smells of tire fires. There is a soft glow inside me that feels lonesome because it might not be there anymore.

I wish the sound of gunfire still filled the streets at night. The sound reminded me of past days when there was always something worth watching. Now it’s a lot of sitting around until we feel like eating meat again.

I get up and look out the busted side of the building. As before, nothing going on. Maybe I’ll walk down there and find myself something to kill. A buffalo. Another bear.

But no, I decide against it. My body has become impossibly soft and flaky. At any moment I could lose a whole chunk of leg.

No sleep again. Damn it. I look across to the other side of the open room where Tammy is sleeping (quite soundly I might add), to the far skeletal supports of the building, and below to the scattered streets, the color of spatter and strange drawings of disrepair on the sidewalks.

It's the shoe. The damn blue and pink color of the shoe. Tammy found the thing last week. "Just sitting out there on this pile of rubble!"

Of course she thinks it's a sign. Blue with pink tassels. A school shoe. A girl's shoe. "Definitely a little girl's shoe, Jakob."

It's easy to see where this is headed. So I take Tammy on all the worst tours. The old rape factory. The intestinal gallows. The ovarian chambers. But nothing (nothing!) seems to convince her that the very last thing this dying world needs is another baby girl to stick in its vices. Especially (especially!) if that baby girl belongs to me.

"Do you know what that'd do to me?" I say.

"And why does this have to be about you?" she says.

"Are you fucking serious, Tammy? What does this have to do with me? This has everything to do with me!"

Tammy gets that look on her face when she's said something that's really pissed me off, but is sticking to it anyway. Bitch.

"Well," she says, "I don't really care. I want a child, Jakob. A girl. With or without you."

Oh how very original, I think.

When the tours don't work, I cut out old newspaper articles and paste them to the blasted walls of the building. The ones that almost gleefully detailed the end of our living times. I point to them and say, "You know you were on the Job for this! You didn't suddenly go blind or anything! You saw this!" I say pointing. "And this! And this, too!"

Tammy looks flatly at the pictures of the fetal-slaughter canals, the vaginal buckets, the fallopian guillotines. Then she looks at me and says, "Everything is a worst case scenario with you, isn't it?"

This, I think, this is why I can't sleep anymore. The body of my wife is pretending to have a biological clock, for Christ's sake.

The hard sound of chalk. Etching: "Remember the fetal sickness. The one called Night Bleeds. The strange correction turning babies into burping cannonballs, firecrackers that jumped and gurgled before exploding from the mother's stomach. Remember the riots. The bodies left burning on the byways of the cities. The Black Police 'curing' the hospitals in hopes of eradicating that quickening disease. Remember what they looked like. The women, pregnant and straining, tied into machines, tubes tied into their bellies, as every child seemed just fine, normal even, right until the moment of birth when the delivery room was painted black, a thick tarnish of blood and guts dripping from the walls and doorframes, clung to the faces of the doctors and nurses and general attendants. The woman herself lying there as if a grenade had been unpinned upon her abdomen."

I stand up from my chalkboard and crack my back. This paragraph is giving me fits. I scratch at the bailing wire holding my wrists in place, a rich gelatin beginning to seep from beneath the rusty band. A piece of flesh falls from the front of my right thigh. I shake it out from my robe and stare at it on the floor of the building. It looks like Africa.

Sentiments aside, I think it's time to consider a new body.

I walk over to the corner of the chalk room and pick up the bone I discovered yesterday. It is a long, misshapen thing, and if it wasn't for the yellowed marrow, I wouldn't even call it a bone, but a piece of ancient alabaster, the mold from some buried city.

I turn it over in my hands, feel its deformities with my wilting and green fingers.

I look down onto the street and decide the animal it came from must have had a terrible disease.

And she's off again. I catch the glimpse of her long red hair streaming goodbye behind a hill of concrete and steel framing. I call her name, but it's no use. I throw a tizzy-fit. Stomping around the broken street, flailing my arms until something cracks.

I stop. Sigh. Pick up my right arm and go looking for something to reattach it.

Claiming this body as my own is similar to the first time Jonah operated a fifty-caliber machine gun. It was a monstrous instrument and the color of the gun reminded him not only of his father (who'd killed himself with a gun), but of every girl he'd ever fallen for in his entire life. The color of it sounded through his liver and ribs, coloring his

Insides in pales of orange and red, a streamline effect of pink and cream swirls. His mind, of course, was unconscious of these colors, but everything Inside him was screaming with them, causing the usual strength in his arms and hands to fail, the gun kicking him to the ground (his finger still caught in the trigger), spinning over his head, sending bullets every which way. Fortunately, no one was ever hurt. And the color Inside Jonah would blush and calm, the blood smoothing over the vibrating remains of the orange until Jonah felt only the color of his father—a vague deafening of blackness—and the girls, faceless and fleshy, pointing at him from atop his lungs and laughing. And there was a dog, an actual dog, racing around in the pit of his stomach, sniffing at his intestines and yelping.

All that is gone now. There is just the shell, the image of myself filling the tissue and marrow, empty of all color but the things I see in this dying decay of a world. And I'm weak with the memory of Jonah. Weak with the memory of every Job I worked—Jonah and his father Lazarus and Jonah's great-grandfather, my first Job, Deacon Summer. There were other Rotations. A IV Age astronaut who drowned in the Bering Sea on return from orbit. III Age Las Vegas stripper—fake tits, glass eye, leg extensions, three venereal disease, one for each kid. Even an obscure Prussian lord who drank small amounts of salt water every morning, believe it would ease his small plot of land from famine. But the Summers were by far my most rewarding work. The study of their family as fascinating as any Celestial could hope for, the colors blooming and twisting, never failing to shake the very source of my image, and if there could have been tears to shed on each of their deaths, then damn right I would have shed them. But now there is just this shell. The last in the line of them unnaturally repaired, leaky, disfigured, soft

and crumbly, detached of all previous meaning, all color and sound, my image as empty as anything the ground might afford him. Better Jonah was stuffed with grub worms and maggots than me.

I find Tammy at the southern most end of the city, calling the Night Bleed children to her breasts as if ready to milk them as her own.

“Tammy,” I say. “Tammy. Come on, baby, let’s go.”

And she’s furious with me for scaring them. “Fuck you, Jakob! Leave me alone!”

But I can’t leave her alone. This isn’t healthy, pretending these little fucked deformities belong to us.

Later, after I’ve pleaded and pleaded, finally having to kill the children a bear and prepare them steaks, watching their charred faces flicker against the flame as the bear meat cooks (like watching something stare at the color of itself), Tammy agrees to come home with me.

“You hate them, don’t you?” she says, her face red with crying.

“Hate them? What are you talking about? They don’t mean anything to me?”

“Well they should. They should, Jakob.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re human! They’re alive!”

What she can't understand, and I see this now, is that those things should not be alive. They are a mistake. Everything should be dead. It's written so in the Book. This shouldn't be happening. None of this should be happening. And I don't like the look I see in Tammy's eyes. It's a "Let's do something about this" look. It's the image of changing what's already been written and done. It's the color of nothing I'm going to say is going to change her fucking mind.

My shoulders collapse. "Okay," I say. "What do you want to do?"

In the history of bad ideas, this has to be one of the worst. Nobody but Tammy. I swear to Christ, if I could possibly die, she'd be the death of me. And as I transcribe what I've written out in the chalk room into a small black and white notebook I found in a bombed out convenient store, I can't believe I'm going along with this. I must be farther gone than I thought.

She comes in with the blue shoe, the pink tassels wrapped around her fingers. The glass cuts on her arms and hands have nearly healed, and her face has never looked brighter. All the while, my skin (Jonah's skin) goes on getting whiter and whiter, the seams of his limbs leakier and leakier.

"You're not believing in your body, Jakob," Tammy says suddenly.

I look back down at my notebook, continuing to write. "I don't see what business that is of yours."

"Maybe it's time you got rid of Mr. Jonah Summer."

"Be quiet," I say. "Or I'm not coming."

I can feel Tammy smiling.

The children are waiting for us south of the city. Their faces are like unsure raisins. What little belongs they have wrapped up in dirty white plastic bags. We walk through the city and climb the north bank, looking back again at the dead streets and sidewalks—the hospital and bars and slaughterhouse, the center square crapped into a crater of disease and empty skulls, the ice of the burying hill shining dimly under the hazy grey-orb sun. Somewhere I hear bears crying.

Tammy herds the children in behind us. She takes hold of my hand and it pops off. She looks at Jonah’s floppy green fingers and smiles before giving me back the hand.

I look at this thing of Jonah’s. Then I look at Tammy and say, “Now what?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “What do you think?”

I look back at the children. They’re muttering among themselves, a strange language that would sound like the color of fire if the color of fire could talk.

“How about this,” I say. “Two endings.”

“Two endings?”

“Both are real,” I say. “But I’ll only write one in the Book. Only one will be remembered as real. The other will only sound in the color of our dreams.”

Tammy thinks.

“Okay,” she says.

She hushes the children. She tells them to sit down and listen to the decayed looking man. They look at me and nod. Tammy then gestures for me to continue.

“The first,” I say, “will go like this.”

This Is Our Sound Dream

And those left to mourn the world stand at its edges, tossing off tablets of paper into the smoldering pyre below. On one of these tablets is the story you have just read. On another is your story, written and falling, crumpling into the lower towers of the burn like nothing before it.

This is our goodbye dream.

From the shelves of the heat, we watch the world fold itself away from itself, each piece dividing by the fraction of less and nothing. Each piece having the sound of distant thunder. The sound of bricks falling. Pavement breaking.

In the capillaries of the hot cell we have found three discernible shapes of pain and hope, where pain means still something worth feeling for. The first shape is a small blue shoe with pink tassel ties. The second is bone. The third ice. A shoe, bone, a bucket like hotel ice, make the ineffable shapes of nobody’s big goodbye.

Everywhere and always is the sound of chalkboards. Names and dates. The white scent of lives disappearing. The hard sounds of chalk fill everything.

Rooms of light litter the space of dark where the rest have died. Graves built into the side of the buildings, right back into the ribs of the concrete, like the hidden places of children or soldiers waiting for rockets to stop their screaming.

We invent a custom for burying the open dead. We take the sound of their eyes and wrap them in cloth cut from our robes. This is important, but we're not sure why. We just feel it. Like the way we feel about being alive. Or, perhaps more precisely, the way we feel our way through the holes of boiling oil and smoking skulls, feeling the heat with our arms outstretched.

To retain the sound of eyes, the sound of them must be buried in ice. This practice, we're finding, also preserves the color of sound.

The sound of eyes is like a softly shut door against the sudden flash of bad weather.

It's the color of rain falling in the streets.

This Is Our Color Dream

Tammy and I are running with the children. Running down the slopes, passed the wasted Pacific, grey and blasted under the wrong color of the day. We're clattering up what were once sea rocks and the smell of sand still fills the air. The bears are not far behind, crying, they're screaming carrying under the grey soft sun. I'm carrying two charred bodies on my back, thinking about the baby girl Tammy and I will never have. It feels like these worthless legs are going to buckle right off.

Tammy falls. The children clinging to her robe slip off onto the rocks and roll down the sea cliffs. The image of Tammy breaks through the mold of her Job and goes soaring after them. But she's unable to catch them with the vapors of her arms, their burnt bodies passing right through her as they fall and break on the lower beach.

And watching the color of Tammy's image blister into red and purple, the empty mold of her body quickly going grey, going green, the eyes dark and sunk, it suddenly feels to me that the color of the world, the color of any world, was never (never) meant to end.