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The stories in *Outlanders* involve characters who live their lives on the outside of things—relationships, reality, social norms—even as they simultaneously desire and resist becoming part of the “inside.”

OUTLANDERS

by

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Committee Chair

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To my family, friends, and mentors for all their patience and encouragement

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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THE NIGHT GARDEN

There's a table at the end of the yard where, now that it's summer, I've been sitting at dusk and watching the fields. The table and its two chairs are iron and old and rusted badly; they were already old and rusted badly years ago when Grace found them on a roadside a few miles from our house. We didn't need them then, just as I don't need them now, so I carried them out to the thin treeline between the garden and the fields where we put things we'd never use. I think a better man, a more interested man, could probably still save them. A wire brush, a touch of paint—then I could bring them up to the bricked patio and make something real of them, a place for friends to sit and have a drink when the weather was nice. It's the kind of task that Owen, with his nervous energy and his parents' garage of counters and tools, would throw himself into if I mentioned it in passing. He worries about me, I know, and he wants to help. Sometimes, when I stop to think about it, it's quite moving. But I worry about him, too, and he's in worse trouble than I am.

So I don't mention it. Instead, last week when June turned into July, I pulled on a pair of gardening gloves and ripped out the ailanthus and wild carrot that had grown up around the chairs and under the table, and I brushed off the table itself with a few quick sweeps of my hand. Now I sit out there and watch to see what moves at dusk—something's been in the vegetable garden, and I want to know what it is. It's all I think

about lately. I'll be reading the paper, for instance, or scrubbing the grout between the shower tiles, and suddenly I'm picturing the garden at night—the shock of raspberries on one side, the dark trellises of snow peas on the other—and trying to imagine what's gotten past the high mesh fence to eat so voraciously from the rows of spinach and lettuce and cabbage. None of the usual tricks have worked. I've put up foil pans that clatter in the slightest breeze, and I've left snapback traps of increasing size in the runways between the rows. I've even sprinkled foul-smelling bloodmeal all around the garden's edges, but still something gets in. In the morning I find the traps untouched and more leaves torn away and half-eaten so that fairly soon there won't be anything left to speak of. There are no tracks; it's been dry of late, and even if there were markings of some kind, I would have no idea what they belonged to. Owen might—he still hunts sometimes with his father—but I won't ask him. I think I want to be surprised.

Still, just in case, when I sit out in the evenings I take with me a hard plastic slingshot and a handful of metal pellets. It's only a gesture; I'm little good with any of it. On occasion I try to improve my aim by shooting at the shed not fifty feet away, but I find that as I near seventy, I've lost a good bit of that prize muscle of youth, and I struggle to pull the band back far enough to get any distance or force. Grace, on the other hand, had been quite good with it. Sometimes in bed I would touch her arm and marvel at her small, hard bicep, an astonishing bicep for a woman in her sixties, the tough and tangible result of decades of practice. Bunny-killer, I would say, and pinch it, and sometimes that would be enough and she would curve up against me in the darkness. Now I sleep most nights on the couch in the den, where I don't feel like anything is

missing beside me. It makes me feel like a boy again, lying awake and alone in a narrow bed. It takes some getting used to.

But I want to talk about the garden. I've been watching it now every night for the last week. I eat at six-thirty as I always have, wait two hours, and then go out and sit at the table for a long time, until well after the moon has come up. It's waxing these days; each night it puffs out a bit more and it gets easier for me to see across the field in its light. I'm getting better at interpreting shapes and shadows. The deer, for example, seem strange and alien in its glow. Sometimes they sit down like cows and look like nothing at first, but then a little hillock rises and you see the bladed ears and the long thin shanks. Even when I know they're there, I'm always surprised when they stand and the whole shape of them comes together.

Owen has come once to watch with me. He's lost and has nothing better to do, and since I feel partly to blame for this, I always let him stay and talk when he visits. He's twenty-four and lives three houses down with his parents; I see them walking past sometimes on the road of our cul-de-sac, and they look defeated, as parents of children like Owen often do. I can see it in their shoulders when they walk, and I remember it in their eyes when they came to offer their sympathies—they blame themselves for their son who can't hold a steady job, and who, now that it's summer, drives a snow cone truck around the dense suburbs just a few miles north of here. I want to tell them it's partly their fault and partly not, that as his former teacher, I also share some responsibility, even if it was almost a decade ago. But that's a complicated conversation to have, and how would I even start it?

Grace and I had no children, though it wasn't something denied us. It was just something we never wanted. For years we'd sat across our desks from plenty of men and women who shouldn't have been parents and who grew defensive and angry as, after a time, they realized it, too. We explained to them that their children were disruptive or dismissive or detached in class, or that they talked back or had little concern for their peers or themselves. These aren't things parents want to hear, even when they sit down and shake your hand and say give it to them straight and pull no punches. This was enough for both of us. So though we talked about it every few years, we did so out of a feeling that we were expected to talk about it, until the time for it had passed and it was one less question to consider.

But there's still Owen to think of. I can hear him returning to his parents' house each night; the childish music from the truck's loudspeakers has become his background and he forgets it's on until he shuts off the truck and it's suddenly silent. I know he can't make much money from the job—I can't imagine people these days buying snow cones from a man in a truck. It seems a bit ominous now, and if nostalgic, only in a pitiable way. But I also know he's not doing the job just for the money, and I've told him many times this summer to stop doing what he does. Tonight I hear loud rock and a heavy bass thumping underneath the tinny, incessant melody of the speakers, a sign he's in a bad mood and that he'll be coming over to talk about it. I go up to the house and take two beers out of the fridge and return to the table and my watching. The bottles sweat immediately in the warm air.

The first stars are coming out when Owen arrives. I face east across the fields and can see Arcturus appearing slowly, as if from down a long hallway, in the high, hazy sky.

Owen is flushed and sweaty. He crosses the yard in a slouch with angry steps. When he gets to the table, I nod at the other chair and the beer. I hand him my keychain with the bottle-opener, and he opens his bottle and then mine and then sits down.

“Shit,” he says.

“You went by her house?” I say.

“Yeah,” he mumbles into his beer. He takes a sip and looks out at the fields. I don’t say anything else. I still feel very much the teacher at these times, though I retired last year and haven’t yet decided what to do with thirty years’ worth of books and lessons now sitting in boxes in the basement.

We sit like this for a time while the air gets darker and the mosquitoes pick up a bit. Fireflies start to flicker in the woods on the far side of the fields, and I imagine that whatever has been in the garden is just now waking up from a drowsy afternoon and is turning its head in our direction.

“Well,” I finally say, “what happened?”

Owen snorts, which is what he does when he’s at fault but wants to be a victim. I look at him and see he needs a haircut. He’s getting a soft roundness in his arms and stomach.

“I saw them,” he says. “Through the window. They hadn’t put the blinds down yet and I saw them through the window.”

“Well,” I say.

Owen is quiet for a bit. Then finally he swears again.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I’ve said this to him many times before. “You need to stop doing this,” I say. “It’s not good for anyone.” I’ve also said this many times before.

“I just keep thinking—” he says and stops.

“I know,” I say, “but you have to quit.”

Owen runs a hand through his hair to get it out of his eyes and sits back with a heavy sigh.

Owen didn’t get the girl. It doesn’t really surprise me. He was often abrupt and sullen and alone in high school and devoid of the good looks that sometimes make that behavior mysterious and appealing to women. His wide, owl-like face with half-closed eyes and a mouth that turned naturally downwards gave him an appearance of perpetual annoyance. Once, during a conference with his parents, I mentioned this expression to them, and they sighed and said, “No, he’s not annoyed. That’s just how he looks.” In class Owen rarely spoke or earned anything above a C; I pictured him as a dull, flat surface that didn’t reflect light so much as mute it. So I was astonished when, at graduation, he came up to me and offered his hand and thanked me for being his teacher. But this happens sometimes. Two years ago, when his parents moved into a house on our street, the two of us talked awkwardly one evening in the middle of the road as Grace and I returned from a walk. Grace decided he was sad and in need of purpose, so she hired him to mow our yard and water our garden when we were away, and then, though we’d paid him, she invited him to dinner as a thank you. It was in this way that he began stopping by on his own.

This past winter she asked him one night if he was seeing anyone. We were sitting at the kitchen table drinking hot chocolate. Owen had put tiny marshmallows in his. He blushed and stammered, but soon it came out that he was in love with a girl he'd graduated with. He'd been in love with her for six years, he said, and had run into her at the video store a few days before. They'd talked and he was excited. When he's excited, he puts a hand on each knee and drums rhythms with his fingers so that he seems suddenly capable and confident. He did so that night. I hadn't taught the girl he spoke of, but Grace had. She went upstairs and returned with the yearbook from his class and pointed out the girl to me; her name was Amber. It was a portrait and she had blue eyes and long brown hair and perfect teeth. She could have been a model.

"Now, Owen," Grace said, "you know she's married." Grace had a lot of friends at school and knew these kinds of things.

"Yeah," said Owen. "To Bobby Killick. But that won't last. They got married too young." He said this with the gravity of someone who knew such things, but because he didn't know such things, it sounded strange and hollow.

"I don't know," Grace said. She looked at Owen carefully. "There are other girls out there," she said, and looked at me because I hadn't said anything.

"That's true," I said. "There are lots of other girls out here. Single girls."

"Nope," Owen said, and stopped drumming on his knees. "I've got a good feeling about this. I think she's the one for me." He finished his hot chocolate and smiled at us.

"This won't end well," Grace said after he left.

“Probably not,” I said.

“You need to talk to him,” she said. “He’s going to get hurt.”

“He’s in love,” I said. “He’s not going to listen to anyone.”

“Well,” she said, “you still need to try.” And she looked at me in her way so I understood that’s how it was.

But I put off this conversation for a time and then, in March, there was the stroke and the funeral and the long, slow afternoons of wandering about the house and ending up in rooms without knowing why. Owen came by several times in those days and I told him I was busy or tired and he looked at me with a sadness I understand now wasn’t just for me, but for him, too. Through the living room window I watched him shamle away, shoulders slouched and hands in pockets. We didn’t talk again until it was late May. Over a beer at the kitchen table he asked how I was doing, saying it with the feigned confidence of a child who’s never had to ask this question seriously before. Though it was far from true I told him I was doing well, and he nodded, visibly relieved the answer hadn’t been different.

What he really wanted to talk about was Amber. It took me a moment to place the name. He said he’d done some research and learned where she was living, that it was a house just north of here, that he’d heard Bobby Killick wanted to join the Army and that Amber wasn’t happy about it. He was drumming on his knees as he said all this. He was smiling.

“Be careful,” I said. I found I had a hard time saying it. I had to drink from my beer and say it twice before it came out right.

“I’m fine,” he said. “It’s gonna work out. Bobby’s a jerk. He’ll do what he wants and that’ll break things up.”

“Well,” I said, “I don’t know.”

But Owen was confident. He told me about the job with the snow cone truck and said happily that he’d be working in her neighborhood.

“I bet I’ll see her a lot,” he said. “She likes to garden, so she’ll be outside. I can pull over and talk to her, you know. Offer her a cone on the house.” He grinned.

I’d never seen him so pleased. “Just be careful,” I said again. “Don’t get your hopes too high.”

“No worries,” he said, and clinked his bottle against mine. “It’s all under control.”

It wasn’t, of course. Two weeks after that, before I began sitting out at the table in the evenings, Owen came over. I’d been reading at the kitchen table, and when the doorbell rang I realized I’d been looking at the same two pages for the past hour.

I let Owen in. He didn’t look good. The evening was still and hot and he was red from the heat and something else. He slumped in a chair at the table and I could smell the sour sweat coming off him. He let out a long sigh that sank him even lower in his seat.

“There’s a kid,” he said.

“A kid?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I went by in the truck and they were out in the yard. There was a kid. A little kid walking around in diapers.”

“When was this?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Couple nights ago.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You should have told me.”

“Yeah, well,” he said.

On his shirt were colorful splashes of syrup. I poured him a cold glass of water.

“How can they have a kid?” he asked. He looked right at me and asked again:

“How can they have a kid?”

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “It happens.”

“She never said anything about a kid,” he said. “At the video store. She didn’t say anything.”

I nodded and we sat there for a minute in silence. A single bird outside was calling over and over in the hot air; after a while I looked out the window and tried to find it, but it was just about dark and all I could see was the two of us reflected in the glass.

Owen cleared his throat. “I’ve been doing something,” he said. I turned back from the window and looked at him.

“I’ve been driving by at bedtime,” he said.

“What?” I said.

“When they’re putting the kid to bed,” he said. “I drive by in the truck and play the music so the kid can hear it.”

“Owen,” I said.

“I just think maybe it’ll do something,” he said.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He pushed the glass of water away from him. “Just make things hard for them. Get the kid excited or something, you know?”

“Owen,” I said. “You can’t do that.”

“I have to do *something*,” he said. His eyes were wide in the bright fluorescent light and I could see the redness in them.

“It’s not right,” I said.

“That’s easy for you to say,” he said. “You got *your* girl.”

I didn’t say anything. The bird outside kept calling and we sat there.

“Sorry,” Owen muttered. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said after a minute. I pushed my chair back a little. “It’s just not good for you,” I said. “It’s not good for you to keep going by there.”

“I know,” Owen said miserably. He put his hands in his lap. “I just don’t know what else to do.” He looked at me. “Do you?”

I still have no answer for him. We sit on the treeline and watch parts of constellations come into view, and I strain my eyes across the field to the far woods. It’s the time when deer will start appearing if they plan to show up, the time when other things I can’t see start to rustle in the grasses and trees. A few crickets, a month ahead of the August chorus, strike up from a tangle of honeysuckle to our left.

Owen asks me if I want another beer, and I tell him no, but help himself. He slouches off and when I turn to watch him go, I’m surprised to see how dark the house is; I haven’t left a single lamp on. When Owen turns on the light in the kitchen, it shines

halfway out into the yard, and I think how that's what it must have looked like before.

For a moment it's nice; then I get that little catch in my throat and turn back towards the fields.

Almost all the books I've been reading say poison is the answer. Bloodmeal and cayenne pepper are fine for easy cases, they say, but it *is* your garden and in the end you have to defend it: cyanide for groundhogs, Warfarin for rats, naphthalene for rabbits. A length of rubber hose run from your car's exhaust pipe into burrows for moles and chipmunks. Failing all this, the books say, you start shooting. I read these things with morbid attention. I want the garden back, it's true, but somehow I've decided that whatever gets in at night is beyond these tricks, and that the most I can probably ask is only to catch a glimpse of it. But I want that glimpse.

The light goes out again and Owen comes back with the last four bottles. He's already started one on the walk back. He offers one to me, but I shake my head and he shrugs and slumps back into his chair with a sigh.

"It's just not fair," he says.

Again, I feel like the teacher for a moment and try to muster up something wise, but the effort makes me tired. "No," I say, "probably not."

Owen picks up the slingshot and snaps the band sharply. "Fucking Bobby Killick," he says, and I tell him, automatically, to watch his language, then apologize for doing so. "I hope he goes off to the Army and gets killed," Owen says. He snaps the band again.

“You don’t mean that,” I say. The moon is coming up through the high pines and it’s orange and bloated from the haze. I realize how warm it still is, even with the sun gone. The moon lays its light down on the fields, but I can’t see anything yet, not a deer or anything else.

“Yeah, I do,” Owen says. He finishes his beer and uncaps another with the bottle-opener he brought with him from the kitchen. “He deserves to die.”

I knock against the table so hard that Owen’s beer rattles and falls off. “Shut the fuck up,” I say, and I realize I’m half-standing, one fist clenched hard, and Owen’s face is astonished in the dim light, his hands up by his head like he’s about to get hit. I’m breathing hard and in the nearby brush something scuttles away.

It takes me a moment to sit back down. I can feel my heart in my chest. Owen watches me with big eyes and we can hear the beer fizzing softly in the dirt. I put my hands on the table. “Owen,” I say, “I’m sorry. I’m tired, that’s all. It’s been a long day. I didn’t mean it.”

Owen lowers his hands. He doesn’t look up at me, but he nods slightly. “It’s okay,” he says. “I know it must be hard.”

I nod, too. “It is,” I say. I open another beer and offer it to him. “Let’s just sit here for a little while,” I say. “And see what we can see.”

Owen takes the beer. “Okay,” he says. “That sounds okay.”

So we do. In time the moon clears the pines and it’s bright enough that it washes out all but the brightest stars. I can see the fields clearly now, but nothing moves in them; the woods on the far side are a dark line. A little breeze rises from behind us and I think

that does it, anything downwind now will smell Owen, but I can't get angry about it. I look over at him and see he has the beer propped on his knee and his eyes are closed. I realize how young he is and feel bad for having snapped at him. Out in the darkness I feel like I'm not entirely here anymore, so I drum on my knees a bit just to make sure I'm still intact. Owen emits a snore and I reach over carefully and take the beer off his lap and put it on the table.

The moon goes higher and makes tangled shadows along the treeline. At one point a bird cries suddenly to my right and I sit up straighter; another time I hear a quick thrashing in the underbrush to my left and I sit up again, but nothing appears. Somewhere out there, I think, whatever it is is watching, and I think again of the strange formulas of poisons, the mixtures that sound to me like witches' potions: powdered aluminum, two ounces, mixed into a pound of tobacco dust, scattered like sand over runways or vegetables; strychnine and baking soda blended dry over a quart of oats and warmed in the oven, sulfates ground into powders, dipped in beef fat and paraffin, lowered into holes with long-handled spoons...I start up in my chair and realize I've been slipping in and out. Owen snores softly, his head sunk down on his chest. I look over at the garden, but it's quiet and still. I should wake Owen, but I don't. Instead, I settle back into my chair and look out at the fields and there's a nightbird I can't see calling from somewhere close...

When I wake, it's from Owen's gentle pushing at my shoulder. It's bright again, cooler, the treeline in shadow though shafts of early sunlight fall across the yard behind us.

“Oh, man,” Owen says, “we fell asleep out here.” He’s standing and grimacing as he stretches. “Are you okay?” he asks me.

I stand, too. My knees are stiff and I can feel the arthritis in my knuckles. “I’m okay,” I say, and we stretch and yawn and then turn to look at the garden. The last spinach plant is gone save for a few sorry leaves. Owen sees me staring and asks what’s wrong. I point to where the spinach was.

“It came back?” he asks, and I nod. “Oh, man,” he says, “that’s freaking creepy.”

I shake my head and rub my knuckles where they ache. I blow out air and try to smile. There’s nothing else to do.

DEAD WATER

At the end of September the wells dried up and a man from the city came to the school to tell them about the water restrictions. He told them the reservoir on the way into town where they liked to swim and fish was almost empty, and they had to be good children and do what they could to make sure everyone had enough water to drink and cook and bathe in. He was a big man and they listened to him because he was a big man and because he wore a dark blue suit with thin silver stripes in it. They listened to him in the gym they also used for assemblies and lunch and they listened because they could tell he could get angry and mean if he wanted to.

After he left, Mrs. Ake took them back to their room. They sat down in their rows in their wooden seats at their wooden desks. Mrs. Ake told them she expected a lot out of them because they were the oldest boys in the school, and the younger boys and the younger girls looked up to them, and if *they* didn't try to save water, how could they expect the little ones to? They sat in their wooden desks and listened to her while they sweated like horses and drew pictures of monsters and warplanes and warships in the edges of their notebooks. It was hot and close in the room. It had been hot and close since April, but it didn't rain and the wind didn't blow. The ground turned brown and the trees dropped leaves even though it wasn't really fall and the animals out in the fields got sick and died. People got sick, too. Some died and some went strange. No one could sleep in that heat, and it made some people odd. They all knew about the man who ran

out of his house one night and jumped in front of the train coming up from the south. Sometimes on the way back from school they acted it out. One of them would stand on the ties and babble and cuss and act crazy and the others would line up farther down the tracks. Then they ran at the crazy boy as fast as they could, and if he didn't get out of the way, they knocked him down on the ties and yelled and hollered like a train.

Mrs. Ake sat behind her desk and said she was sorry, but they would have to get rid of all their classroom pets. Water is for people now, she said, not animals. We'll let them go in the woods, she said. Animals like the woods. The boys sat and sweated and looked at her and she looked back at them. She said she was sorry again, but she didn't look sorry; she never looked sorry. She had thin black hair that turned darker in the damp heat and pressed so tightly against her temples they could see her skull. Every drop counts, she said, then gave them each a job. They drained the fish tank into a bucket and put the turtles in a shoebox and the black snake in another box. Then they carried the animals down to the woods behind the school. They didn't want to do it, but they did. They knew Mrs. Ake watched them out the window. They went across the packed dirt of the playground and down the hill and past the ragged ball diamond to the woods where the stream came out of it. Then they walked in and knew she couldn't see them anymore.

In the woods they found a place where the stream still had a trickle of water in it and the edges were still muddy. They poured the water out of the bucket and saw the flash of color as the fish slid out. They caused a little flood with their water. The stream filled wildly for a moment and frothed white and stank of old algae and fish dirt. When the water spun away, the fish flapped and twisted in the thin current. A boy named

Corwin tried to save them. He took a rock and dug a little hollow in the streambed to make the water deeper. Two of the other boys helped him. The others let the turtles out a few feet away and poked them with sticks until they moved on stubby legs into the drooping ferns. They let the snake out, but first they sneaked up on the boys digging in the stream and made them yell when the snake flicked its tongue out on their necks. Then they stood around while Corwin and his friends dug their hole. After a while, some of them picked up sticks and threw them at each other and yelled, You're dead, until they were all throwing sticks at each other and yelling, You're dead. They felt safe under the trees. They knew their teacher was far up the hill in the classroom with the lights on and they knew she couldn't see them. They knew no one could see them. When they tired of sticks, they picked up small rocks and acorns and threw them at each other. The rocks hurt and sometimes they wanted to cry when a rock hit them, but they knew they couldn't cry, so they laughed instead and tasted the blood in their mouths. They made explosion sounds and yelled Got you, you're dead! like they knew their fathers were doing to the Japs across the ocean. Even Corwin and his friends lost interest in their hole and joined in. They stayed in the woods, throwing rocks and hurting and laughing until they knew Mrs. Ake was getting impatient and angry and would paddle them if they didn't get back soon. They brushed themselves off and wiped away blood and went back up the long hill to the classroom. After they left, the fish washed onto the mud and breathed air until they died.

It didn't rain and the water in the lake got lower. The man from the city came back with two older men with tools in the pockets of their blue overalls, and they turned

off the water in the boys' bathroom. The principal told them they would have to hold it, unless it was number one. If it was number one they could go down to the woods. The girls laughed. They got to keep their bathroom. They didn't have to go in the woods. But when the youngest boys couldn't hold it and dirtied themselves, the men from the city came back and turned the water on again. They weren't happy. They wanted the boys to be men who could hold it in.

The older boys went down to the lake after school and looked at the big shoreline getting bigger. They had never seen so much land there before. They yelled and shouted and pushed each other down and dueled with roots the water left when it pulled back. The water left treasures, too. They found two metal chairs and five rubber tires and a rusty birdcage. They stacked the tires on the muddy beach and balanced one of the chairs at the top. They crowned their tower with the birdcage and put two dead trout in it. Sing, they yelled, sing us a pirate song, you smelly birds. When they got tired, they sat down and threw stones at the crows feasting on the dead carp lying on the beach. Sometimes their aim was good and they hit the crows and the crows let out metal shrieks like trains.

After a while a small-boned boy named Henry ran down to the lake edge and filled his hands with green water. He ran back and threw the water on the others and laughed. Don't waste the water, the other boys said. We need all the water we have left in there. But Henry ran back to the lake and filled his hands again and threw it on them. Stop it, they said, but he did it a third time. One of the bigger boys stood up and said, You knock it off, then punched him in the stomach. Henry curled up on the ground and tried to breathe. Okay, he said, when he could talk again and the tears stopped. Okay, he

said. That's better, said the bigger boy, but he looked like he wanted to cry, too.

In October the man came to the school again. He was not happy. They could see he was angry, and that scared them. He had damp stains on the collar of his shirt and he told them the school was closing. He told them there was only forty days of water left in the lake. He told them everyone had used too much water and this was what happened when no one listened.

Mrs. Ake wasn't happy, either. She told them they should have been a better example. She told them they should have drunk less water and been more like men. She told them they should have been like their fathers across the ocean who weren't drinking water but were killing Japs for them. Then she told them to clean out their desks and go home. She waited while they worked slowly in the close, hot room. She waited with her purse on her shoulder and a thin thread of sweat working down her neck. She told them to hurry up. Why didn't they want to be good examples? she said. What was the matter with them? Henry told her to shut up. When he said it, they froze and looked at Mrs. Ake. She turned red and they could feel the heat coming out of her.

What did you say? she said. She said it very slowly.

Henry didn't answer. He pulled a leather strap around his books and tied it tightly. He arranged his pencils carefully on his desk and didn't look up. The boys tried not to breathe.

What did you say, Mrs. Ake said again and stood before Henry. He put his pencils carefully into his back pocket and checked the leather strap again. The teacher

reached for his books and he drew back. She untied the leather strap and doubled it over and struck him with it across his face. The other boys didn't say anything. They sweated like horses and watched with thick, dry tongues. Henry cried out and grabbed his face where the strap hit him. When he pulled his hands away and looked at them, they could see a long, red welt rising like water on his cheek. Mrs. Ake looked at him and hit him again. They saw her mouth curl like a dog's when she hit him. He cried out again and dropped to the floor. She tied the books again with the strap and turned when the door opened.

The principal asked what was going on. He said he had heard yelling. He looked at the boys with the thick tongues and the wide eyes and he looked at the teacher with her breath coming just a little fast and the boy getting up from the floor in the back of the room. Mrs. Ake said nothing was going on, they were getting ready to leave. The principal looked at Henry again, who was sniffing but standing and looking at his shoes. He looked at Henry for a long time. They could hear the electric clock ticking and the sobs catching in the boy's throat. It's nothing to cry about, he said to the boy. It will rain and the school will open up again. He looked at the teacher again and shut the door.

After the principal left, they walked out of the room and down the hall to the doors. They didn't say anything. Mrs. Ake didn't say anything. She watched them leave and then shut the door and walked the other way. Some of the younger boys and girls yelled and cheered and ran down the hall. They didn't understand anything yet. They had new teeth coming in and were in love with summer. They ran out the front doors

into the sunlight and the heat.

The older boys didn't go outside. They followed Henry into the bathroom, where he looked at his sweaty red face in the mirror and sniffed when he touched the angry marks on his cheeks. He tried not to cry. One of the other boys handed him a paper towel and he tried to wipe off the tearstains. He tried, but it hurt when he touched his face and he wanted to cry again. Another boy patted his back a little uncertainly and a third said his name and then was quiet. They stood in the bathroom like a ring of stones and liked that it was quiet and cool. They didn't say anything. They looked at the tiles and their dusty shoes.

Soon Henry stopped sniffing and turned on the faucet. He turned the knobs as far as they could go and watched it run. The water hit the basin and sprayed out and hissed and roared like a downpour when the sound bounced off the tiles. They felt the water splashing them and they stared at Henry. He put his hands under the faucet and filled them and flung the water on his face. When the water hit the welts, he clenched his teeth and made fists and swallowed hard. Then he did it again and again, until he got used to the pain and water lay on the floor in small puddles and the sink started to fill because the drain was slow.

Stop it, said one of the boys, you're wasting all that water. Henry didn't answer. He kept splashing water on his face until his bangs were wet and dripping and the front of his shirt was soaked. He felt it trickling down his chest and pooling in his waistband. Stop it, said the boy again, and others joined him. They tried to reach in and turn off the taps, but Henry slapped their hands away. The bigger boy who had punched him reached

in but Henry pushed him savagely so he fell against the wall. The water reached the top of the sink and flooded over onto the floor. They yelled and grabbed at him and pulled his arms behind his back, but he shook free and knocked two of them over. One of them hit his head on the floor and started crying. Another lunged for him and fell into the puddles. Henry made a sudden, angry sound in his throat like he was shouting and crying at the same time and pushed through them out the door. He slipped at the doorway and kept going though he almost fell.

The other boys followed him. They left the tap running and they left the crying boy on the wet floor and followed him into the hallway and out the doors. They followed Henry across the packed dirt of the playground and down the hill into the woods. They yelled and shouted and sobbed at him as they ran. Henry stumbled when he got to the woods. Come back here, yelled the other boys and they tripped over roots and rises. Come back here, they yelled, though they didn't know why. They felt something hot and fierce and thirsty in them and when they yelled, they drank. Hey you, cried the bigger boy and he picked up a rock by the stream. Hey you there, he cried, and threw the rock. It hit Henry in the back and he yelped and slowed down. The other boys grabbed rocks and threw them at Henry. Some of them hit trees like shot bullets and knocked off bark. Some of them flew over his shoulder or landed behind his legs. Some of them hit him. One hit him in the head and he fell over. He heard cheers behind him and felt the ground shaking as they got closer. He heard the blood in his head beating like a river while he waited for them to come.

THE FIERY EYE

On the last day of school Gorsky and I were coming out through the main gates when my cousin said, *Aw hell* and dug in his jeans for his cell phone even though it hadn't made any noise, which wasn't right because Gorsky's phone always made noise no matter where he was, class, the movies, a grocery store, always something weird and embarrassing if I was with him, loons calling or monks chanting, never just a song like you were supposed to have. *And that's how you get attention*, he would say, and he was always right, he always got attention, though I'd said to him a thousand times I didn't want attention, I hated it, I just wanted to be left alone because, as Gorsky knew, I was always thinking, always anxious, and attention went right to my guts and woke up the rattlesnake who lived down there on an ugly black rock. This time his phone hadn't played anything at all, but he opened it anyway and was talking into it very seriously, nodding his head in understanding or sympathy, saying he'd be right over, then listening carefully some more and saying he hoped he could help, he hoped it wasn't too bad, and I was so worried and wondering who he was talking to that I never saw Uncle Shirov standing by the road under the big linden tree until we were right on top of him. Gorsky nodded solemnly at Uncle Shirov and slowed his pace just enough to point to the phone with his free hand and say, *Good to see you, uncle, I'm sorry, I have to take this*, and then continued his call, nodding and frowning some more even as Shirov looked right at me

from above his dark, thick beard and pointed one finger that meant stop, and I stopped while Shirov stepped forward from the tree like he was coming out of it himself and he could have been, his arms and legs were so long and his chest so wide he may as well have been a dark, awful tree. Then just before Gorsky turned the corner out to the Nevsky, I saw him snap his phone shut and wave back at me with a big grin on his face, which was when I saw how fast and terrible and brilliant he was and that he'd left me alone with the wolf.

I started to say, *Hello, uncle*, but I couldn't even get through those two words, I never could, because what Shirov did when you were talking to him was not say anything at all, just look at you with his dark angry eyes until whatever you were saying, even *Hello, uncle* sounded childish and absurd and there wasn't much left to do but feel ashamed and drop your eyes down his massive chest until they rested somewhere around where his heart might be. Except what I'd heard a hundred times from my aunts and even once from my mother was Shirov didn't have a heart, he had a little chicken coop where his heart was supposed to be and every now and then, every ten years or so, the little chicken in that coop would give him a nasty sharp nip in the side and he'd act like a person for a few days until he forgot about it and go on like he'd always gone on, huge and silent and furious with everything in the world, with dogs barking on the street, with phones ringing in buses and theaters, with my mother for marrying a small man from Moscow and having me. *Jesu Christi*, is what he said when he first met me, *Jesu Christi, this thing has spoiled the bloodline.*

Jesu Christi, and I was five at the time—five!—my first white night, my parents had decided to show me what the fuss was about and they woke me hours after I'd fallen asleep and said, *Let's go outside!* and that scared me because it had never happened before, I'd never been awake at such a late hour unless I was sick, and I thought, *Am I sick? I don't want to be sick.* And so I was already nervous, my stomach already a little upset from the strangeness of it all, the sky not dark like it was supposed to be at night, but still lit though the sun wasn't out, and I kept asking them, *Where is the light coming from?* which made them laugh over and over, though they never answered except to say, *It's magic!* Down along the Neva they pointed out the bridges all lit with colored lights and going up and down to let the nightships through and they took my hands and made me clap, though I didn't want to clap, I wanted to be back in bed in my room where it was dark and everything was how it was supposed to be. And Shirov found us there and I felt how my parents lost their playfulness when he arrived and I saw how small and worried my father looked beside him. *Is this him?* Shirov asked them, and my mother said, *Yes, this is him, this is Nikolai, Say hello Nikolai, this is your Uncle Shirov.* I remember Shirov leaning down to look at me, and he had to come down such a long way I thought he was coming out of the silver sky itself, and his dark eyes got close and angry and he said, *Jesu Christi, this thing has spoiled the bloodline,* though his beard was so thick it seemed like his mouth never moved, the voice just came out of the same far place where the light was hiding and I got sick right there on the Dvortsovaya.

It was no better, ten years later, standing there with him under the big linden tree outside the school gate, Gorsky somewhere out in the crowd on the Nevsky laughing and

laughing and talking on his phone and calling out to pretty girls, Gorsky, who hadn't spoiled the bloodline even if he hadn't improved it, who would be able to look Shirov in the eye in a couple years while I had stopped at his chest and even had to look up a little if I wanted to see that spot where the chicken sat in its coop. I tried to say hello again, but for months I'd been having this trouble with my throat where I worried about choking on my own saliva and dying from it someplace sad and common, like my own room or the school auditorium or right there by the street under a big linden tree if I didn't pay absolute attention to what I was doing when I swallowed, but that made swallowing even harder so I almost *did* choke sometimes just sitting in a chair or standing still talking to someone, and I could feel it starting there with Shirov who was looking down on me in the shadow of the linden tree and I knew he was going to command me to do something for him because that's what I was to him, someone who, if he had to exist at all, was going to do things for people who had things of purpose to be done.

Come tonight at eight, he said, and that was all he said, after all that standing there and looking at me and me trying not to choke, *Come tonight at eight* was all he said, then turned around and started off down the street toward the Nevsky in that gray wool jacket he always wore no matter how hot or cold it was. Which is when I remembered the Festival had started and my parents were letting me stay out the whole bright night to go to parties and have some fun, worried as they were that all I did was go to school and read books and sometimes play cards. *But I can't!* I called after Shirov and started to say it again when he turned around on the edge of the street in the full sunshine where he seemed somehow bigger and darker and he didn't even come towards me, just pointed at

me with the same finger he'd stopped me with before and said, *I'll be done by then* before he crossed and went away and I ran home just in time to beat to the bathroom the rattlesnake that had woken at the sound of Shirov's voice.

Of course I couldn't eat that night, I could barely eat most nights, worried as I was about choking and about looking like I wasn't worried about choking, even on nights I had nowhere to be after dinner other than my room, where I could eat in relative peace if I had some cheese and crackers and could hold on to the edges of furniture while I swallowed. At dinner my father asked me what I was going to do that night, which was good because you can't eat when you're talking and I knew I could talk my way to the end of the meal and slip some of the meat and bread into a napkin so it'd look like I'd been eating and so I'd have some later for when I was alone. *There's a party at Andre's?* I said and *Maybe go watch the bridges?* and my father nodded, sniffed, and took another bite because he worked for the city and had to listen to people all day so he didn't want to talk when he came home, he wanted to eat and watch some TV and then get on the computer and look at pictures of birds someone in his nature group had taken the weekend before, and he'd get jealous about some of those pictures because he wanted to be the one who took them.

My mother said, *You'll have a good time*, but she said it like she was asking me to do something I was supposed to resent, I knew she worried about me sitting in my room alone and reading too much because it worried me too, most of the books I read were badly written or stupid or uninteresting, but I read them anyway because I figured eventually I'd have to come across a good one and even in some of the worst ones were

scenes of sad people reading and reading in little lonely rooms until one night while it's snowing or storming they come across something so big it's almost miraculous and their faces go white not because they're scared but because light has come up somewhere inside them and even though it's late and they're shaking they go to the window and look out at the world and know something important has changed and things will be better from then on. Some nights, hanging from the edge of my desk while I tried to swallow a bite of bread, I thought, *This can't go on forever* even though I knew it could, and I kept choking and reading and waiting.

I took the subway down to Staronevsky and at eight I was outside Shirov's door a few streets up from the old monastery with the graveyard that made me nervous like the subway sometimes made me, all those things underground and claustrophobic so it was almost okay to be standing on Shirov's step even though I knew inside it was like being underground anyway, wood dark and heavy and never any lights on, only whatever came in through the windows and Shirov didn't clean the windows—I cleaned them once a year ago, he showed up under the big linden tree and pointed at me, told me to come to Staronevsky that Saturday, he had a job for me, but I was bad at it and missed spots, left streaks, forgot to change the dirty water in time, so Shirov shook his head and glared, never said a thing the entire afternoon, and later in my room I was playing cards when I realized he felt owed that work, it was how he tolerated me walking about, and that made the rattlesnake wake up and I never told my mother about that day.

Shirov let me in without saying a word and I followed him down the dark narrow hallway I remembered from before, the boards groaning under us like an old ship, all that

wood heavy with Shirov's smell which was the smell of basements and sawdust and pipe smoke, a smell that made me want to sneeze even though my throat was closing up and just before I started to panic we came out into the kitchen and there was a little more room and a little light got past the houses on the other side of the alley and made it brighter. In the kitchen was the smell of cooked meat but no pans or plates were out, on the table there was a picture of something in a new frame the size of a big book like an atlas and Shirov went to it and held it up and said, *Take this to Anna*, who was my aunt over on Kuznechy, banged it once on the table so a soft rain of sawdust came off it because Shirov knew some carpentry and had even redone the frames around his windows. I nodded and stood there and while I stood there my eyes got adjusted to the dimness and I saw what was in the frame, an icon of Christ, but a terrible one, one that got it all wrong from the stories I'd heard in church which never said anything about blood-red eyes or a broken nose, a jaw that sharp and angry, they didn't say anything about him glaring and fuming like that, his gaze somewhere off to the right, the muscles in his cheeks and temples tense, and in the dark background little spots of light where blurry awful things were happening, and I took a step back.

Shirov noticed this and stared at me and said, *What?* and I said, *Nothing, nothing*, but there went my throat again and I was thinking how miserable it would be for me to die in Shirov's dim kitchen with that icon watching the whole thing and how the last thing I'd see would be both of them glaring at me, and that wasn't really how I wanted to go out, not before I'd had that chance to sit up in bed some night with a book in my hands that would change everything, *Are you afraid of this?* Shirov asked me, and I shook my

head no but couldn't say anything at all, I was trying to swallow and Shirov said, *What's wrong with you?* but I still couldn't say anything and just kept shaking my head, my hand out and looking for something to hold onto and Shirov stepped closer and said it again and when I fell back against the counter gasping, he slammed a fist down on the table and yelled *What's wrong with you!* and I finally grabbed the counter edge with one hand and swallowed hard and shook as bad as the table did under his fist and that woke up the rattlesnake.

When I could talk again I said, *I can't* and he looked at me and I looked at the floor and said, *I can't, just mail it* and Shirov picked up the icon and held it in front of me, *This doesn't go in the mail*, he said, *you think this goes in the mail?* and I couldn't look at it, all I could do was hold onto the counter with both hands and hope someone would knock or the phone would ring, anything at all. Shirov kept holding the icon in front of me and asked, *Do you think about Christ?* and I shook my head, no, I didn't think about Christ, I was sixteen and could barely eat, how was I supposed to think about Christ? *Speak up!* he said and I said, *No, I like to read*, and Shirov just glared at me and said, *What kind of answer is that? You like to read? What kind of answer is that?* The rattlesnake rose up and I and wondered where the bathroom was, *Please*, I said, *can I use the bathroom?* and I must have looked as bad as felt because Shirov lowered the icon with a disgusted grunt and pointed back into the narrow hall, where I found a small half-bath and got sick in the sink. When it was over I ran the water for a while and splashed some on my face, then dried my mouth on my sleeve even though there was a little cream-colored hand towel hanging on a hook by the sink.

Back in the kitchen Shirov was sitting at the table, the icon wrapped in brown packing paper and tied neatly with twine. I sat down across from him where there was a glass of water, and I took a sip that was cool and good and I didn't have to think too hard to get it down even though I was shaking a little like I always do after I get sick. Shirov didn't say anything for a while, but I knew I couldn't go just yet, not without something more, I could feel Shirov gathering a storm but I was too tired to get out of the chair, I could have fallen asleep in it and forgotten all about the Festival and the parties I was supposed to go to. *Someday you'll have to be a man*, was all he said, though, and I said, *I know*, and tried another sip of water, *Do you?* he asked and stared at me in the faint light and I nodded because I knew I would, I worried about it most of the time. We sat there a little longer and then Shirov said, *You'll take this to Anna, she needs reminding* and I was too tired to fight even though I didn't want to go anywhere with that icon and only the thin brown paper between me and the terrible eyes and shattered nose. But Shirov stood up and I did, too, even though I went too fast and it made me dizzy and I thought it was all going to happen again, but nothing happened and I followed him down the narrow hallway, through the lingering smell of my own sickness and then out the door. I started to say something, but Shirov shut the door and I heard the bolt shoot home, so I walked out of sight of his house and then sat down on the curb with the icon beside me and decided there was no way I was getting on the subway again, I would walk over to Anna's house even though it would take a little while, I wasn't going underground again.

I stood up and started walking and after a little while I started feeling better, hungry almost, though I didn't dare risk anything by stopping for a cup of tea or some

soup. It was a little past nine and the Nevsky was busy, people hurrying by with beer and vodka and kvas and bags of food that made me even hungrier, the dampness of the Neva starting to come down alleys, phone conversations drifting from the stores and apartments above the street, and finally when I was about halfway, just north of Moscow Station, I decided to sit down in a café and have some bread and cheese.

While I sat there I untied the icon and undid the paper carefully, noted how Shirov had folded it so I could do it right back up, then turned the icon over and looked at it again, I thought this would be a good test if I could see it and also have a bite of cheese at the same time. I turned my back to the patio wall so I was facing the Nevsky, I didn't want anyone on the street to see what I had, but I learned right away I couldn't look at it and eat at the same time, it unnerved me too much. I turned it back over and folded up the paper carefully, perfectly, retied the twine as close as I could get it to the knot Shirov made. I left most of the bread and cheese sitting on the plate and went on walking as the sun sank lower, the trains at Moscow Station rattling and roaring close by, and it was close to eleven by the time I got to Anna's house, worried suddenly that maybe it was too late, maybe I should have waited until tomorrow, but I rang the bell and stepped back.

When my aunt opened the door and looked at me with a frown, I said, *This is from Shirov* and when she took it, still frowning, I said, *He wanted me to give it to you,* and that made my aunt mad and she swore and went on for a long minute about *Shirov thinks he's better than us, won't call anyone or send a package himself, has to get children to do his dirty work for him* and I started to say I was sixteen, but she went on *when he dies no one will care, you know that? Not even your mother, and she's got that*

soft heart of hers, but not even she'll care and I nodded and tried to back away, but then my aunt tore open the paper without even untying the twine and she swore again and thrust the icon at me. *What's this?* she said and she shook it in my face a few times, each time saying *What's this!* louder and louder until someone next door called out for her to shut up. *It's for you,* I said, but my aunt had stepped outside now and I could hardly hear the trains in the distance for her yelling at me, *You think I want this? You think I want this? You take it back to Shirov and tell him to go to hell, you hear?* I kept backing away, but my aunt followed me and threw the icon down on the ground at my feet. *You tell him to go to hell,* she said again and the neighbor yelled *Shut up!* once more and then she went inside and slammed the door.

I picked up the icon and brushed it off awkwardly. I felt like I should say something to it, but didn't. I tucked it under my arm facing away from me so I couldn't see it, and then wandered back out to the Ligovsky. To the east, out over the Neva, the sky was turning bright and silver where the darkness was growing, and I had the urge to eat again.

WHEN THE WATER RISES

During supper in the dining car the former Queen of the Lettuce Festival wanted to know if the world was ending.

“Now, listen,” she said. “You can tell us—we’re not the kind that panics. We just want to be ready, that’s all.” She nudged her husband beside her. “Isn’t that right?” she said, then said it again.

“Oh, yes,” said her husband. “We are calm, cool, and collected.” He had the red nose of a drinker and giggled to himself as he ate his salad.

She wasn’t talking to me. I was traveling alone and hadn’t shaved in four days. I’d learned that a young man traveling alone doesn’t get asked questions. He makes people nervous.

She was talking to the man sitting beside me, a middle-aged man in a clean blue polo shirt who had introduced himself as David. He was a geologist.

The Queen tapped a golden fingernail on the tabletop. Her nail polish was the same color as the rims of her glasses and the watch on her wrist. “Tell me,” she said, “I hear about these glaciers melting in Alaska and California. Is this true? We want to be ready, you know, when the water rises.”

The husband paused in his eating to bang down a fist on the table. “Always be prepared!” he cried. His wine glass shivered. He speared a cherry tomato on his fork and grinned at it.

The Queen turned to him. “Howard,” she said. She gave him a stern look through her gold-rimmed glasses. “We’re talking.” She turned back to David the geologist: “Excuse him,” she said, “he used to be a boy scout.”

“Eagle scout,” said Howard. “Once a scout, always a scout.” He put down his fork and picked up the wrapper the Queen’s straw had been in. “Watch,” he said, and winked at me. “Hitch knot!” he said and twisted the wrapper into a pretzel before it tore in half. He looked disappointed. “Oh,” he said. And after a moment, “I seem to have forgotten.” I handed him mine and he thanked me.

David the geologist resettled the napkin in his lap. “Actually,” he said, “there’s a glacier on Mt. Rainier that’s growing. I was up there last month.”

“Oh, dear,” said the Queen. “What does that mean?”

“Hard to say,” he said, “but you never hear about the growing ones. They’re not sensational enough.”

“Oh, dear,” the Queen repeated. “I wonder if they’ll make us extinct someday.”

“Oh, we’ll all be extinct someday,” David the geologist said. “We’ll die off, but the earth will go on. Something else will replace us. Maybe the insects, maybe the birds. But something will.”

“Awful,” the Queen said. “What an awful thing to think about.” She sat back and looked out the window. We were passing through the wide fields of eastern Montana. It was August and they were full of alfalfa and cutterbees and the hot evening sunlight.

A waiter came by and cleared away our dirty plates as the train swung into a long curve. He swayed with it perfectly and didn’t miss a step. When he returned Howard

said he was ready for some apple pie.

“I bet it’ll be the insects,” the Queen said at last. “There’s so many of them.”

“Could be,” said David the geologist. “Wouldn’t surprise me at all.”

“Me, neither,” said the Queen. She was quiet for a moment and touched her white hair lightly with a hand. “I just hope it’s not flies,” she said. “I don’t like flies.”

The waiter brought Howard’s apple pie and we fell into a silence as we concentrated on our food and the doom of the world. I didn’t think it would be the insects. I didn’t think it would be the birds, either. I had a feeling it would be something else entirely, something worse. But I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t worth fighting over and I’d already lost one fight that week.

*

Two days before in Chicago Lucy told me we weren’t working anymore. We were moving apart, she said.

“How are we doing that?” I asked. We were sitting under a black umbrella at an outdoor café. The Chicago River flowed beside us and two gulls clattered over it.

“I don’t know,” she said. She shrugged and sipped dark soda through a straw. It was hard to hear her. It was rush hour and the traffic was a loud wind that redoubled off all the buildings. I pulled my chair closer to the table.

“It’s like I’m going east,” she said, “and you’re going west.” I frowned and leaned toward her. A light had changed and a horn sounded as she spoke. “We’re just

going in different directions, you know?” There were cardboard coasters on the table and she pushed two of them apart with her fingertips.

“That’s not true,” I said.

“Vance,” she said. She tried to smile, but instead she tipped her head to the side and took another sip of soda. When she did her hair slid over itself like grain. It was shorter and lighter. I’d seen this the moment I got off the train and it worried me somewhere deep.

I’d mentioned it that afternoon on the platform. After we’d kissed hello I said she’d done something to her hair. Yes, she said. She had looked at me steadily. She’d gotten it cut, she said, and lightened, too. She’d told me this on the phone, she said. Didn’t I remember? Oh right, I said, she had. She hadn’t.

She wanted to know if I liked it. I didn’t. No, I wanted to say, are you kidding me? but I was thinking instead, thinking of how it was when we were both still in Shelby and we’d put food and beer in my truck on Friday afternoons after school and drive west through Cut Bank and on up to Glacier, where we’d hike until we found a good spot near water we could swim in before dinner. We’d sit against rocks and drink the beer while the stars came out above the lodgepoles and the spruce and the katydids began to tick and clatter in the brush; sometimes we’d hear the hoot of an owl and then Lucy’d make her eyes big and put her face close to mine and hoot at me until I’d kiss her to make her stop and she’d be laughing too hard to kiss me back. Later in the tent I’d pull her down on top of me and her hair was so long and thick that when it covered my face I couldn’t see a thing or really even breathe, but I’d hold her there like that after we’d finished, the

darkness beneath her hair so complete that nothing came in at all, not the starlight or the cricketsong or the damp smell of mud curving up from Rose Creek—even our breathing seemed to have gone someplace far away where it sat and waited quietly.

It was that stillness, I decided one night after a year with her had passed, it was that stillness that people must mean when they called something love.

“I can go east,” I said, though I knew it wasn’t true. I already didn’t like the city. It made my stomach heavy. In my suitcase back at her apartment was my return ticket to Shelby, and that’s where I wanted to be.

“Vance,” she said again. “No, you can’t.” She reached across the table and took my hand for a moment and squeezed it.

“Then you can come back west,” I said. I felt a little desperate, a little dizzy.

“I can’t do that, either,” she said. She didn’t take my hand this time. Instead I felt the firm pressure of the world pushing back at me. “I like this city,” she said. “I like my job and I like going out at night and dancing. I like all these people and all the noise. I’m happy here.”

I sat back in my chair and asked if there was someone else. She smiled sadly at me and said no, there wasn’t, and I believed her. I believed there was no one else, but there was still the city and that was still too much.

That night I lay in the dark on Lucy’s couch and tried to fall asleep. Yellow light came in through the blinds and I could smell her perfume in the seams of the cushions. Outside there were people calling to each other and laughing and airplanes rose and landed somewhere near. I covered my eyes with one hand and tried to think of one good

thing. Then I tried to think of nothing at all. In the end I sat up and waited for dawn and wondered once or twice if I might get sick and if I could be quiet about it.

When it was light enough I took a taxi to the station while Lucy still slept. I took a seat in coach, then moved to the observation car and watched the flat land and the thin rivers slide past until evening came and I started to feel hungry again. I didn't have much money, but I decided I deserved a good meal the way a soldier deserves a good meal after a battle, so I got a ticket for the dining car where they seated me with the Queen and her husband and David the geologist.

The Queen wanted to know if David the geologist was married. He wasn't.

"Why not?" she said. She pointed at him with a shining fingernail. "Look how smart you are. How many men know about the end of the world?"

"Oh," said David the geologist. He held up a hand, but he was smiling. "Please," he said.

"Any girl would be lucky to have you," the Queen said. She looked at the neat points of his collared shirt as she said this. I saw her glance at my hands. They were folded together.

"Well, it's not for lack of trying," said David the geologist. "I've met some nice women, but they never seem to stick around."

Howard had finished his apple pie and took up my straw wrapper. He worked feverishly at it for a few moments, looping and relooping it. "Double surgeon!" he said at last and held up his work. He gave it one last tug and it tore in half. He smiled sadly

as before. “Alas,” he said, “this trout has escaped.”

“Stop it,” said the Queen. She took the wrapper from his hands. “Now, listen,” she said to David the geologist. “Wallace and I met thirty-two years ago at the Lettuce Festival in Santa Cruz. I was crowned queen and he was my king. It was a wonderful place to fall in love. You never know how it will happen.”

“That’s a beautiful story,” said the geologist. “Maybe I should go to a Lettuce Festival.” He laughed a little, then stopped.

“I would very much recommend it,” the Queen said. “Wouldn’t you, dear?” She nudged Howard and he grinned.

“Yes,” he said, “go. Go!” He giggled again and gave me his rosy grin. I could see where a touch of apple still clung to a tooth.

“Maybe I will, too,” I said, and the Queen and David the geologist looked at me. I went on: “I think I might like that.”

There was a long moment and I was aware of someone in the car striking a dish too hard with a glass and then laughing. “Yes,” the Queen said finally. She looked at me through her gold-rimmed glasses and frowned a little. “It’s quite an experience.”

I felt the blood rush to my face. I picked up the pieces of Howard’s straw wrappers and rolled them into little pellets between my thumb and index finger. I arranged them like a stone circle around a crumb while the waiter brought the check.

Outside, the mountains pushed up on the horizon and the light grew long and late, making deep shadows in the dells. I held on to the edge of the table with one hand as the grade rose slowly.

THE HORN THAT SOUNDS THE NIGHT ENTIRE

The first time Hipple heard the noise it was the end of October and he was a little buzzed, tipped back in a lawn chair watching for satellites, and Ellie was out there with him, angry and not speaking but unwilling to nurse her grudge inside on so nice a night—an Indian summer night, cool and pleasant in the backyard, the moon long down, the neighborhood terrifically quiet for one so full of dogs and children, and the longer they sat there the quieter it seemed—even on the road beyond the pines the occasional passing car seemed muted by such stillness, the low pulsing of engine or bass barely discernible, just as a few miles away the interstate with its endless roaring slipstream made no sound at all. Yet when the noise came the first time and even the second, Hipple was consumed by his work and didn't hear it at all, his head tilted toward a sky full of satellites darting about, winking into existence in all quarters, emerging from or vanishing into the long curving shadow of the earth.

Everything was up there, as it was always up there, military satellites and spy satellites traveling north to south, south to north, scanning the entire globe every day as it spun beneath them, all the cool zones and war zones, weather satellites winging east to west, west to east, less concerned with where the future was going than what the cloudbanks and jet streams were doing in the present. Hipple watched them all because Rich was dead and someone had to watch, and that's what he was doing with the notepad in his lap, marking where the lights first appeared in the stars, which direction they

traveled, how long it took them to cross the sky or vanish into the shadow and go out like lamps. It was all this that had Ellie so upset, all the late nights of counting, tracking, logging the numbers on a spreadsheet Hipple had made on their computer, how he would sometimes come to bed at two or three or sometimes not at all, then drive off to school the next morning looking terribly like what he was—a middle-aged man with a dead brother.

She'd been understanding at first because it was his brother and because it was so sudden. In the days and weeks after the funeral, she'd been extra gentle with him, Rich just a few years older, forty-two, cruising around and around the track on a cold morning that March, then suddenly splayed on the all-weather, heart attack, and that was it, the ambulance called by two older women who'd been out there, too. Ellie encouraged Hipple to take some time off from work, take the high school's offer to cover his history classes for a couple weeks, but Hipple had declined it all—he wanted something to do, some order and distraction, and he kept coming in even though his students noticed quickly he wasn't altogether there, that he stopped in the midst of lessons on early civilizations to ask them what he'd been saying and that sometimes he missed a button on his shirt or didn't finish shaving and showed up with the beginnings of strange beards. In the end the principal pulled Hipple aside and said he was sorry about Rich, but Hipple needed to get it together, see a therapist at the very least, or they'd have to do something about it.

*

Hipple visited the therapist twice, once in April and once in May. He sat upright on one side of a pleather sofa and looked the therapist in the eye as often as he could, and the therapist, a man about his age with a bald head and books of Chinese numbers on his desk, told Hipple to talk about his brother. Were you close? the therapist wanted to know. Did you consider him a good friend?

Sure, Hipple said, he was my brother.

Not all brothers get along, the therapist said.

Well, we did, Hipple said. We got along fine.

What do you miss most about him? the therapist asked, and Hipple rolled his eyes because he was tired and sad and thought it one of the stupidest questions he'd ever heard, choosing a single thing he missed about someone.

Beats me, he said.

I want you to think about that, the therapist said. I want you to figure out what that is. For next time. That's your homework, he said, and grinned a little because he found it funny to be giving a teacher homework.

*

Hipple first heard the noise when he was reaching for his beer. It came from the east, from beyond the cornfields that lay on the other side of the pines and the road, and it was so low and faint he thought maybe he'd imagined it. He looked at Ellie to see if she'd heard it, but she had her head back against the lawn chair, her eyes shut, her arms across her chest. She looked content, almost happy, and he felt a pang of remorse flitter

through him, sorry she'd gotten tangled as she had in his shadow. He thought about reaching over to touch her, but then sat back and listened. When he heard the noise again ten minutes later, it was clearer, low and hollow like a horn, which was how Hipple imagined it—a horn, a real one, shorn from some animal that ran with thundering hooves across an African plain, that someone was blowing into out there beyond the fields. He reached over and nudged Ellie's arm.

Hey, he said, did you hear that? She pushed his hand away and he saw she really had been asleep.

She looked at him, annoyed. What? she said. What is it?

Listen, Hipple said, and gestured toward the pine trees and the road and the fields. There's something out there.

Mm, Ellie said, and slouched back down in her chair.

Hey, Hipple said, I mean it. Listen.

Ellie closed her eyes. I don't hear anything.

The noise came again, more distinct this time, closer. Hipple was uneasy. He stood up and tried to see through the pines, but even with the streetlight marking the curve of the road it was too dark to make out anything.

Ellie had opened her eyes again when she heard his movement. What? she said again.

Don't you hear that? Hipple asked. That sound? He cocked his head to listen better and saw he'd knocked his notepad to the ground when he stood. He picked it up and shook the dew from it.

Don't be mean, Ellie said. She sighed and closed her eyes.

How am I being mean? Hipple asked.

You're trying to scare me, she said.

No, I'm not, Hipple said. I'm not. There's something out there.

As he said this the noise came again, a low, deep horn that swelled up from somewhere so close Hipple backed into his chair and knocked it over.

Let's go, he said. He stumbled over the chair again as he picked it up and tried to fold it together. C'mon, he said. He tugged at Ellie's arm.

What's wrong with you? she said. She was looking at him half in annoyance and half in worry.

Hipple returned her look. How are you not hearing this? he said. It's right out there—he gestured at the pines.

I didn't hear anything, Ellie said.

Trust me, Hipple said. There's an animal or something out there. We should go inside.

You mean like a deer?

Yeah, Hipple said. Maybe. Let's go.

Ellie stood up slowly and stretched. In the dim light she looked at Hipple's wide eyes. You're a mess, she finally said, then folded up her chair. You need some sleep.

I know, Hipple said. He was watching the line of pines.

Ellie sighed and went in the house, and Hipple backed through the door behind her.

*

His sense of humor, Hipple said. It was his second session with the therapist. That's what I miss most.

The therapist nodded and took a sip from a cup of tea. How so? he asked.

Hipple shifted on the pleather and it creaked under him. I don't know, he said.

Sure, you do, the therapist said. Did he tell jokes? Do impressions? What?

Okay, Hipple said. It was late afternoon and the sun was coming through the window so he could see the dust drifting and falling through the air. Okay, he said again, and told the therapist about the party.

It had been the fall before, right around Homecoming, and Rich had thrown a party because he liked throwing parties. He'd invited a bunch of people from the CC where he taught earth science and astronomy and Hipple had invited a bunch of people from the high school. It was a good mix, and after a couple hours when people were starting to feel happy, someone turned on the stereo and a few of the women took off their heels and started dancing in the kitchen. Hipple was drunk enough by then to be half-hypnotized by dancing women, so he was standing in a corner just watching when Rich came up and stood there, too, watching with him. The music was loud and fast and in time more women and some of the men shimmied into the group so people bumped up against the counters and the fridge as the dance floor got smaller and smaller.

Hey, Rich said, I'm gonna play DJ, and Hipple just nodded because Ellie was out there and he was wondering if he should be out there with her, and when he turned to ask Rich what he thought, Rich was gone and Hipple was just standing there by himself,

swaying a little bit. Then another song came on and all the women shrieked and started dancing even faster, and just when Hipple had decided to join them and had drained the last of his beer, the song cut off abruptly and everyone cried out in protest.

It's okay, I've got it, he heard Rich calling from the living room, and a moment later there was a long, deep bass note that sounded like a whale sighing, and a couple of the women clapped and cheered because they thought it was Moby or Crystal Meth or some new electronica. But then the bass note just kept on going, wavering like it was about to go out, then rising a little bit, then falling again, repeating like that until it was joined by a high metallic keening so alien and so relentless it raised goosebumps on Hipple's arms. The crowd on the kitchen floor quieted and stilled, waiting for the drum machine to kick in and looking at each other in bemusement when it never did. A couple minutes passed like that, long minutes with the bass note following its weird rise and fall, the keening getting up into ranges that made Hipple wince, and the whole party ground to a silence with everyone half turned away from the sound, pained looks on their faces, unsure what to do or say in the envelope of such racket.

It was Hipple, finally, who made his way into the living room where Rich was standing at the cabinet stereo with his eyes closed and a smile on his face. He had a beer bottle in one hand and was tapping an uneven rhythm on it. Okay, Hipple said, that'll do, and hit the stop button. He stuffed the nearest CD into the changer and hit play and the sound of guitars and drums and bass all playing together was about the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard.

Afterwards, the spell broken, the dancers started again, the laughter picked up in corners, and some people spilled outside into the yard where it was cool and the moon was floating up.

What the hell was that? Hipple asked Rich, and Rich laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

The sound of the universe, he said. That's what that was.

Seriously, Hipple said.

Seriously, Rich answered, and pointed at a jewelcase on the cabinet top that read *Sounds of the Universe*. There was a picture of a satellite on the cover, hoops and antennae and cylinders protruding from it, star-dusted space behind it, and the crescent edge of a planet rising up in the bottom right hand corner.

Fucking spooky, Hipple said. It freaked everyone out.

Rich shrugged. I guess the universe'll do that, he said.

Later that night Hipple was undressing in the bedroom when he started laughing. Ellie was in bed reading and looked up at him. What is it? she asked. What's funny?

But Hipple couldn't answer her. He was pulling off a sock when the laughter got him good and he fell over on the floor, splayed out on his back and laughing too hard to do anything but lie there and laugh, and soon Ellie was leaning over the edge of the bed and laughing, too, just from watching him, and it went on until he was worried he might never be able to stop, until he had to focus hard to get his breathing back. They lay there a little longer, giggling now and then, and Ellie finally said, So what *was* it? and all Hipple could say was, He was right. That was fucking *funny*.

*

When they were back inside, Ellie said she was going to bed.

Are you coming? she asked, and Hipple shook his head.

Not yet, he said.

Ellie didn't look at him. She turned away and went upstairs and Hipple heard her throw her shoes in the closet. He heard the bathroom door slam shut and he felt again the pang of remorse for her. He stood there a moment longer, listening to the water run and the floorboards creak, thinking of the freckled backs of her hands appearing and disappearing as she rubbed citrus-scented aloe into them, and then he took a flashlight from a shelf in the laundry room and slipped back outside.

The noise came almost immediately from a place within the pines, closer than he'd expected, and he jumped back and flung up his hands like a boxer, the beam of the flashlight swiping across his eyes and blinding him. The noise was still low like a horn, but there was a resonance to it now, a bass that pressed against his eardrums and vibrated in his bones, and he blinked hard to rid the red and yellow spots swarming before him, swinging the flashlight about wildly as he did. What he saw when his eyes cleared were the empty wires of the neighbor's clothesline and the leaves on the ground. He pointed the light out to the pines.

Come on, he said, where are you?

He waited there by the door for long minutes as he held the light on the pines. From the upstairs window came the sound of the bedroom TV, the rise and fall of a laugh track, and then broken bits of voices as Ellie flipped through the channels.

Okay, Hipple said. Okay. He switched off the flashlight and waited another minute, then turned to go back inside. When he did, the noise came once more from the pines, hollow and haunting, louder this time, and even though Hipple knew he should go back inside, go upstairs and get some sleep beside the warm, scented body of his wife, he turned the flashlight on again and stalked across the yard toward the pines.

*

Tell me why you find that funny, the therapist had said, and Hipple had just looked at him.

He didn't get it, Hipple said to Ellie when he told her he wasn't going back.

He didn't get what?

Anything, Hipple said. *It*. Just wasn't a love connection.

Well, you should be seeing *someone*, Ellie said. You need to talk about this stuff.

I'll be fine, Hipple said.

No, you won't, Ellie said. I know you. And she a few days later she had the name of another therapist. She set up an appointment for Hipple, and when the day for it came in mid-June, he kissed Ellie goodbye at the door and then drove to the mall and wandered in and out of stores for an hour.

You skipped it? she said when he told her how it went. Why?

Hipple shrugged. Pointless, he said.

Did you reschedule? she asked and when Hipple didn't answer she sighed and called the therapist, apologized, and set up another appointment.

You could have called them, at least, she said. That just cost us fifty bucks. She looked him in the eye and Hipple saw she was losing the softness she'd granted him since March. You have to go to this next one, she said, but when the time came he skipped again and things between them began to harden.

*

When he was close to the pines Hipple shone the light up into the branches and tried to tell what was shadow and what was limb. He waited for a rustling, for the explosive start of a bird unsettled from its roost at night, but there was nothing, the trees as still as the air. Then he drew closer and aimed the light at the trunks instead of the branches, expecting to hear the catch of a breath, a deep warning growl, the emergence of some thing from the thick screen of needles, hackles raised high, eyes flashing back the light. But still there was nothing. It was when he finally stood straight up and relaxed a bit that the noise came again, this time from the fields across the street, and when he heard it he pushed through the pines and out to the road, where he cast the beam back and forth across the rubble of the cornstalks. The noise let forth a few long, low blasts from deep within the field and though Hipple hadn't even jogged in years, he broke into a dead run as he crossed the street.

The broken ground made running hard. Hipple pointed the flashlight in front of him and tried to run on the balls of his feet, dodging where he could the clumps of earth and the hard stumps of corn that kept catching at him and breaking his stride. The noise, the horn, he decided, continued to sound long, deep blasts that he felt in his chest and his spine as it shifted from the east to the southeast, quartering like wind. Hipple fell twice

before he made it to the end of the field, and by then he was breathing hard and smeared in places with dirt. Across his right shin was a bloody scratch from a splintered corn stalk, and sweat had broken out under his arms and at his temples. He had come out to a road that bent towards the southeast and he paused there to get his breath. But the horn sounded again, louder, more insistent, and when he heard it he turned off the flashlight and stepped onto the fog line, which he followed at a slow, steady trot past a subdivision and then an elementary school and on down the road.

*

Microwaves and gamma rays—that's what they'd been listening to, Rich told him in the days after the party, turned into sound through a bunch of algorithms. And it would've gotten better, too, Rich had said, if Hipple hadn't shut it off—the best stuff came later, the really great stuff like the terahertz, the UV light, the radio waves, all that was farther in, maybe twenty, thirty minutes or so.

Twenty or thirty minutes? Hipple asked. How long is that thing?

Hang on, Rich had said, and he left the den where they were watching Thursday night football. He came back with the CD and popped it into a boombox sitting atop a bookshelf. He muted the TV and then held down the fast forward button for a minute.

It's okay, Hipple said. I really don't need to hear more of it.

Yeah, you do, Rich said. He let go of the button and the den filled up with strange chirps and moans, heavy vibrating buzzes and dissonant echoes. Sometimes the moans and buzzes would stop and there would be only silence for a long moment, and then another weird sequence would begin. Hipple shifted uneasily in his seat.

Okay, he said, that's enough.

Takes a little getting used to, Rich said. I like it, though.

It's creepy as hell, Hipple said.

Well, Rich said, that's what it would sound like. He stopped the CD.

If that's true, I'm glad I can't hear any of it, Hipple said. Put the game back on.

Rich shrugged and unmuted the TV. He glanced at the score. This thing's over, he said. Let's go outside for a bit, see what's flying around up there tonight. He picked up the clipboard where he kept track of the satellites he saw.

But Hipple found himself unnerved. He glanced at his watch and said he'd better be getting home or Ellie would get annoyed.

Rich shrugged again. Suit yourself, he said, and saw Hipple to the door.

*

Hipple had been running for over an hour when he noticed the horn was changing—there was still the deep bass of it, the bone-vibration, but there was something else to it, too, something lighter, almost string-like. On a street in a darkened neighborhood he slowed to a walk as he listened to it and he felt for the first time how tired and thirsty he was, how the sweat had soaked through his shirt and into the waistband of his underwear.

He guessed he was a few miles south of home, in the subdivisions that circled the reservoir. The horn bent its course every quarter hour or so, and he sensed he was orbiting the lake; he could smell its dampness in the troughs of the hills. Now and then the lights of a car flashed in front or behind him, and he would duck behind bushes and

trees until it passed, unwilling to explain why he was out so late, running in jeans and a polo shirt. At a dark, quiet corner he stopped walking. He could smell the piles of leaves lining the street and a drift of woodsmoke on the air. He stood and listened carefully and decided he was right about the strings, that they were getting clearer and clearer beneath the steady call of the horn, and when he'd decided this he started running again. Out through the neighborhood he went onto a road that swung past the lake, the shoulder narrow and lined with gravel and pine needles, and then there was a quick glimpse of the lake itself, a faint sheen of light barely reflecting the moonless sky.

The road climbed from there and he had to walk more and more often, his muscles beginning to protest in earnest, but as he climbed the hill the strings grew more distinct and the horn began to diminish so that for a few moments at a time he couldn't hear it at all. For the first time he began to worry about what would happen if he lost the sound entirely, and he picked up his pace again until at last he crested the hill and came out on the road above the highway, the blaze of lights from gas stations and fast food restaurants momentarily stunning him. He found a damp five in one of his pockets and went into nearest gas station to buy a bottle of water.

The clerk was in his late teens, tall with a sleeve of tattoos on one arm. He took the bill from Hipple with a look of disgust and wiped his hand on his jeans.

Gross, he said. He put the change on the counter and pushed it toward Hipple.

Hipple had uncapped the bottled and drained half of it in one long breath. Sorry, he said when he was done.

The clerk pumped sanitizer into his hand from a bottle on the counter.

Was out for a run, Hipple said.

Whatever, the clerk said.

Hey, let me ask you something, Hipple said. He kept going when the clerk didn't answer. You hear anything weird out there tonight?

Nope, said the clerk. He settled back on a stool behind the counter and picked up a magazine he'd been reading.

Listen, Hipple said. He went to the door and pushed it open. He heard the sound immediately, the low, fading pulse of the horn and the strings flitting above it. The electronic bell above the door dinged.

Nope, the clerk said again, and Hipple nodded and went back outside. He could see the clerk watching him through the glass doors, so he went around the side of the building and finished the water, then tossed the bottle in the trash. The sound was coming from the east again, from where the stars were coming up out of the ground, and Hipple ran steadily toward it, ran across the highway overpass and out of the vapor lights of the gas stations and fast food restaurants, his course straight until the sound quartered again and he turned down a slow hill and back into another neighborhood.

The sound was changing again, the horn almost gone, the strings rising and mingling and twining with something like the tinkling of piano keys. Hipple tossed aside the flashlight, tired of its weight, and kept running. The sound grew louder and louder and he wondered if he could chase it all night and never find its source, heart and legs eventually ceasing with the effort and leaving accounted all those lights in the sky.

By the time the sound turned him back onto his own street he could scarcely hear anything else—the slapping of his shoes against the pavement, even his ragged breathing seemed distant and meaningless, something that was happening outside of him and faraway. The sound grew louder when he entered the backyard, louder still when he entered the house, and when he ran up the stairs to their bedroom, it was so loud it was hard to see, the air was thick with it, there were melodies in it he couldn't quite follow though he could hear the horn in it again, the strings, parts of other instruments he didn't even know, and when he closed his eyes and stood in the doorway he felt it coming out of his skin, out of Ellie's skin, so strong he could taste it on his tongue. It was so beautiful he felt almost sick. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard.

COME ALIVE

On a fall afternoon seven months after Celia's husband died, a man from Tru-Lawn came to spray the yard. When he rang the bell Celia was in the kitchen, listening so hard to Richard's last tape she had her ear against the player's speaker, her breath held, her eyes narrowed in concentration; when the bell sounded she cried, "Oh!" and jerked a knee into the table hard enough to bruise herself.

The bell rang a second time and then a third, and by the time she limped down the hall and opened the door the man was turning away. He was thin and short and looked disappointed that she'd answered.

"I'm here to spray," he said, and waved in the general direction of the truck. He was wearing a green polo shirt and khakis with *Tru-Lawn* stitched in neat block letters on the breast pocket, and beyond him in the driveway was a green truck with the same neat lettering printed down the side and across the hood.

"I didn't order any spraying," Celia said. She kept the screen door locked and talked to him through it.

"Your husband ordered it," the man said miserably. He turned toward her and held up a metal clipboard in one hand and pointed to some lines near the bottom where she saw Richard's childish scrawl beside the type: "Richard Ebaugh." For a moment she

got dizzy and felt like the man and the truck were receding at a fantastic rate and she wondered if she was going to be sick.

The man turned the clipboard around and looked at it. “Yeah,” he said. “Last winter.” He held it back up for her and pointed to the paper again. “We were here in the spring, too.”

“I don’t remember that,” Celia said. She leaned against the doorframe and waited for the feeling to pass.

“Once in the spring, once in the fall,” the man said. He looked at a spot beside her and she saw how bloodshot his eyes were and that he’d missed some places shaving.

“Oh,” Celia said. She couldn’t remember Richard saying anything about it, but it sounded right. Even after two years the novelty of owning a house hadn’t worn off for him, and she could see him standing on the front porch with his arms crossed and satisfaction on his face. “I had it *sprayed*,” he’d be saying. “Soon it’ll be so high we could hide a lion in it.”

“Keeps the grubs down,” the man said. He still wasn’t looking at her. “Boreworms. You know.”

“Oh,” Celia said again, and she remembered how after the funeral she’d gone to stay with her sister for a few weeks so she wouldn’t be alone.

“It’ll just take an hour or so,” the man said. He took a pen from his breast pocket and held the clipboard out. “You just need to sign here,” he said, and pointed to a line below Richard’s at the bottom of the page. He blinked hard and stood there expectantly.

“I’m sorry,” Celia said. “It’s just—”

The man stopped her. “It’s okay,” he said. “Here.” He sat the clipboard and the pen by the door and took a step back. “You can just sign it while I’m working,” he said, “and I’ll get it when I’m done.”

“Okay,” Celia said. “Thanks.” They looked at each other for a moment and she saw how narrow his shoulders were and how he slouched like a scolded child as he stood. He was younger than her, she decided, at least ten years. Mid-twenties or so.

The man turned away and went down the driveway to the truck. He moved without swagger or bounce in his step; he didn’t move like a young man. She watched him as he opened a side panel on the truck and took out his things, watched him while she retrieved the clipboard and signed on the line below Richard’s name. She tried not to look at it, but it was right there, as if he’d written it only a few moments before, then come back inside the house smelling of sunlight and shaving foam. She felt her chest tighten so it was hard to breathe and she knew she’d be shaking in a minute. She replaced the clipboard and returned to the kitchen, where she sank quickly into a chair.

There had been plenty of moments like that in the first few months after Richard dropped over on the track at the high school. A massive coronary, shocking in its suddenness, never a single warning sign, rare for someone barely forty. Two women, older, walking partners, had been out there, too, despite the cold March morning, and saw him go down. One of them called 911 from a cell phone and even though the paramedics got there fast there wasn’t anything to work with. Celia got the story from the women themselves, both of whom were church-goers who felt it a moral obligation to offer Celia what they could, namely their prayers and the story of her husband’s death. One

moment, they said, he was running in one of the inner lanes—they were slow, so they kept to the outside ones—and the next he looked like he'd been pushed hard from behind, so when he hit the ground his momentum carried him forward a few more feet. They'd seen him out there before, they said, he seemed like such a nice man. He'd always smiled at them and said good morning.

After the funeral Richard kept coming alive in ways she hadn't expected: bills addressed in his name, telemarketers calling and asking for Richard Ebaugh, occasional emails from distant, periodic friends who hadn't heard the news. She'd worked hard to eliminate such reminders. She'd called the utilities to put them in her name only. She'd had the phonebook entry changed. One evening just before she pulled into the driveway, she stopped the car in the middle of the street and got out so she could peel, one by one, the gold and black stickers from the mailbox that spelled out "The Ebaughs," then couldn't eat dinner for the lump in her throat. But his name, written in his own sloppy hand instead of set in type, went through her fast and hard and left her trembling as she sat down before the tape recorder.

The tapes, she knew, were probably a bad idea, not the kind of thing that would help her move on, and moving on is what everyone wanted her to do. When friends and family called or came by to ask how she was doing, she told them the truth for that day: she was okay or it hurt a lot or she'd gone an hour or two without thinking about it all. Sometimes, especially with her sister, she'd cry, and Maureen would just put an arm around her and let it go and not try to say anything that was supposed to be wise or comforting. But Celia never told anyone about the tapes.

Richard had taught earth sciences at the community college and he liked to tape his lectures before he gave them so he could hear if he was making sense. That's what he said. She'd laughed when she'd first learned of it. "You just like to hear yourself talk," she'd told him, and he'd grinned because it was true, he did. He'd had a radio voice, full and vibrant, and sometimes in bed she'd ask him just to talk so she could fall asleep listening to it. "What should I say?" he'd ask, and she'd tell him anything, whatever, talk about the weather, and that's what he'd do, because that was his favorite part of the classes he taught, the weather, and she'd fall asleep hearing him list different types of clouds or fog or winds or just forecasting his own predictions for the week, a touch of childish wonder in his voice even after all those years.

Ever since she'd remembered the tapes a few months before, she'd been listening to them in the mornings; it was too hard now to hear his voice at night when she was trying to fall asleep. But in the mornings when she needed something to get her through the rocky space between waking and breakfast and starting the day, she'd listen to them on the tape recorder at the kitchen table. At first they all broke her, especially the ones where he'd crack jokes or call to her in the middle of speaking to ask if they were having coffee or if she wanted to watch something later on TV. But eventually she could listen and smile a bit and in time it was a little like having him there with her, talking to her about the earth and the sky while she cut up an apple or watched the birds flick about in the backyard, and she kept a stack of tapes in a kitchen cabinet so she could get to them easily. Richard had made hundreds of tapes—he'd been almost ten years at the CC—and he never got rid of them, just put them in shoeboxes and Tupperware bins, sometimes in

their cases, sometimes not, all of them sticker-labeled with a date and the lectures they held. Even after she'd bought him a digital recorder on Christmas he kept right on with the tapes, Maxxels and Fujis and Sonys he'd bought in bulk because he knew they were going the way of the eight-track. But by October Celia had gone through all of them a couple times—on the worst days she'd listen to five or six in a morning or afternoon—and on a rainy Saturday in September when she saw she was nearing the end of them, she'd gone through his desk, his closet, his boxes in the basement to see if she'd missed a tape that had been squirreled away, but as the day went on and the house grew darker and darker, she ended up sitting at the kitchen table with an untouched glass of wine, wondering once more if she'd finally come up against something too vast for her to handle.

But then, only a few days before the lawn man came, she'd driven Richard's car for the first time in months, and when she'd gone to turn on the radio, she'd bumped a button and the deck ejected a tape. She'd pushed it back in to listen, but it was garbled and distant and she couldn't make out what it was until she turned the volume all the way up. It was Richard, she realized, Richard talking beneath the hiss and static. She ejected it again and looked at it while she drove, but there was no label on it. She flipped it over again and again in her hand as if a label might appear if she just kept at it. Back at home she'd put the tape in the player in the kitchen and listened closely to it, first with the volume turned way up and then with headphones on. After a while she could tell by the cadence of the voice that it was a lecture, but she thought also there was something different about it, something in the sound that made it more purposeful than just practice.

She'd put it in the two other players in the house, first in the boom box upstairs in their bedroom, and then in the big living room stereo they'd bought after they moved in, where she could play with equalizers and treble and bass, but which still didn't let her hear what he was saying. She thought about taking it to a professional, someone with a machine that could remove the static and give her Richard's pure, clear voice, then decided that was crazy. It was just another tape, she told herself, another lecture about rocks or winds, something she'd heard many times before. But she'd gone through the Yellow Pages anyway, audio, electronics, music.

The lawn man was kneeling in the middle of the front yard. Celia saw this when she steadied and got up from the table to see what he was doing. He was kneeling on the ground with his back to her, two green plastic tanks like scuba gear sitting beside him. She watched him poke at the grass and then write something on another clipboard. She went back to the kitchen and boiled some water for tea, then came back to the window and watched the man strap the tanks to his back and begin spraying the grass with a long angled nozzle attached to a rubber hose. He wandered here and there in the yard, sometimes stopping to kneel again and put his face down almost to the grass itself before he stood up and continued spraying. She watched him for a little while and then went back into the kitchen, where she turned on her laptop and decided to find a place, any place and anywhere, that could tell her what was on that tape.

The urgency of her need to know surprised her, even embarrassed her. For a moment as she sat there at the table, she felt a brief flash of something like shame, and she almost closed the computer. "It's just a lecture," she said aloud, then felt

embarrassed to have spoken even that and looked out the window, half-expecting the lawn man to be standing at the glass watching her in bemusement. But in the days since she'd found the tape, she'd come to believe it bore some kind of message, Richard speaking directly to her as if he'd known all that would happen, had seen it long ago in portentous patterns forming and colliding, and wanted to give her something to help, some way through it all. So she typed and searched and in fifteen minutes had found a place in Philadelphia that could clean the tape and another in Baltimore. She wrote down the phone numbers on a napkin. She kept searching. When she finally looked up again the lawn man had come into the backyard and was going once more through his ritual of kneeling and noting.

She watched him for a few minutes as he moved around the backyard, sometimes cocking his head like a robin when he was down near the ground. He hadn't taken off the tanks and the way the sun hit them she could see the dark liquid moving inside as he did. Eventually he drew close to the house and she watched him kneel down once more and paw lightly at the grass, then make a note on his clipboard. And then he stayed like that. Celia was watching him and thinking of the tape when she realized he'd been like that, balanced on one knee, for longer than seemed right. She closed the laptop and half-rose from the chair when, even with his back to her, she saw that he had put a hand to his face and that his shoulders were shaking. The dark liquid in the tanks shook with him.

Celia tapped on one of the kitchen windows, but the man didn't seem to hear. Then she undid the lock and pushed the window sash all the way up. "Hey," she said. The man didn't answer, but dropped his hand with a start and stood up so fast the tanks

threw him a little off balance and turned him toward her. “Hey,” she said again, “are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m okay.” He brushed a hand quickly across his eyes and started to move away.

“Are you sure?” Celia asked.

“Yeah,” the man said again, but he didn’t move or look at her. Celia saw dark stains under his arms and realized how warm the air was coming through the window screen. It was Indian summer and she smelled new-cut grass. They stayed like that for a moment, Celia leaning into the window and the man stuck in a half-turn. Then Celia asked, “Do you want something to drink?” and after a moment the man nodded.

“Thanks,” he said. “It’s pretty hot out here.”

“Go sit over there in the shade,” Celia said and pointed to the maple tree. The man nodded again and she closed the window. She watched him shuffle toward the tree, then sink down heavily beneath it. He didn’t look good. He looked too young and too tired.

Celia put ice in a glass and filled it at the sink. The ice cracked when the water hit it and she wondered for a moment if it was all a scam, the man just acting to get her out of the house, his partner coming in through a window and cleaning the place out while she played nurse. Or not even robbery. Something worse. But then she was opening the door from the back porch and walking across the grass to the maple where the man was sitting. The sun was moving towards the west, the tree limbs bouncing lightly in the thin breeze. The sharp smell of chemicals blew in from the front yard.

“Here,” Celia said. She handed the man the glass and he drank it all quickly. “Thanks,” he said. He handed the glass back and sat there and Celia could see where tears had cut through the sweat on his face. She stood there awkwardly with the glass and looked down at the top of the man’s head, where she saw a small bald patch forming on his crown.

“It’s hot,” she said, and the man nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, “they didn’t say it’d be so hot today.”

Celia tapped a fingernail against the glass and it made a ringing sound that reminded her of weddings.

“Bad allergies,” the man said. “Always get me this time of year.” His voice caught and he cleared his throat hard.

“Hay fever,” Celia said, and the man nodded.

“Thanks again for the water,” the man said. He started to rise, but the tanks made it hard for him. “I’ll finish up and get out of your hair.”

“It’s okay,” Celia said. She watched him lurch to his feet.

“You should have a cap or something,” she said. “Something to keep the sun off your head.”

“Yeah, probably,” the man said. He came up to just above her chin. “Listen,” he said suddenly, “you won’t say anything, will you?” He looked right at Celia, squinting in the light until his eyes were almost closed. “You know, about”—he gestured at his eyes and looked away.

“No,” Celia said, “I won’t say anything.”

“It’s just been a bad week,” the man said, “you know?” His voiced wavered again but he brought it under control.

“Yeah, I know,” Celia said. She felt the sunlight hot on her neck and the skin would be tender by evening.

“My girl—” he said, then stopped. “Forget it. You don’t wanna hear this.”

Celia started to ask, but the man cut her off. “It’s not bad,” he said, and flung his arm out.

“What?” Celia said.

“The yard,” he said. “It’s not bad at all. You’ve got that brown patch out there and another over there”—he pointed to the strip under the clothesline—“that’s grubs, you know, probably some webworms. Looks dead, but nothing really bad. Nothing that can’t be fixed,” he said, and reached back to tap the tanks with a fingernail.

“That’s good,” Celia said.

“Yeah,” the man said. He was a little better now that he was talking about things he knew. “Some yards in this neighborhood, you should see them, they’re just disasters, getting eaten alive. Not much to save after a while. But you guys must be doing something right, huh?” He pulled his shirt away from his back and fanned it a little to get some air in.

The wind shifted a little and blew a squadron of yellowing oak leaves across the yard.

“Okay,” the man said, “I’ll finish up now.”

Celia nodded as the man shifted the straps on his back. She went back inside and the cooler air in the kitchen felt good. She put the glass in the sink and splashed some water on her face. Then she sat down again at the table and called some of the numbers on the napkins. "I have a tape I need to get cleaned up," she said. "If I bring it in, can someone fix it?" "You can mail it to us," they said. "You can't bring it in because we outsource that kind of thing." "Oh," she said, "then can I just take it to that other place instead?" "No," they said, "that's not how it works." "How long will it take if I mail it in?" she asked. "A few weeks," they said. They told her prices that she wrote down on the napkin and then she hung up. She looked out the window and saw the man still spraying, working his way closer and closer again to the house.

Celia put the tape into the player and turned the volume up. Under the hiss she could hear Richard's voice rising and falling and she rose to unplug the fridge so it wouldn't buzz and distract her. She thought at the beginning she could hear him say, "Well, now," which is how he often started his lectures, but then she couldn't be sure if the lecture went on from there or what it was about or how he continued. "Well now," she thought she heard him say, and then though the next part hissed at her, she followed the rise and fall of his voice and thought maybe the next part, following some lost phrase, had the word "plate" or "plain" in it. "Well, now," he said. Celia hit the stop button and sat back in her chair. She rewound the tape and listened again with the headphones on, and it seemed most definitely he was saying, "Well now," and the word "plate." She rewound the tape again and looked up to see the man outside undoing the tanks from his

back and stretching. Then he picked up the tanks by a handle on top and began moving off to the side of the house.

Celia rose quickly and was on the back porch. Through the screens she called to him. “Wait,” she said, “are you done?”

The man started a little again at her voice and then came back around the hedges so he could see her. “Yeah,” he said, “that’s it. You don’t want to walk around out here for a while, though. Tomorrow’d be fine. Tomorrow morning or afternoon. Got to let the stuff sink in.” Celia saw he was red from the sun and offered him another glass of water. The man hesitated. “No,” he said, “I’ve bothered you enough. I should get going.”

“It’s not a problem,” Celia said.

“Well,” the man said. “I guess I could.”

“You can sit here if you want,” Celia said, and gestured at the porch.

“Okay,” the man said after a moment. He came to the door and sat the tanks down just outside of it. “Sorry about the smell,” the man said. “It’s hard not to smell like chemicals at the end of a day.”

“It’s fine,” Celia said. “Here,” she said, and picked up a lawn chair leaning against the wall. She hadn’t brought it in from the wet spring and there were blooms of rust in places.

When she came back out the man was slumped in the chair. He looked even smaller and younger like that, slouched like a grade school student. Celia handed him the glass of water and pulled another chair up for her. She sat down near him and put her

feet up on the brickwork. The chemical smell came hard off the man but it didn't bother her. She liked sitting out there with the wind in the trees and the sun laying its bright long light across the grass. They didn't say anything for a few minutes and the man finished his water and then held the glass carefully like he didn't know what to do with it.

After a moment he pointed out to a dull brown patch in the center of the yard. "That'll come back," he said. "Give it a little time and that'll be good as new."

"Hey," Celia said, "how do you know?"

"Know what?" the man asked.

"How do you know what's down there? What to spray for?"

"Oh," the man said, "you just get an eye for it. Sometimes I just know, yeah? Just know after a minute or two what's going on down there." He almost smiled, but she could see how red his eyes still were, and his smile vanished. He rolled the glass in his hands and didn't say anything else. A pair of sparrows twisted by, chattering, on their way to the neighbor's oak trees.

"Hey," Celia said, "do you want to listen to something?"

The man looked up, startled. "Listen to what?" he said.

"Hang on," Celia said, and she went back in the kitchen and returned with the tape and the player. "It's a tape," she said. "Can you just listen to it and tell me what you think is on it?"

The man shrugged. "I guess," he said. "What is it?"

"Just a tape," Celia said, "I think it's just a speech, but I can't tell."

The man rolled his glass between his hands for a moment and looked back out at the yard. “I don’t know,” he said. “Seems a little weird.”

“Just have a quick listen,” Celia said. “Then you can go if you want.”

The wind lifted again and they could smell the sharpness of the pesticide. “Yeah, okay,” the man said. “Okay. Sure, let’s hear it.”

Celia set the tape on a small wicker table between them and pressed play. There was the hiss and then the static and the blurry, garbled voice in the background.

“That’s terrible,” the man said. “Is this thing broken?” He gestured at the tape player.

“No, it’s fine,” Celia said, “just listen and tell me what you think you hear.” She thought once more she heard Richard say, “Well now,” but after that the sound seemed to change and couldn’t hear the word “plate” anymore, just the wash of static.

“Okay,” the man said. He slouched lower in his chair.

“It’s a speech,” Celia said again. “I think it’s a speech.”

“All right,” the man said.

“Just listen,” Celia said, and they did. While they listened the shadows grew out longer and the sun continued its crawl into the west and after a while there was a bright, blinding flare when it caught a window of the house behind them. Celia closed her eyes and tried not to think too much and she listened to Richard saying “Well, now” and sometimes she thought she heard a question rising in pitch at the end of sentences—
“Doesn’t it?” The muttered words that sounded like science but not quite. She glanced over once at the man slouched in his chair and saw he had his eyes closed, head dropped

almost to his chest, but she knew he was awake because every now and then he rolled the glass between his hands. They listened to all forty-five minutes of the tape, and when it hit the end the stop button shot up on its own, and the man opened his eyes.

“What was he talking about?” he asked. “I heard a man talking, but that’s about it.”

“I don’t know,” Celia said. “You couldn’t hear anything?”

“Not too much,” the man said. “There’s too much noise in it. He was laughing a lot, though.”

“He was?” Celia asked.

“Yeah. Do you know who it was?” the man said. He had turned a little toward her now and since she sat a little behind him, he had to twist to see her.

“It was probably about weather,” she said. “A speech about weather.”

“Oh,” the man said. “Well, I guess people like to hear about the weather. I don’t know about making speeches about it, though. But it sounded like he was having fun.”

“I guess,” Celia said. “You think he was laughing?”

“I think so,” the man said. “Somewhere in the middle? I’d have to listen again, but”—he checked a cheap plastic watch—“I better go.” He sat forward and put the glass carefully on the brickwork. “Listen,” he said, “thanks again. Are we cool?”

“Yeah,” Celia said. “It’s okay. You were nice to listen to this with me.”

“You should give it to someone,” the man said. “A professional, you know. I bet they have all kinds of stuff to fix it up.”

“Maybe,” Celia said. “I might do that.”

The man moved to the door. "Take care," he said. He picked up the tanks and went around the side of the house. In a little bit Celia could hear the truck start, then back down the driveway. Between the neighboring houses she could see it turn out to the main road and then disappear with a faint roar.

Celia sat outside until the sun went down behind the houses on the street behind her and the evening cool rose up from the chemical grass and the birds started their night songs as they rustled and scolded each other in the branches of the maple tree. When the sun had finally vanished and night started to settle in earnestly, she watched the stars rising in the east and tried to name the few Richard had taught her. He had taken her out in the yard one night shortly after they moved in and enthusiastically pointed out constellations she'd never even heard of, and though she found it wonderfully romantic, she'd been dizzied by the bowl of the sky and couldn't retain a single thing he said.

Now she rewound the tape once more and folded her arms around herself to stay warm. "Well, then," she heard Richard saying beneath the hiss, and she closed her eyes and imagined him in the den, pacing back and forth as he spoke, tethered to the machine by the little microphone in his hand, she imagined him in his classroom at school, pacing back and forth behind the Formica lab counter and gesturing out the windows at the clouds and the hills and the sky beyond. "Well, now," she pictured him saying as he grew excited, almost joyful, "It seems impossible, doesn't it? This whole place seems impossible, doesn't it? Doesn't it?" And then he was laughing and laughing like he did when he was happiest, that radio voice rich and knowing and steady as an anchor. And as she nodded off, Celia imagined the grass in the yard doing the same thing under the

rising stars, laughing and laughing as their roots sucked up the spray and pushed alive in the darkness, asking themselves with such delight, “Hey, how impossible is *this*?”

STEELED

The car my father was eating when I was a child was a yellow 1976 Buick Skylark that he kept on blocks in the little garage that stood apart from the house. He had always been eating it, for as long as I could remember, and there were parts of it I'd never seen—the bumper and fender, for example, the wheels, the trunk lid, the grille, etc.—because he'd eaten them all years before I came along, back when it was just him and my mother living in the house and he was still working track maintenance for the railroad. But even by the time I was eight, there was still a lot of car left. A Skylark is a big meal, even for someone with my father's appetite.

I wasn't allowed to eat the car—my mother's rule. I'd tried, of course, very early on, when I was three, and my mother had caught me in the driveway biting a long piece of panel flashing my father had pried off the car and left sitting on the pavement. I remember how hard she grabbed my wrist and how her face filled the sky above me like a sudden cloud, terribly twisted like she was going to yell and cry at the same time, just before she swatted me across the bottom and sent me to my room. A little later, when I was still red-eyed and whimpering, my father sat me down on a chair in the kitchen and, with my mother watching from the doorway, made me promise I would never try to eat the car again. It was only for him to do, he said; it was not for children. Did I promise? I did. It was the first promise I ever made, and I stuck to it because I had never seen my father look so grave before or so pale; I think it was the first time I'd seen him without a

smile, and when he put his hand on my shoulder, it was so heavy I felt I could hardly bear it up.

As I got older, though, I was allowed to sit with my father and watch him eat the car. I knew this concession had not come easily and that it was always under debate; often at night I could hear them arguing about it in their room with the door shut, and though I couldn't often make out the words, I knew from the pitch of their voices that it was the car they were talking about, the car, and my father, and me. Sometimes I fell asleep listening to them argue, my mother's tone always frustrated and aggrieved, my father's placating, almost mild, and they would continue to argue in my dreams, where my mother's face—a pretty, elfin face with dark eyes and dark curly hair—would twist awfully, starting at her lips and then going outward like a ripple until I couldn't see her face at all. And then I would wake, hot and scared and paralyzed, a great sorrow for her locked up in my body.

Still, I loved watching my father eat the car; it didn't take me long to understand that none of my friends' parents were eating cars, and this knowledge made me tremendously proud. So in the winter after I finished my homework, I would go out to the garage and, because there was no room to open up even a lawn chair, I would sit on the broad hood of the car and watch him, and my father would lean against the wall or sometimes sit on the edge of the hood beside me. Up close like that I could see the muscles of his jaw striate and flex when he bit into something, and I heard how different materials made different noises when he chewed them—spark plugs cracked like ice, body metal rasped like a file, the plastic dashboard crunched like chips or cereal flakes.

Because I wasn't allowed to eat the car but wanted to help, I held a thermos of coffee in my lap and poured my father a lidful whenever, in the midst of chewing, he gestured to me that he needed a drink to wash it all down.

We didn't talk much when he was eating. My father had a TV face with a sharp jaw, dimples when he smiled, and the same bright blue eyes I did, but when he was out there eating, all of that disappeared into a heavy frown of concentration; it seemed to me like he was trying to solve an endless and extraordinarily difficult math problem. In solidarity I frowned along with him and sighed sometimes when he did, and when he thanked me for the coffee I poured him and patted me on the knee, I felt like part of a team that was getting somewhere.

My mother watched all this. Whenever I went out to the garage I felt her eyes on me from the kitchen or an upstairs room, and sometimes she would appear suddenly in the window of the side door and startle both my father and me. My mother could do that, could appear swiftly and silently, even when you knew where she was in the house or listened carefully for her approach. I'd wave at her from the hood of the car and she would look back and purse her lips; sometimes she would just return to the house, other times she would open the door and have some chore for me that took me away from the garage. When the weather was warmer and my father and I sat outside on the driveway in the shade of the high hedge between our yard and the Bauer's, my mother's face would flit in and out of the kitchen window as she kept an eye on us.

Why does she do that? I asked him once when we were sitting outside and my father was taking a long pause to let things settle. Why is she always watching us? He

had a little wooden table beside him and he was eating two door handles he had quartered with a hacksaw.

She's a good mother, he said after a moment, and I wondered why he said that because it never crossed my mind that she wasn't.

Sometimes there were stretches when my father abstained from the car for weeks or months, and those were the times when my mother was happiest and I didn't wake in the middle of the night. If I asked him why he wasn't eating it, he would pat his stomach and tell me he was on a diet, that he needed to stay trim for my mother. She laughed when she heard him say things like this, a sound so rare in our house it was like music when it happened. I didn't understand any of this, because my father never needed to go on a diet and probably never would—though he spent most of his days driving a courier van, he was still slim and muscled from years of driving railroad spikes into ties with a steel-headed mallet.

It was during one of these periods when my father wasn't eating the car that the Bauers moved away and the Newtons moved in. The two of them came over one Saturday soon after their arrival and introduced themselves as Sid and Katie with a 'K.' My father shook their hands and asked if it was also Sid with an 'S' and this made them all laugh except for my mother, who only smiled a little when she shook their hands and, when my father asked them in for a drink, told me to take some coasters out to the back porch.

The Newtons were young, but they were tall, just as tall as my father, though Mr. Newton's face was rounder than my father's and his shoulders not so wide. He and his

wife sat beside each other on the porch swing and when I brought them their drinks Mrs. Newton asked me how old I was.

I told her I was eight and that I'd just finished third grade.

Oh, wow, she said, and her mouth made a little O. Congratulations. She had big brown eyes and freckles and when she smiled her nose went up a little like a rabbit's.

Thanks, I said.

We should celebrate, she said, and from her shorts pocket she took out a grape lollipop. Is this okay? she asked my mother, and my mother nodded. She leaned forward and handed it to me and I could smell vanilla. I loved her immediately.

Mrs. Newton had brought something for my mother, too, a bouquet of blue and yellow flowers she'd picked from their flowerbed. My mother put them in a vase and sat them on the little table on the porch.

I don't even know what they are, Mrs. Newton said, but aren't they pretty? The Bauers planted the prettiest flowers over there.

I hope we don't kill them, Mr. Newton said. We're not really gardeners.

My mother said the blue ones were veronicas and the yellow ones were daisies.

Really? Mrs. Newton said.

My father smiled at my mother and said she knew flowers, and my mother looked back at him and said her parents had a lot of flowers when she was growing up. That's how she knew, she said.

Hey, Mrs. Newton said, you should come over and take a look. There's a lot of them. I bet you could tell us what they are.

Yeah, Mr. Newton said. That's a good idea. Come on over. We can give you the tour.

What do you say? my father asked. He looked at me. Do you want the tour?

I did. I'd never really been next door; neither had my parents. The Bauers had kept to themselves on the other side of the hedge, and I'd seen them only occasionally on a Sunday morning when they drove off to church or at Halloween when I stood in costume on their doorstep. To me they were old and mysterious and their yard was, too—dark with tall pines and oaks like a fairytale forest.

So we went down the driveway with Mr. Newton out in front, his drink in his hand, and then my father and Mrs. Newton together behind him, then me; my mother followed slowly as we rounded the hedge at the road and went up the Newton's drive. Mr. Newton led us across the front yard, ducking under the limbs of a big maple, and around the far corner of the house where a deep flowerbed ran the length of the building.

Hot dog, my father said.

The garden was blooming wildly with blues and reds and oranges and yellows; there was so little space between the flowers it looked almost like there was only a single flower growing there with petals of a dozen different colors. Amid the flowers was a ceramic fountain where the water spouted from a tiny lion's head and fell into a second basin and then a third where a stone frog sat on the bottom; there was also a stone lighthouse with ivy crawling up its sides and a burst of yellow flowers growing where the light would be. Rising above it all was a towering rose bush that grew up against the side of the house like a tree and which was taller than either my father or the Newtons.

That's my favorite, Mrs. Newton said, and pointed at the rose bush.

Me, too, my father said. Tall.

Mrs. Newton put her hands on her hips and looked at it. I didn't know they could get that big, she said.

This one's my favorite, Mr. Newton said, and put his hand on the head of a little ceramic angel that barely stood above the flowers around it. It was holding a finger to its lips and looking off to the side with wide eyes. He's up to no good, Mr. Newton said. He patted the angel and said, And he lost his pants.

I could see even my mother liked the garden. When Mrs. Newton asked her, she started naming the flowers she could, and Mr. Newton ran inside and got a pen and paper so they could write everything down. Afterwards they showed us around the house, though before we went upstairs my mother said she was expecting a call and excused herself. Mrs. Newton thanked her and hugged her before she left, and I hoped I, too, would get a hug before we went home.

From the upstairs rooms I could see our house and the garage and the hedge; it was a view I'd never had before. I looked out the back windows to the thick trees and saw how the sun barely even came down through them. Mrs. Newton asked me what I was looking at and I pointed to the trees and asked why anyone would plant so many.

Mrs. Newton shrugged. I don't know, she said.

I like the flowers better, I said.

Mrs. Newton smiled at me and her nose went up again like a rabbit's and she told me to come over whenever I wanted and I could help her take care of the flowers.

So I did. Every Tuesday and Friday that summer I went next door in the afternoon and helped Mrs. Newton water the flowers and push little fertilizer sticks into the ground around them. I knew that helping her with the flowers was a role as fragile as helping my father with the car—it was something I'd heard my mother and father arguing quietly about that night after we'd all seen the garden, the first time I'd heard them argue in a long while. My mother didn't like Mrs. Newton; I could tell that from the first day they'd met, but I also knew my mother greatly believed in manners and playing by the rules, which was why, I thought, she disliked it so much when my father was eating the car. So I held my breath a little each Tuesday and Friday when I asked if I could go next door, and when my mother said yes, I ran over there as fast as I could before she changed her mind.

I loved it there. Mrs. Newton had decided she wanted to learn about gardening and she showed me the books she'd bought that had pictures of plants and flowers in them and instructions on how to grow things. She'd marked a lot of the pages with little colored pieces of paper that stuck up and made it look like the books themselves were blooming. My job was to fill a green watering can with the outdoor hose and then tiptoe in the invisible spaces between the flowers and shower them until the ground stopped sucking up the water. Getting all the way to the back where the rose grew was the hardest part, and it made me nervous and excited every time; I would trace a thin space through the other flowers, up on the balls of my feet, and then, when I was close enough, I would lean over on one leg and try to hit the base of the rose with an arc of water from a few feet away. Mrs. Newton laughed once when she saw me doing this and said I looked

just like a little fountain. While I was watering, she trimmed off blossoms that had dried up, picked June bugs off leaves, and scrubbed away the algae that was always trying to grow in the lion-head fountain.

Mrs. Newton liked to talk while she worked. She asked me questions about what I liked to do in the summer and what I liked to do at school. Sometimes she talked about herself. She told me she didn't know what she wanted to be yet, and this astonished me because I thought adults always knew those kinds of things. All she knew, she said, was that she didn't want to work in an office like Mr. Newton did. Maybe you'll be a gardener, I said once, and she liked that and laughed and gave me a vanilla-scented hug.

Sometime in August, a few weeks before school started again, my father came home early one Friday and went over to the Newtons with me.

Come on, he said, I want to see what you do over there.

I didn't want him to come and told him it was nothing special.

No job too small, he said, which was one of the things he liked to say sometimes after I'd poured him coffee in those periods when he was eating the car.

Mrs. Newton was happy to see him. The garden looked good and she pointed out some new flowers we'd planted on the very edge of the garden where they had been the slightest of spaces. She told him what a good helper I was and how sweet I was, and I felt suddenly like Mrs. Newton wasn't Mrs. Newton anymore, but a teacher talking to my father. I felt an anger I had never known before light up hard and bright inside me, and at dinner that night I couldn't look at him.

But he kept coming over on Fridays. His load at work had gotten lighter, he said, and so he could spend some more time at home. My mother became quiet and sharp again like she did when my father was eating the car, and I found Friday afternoons had lost something. I still watered the flowers, but I wasn't as careful about where I stepped, and my father, who had taken to touching up the faded colors of the lighthouse and building a trellis for the giant rose bush to lean on, looked up once and told me to watch my feet, that I was walking around like Godzilla in Tokyo. Mrs. Newton liked his jokes and laughed at this, but I burst into tears and ran home.

Later that afternoon he apologized to me and asked me what was wrong. I told him I didn't want him coming over there anymore, and he looked at me for a while and then nodded and said he wouldn't. And the next Friday he didn't, and it was just Mrs. Newton and me, and I was happy and stepped carefully and made sure all the flowers got plenty of water. And then school started, and that was the end of my afternoons with Mrs. Newton.

But one afternoon in the fall as I walked home from the bus stop, I ran into my father coming down the Newton's driveway. He wasn't smiling and he was walking fast and when I asked him what he was doing, he only touched a hand to my shoulder as he went by. Why were you over there? I called after him and then I followed him at a run up our driveway and into the garage, where he took a hammer from a peg on the wall and, with one stroke, knocked the remaining side mirror off the Skylark. He held the

mirror in his hand like an apple and bit into it hard; I could hear the metal snap in his mouth as he did. He chewed hastily and swallowed and then took another hard bite.

Why were you over there? I asked him again. My eyes felt hot like I was going to cry, though I didn't want to.

My father didn't answer. He took another sharp bite and the glass of the mirror shattered and a sliver of it flew into my hair. I yelled.

Get back, my father said, and he leaned down and pushed me back gently. His eyes were small and there was a smudge of red on his neck and the quick scent of vanilla. He picked the bit of glass from my hair and told me to go in the house. Why were you over there? I said again, but he backed me out the door and shut it behind me.

I threw my backpack on the driveway and waited for my father to open up the door, but when he didn't, my eyes felt hot again and the bright, hard anger lit up inside me and because I didn't know what to do, I turned around and punched the siding. I wondered for a moment at how it hurt my hand, but then I turned and ran, though before I did I thought I saw my mother's face float into the kitchen window, her eyes wide and puzzled and afraid.

I ran all the way to the back of our yard without knowing why and then, as if pulled by a rope, I threw myself through a thin spot in the high hedge and rolled out on the other side under the shadow of the old, tall trees. I was shocked how dark it was in their shade and I lay there for a moment while my eyes grew used to it. But then I was up again and running, weaving past the gray and black trunks towards the Newton's house, my steps muffled on pine needles, until I broke out into the light where the garden was.

I didn't hesitate. I jumped right in among the flowers and went for the rose bush. I wanted to tear it down. I grabbed at it with my hands and bit my lip when the thorns jabbed me and drew blood. So I put my shoe against it and braced myself against the wall of the house and pushed and pushed until I was out of breath, but the base of the rose bush was as thick as a small tree and wouldn't give. I dropped to my knees and tore at the ground with my hands, scooping away the dirt from the base like a dog would, trying to get to the roots, but they were deep and solid and in a bit I sat back on my heels, panting and angry and near tears once more. Finally, I picked up the angel with the finger to its lips and beat at the trunk with it until the white pulp showed and the bush began to shiver with each strike and a stalk broke at last and fell into the flowers. I kept going. At some point I started crying, silent crying, like a baby so upset it can't even make sound. And then I stopped and dropped the angel and looked at the rose bush. It was still standing, but it sagged heavily away from the house and there was a foam on the beaten trunk that looked like spit. I ran back into the trees.

When I got back to the house my backpack was gone from the driveway. I thought my mother would be standing there, but she wasn't. The door to the garage was open and my father was sitting on the threshold of it. He was chewing and had a bit of metal in his hand.

I'm sorry, he said when he saw me.

I sniffed and tried to wipe my eyes.

My father looked up at me, squinting against the bright sky. Your mother's out looking for you, he said. She saw you run off.

I did something bad, I said.

My father kept looking at me. Yeah? he said.

Yeah, I said, and sat on the ground in front of him. I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

Are you sorry? he asked.

I squeezed my knees tighter and blinked to keep the tears back. Yes, I said.

My father reached down beside him and picked up one of the plastic punch buttons from the radio. Here, he said, start with this. Let it sit on your tongue a while before you try to bite it.

I took the button and looked at it. It was smooth in my hand. I looked again at my father.

Go ahead, he said.

I put the button on my tongue and closed my mouth carefully. It felt like a small stone there and I was careful not to move for fear of choking on it. My father resumed his chewing. Somewhere in the neighborhood a mower started up, and we listened to it for a while as we sat there. My hands started to hurt and I felt sick. I squirmed and my father noticed.

Try to bite it, he said, and I shook my head.

It's too late now, he said.

I clenched my fists and shifted the button to the side of my mouth. It felt smaller there, thinner, like a dime. I closed my eyes and bit down hard. Nothing happened. I can't, I said.

Keep going, my father said.

I tightened my whole body and tried again. It was like opening a jar lid that had been sealed for years; I applied more and more force until I thought my eyes would pop out from the sheer effort, and at that moment, the button shattered like a lollipop and in my astonishment, I swallowed part of it whole. It went down hard, jagged, scratching my throat the whole way and making me panic and gasp and cough. I spit out the other pieces in the process.

My father handed me a cup of water. Make sure you finish it, he said, and nodded to the pieces lying on the ground.

I took the water, shaking, and managed a few sips. I put it down and tried to get my breath back. Is it always this hard? I asked when I could talk again.

My father took the water back and sat it beside his chair. Yes, he said. He smiled sadly at me. But you'll get used to it.