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Skunk Ape: Stories and Poems

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

Aaron Fallon

Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Emily Pease, Director

Nancy Schoenberger

Henry Hart

Arthur Knight

Williamsburg, VA
April 16, 2010

Skunk Ape

Aaron Fallon

For all she's given me in support of this project
I am deeply grateful to Emily Pease –
her patience is truly boundless.

Mythologies...are great poems, and, when recognized as such, point infallibly through things and events to the ubiquity of a "presence" or "eternity" that is whole and entire in each. In this function, all mythologies, all great poetries, and all mystic traditions are in accord.

Joseph Campbell

What a man believes upon grossly insufficient evidence is an index into his desires -- desires of which he himself is often unconscious. If a man is offered a fact which goes against his instincts, he will scrutinize it closely, and unless the evidence is overwhelming, he will refuse to believe it. If, on the other hand, he is offered something which affords a reason for acting in accordance to his instincts, he will accept it even on the slightest evidence. The origin of myths is explained in this way.

Bertrand Russell

I'm going to be like Du Chaillu, the Frenchman who was the first to shoot a gorilla: an animal that for two thousand years Europeans believed to be mythical...I've been mocked for devoting my life to a legend. But legends have moved whole nations and held them together.

"Ancestral Legacies" by Jim Shepard

I. Skunks in the Moonlight

Good Fences, Good Neighbors

A man who was new to the neighborhood surprised me one morning by approaching me by my mailbox. He pointed to it and said, "Keep them raggedy ass claws of yours out of my mailbox."

He was dressed for work it seemed, a sharply cut blue suit, a red paisley tie:

"I'm fairly sure this one's still my mailbox," I told him. He stared at me. I waited to see whether he would finally speak. When I checked my watch, I was running five minutes late.

That's a fine watch, he said, grinning, looking on expectantly. I checked my watch again.

Six minutes. "Okay," I said. "I'll trade you the watch for the mailbox, if you'll throw in yesterday's mail too." He rubbed his wrist, laid his palms together in the morning sunlight. I laid the watch gently in his hands.

Galway, 1986

1. First sighting

You were dressed in the 80s
when I found you—staring blank from your place
in the crowd, on a hot afternoon in August:
a day the Waterboys showed up unannounced
onstage at “Galway Lark.”

I pleaded with you from the edge of the stage to come back
with me. Though I saw your eyes understood
my pleas through the damp heat of summer air,
through hundreds of torsos, sweating tshirts plastered
to them, through hundreds of frantic, slick arms, you kept
dancing. When I whispered, one ear at a time, through
the crowd, you disappeared.

2. the Recent Past

I went to Royal Albert Hall in 2007,
did the twirl in rhythm as they counted it out,
waited outside for an hour after, hoping to see your face.

3. Passing Through

Your wide eyes, the pestering thought
that I don't like how much makeup you wear.
Casual denial from me: No, I haven't heard
the Fisherman's Blues.

You stood us up, taught me the words
as we danced, drunk as the night,
in the living room of your first apartment.

Roulette

I am making a marinade for our steaks:
Two beautiful strip steaks. Rosy pink in the fridge.

Cayenne pepper, vinegar, olive oil. Oregano.
Black pepper. Paprika. 2 cloves of crushed garlic, thyme.
I reach for the salt. My other hand finds a measuring cup.
A quiet voice cautions *You only need a teaspoon.*

I pour a fourth-cup full. I feel the softness of the crystals
colliding. I exhale
and pour the rest of the cup full. Salt runs
like water into the dirty dishes in the sink.

Like that, I'm scrambling through the cupboards
for the biggest mixing bowl we have.

I pour the first cup of salt into my bowl, turn
on the water. It fills, giving me sudden fits of terrifying giggles:
I am the cook. I am marinading. Salt to taste.

My taste. I feel dizzy. The kitchen moves quickly.

I dump the rest of our salt into the bowl,
watch the hot water turn foggy, gurgling, seeping
through the mess of cereal bowls, dirty coffee cups.

I peek into the fridge. Unwrap the two steaks,
weigh them, one hand against the other. I let the
right hand slide its steak back into the package.

I stand at the sink, beautiful lean strip of steak
in both hands before a bowl rushing with thick water.
I check through the living room window for signs
of your car on our street. I drop the strip into the bowl.

I turn the water off. I'm giddy, moments away
from tearing into the hunk of beautiful strip steak,
bare teeth and all. I say to the dog, "I am cooking,"

He slinks off thinking
he has done wrong.

I drop my hands,

overturn the bowl in the sink,
replace my salty strip steak in the fridge.

I look to the window again. Spin the styrofoam
tray awkwardly several times. I close the fridge with a smile.

By the time you are home again,
I've made a responsible marinade,
tell you to dip a finger, approve my work:
The coals in the grill are just nearing ready.

Birthdays

I watched you bake the cake
this afternoon
from just beyond your
kitchen window.

The things you were saying
to yourself would have made
for awkward conversation
had the neighbors been home.

Your living room is a jungle.
There isn't more than a spoonful
of lemon juice left in your fridge.
Your mustache needs a trim.

While you were asleep, I looked under
the hood of your car, inspected your tires
by worklight. They could use some air
before you leave.

Your A/C belt is still broken, but
you've known about that for a while.
Everything else works beautifully-
ready for the long trip across the state.

21 June, 2009

They are standing on the steps of the municipal building,
the two blonde girls looking bored. The man frowning,
fiddling with his camera. I watch as they hop the chains
the man's skinny high-socked legs and jeansshorts,
easing awkwardly over one leg at a time. The
two blondes take their time lifting their brightly colored heels.

One blonde sneering, both stretching their fake-tan legs from
daisydukes down to the gray concrete; one pouts, peeking
out from behind important-looking columns. Nobody
working in the offices has noticed them on the steps outside.
The glass doors behind them always locked, framed by a few
potted plants inside. A row of desks, the glow of fluorescent light.

The photographer has a stringy salt-and-pepper mullet.
His shirt is white, smudged at the shoulder. He takes his hat off
to wipe at his brow. He's going bald. Traffic on Campbell stops.
I turn toward the crosswalk, continue
down the block staring up at the dark windows of the office
where I work, to make coffee before the lawyers arrive.

By the time the coffee finishes its drip, I know the photographer
and the two girls are celebrating with champagne: cigarette smoke
curling between the three of them
smiling as the warm bubbles go to their heads.

Ecclesiastes

*This is the evil in everything that happens
under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all.
The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is
madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward
they join the dead. -Ecclesiastes 9:3*

I call you a fattening drunk
knowing it's cruel and untrue
because I need elbow room at the dinner table.

I watch our neighbors sleep through
the attic window
with a serious expression on my face.

Worst of all
I ate all of the half-gallon of ice cream
that was left in the freezer.

Premonition

Spring, etc. Allergies, etc. Willie Nelson again last night-
he'd been standing in the curtains out of politeness.
It was just about 4:30 when I sat up, awake, open to the dim blue room,
the feet poking out from beneath my curtains, the shadows
on the floor, the streetlight stained curtain-blue.

Invited Willie Nelson in: he removed his hat,
smiled warmly. I was glad he had chosen tonight to visit.

How long had he been there? I asked
as he followed me into the kitchen, where
I made coffee without turning on the light.

Tonight, he seems most excited to tell me about his garden.
I am about to cry. Maybe it's just early.
My own tomatoes can't seem to make it.
I screen them off but a great sadness
in the ground swells up, carries the sweetest yellow green bits
laughing back to hell. I think about my tomatoes enough at work
that I have to go into the men's room, pound the door of the far
stall, once, twice, sobbing as softly as I can, choking with rage.

I'm clenching my fists already, distracted by tomatoes.
My guest raises his hand to retrieve my attention. Check them
in the morning he says. I watch his eyes in the distant pale glow
of the digital microwave clock, searching for signs of what to expect.

When he leaves, around six, I sit on the front porch
trying not to scratch my itching eyes, watching for
the first peeks of sun through the clouds
in the reflection of my neighbor's window.

Skunk Ape

My cousin Robert is back from basic.
We sit on the back porch drinking beer,
listening to frogs, crickets

listening to shadows run long
over the fresh cut grass of the lawn,
listening to rustles in the underbrush.

Out front, the occasional truck
bouncing shocks, things clanking in the bed,
the headlights stretching up into the treeline.

After a while Robert gets up, shuts the cooler,
heads inside. I don't bother asking –
I'm unsteady on my feet, but the cooler isn't far.

As I reach to reopen the cooler,
I see its enormous hairy back rise up
through the tangle of dark brush:

two bright eyes glancing over a matted shoulder
basking for a moment
 in the distant glow of my porch light.

The frogs and the crickets continue.
I scratch my head and sit, opening another beer.
The skunk ape slinks into the night.

Everett at North Fork

1.

Nothing like a pair of pretty
brown eyes, the ram said.
He fluoresced, wavered in static:
the first trickles of the newborn rockslide.
I followed him out of the city.

I passed a long field
full of golden-brown grasses,
an old wood fence, a dead bull between
two long rocks. A dozen buzzards
perched still in the late sun,
around their decaying bull.

Sun-browned weeds,
broad, muddy fields. The lazy river.
Soft eyes awake to the heat of September,
wings cocked to the tug of warm breeze:

The horns of the bull,
naked in the familiar wind,
while the buzzards waited.

2.

The second night fell with a clear sky.
I wandered up to the ridge overlooking
an overgrown train bridge, fallen
bricks: the north fork of the river.

After the last of my fire had died,
my eyes swallowed shapes whole in the dark.
A sound grew: sudden rise and fall
crazed mother and child,
together in the same moment of agony,
their cries lost in the empty throat
of some great black hound.

In the darkness, I could see distant colors,
time refracting, writhing in the blue-gray field:
the gravity of the cries, which rippled outward
the way the last true words you spoke died on your lips.

The morning sun getting settled
over the folds of the hills, creeping
down to the dry streambeds in the valley,
to smile on the patient, blood-red lips of the earth mother.

II. Aeolia

Laboratory

*...but the hawk
Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.*

-Ted Hughes, "Hawk in the Rain"

Rain in Durham; rain for
the past three days.

Puja is not thinking about hands
that held her in bed on rainy mornings.

She is wearing a flannel shirt
curled up in her chair,

knees tucked under her chin, skinny wrists
hooked together around her ankles,

dark eyes softly narrowed to the white room, black hair
over her shoulders, shivering in the air conditioned draft:

waiting for data to manifest, for mice to grow,
for a pattern to emerge

and finally clarify itself.

Sometimes I Get a Great Notion

In the tomato fields after the fire
the sun cut flat over the Chevy sitting
just off the farm lane where it crosses Savage Neck road,

I smoke a joint and feel warm
standing barefoot in the sunraked ash.
The osprey's nest perched on the far side of the field.
Dusk drops over the bay behind the nest.

Hard to tell from here just how it might feel
if in the morning I drove that old Chevy out across the water.
Maybe catch a glance of what all's on the other side.

To Your Perfect Shoulders

Light rain
passing through.

Bruises like
prayer flags

from your
perfect
shoulders

stretched
across

my own,
aligning

in joyful
hope when

we lie
side by side

in our sleeping bag,
watch the morning
unfold through clouds
in our patch of the
southwest sky. Drops
gathering on leaves,
pattering on our tarp,

beneath which-
our damp boots,
the filled canteens
we set out in the night,
our hungry stomachs,
and the 1,000 miles
between us
and Mt. Katahdin.

On the Road to La Paz

On the road to La Paz
I understand there's a man
who drove four awkward posts
into the ground, hung his blanket
across them on the very edge of the cliff.
A man who now stands
under his shelter waving
green and red cardboard discs
directing traffic on what they call
El Camino de la Muerte
while Condors drift
through sun fog and mud
thirteen, fourteen thousand feet
into the mountain-thin air.

My Last Night In Camden

you pointed grimy bandages, the finger that
you had slammed in the car door
two days earlier:

drank the rest of the wine,
shouted about the doctor's office
until you could no longer stand.

I stood by your bedside
holding a trashcan to your face
as your shoulders tensed,
as you wretched the last drops
of wine from inside you:

the calendar on the wall showed
August, Hay Bales in Lower Saxony.
I fell asleep that night murmuring to myself
in the chair by your bed, whispers of the spring
I spent in Dresden, the smell of coffee in Munich,
the bluffs along the Rhine, terraced with grapes
waiting for the late-summer harvest.

Palacios

Turned the a/c on last night:
it's way too early in spring to
have come to that. Woke up
with a bad taste in my mouth. Had been dreaming,
though about what I don't remember anymore:

Dreamt again when I dozed off at work,
was in the Palacio de Bellas Artes.
Fred woke me up: trouble sleeping last night,
allergies, hot, still air. . .no I'll be O.K. Just
need a cup of coffee is all.

In the kitchen with bad coffee and a newspaper.
I stared at the paper but couldn't see past
the man with the railroad spike in his back just
below his shoulder blade: the neatly pressed
white shirt, his balding head, the laughing whore:
the chains, gears: machines between her legs. Too
many pearls around her neck. Empty black eyes.

I can't even remember what was in the rest of the painting.

After work, I saw hipsters at the bar
a glimpse of familiar yellow jerseys on the t.v. on the wall.
I stopped in at 202 Market. Drank wheat beer
with too much lemon, thought about my last
hours in Mexico City doing much the same:

watching
with an uncomfortable serenity
settling over the corners of my mouth. The
tweaking of my lips as
Club América bossed the midfield, waiting
for more than a taste of what was surely
the inevitable goal coming.

Gordonsville

In the back of the station wagon
my brother scowled a little still
around the slack edges of his mouth
the dusty rims of his eyes
his arm resting on the seat,
fingers entwined in the bent spokes
of the front wheel of my bicycle.

He watched an old man next to us
curse and drip gas on his workboots
and slam the door of his chipped blue Chevy.

I asked him why the man had gloves on –
It's hot, I said.

He shook his head and turned to watch Mom
walk into the afternoon sun, heels clicking on the pavement,
the jingle of the bells on the door, the sign for 2-Liter Pepsis.

I should get the front seat, he said.
It's your fault.

And if I'd made the knobby tires fly
down the long hill past the mailboxes,
the drops of sweat would have gathered on the wind
instead of the hot asphalt
with the drying blood of my skinned knees.

I tugged at the sticky square Band-Aids
the lady from the church had put on my knees
before she'd called our mother.

"Okay," I said, unbuckling myself.
My brother looked on as I climbed
onto the seat – his eyes suddenly wide
as the seat broke and I tumbled into his lap.

III. The New World

The Batting Cage

My older brother
tells me I'm over-swinging.
I tell him to go fuck himself,
but I still wait to hear what he says next.

We are here every weekday
in the afternoon, and after dinner
until 10:00

when they turn off the lights
and shut the cage.

Near Buena Vista

Now she's gone,
I've let the trash pile up
on the couch in the
front room for
too long again.
Lost a good pack
of cigarettes
in the trashpile,
decided
the time had come.

Slung a couple bags
into the back of
the truck—Sally
wanted to hop in
the back as soon as
I let the gate down.
Sorry pup.

Left her on the porch
with her head down—
them big eyes
following me up
the gravel drive.
Got on Rt. 60, made
my U-Turn, no traffic.

There was a cat
sleeping next to
one of the green
metal dumpsters.
The wheels of
my truck on the
gravel woke him up;
he gave me the eyes.

Tossed my trash
got on my way
got to the farm lane.

Did a three point turn,
came back up the

farm lane, back to
the dump on Rt. 60.
Scooped up that
cat, brushed him down.

Sat him in the front seat.
Told Sally when I got back
we had a new friend. Hadn't
thought of a name yet, but

I called him Jake and that seemed alright.

I opened up a can of tuna,
tossed the tennis ball for Sally,
cracked myself a beer as the
sun went down over the river.

Late July

The welcome mat
grew mushrooms this week:

came apart in my hands
when I picked it up.

Light Rain in Albemarle County

Terrifying, the stillness tonight
in this, the city of feral children.
No. That's not the problem here.
Drifting off into strange statements.
Fucking focus. Grip. Focus:

I was driving before I figured out that I'd left the kitchen, that's how it started.
Back door open, rain dripping from the gutters down onto the concrete step.
Then I'm on the interstate. As suddenly as I was on it, I'm off again.
I'm not sure which county I'm in. I'm west, I think, because the east is bright.
The city.

Jesus, I'm not supposed to be in this neighborhood.
Too many columns on the houses. Not the time of night
for me to be stopping in to visit. Get picked up for sure.
"No officer, I'm not drunk, I'm not high, I don't have a gun.
I'm just wandering the streets in the City of Feral Children tonight
because I have a lot of pent-up energy
and these rich motherfuckers are absolutely *fascinating*."

But none of those rich motherfuckers are up. Nobody gives
two shits I'm standing on the corner inspecting the columns
of their houses. The shape of the rain around the moon looks like...I don't even know.

Thinking about you makes me absolutely sure
I'm a dog showing its first symptoms of rabies,
but I'm okay with the rain.

I breathe. Things, the world, they go along like that:
Rain falls, I breathe, shift on my feet.
Nothing changes. I get tired of waiting.

When I pull away from the curb again,
the baseball under my seat rolls by my foot.
In one beautiful foreign motion, life is slowing down. It's beautiful
to watch myself in the rearview: I'm pulling off
by one of those radars they put up by the road,

try and see if I can hit 80. These things though,
they're solar powered around here; they turn them off at night,
like everything else. No Rookies here. And no flashlight to find my baseball.

Head east. Go home. Get dry.
That'd be a promising start.

Sunday Morning in Floyd

I woke up in the tall grass,
mouth dry, back of my knees itching
in the heat of the open meadow
ten yards from the riverbend.

I remember the false dawn,
the fog, looking for my shirt,
shivering, waiting for the sun,
waiting to fall asleep again.

I dry heaved in the sticky wet grass
before the sun finally fell through
the tall pines along the ridge.

I stretched out for all the ticks in the high grass
and finally slept.

Turkeys had run through at some point in the morning
gobbling, fat and wild, full of furious calories
burning their way through the high grass
on fat drumstick legs. In my half-sleep
the only thing I worried about
was having to spit the feathers out. One
by one.

I woke up again in the late morning heat,
no fog left on the river, air thick.
Sweating in dry grass, golden grass – ain't got no pity,
each swallow of green left in the long shafts
ungodly, clinging,
practically sneering at my dumb ass.

And still, none of the others were up.

I found one fat girl in a bikini passed out
in the cab of my truck. There was a used condom
on my floormat.

She didn't wake up, so I let her be. I drove up grassy hill,
through the barbed wire gates, stopped to throw up
on the gravel road. Before I closed the door, I looked down
through the pine trees, past the old cattle fences,
down the grassy hill where I'd got my truck stuck

last October, turned the wet grass to mud.
Took me ten or twelve tries before I could get out,
thought I'd be walking back to the highway,
hitching myself a ride back into Roanoke.

"Today though," I told the sleeping fat girl,
"we're going to a better place."

I turned left when I reached the highway,
drove into the town of Floyd, pulled into the Hardees
across from the gas station. I snatched a \$5 from the fat girl's
purse. I walked into the Hardees, shivered and buttoned up
my shirt, waited, looking at the board.

Man at the counter asked me what I wanted.
I went up and down the list.
Finally I told the man I wanted a chocolate shake.

Must've been the first time I'd had one of those since
I was five years old, the night my old man quit his job,
when me and him sat in the Hardees down in Roanoke
sipping at milkshakes while the sky turned red over Bent Mountain.

Spectator

Last night,
watching the empty room spin,
laughing at every woman I ever loved.

Drunk again tonight
watching the curve of your spine shift.
A rush of blood
from my red face
when your fingertips brush my arm.

You threw away
our last pack of cigarettes Tuesday.
You fall asleep breathing into the crook of my neck.

I think, listening to you breathe,
that I won't spend another night here:

My head is suddenly thick again
as I roll off the bed onto my feet.
I stumble putting my shoes on.
I kiss your forehead.
The door shuts louder than I meant.

Outside looking up,
I realize I've left the lights on.

Angels We Have Heard on High

Walked up Roanoke Mountain
to look at Turkey Vultures-
had been wondering how
the rest of the week might play out,
looking for signs wherever
they might be had.
When they're swirling in those big
columns, drifting up and up
it means they're gathering
momentum with the winds – getting ready
for a longer trip somewhere.
What they're looking for, though,
is a question that doesn't bear asking.

Sourwood Mountain

I been saying strange things lately.
Talking out my ass, but it's been
solid gold that's been coming out
so I haven't tried to stop it at all.
In one interview, I mentioned that
taking up cigarette smoking
has been on my list of things to do
since the day my old boss died of lung
cancer, having never smoked a day
of his life. He looked at me funny
so I said, "What I mean, sir, is that
in life, sometimes, there is sour grapes."
I had another cup of coffee on the house
in the company kitchen before I left.

Redwing

We're rolling along.
The sun's out and the
roads are mostly clear.
Headed down Roanoke
mountain in the shade,
getting out every so often
to snap a picture,
or try to shove a
snowdrift out of the road.
You've stuck a tape
into my old car's
tapedeck—some guy
you met down on the
Market playing some
old timey clawhammer tunes:
This is the first day in weeks
we haven't fought. We can
breathe a little, tell ourselves
it was cabin fever is all.

March, 2007

The moon shifts.
Its pieces rearrange
and fade into static.
Traces cling to cloud cover.
The clouds become blue-gray
in false morning light. I'm standing under
the awning of our least-favorite cafe
across the street from her apartment,
waiting on the rain.
When the rain comes,
sidewalks will empty for days on end-
in the downpour, the city
will become mine:
I sing pop songs under my breath,
watch water droplets as they divide into infinity,
and cling for a moment onto my unshaven chin.

Everett in Vinton

Couple of us were sitting out
on the front porch smoking
cigarettes, watching evening
traffic thin out.

Jenny had her swollen ankle
propped up on the rail, and
I could feel the dirt from working
in the garden earlier on my shirt
as my mind touched on each of
the stray hairs she hadn't shaved
closely around the red and purple
puffs of skin and dark bone.
Zach's friend asked me something
and when I didn't look at him
right away everybody saw me
staring at Jenny's sprained ankle.
Later, when me and Jenny first
kissed, panting in humid air
Jenny asked me what had made me kiss her.

It didn't feel like such a tale
when I told her it was her big, ugly
ankle that had gone and touched
my heart, made my blood run soft
through the crooks and turns in my
tired old heart.

Right up until the end, when
we would make love I used
to kiss that ankle, hold it
framed in the afternoon
sunlight and the chipped
paint of her windowsill.

Wilderness Road

My car went off the road
up on the Roanoke Mountain
headed north on the parkway.

Somebody else came into my lane.
They measured skid marks the next morning.
Found my car fifteen feet below the road.
It was April. Broken glass settled in the
fork of the tree trunks, covered with a light
dusting of pollen.

The mountain laurel weren't even in bloom yet.

In the morning they found me
wandering in Garden City
bleeding from the ears —

Between the moments of my tires
on the pavement and sitting with a
gray blanket wrapped around me
under the overhang of the Exxon
station, there are only snatches of clarity.

More like watching a friend in a drunken
stupor than living in my own skin:

There are tall trees and the roots that jut,
long slides, and the bloomless mountain laurel
bushes. No moon.

A man as tall as a tree with heavy breaths,
crashing through the brush ahead of me.
I follow the trail he leaves —

Men are going to work in Chevy Suburbans
and old trucks. The dawn has come, but on
Yellow Mountain road, the cars all still have
their headlights on. I step from the treeline
to the side of the road where I sit and wait,
waving blankly at passing cars.

A man stops. People gather.
They ask me how I got there
and I tell them I followed the
Kentucky Wildman.

They ask what I was doing in Kentucky.
I tell them I couldn't say. I feel suddenly
awake. A light rain begins to fall. The clouds
grow lighter.
The leaves never looked greener, I think.

Ophiuchus

Nights are still damn hot.
Afternoons, every biker I pass
I'm thinking is you,
changed your mind,
trying to make peace,
maybe thinking about
winter camp.
This corresponds,
no doubt, with the dreams
that keep coming
just before sunrise.
Your half-gloved hands
hanging the road bike
on the garage wall again,
the dust beneath your
fingernails, the gentle
stink of your sweat,
soaked permanently
into those gloves.
Your mountain bike
is gathering dust,
and I run my fingers
along the thick nubs,
wishing sometimes
that your road bike
had tires so thick as this-
knowing, with a particular
bad taste in my mouth,
that they'll be fine.
Nights are still warm enough
that I sit out on the rocks at
Lost Mountain Overlook from
evening to midnight
counting the stars that make
the great snake-handler in the sky.

Oyster

the Atlantic creeps closer
to the walls of my house each time
a wave crashes on the shore.

I caught a lemon shark last week.
I am not sure whether it is the cause
of the change in the wind or a result of it.

My favorite bar is in Eastville—
each time I start the car, my mind
floods like the engine with a fine, misty vision

the ocean's malicious giggles:
it fills my bed with seaweed.

But the ocean is patient;
it never once dreams of any sudden, final leap towards shore.

Someday the waves will stop altogether.

IV. Hammerclaw Tune

Hammerclaw Tune

I watch a lot of the Discovery Channel. Seems like I usually end up watching it the most right before I'm about to go out on a Friday night or something. I don't usually have much taste for such things after I get back in on Saturday mornings. But before the night's begun, watching lions stalking their prey? That's my shit. Can't get enough. I was watching the other week, they showed desert lions—not your average king of the jungle, right?—who set up on these rocks. They let all the antelopes and shit stay out in the sand dunes where it was hot, because they knew that them poor dumb bastards had to come back to the rocks eventually to find food. The lions just waited. They knew exactly what the score was. People like watching lions because they know we aren't no different. Say what you want, but we all predators and prey. Some of us is just honest enough to sharpen our claws. But motherfucker, make no mistake: shit's hardwired into all of us.

Maybe I'm showing my age, but I can remember this LeBron James soft boy approach never would have flown back in the day. Michael Jordan—there was a dude who knew he was a lion. The soberest I can recall my mama was when she was watching Jordan. She'd grown up down in Carolina, and followed the TarHeels like the rest of her folks. When M.J. came along she found religion. It was all of us—my little sister, my older brother, my moms and our stepdad—who would watch Michael try to bring it to the Pistons, the Celtics, the Knicks, on into the 90s against the Lakers, the three-point shooting against the Blazers, against Barkley and the Suns. We watched it all. When my older brother got shot in a crossfire out at Lincoln Terrace, our mom and me were with him doing his rehab exercises every day, Moms telling him, “Michael Jordan got froze out of the All-Star game, what do you think he was doing the next day?” or “When M.J. didn't make varsity, what did he do? He dropped 40 a game for the J.V.” and on like that.

That's where we learned what predators was. My older brother, Larry, like I said got shot accidentally when he was a teenager, ended up becoming a cop. I didn't see it that carrying a gun around was going to make him any more safer—if anything, being a cop was going to get his ass shot at more, but, hey, you do what you do in life, right? You think them desert lions ever try being a gazelle for a day? And me, my thing wasn't guns, maybe because of Larry, but I was fast as shit. I did track and cross country through my years at school—the 400 was my best—and went to Ferrum running cross country. But the thing that I really enjoyed was chasing down girls. It surprises me, as I keep getting older, how many dudes out there wanted guns, wanted drugs and wanted money—especially money—more than anything. I mean, that's all good shit to have, but motherfucker, watch some Discovery Channel or something, and tell me we weren't born to get it.

My first time with a girl was on top of a deep freezer in her basement. I might've been 14. We tossed a dirty red blanket across it and she told me she was giving me the red carpet treatment. I made some clever joke about giving her the red carpet treatment, since she was a redhead and all. It became one of those dumbshit jokes that stick around.

We used to get after it then. I mean we really got after it. Like there was no tomorrow. We fucked every which way we could think of, and then some. There wasn't a damn thing that either of us wouldn't try once. OK—maybe a few things, but we were pretty fucking out there.

She tried to stick me in the ass once with the broken leg of a little foot stool. That wasn't cool. Shit had splinters and everything. Mostly the things she did would set me on edge at first, but then I'd daydream about that shit for weeks. She would just get this look in her eye and there was no telling what she'd come up with. She got a pair of handcuffs once and we took turns. She used to love biting my lip till it bled. She tried out the chocolate syrup, maple syrup, whipped cream and anything else handy that happened to strike her fancy. I had no reason to know better—I thought that's how sex was

for everyone. She saw them use hot wax in a movie once, but I told her she could do whatever the fuck she wanted with that candle, so long as she kept it the hell away from me.

Her daddy would have beat the shit out of the both of us if he ever caught us at it down there. He might've even shot me right on the spot. Not exactly a real bright dude, her old man. He'd gone to jail for aggravated assault, for simple assault, for DUIs a couple times and when he was real young even breaking into this young couple's place. It was listed as home invasion, but he told his little girls that their daddy had gotten too drunk—let this be a lesson to you, girls, and all that nonsense. Maybe he meant it, and maybe he meant well for those girls, but if I'd have been a brighter man then, I'd have seen right away that the old man had ruined those girls for years to come. Reminds me now of that commercial Brett Favre did—the one about being a Monday morning quarterback. Did a lot of dumb shit back then. Might've known better, but I guess I didn't.

We were sort of an item for a long time. Was like three, four years almost. We weren't exclusive or nothing like that—for a while we pretended to be—but it all ended bad. I'm not a violent dude, but I ended up breaking her nose one night when she smashed up a bottle and came after me. After that, it didn't take a rocket scientist to tell that the best was behind us.

So we broke it off and you'd think, looking back, that the whole thing would've been this sobering experience and all. But come on, how many sober seventeen year-old dudes do you know? Not a one—they're all hopped up on hormones and shit, ready to fuck whatever walks for a good time. So that was me—horny as hell and dumber than shit. I let things settle for a week maybe before I was climbing up the walls, ready to get back out into the mix. I called up Alan Johnson, who I ran track with back in middle school. We still hung out occasionally since then. Back at middle school, before I started losing so many races, I thought I was some hot shit out there on the track. I did okay through the rest of my days as a real runner, I never dusted anybody like I did in middle school, but I met this dude Alan. He was stinky fucking rich. And he loved to go out and get girls. We was friends right off.

He was a real good dude at heart. Real good dude. Once I went to his place and found him drunk as shit in his basement at 3:00 in the afternoon. I knocked on the basement door and the motherfucker nearly fell off the couch trying to wave at me to come in. The t.v. was on and Maury was telling some girl the man she was with wasn't the father. Josh was staring straight through that shit. I set him up and said, "Jesus motherfucker, you're looking sloppy as fuck," but he looked at me, and I'd have nearly sworn he was sober how straight he looked me in the eye, and he said, "Josh, I just want to quit being a piece of shit."

He talked for almost an hour about his plan to keep his hands off girls and shit like that. I put him to bed and bounced, but wouldn't you know it, next weekend, the motherfucker was back to his old ways. Like father like son, ain't it. His Dad's richer than sin, but he's got like three ex-wives and a real young girlfriend these days. Alan worries a lot about being like his dad, but I think he'll get his self straight in the long run. I mean, shit, how hard can it be to do better than a dude like that?

I called Alan up on a Saturday night. I said to him, "Come on, let's get us some pussy tonight," and he said if I drove we could go to this girl's party. I asked if it was Southwest County and he tells me it's actually out in Rockbridge. But it's not like I had shit else to do, so I said sure.

This girl—her name was Alex—her folks owned this apple orchard. Real prestigious sort of folk, the "been here since the white man landed in Virginia" sort of family they are. And Alex is a fucking stoner to end them all. Mostly, you think of dudes sitting at home playing Xbox high as shit all day, but even though she was quite the looker, Alex probably smoked enough trees to make your average pothead weak in the knees just thinking about it. Shit, when you got money, what else is left but to kick back, right?

And damn, brother, was she fucking gorgeous or something like it. Honey blonde hair. The color of a fresh beer straight off the tap, bubbles rising like the way her hair looked when she moved it in the light. And Goddamn, brother, girl was born to cause some mischief.

I sat there and counted em up: watched as Alex gave every single dude in the room a sly look, and motherfuckers were all taken aback enough that the thought of *actually* leaving the room with her didn't even cross their silly ass minds. Some deer in the headlights shit, right there. But you could see right off that girl was going to have her fun, one way or the other.

We all ended up out in the apple orchard. Alex passed out joints like it was a goddamn tickertape parade. She rolled them with her fancy little machine that pressed that shit neat as you like. There were a couple coolers full of beer. Alex was already drunk as shit when she took some shrooms. She sat around for a while telling anybody who would listen how her mama had run off with the local high school's athletic director. I asked Alan if it was true and he said it probably was.

There were all these big cave-man looking rocks in the field next to the orchard where we lit up a bonfire. My head was a little toasted already. The way the rocks danced in the firelight was real pleasant just to watch for a while there. I'd forgot all about Alex until she started flipping out. She was really flipping her shit something good for a bit there, and we just told her to let it pass. Then she got real quiet for a bit and we thought she'd mellowed out.

Next thing anybody noticed, she tried to climb a tree. She fell and cut a mean-looking gash in her foot. Several of us gathered around her trying to figure what to do. She was on the ground just kind of whimpering like a puppy at the back door wanting to go in the house. I told the group—I have no idea why, but it made sense at the time—that I'd been through EMT school and that I was the best-qualified to deal with that shit. Everybody else was high and drunk, so of course they started up with the same thing. We probably sat around at least a couple minutes sorting out who was a qualified doctor and who wasn't. Turns out, we were all doctors.

Us motherfuckers, having established that the medical care Alex would receive by a bonfire in a field of goddamn rocks and stones was better than driving her out to the county hospital, proceeded to wrap her foot. The best thing, it was quickly agreed, was a bag of hotdog buns. Not the actual bag. Goddamn, what we must've been thinking. We used the hotdog buns themselves. Like them soggy motherfuckers could even hold a hotdog, let alone somebody's bloody leg. We used the bag to tie off a couple hotdog buns around her foot. I looked at her, real serious and all, said, "Alex, we're going to need to change your dressing once an hour. Otherwise it won't work." We might've changed her bloody hotdog buns twice. Not a single person there once questioned our medical knowhow. We passed out right by the fire. The next day I had my first hangover.

Woke up in the grass and a couple of people were sort of milling around, seeing about getting the fire going again and all, pouring new ice on the beer. When Alex got up in the middle of the afternoon, Alan Johnson still hadn't got up yet. She give me a sly look and said, "Let's go get some pills, huh?" I suppose my face didn't change much. The day was hot and bright. I was hungover and could smell myself. You know your ass stink when you start smelling yourself. So all in all, you might've said I was less than enthused about going to find pills. In my head, I was thinking she was on about driving way out to some podunk little house with a saggy front porch and some skinny toothless motherfucker grubbing at our dollar bills in exchange for some horse tranquilizers or something. I said I didn't think I was up for it, but shit, I ended up going anyway. She grabs keys out of her kitchen and leads me out into the garage where this green Beamer's parked. Thing that annoyed me was that she paused before opening it to look at me. I probably didn't look real impressed with her ride.

She was a terrible driver. I'm not one of them dickheads always running around talking shit about women drivers or anything—she was just a shit, shit driver is the long and short of it. She probably thought she was wrapping me around that little pinky finger of hers every time she cranked her tachometer up into 9,000, 10,000. In my head I was thinking, "Yeah, yeah, real sexy. Living

dangerously. Yeah, yeah.” That and going through my first hangover made me sure I was going to toss my cookies all over the floormat before we got there, but we made it alright. Nobody said anything. I just tried not to look out the window until we stopped.

Instead of going to some shithouse in the sticks, we ended up in the parking lot of a little building that could’ve almost been a house. It was just off the highway. It was the kind of place like what’s been going up all over old Southwest in Roanoke. Turning shitty houses into law offices, dentists and architects and all that. I remember back in high school when I had my job making deliveries for HoppyCopy out to places like that. I’d stand in the air-conditioned foyer thinking it was like being in somebody’s house, and some secretary who was always about the right age my mother would’ve been would look at me and smile and say, “Sure, I’ll sign for it.” I sat down in the waiting area while Alex signed herself in. It was Saturday morning, but sure as shit the place was open like it was the middle of the week. Alex said, “This won’t take long,” and headed back, so I sat there for about ten minutes, wondering why she’d seen fit to bring me along.

When she came out, she didn’t walk over to me first. She just paid the bill and headed for the door. I followed. In the car I asked what she’d got. She grinned and handed me a script for hydrocodone, sure enough. “Just for your leg?” I asked.

“Told him I’d sprained my ankle,” she said.

“They don’t give people Vicodin for just spraining ankles,” I said. “Believe me girl, I’d have a nice fat wallet if them motherfuckers gave that shit out like Halloween candy.”

“I know this guy,” she said. “His clinic out here gets a lot of support from the community. He takes care of us in return.”

She sent me into a pharmacy to get the prescription filled. The man at the counter didn’t ask anything about the script when I gave it to him. Just adjusted his glasses, told me it’d be a minute, and

handed me a bag. Alex hadn't given me any money to pay for it, so I paid with my own cash. Before I went back out to the parking lot popped one for myself. I figured I'd earned it with the headache and all.

Suppose you might say that started a trend. Like Brett Favre says, hindsight's 20-20. Alex took me back to her place and brought me up to her room. She popped two of them Vicodins like she was on tv or some shit and lay back on her bed with her eyes closed. I looked around the room and the blood rushed to my head the exact way it did when I was 14.

"Your folks aren't coming home anytime soon are they?" I said. She rolled over and whispered something I couldn't make out.

I set down on the bed beside her and ran my hands along her legs. She just lay back. I undid the buttons on her jeans and kissed her for the first time.

She wasn't no good kisser, I'll say that much. Sloppy as fuck. But shit. Wasn't nothing else better to do. And as Wayne Gretzky says—maybe this is the best guy-advice ever—"You miss 100% of the shots you don't take."

I don't want to act like one of those guys who thinks it's real cool to beat up on girls. But there's also something different—when you and somebody are so in touch with the rawest animal instincts and you're just going at it, like MJ and the Pistons used to do: take it out of context and guys would've been arrested for brawling. And I was thinking it was the same with this girl, Alex. It frustrated me how little she was involved in the whole process. That's total disrespect for yourself and the other person. So I picked her up off the bed and shoved her up against the wall by her throat. Cause of the pills she took, it wasn't a real pronounced reaction, but you could see her eyes get a little bigger. Closer to normal size.

I saw her nails for the first time. They were painted a really nice shade of blue. I like it when blue and green are mixed. Her nails were digging into my arms. I bit her lip and it bled. She ripped one of the

buttons off my shirt as she yanked at it. She pushed me away and I lay back on the bed as she sat heavy on me. It's strange to try to describe how it all felt. It was a combination of how I'd felt looking at those big rocks dancing in the light of our bonfire, feeling like my head was in the well-lit, smoky forests of some far away time and planet, and how I'd felt watching the goddamn tachometer jumping on Alex's BMW while my head imploded like the last gasp of a black hole. It was both those. And while I felt those things, I had a little inkling in the back of my mind that I could put on a condom and it was so inconsequential next to the celestial high of the century and the hangover that could end all existence. Shit, I knew it was wrong. I did it anyway, cause it didn't fucking matter.

Shit was sloppy as fuck and quick as anytime I ever had. Looking back, you'd have to say that she was the best looking girl I ever got with, but goddamn was that shit disappointing. Million-dollar drive and a five-cent shot, we used to say on the playground. We got done and I said, "I need a beer," so I went downstairs and popped open a beer. I was setting on the couch in her family's living room and in front of me on the wall was this big old banjo.

When Alex came downstairs again, I asked her if it was hers, if she played. She snorted. "It's my dad's," she said. "He bought it about four years ago and still can't play anything."

I tapped my fingers on the drumhead a couple times and ran my thumb across the strings. It didn't sound in tune. My fingertips were dusty.

I sipped my beer and looked at it. It come to mind that somewhere, once upon a time, some motherfucker had thought to himself to string a guitar across a drum, or something like that. Or maybe it was a caveman stretching deer guts across a turtleshell. I stared at it and touched it a few more times before I wandered back out into the evening. Things were getting cool. From the back porch, I could see

down in the field the bonfire was still burning. I wondered what all they'd been burning on it all day. It occurred to me to go look for Alan, so I wandered down.

He was sitting by the fire—it was hot as balls next to that fire—talking to some dude about colleges. He asked me if I wanted to stick around another night or go back to Roanoke. I asked him what he wanted to do.

“Honestly, Josh, I don’t give a damn,” he said. His voice sounded dry. I sipped at my beer.

“I guess we might as well head back to Roanoke. I’m still hungover,” I said, even though I was feeling fine by that point.

We walked back up towards the house where he had parked. He headed to his car and I said I was going to say goodbye to Alex. She was passed out on the couch in the living room. The house was still.

Back outside, I told Alan to open the trunk, and he obliged without once asking.

Leaving that house the sky was starting to get dark with a summer storm. We drove back towards Roanoke without saying much. He dropped me off and I might’ve forgotten if he hadn’t popped the trunk when I got out. We shook hands and I stepped out. I looked at the open trunk and scratched my head. My mouth felt dry, but when I laid my hands on the dusty banjo sitting in Alan’s trunk, I felt like it had all been worth the trouble. I giggled just a little bit as I carried up the front steps of my porch.

My uncle was over, having a beer in the kitchen with my folks when I walked in. I grinned at them and said, “Look here what your son found,” and explained how it had belonged to somebody’s little brother who had gotten a newer one and never played this one anymore.

My uncle and my dad took a look at it, tuned it and passed it back and forth a few times. I remember years later talking to my uncle at a wedding reception about that banjo. We’d both had a few drinks when he told me he knew that nobody’s brother had gotten a better banjo than that one.

“Boy you walked into that kitchen with a Gibson banjo. That thing must’ve cost at least a couple thousand dollars new. I didn’t know whose it really was, but I figured whoever you’d pinched it from would get wise that you’d took it and either kick your ass or call the cops. Either way, I figured it was your ass, not mine or your daddy’s.”

Since then, the thought crossed my mind a few times: I guess I like to think that Alex told her folks she had no idea who could have done such a thing. As time went by, I liked to imagine that I was sort of a dashing figure in her mind, the way she sort of became bigger than life in my mind over the years.

The banjo ended up gathering a lot of dust in my room the rest of the year. In the fall the following year, though, I packed up and moved in down at Ferrum. I walked in with that banjo and propped it up like a decoration, but when my roommate ended up moving in, he asked if I played. I told him I didn’t and he just about flipped his shit.

He was from Abingdon and real into bluegrass. He asked me how I got the banjo if I never played and I told him it was more of a keepsake than anything else, but he insisted on teaching me how to play. I didn’t really fight him on it. I used to look at that thing and imagine myself playing it. I never learned how to fingerpick like he could, but when he taught me about hammerclawing, I guess I sort of found a niche. I learned my chords, and I could play things that sounded cool, at the very least. By the end, Chris was even dragging me to open mic nights with him where he played guitar and mandolin while I tried to keep up with him on the banjo. Ferrum is real bluegrass country.

I moved up to Lynchburg after college, I guess I sort of felt like I was legit about that bluegrass. I wasn’t legit about anything else. I had a degree in Visual Communications, which meant I basically had a degree in being a jackshit “student athlete.” Hard to get your start when you’re not exactly sure what

you're good at. And there was nobody going to hire me because I was good at running real fucking fast, or running my mouth or shotgunning a Natty.

But Chris had taught me how to play some banjo; that shit turned out to be kind of important. Ended up, I met a girl at an open mic night. She was there with her guitar, and from the very first you could tell she was the real deal. She started singing and fingerpicking. There's nothing better than a guitar played without a pick. I looked around the room and the hair on the back of everybody else's neck also stood straight up.

She played with a sour look on her face the whole time, but she stood up at the end of her twenty minutes and said, "Thanks again y'all, my name's Robin and if anybody's looking to start a band, come buy me a beer." She smiled and stepped off the little stage. Straight away, there were four guys at the bar with beers in their hand, telling her about the world tour they were ready to go on.

When my time came up, I was all nerves and warm beer, but I stepped up and played a hammerclaw tune I'd been working on. I introduced myself and said, "This here's a song I call Robin," and played it looking over at Robin and all the guys buying her beers. That night, she ended up joining a band of four older dudes—but she left with me.

For a while, things looked pretty bright. We decided to move in together a couple months in. I was feeling like an honest-to-God adult, ready for real adult commitment in the real adult world and all of that. Again, Brett Favre knows the story. Then again, shit looks a lot prettier looking back, knowing it's all coming to an end.

On the third day after we moved into our little rental house, when things were still in boxes and the furniture was all still in the front room, a raccoon wandered down the middle of the road.

Motherfucker was clearly out of sorts. The man from animal control said it sounded like rabies,

but that it was also possible the raccoon had drunk a case of skunked beer or paint thinner someone had left in a dumpster—said it wouldn't have been the first time. When the sheriff rolled up, I was waiting outside and Robin was watching from inside, occasionally letting me know how dumb she thought it was to watch the rabid raccoon from outside.

I pointed down the block and the sheriff adjusted his belt and put his hat on. "Yeah, he's walking pretty funny. I guess they'll put him down soon as animal control get here." The raccoon waddled, looking real desperate, his furry sides puffing in and out. The road was quiet except for the occasional burst of chatter from the sheriff's radio. The raccoon come back the other way and ended up passing within fifteen feet of the sheriff's car on his way back down the block.

Sheriff had his hand on his gun as he watched the furry motherfucker waddle down between the yellow lines. We stood there in the grass and followed down the road a little bit as he kept on down the block. The pavement was hot and there wasn't any breeze that day. When the animal control van arrived, the raccoon hadn't got much further. Two men got out, one had a tranquillizer gun and the other had one of those long poles with a noose on the end of it. I turned and went back inside.

I poured myself a drink while the men took care of the raccoon. Robin told me I was lucky but dumber than shit to have stood outside watching that little motherfucker. I grinned at her and said "How do you know he didn't go and bite me when you weren't looking?" I nibbled on her ear and told her she was going to get it too and we started going at it on the floor of the front room, the windows open, the sweat beading on our foreheads. He was lucky, I remember thinking, seeing as how he probably went out feeling high as shit from whatever drugs they give him. I tasted salt on Robin's skin. Dying high out of your mind has got to be a better way to go than the little pieces of your brain throbbing that much, blood vessels bursting and finally exploding from the inside out.

There are some days now when I think that'd be an okay way to go. Those are days when I find myself thinking it'd be a good plan to just bash my head against the wall until I pass out. Okay, it sounds emo as shit. Like little thirteen year old boys might do that when their girlfriends break up with them at the mall. Whatever. Maybe they do feel that way. Doesn't mean that shit's the worst idea that's ever been had. What'd that motherfucker say in *The Matrix*? Ignorance is bliss. And when you're not ignorant, it's like a splinter in your brain. You can ignore it, but the more you try to ignore it, the worse that motherfucker itches.

But okay. Stay with me. Look at it from my shoes and tell me there's anybody but my dumb ass to blame here, and tell me that if you weren't me that you wouldn't be doing the same shit?

Robin was a winner. A winner and a half. What was she was ever doing with my ass? Sometimes, the heavens open up and good shit happens to bad people. We've all got shit we didn't anywhere near deserve in life. It happens. So me ending up with Robin was one of those things. It was all going good—falling into place. It was like I'd spent all of my life as a fuckup and then suddenly the same old clouds parted and the sun was shining and I was a good dude. Just like that. I could do no wrong, it felt like.

And of course when people say that, you know what comes next. They end up doing some serious fucking wrong. And I did.

Living in Central Virginia. There's a couple cities. Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Lexington. Events tend to take place in these cities. You run into people sometimes who you didn't think you would. I was at my friend's show once. His band was asked to play one of those Blues and BBQ festivals. It was a good show. An outdoor show at a farmer's market. People were up and dancing. Old dudes with sleeveless shirts, beer guts that were sloppy and beer guts that were stretched tight as a drumhead like a woman in her final weeks of pregnancy. Cowboy boots and flip flops. The smells of the grills, the charcoal. The smell of beer in the evening sun. A bit of a cool breeze.

I was there by myself. Robin had gone up to D.C. for the weekend to help her sister pick out a wedding dress—I was only too happy to miss that one. So while she was probably drinking a Cosmo with her sister talking about which dress they thought would be the best, I was setting up my lawn chair and having me a few beers.

I chatted with people here and there about things like the baseball season (which was starting to pick up and get serious) and the good weather. A little bit of music. But mostly, I kept to my chair in the shade off to the side. It was getting towards the end of the show. The sun had just dipped below the mountain tops and there would have been about twenty or thirty minutes of light left in the sky. You've seen those summer sunsets. I was feeling real peaceful and open to shit. My buzz was in just the right place. My belly was full of mustardy South Carolina barbeque. There was this voice and it was like my mind was stuck in the moment. There was a lag and then it was just like what those lions are like when the afternoon sun has them feeling drowsy and then they realize all of a sudden the gazelles are back in the shade of the rocks, chowing down. There's a moment that everybody knows when that shit in your brain switches on and every hair on the back of your neck knows that it's game time. I stood straight up and shook hands with miss Alex herself.

She gave the whole hello, how are you routine and I offered her a seat and a beer. She sat in my lawn chair telling me about how she owned a little chain of art galleries because she just loved the arts and shit. I was nodding, eating that shit up. I probably had my tongue hung out my mouth like Pavlov's goddamn motherfucking puppies. When she smiled and said let's dance—"just for the hell of it," I said, OK—just for the hell of it. Then she led me off into the parking lot as the last band—the headliner, who'd I'd come out to see—took the stage.

She'd definitely been living hard those years. I can't explain it, but it just didn't make a bit of difference that those abs of hers were like bread dough puffing out between her shirt and her jeans. The lines under her eyes and all the extra makeup she was wearing to try to hide it. She was your textbook

cougar now, but shit. Sometimes you do things because they're worth doing. Other times, you're doing shit just to prove a point. Looking back, you can always tell which is which, but can you tell in the moment? It's just one of those things. Michael Jordan dropping crazy ass shots against Orlando when they'd stepped out and surprised the Bulls and stolen a game. Brett Favre coming back to Lambeau Field as a Viking, twice the gunslinger he was when he left. Everybody's done it at one time or another.

It was one of those things that went along as it went along and I just waited for my mind to catch up. We were in her car in the darkened parking lot after all the others had gone. She was yanking her jeans off and I just stared as they made the dimply skin of her thighs wrinkle and stretch. The car smelled like cheap beer and sweat and the unmistakable dankness of her poon.

And still there were these moments of total hesitation. I could've probably stopped myself at any point if I had been somebody else. Another time, another place. Instead I sat there like a goddamn deer in the headlights.

It was like when you hold your breath and those little black spots start showing up. I closed my eyes, and felt each moment pass. Her breath felt warm in the crook of my neck. It got faster for a while and then it stopped. I opened my eyes.

She was pulling her shirt on and I was sitting there still rubbing my hands over the stubble of her thighs wondering if I needed to go get tested.

Because I was still riding the high of feeling like I could do no wrong (remember, sometimes shit takes a while to catch up to your brain, now), I decided the only thing to do was just tell Robin. Just pathetic.

First thing she says is that she's got to think about it. I try acting real apologetic, and she says *don't touch me*. Second thing she says is she needs some time on her own. Third thing she says is over the telephone. Says that she's thought it over. Her voice is cold and it's plain to see there's no arguing

balls and strikes here. We're done, she says—that's what's best for everybody here.

Acute encephalitis is what it's called when your brain gets inflamed. The raccoon is one of the memories that's played over and over since Robin left. In the beginning, I was drunk for three or four days and nights, waking up and drinking and passing out—sometimes feeling like the end of the world and sometimes feeling like a party. Then, I woke up and it rained. There was something in that morning—it was cool, things were especially green. I drank four or five cups of coffee watching the rain and decided to go out walking in it. I ducked into the library when the rain picked up and spent a long time sitting, watching rain there. I was on one of the computers just poking around the internet when I learned about acute encephalitis. There's some people think, evidently, that it's better if you've got rabies to just let it break the blood-brain barrier. That somehow that spares you the worst effects of it.

Think about that shit for a minute. Let it settle in your brain, motherfucker: when you have got rabies. *Rabies*. The shit that killed Old Yeller. They say the best thing to do is let that shit get straight into your *brain*. There's something to that. Saul Williams has got a song that goes, "When you open to it, vulnerability is power." Tell me that shit isn't barking up the same tree.

The end of the rain, the thought that brains can suddenly catch fire and explode from within—it all came together in this state of, like, religious vision. I grew up assuming I'd be like my dad. I grew up assuming I'd meet some woman and we'd get married and the whole nine. And then it hit me. One of those moments when you knew something all along, but didn't realize you knew it. I felt totally free. Kris Kristofferson's words came to me, "Freedom ain't worth nothing, but it's free," and I probably sang that song about a hundred times to myself that day. It was better than the first time I'd gotten high, it was better than the first time I'd had sex. It was probably the most important moment in my life.

It's the type of shit that old fuckers are always hollering about on the Jesus Hour on Public Access, but listen: it was the real fucking deal. There are very few times in life when you should say

you're sure of anything. Whenever you think things are going good, that's when you take your foot off the pedal, and that big lead you built up starts to slip away. But, occasionally, rarely, once in a blue fucking moon: there's a moment of greatness in your life. Everyone's got one. One of those rare moments when you're like the '04 Sox, and everything looks like it's crashing and crumbling before your eyes, but you're sure that you've still got a fighting chance.

Those rare moments when you feel sure of something, those are turning points. Everything hangs in the balance. Those are the times when Phil Jackson calls timeout and says "Michael, look for John in the corner;" when Brett Favre looks into the huddle and says, "Alright guys, let's win this one for my Dad, God rest his soul." Moments like those are rare. They run over and over again in the back of your mind like Ali-Frazier II on the ESPN Classic of your life. You can practically hear the grainy announcer's mic in the background telling anybody watching that you're on the precipice of greatness. And then all the other voices fade away into a moment of total concentration:

There were planets in the sky and rain coming down on the streets and me in this library, looking to the window, the road, where the horizon disappeared, not thinking any thoughts that could be put to words. Totally involved in the moment. Like hungry desert lions watching gazelles, sharpening their claws, wondering how much longer it's going to be until they come wandering back towards the rocks.

V. In the Year of Election

In the Year of Election

It's October, and the leaves are at their most brilliant, so we agree to meet outside of Mr. Pearce's house—he's, among many things, involved in developing this area—which is halfway up what used to be the old Mill Mountain road. I parked in a neighborhood at the bottom of the mountain and walked up. I've already got a taste of the fall air. Mr. Pearce is sitting out on a small patio in the grass—white wrought-iron café table and two chairs, he's sipping at a cup of coffee. He is wearing a charcoal flannel suit and a bright red down vest over the jacket. His hair is combed back and his mustache is trimmed close. He pours a second small cup full of coffee. He gestures like my grandfather used to when he invited our family into his house. Men who have their dirty fingers in as many pies as Mr. Pearce does are given to a high standard of personal presentation, I find. Midmorning coffee with Mr. Pearce is no exception to the rule.

After coffee, we leave the cups and saucers on the small table and begin to walk the rest of the way up the mountain. I wonder to myself how many of the people he's met call him James, and imagine them stacked next to the people who call me Jeremy. James and Jeremy. The names sound strangely alike, as I consider them in this moment.

When we get to the top, we don't go up to the zoo and the star but continue along the paths that follow the ridges along the spur road towards Roanoke Mountain and the parkway. The sun is high now and the sky is perfect and clear. You can smell woodsmoke from far off. Dried leaves. A touch of Scotch, maybe, and a touch of the strong coffee Mr. Pearce drinks drifts from, along with his after-shave and the smell of shoe polish. He is talking about a new golf course, his life insurance firm, his Richmond

Spiders who have just dropped an easy win against lowly William and Mary in what was evidently a very close game.

Our walk takes us by the rust-eaten hulk of what was once a car. It is surrounded with thick trees, covered in leaves, and probably filled with hornets. Mr. Pearce walks right by it, keeps talking. It is an old car. Perhaps it has been here as long as Mr. Pearce has owned the house?

Another hundred yards past the car is a clearing, and I see that we are again back on Mill Mountain. Powerlines run up and down the long clearing, from the hospital towards the zoo at the top. It seems like the sort of thing an entrepreneurial suburbanite will someday make use of for some Alpine-kitsch chairlift. Or maybe something tackier. But I know once we are here, that the view of Mr. Pearce's terraced gardens and stately looking home are not far.

It's been an extremely uncomfortable walk—the better part of two hours, and he's done almost all the talking. He seems entirely willing to do so, but I am still uncertain why he has called me to join him for this morning walk. On any other Saturday, I might be lucky enough to still be in bed. A late night out with the wife and our friends—some music, some drinks, good times. But last night, I sat around flipping channels, feeling vaguely nervous for today's little walk. And so far, it's been nothing but small talk. Is there some subtle meaning I've yet to grasp? It wouldn't be the first time, but for now, we continue to talk.

Upon reaching his home, he turns to shake my hand. Over his shoulder, I see the wrought iron table is clear of dishes. I shake his hand. Finally, this is the end of it. There are questions to puzzle over, sure enough, but at least nothing bad has come of this.

"I'd like you to join me and a few of my associates for dinner this Monday evening. Can you do this?" Mr. Pearce asks. His tone is suddenly very different. He is standing much taller than I am, and his handshake has gotten unexpectedly firm, leaving my palm feeling like the half-baked, oxygen starved croaker we would keep in buckets half-full of saltwater in our johnboat during summers on the

Chesapeake. Mr. Pearce, I have to imagine, is much more of an angler than I ever was. His red vest and a flannel suit suggest that he is also an avid hunter.

My dad tried to take me hunting a few times and I couldn't bring myself to shoot anything. He never said a word about it, but even as a boy, I knew he was disappointed. I have never been comfortable around men like my father, and today, Mr. Pearce is the spitting image of my old man.

Monday evening, I leave the office and walk the two blocks to our apartment. It's a nice place—recently redone. Tasteful. A lot of the other young professionals in Roanoke have really taken to these refinished old buildings. Artists too, here and there. A lot of studios downtown. The resurgence of downtown Roanoke coincides nicely, I think, with the resurgence of the art community down here. The museum is nice. Lots of nice places now.

I'm still not sure what to think of the museum's architecture. I suppose I don't have the technical vocabulary to describe it like the architects must when they swap opinions about it, but the Taubman is just a little overstated for my tastes. Not in any gangster with diamond-studded cufflinks sense. But it's not as quiet as I think it could have been. Then again, I'm not an architect or a designer. My wife chooses the paint we use on our walls, the sheets that go on our bed and she even likes to pick out my shirts—tells me when I need to get different sizes. But I like to think I have a good sense of aesthetics. There's something inherently classier about understated things.

The inside of the museum is much more to my taste. You forget about all the strange angles when you're inside. You see the real mountains, with their soft curves, the way the different shades of blue blend into each other, maybe the occasional outcropping. I like to walk from our apartment to have my coffee in the café in the museum. The coffee isn't as good, but it's a lot quieter than Mill Mountain Coffee is. I leave that place to the younger versions of myself I see with their dads' old wrinkled copies of

On the Road and their messy haircuts. I might not have had the same edginess as those kids, but their quiet frustration is one I knew well once upon a time.

Tonight, I won't be going to the art museum. I won't be going to any of the little restaurants where I know the wait staff and have a favorite table. I won't be dining with my wife, who I've hardly seen today. I'll be at Carlo's, all the way across town, with Mr. Pearce and his buddies talking about God knows what. I'm less than thrilled, to say the least. In my kitchen, I pour myself a drink and my wife tells me quickly about her day. She picks out a new shirt for me to wear and a pair of dark jeans to go with the vest she's already laid out on the bed. I tell her I feel silly—but she says I'm young and free and I ought to show it. As I brush my teeth she tells me it'll be fine.

"They're probably just looking for a new golfing buddy or something like that," she says. "Just tell them that's not your thing—you can even invite them to play softball with you instead. They'll say no, and everyone can call it even." She's a winner, my wife. I've asked her to drive me over, so she's outside starting the car and I'm here checking my tie in the mirror again. I'm wearing the collar unbuttoned, so there's no reason to, but I hassle with it one last time before I walk out the door.

My wife drops me off in the parking lot of Carlo's and I'm hoping that the table I'll be looking for isn't by the window here. When my dad used to drive me down to the bus stop in his '76 Saab, kids on the bus would tell me as I got on that my dad needed to get his raggedy-ass car painted, take that motherfucker to the body shop, or straight-up junk that bitch-ass ride. It was something that everybody on the bus seemed to love to take part in. The paint had oxidized and was cracking in large portions on the hood. It looked older than it was. The engine, though, was a thing of marvelous strength—the reason he kept that car as long as he did. It was a better car than anybody on that bus ever knew, but my face always

turned red when I got on the bus in the morning. Eventually, I told my dad I'd wait out in the cold instead and he seemed to think it was because I wanted to prove I was tough, so he was happy to agree.

Inside the restaurant is a lot different than I thought it would be. I wonder if Carlo is the type of owner who will come through and check on tables. Carlo is an Italian name—I know that from *The Sopranos*—and I imagine a well-dressed man with graying hair and a loud accented voice asking if everything is to my liking. Instead, somebody looking more like a suit salesman asks me how many I need a table for. I tell him I'm looking for Mr. Pearce's party. He takes me to a large, round table by, thank goodness, a big plate glass window looking out over the hillside and the valley instead of the parking lot. The valley is beautiful this time of year. Nice to look at.

I loosen my tie as I sit down and immediately regret it. Without excusing myself, there's no way I can get to a mirror to tell if it's straight. I unfold my napkin and the waitress asks if I'll have a drink. Almost reflexively, I think of the commercial and say, "I'll have a Sam Adams, please." Nobody takes any notice, though. The waitress gives me an unmistakably automatic smile. She is young and has the look of maybe a Roanoke College student. It still stuns me to see students and think to myself that they're half my age.

At the table the men are talking city politics still. No surprise, I suppose. I gather that one of them is Mr. Pearce's campaign manager, or perhaps just someone familiar with him. The man is a large man, with one of those unmistakable aristocratic southern accents—not the usual Roanoke accent. He is wearing a blazer but no tie. His khakis barely seem to stretch enough to cover his monstrous thighs. I don't want to be caught looking at his thighs beside me, so I crumple and smooth the napkin in my own lap. The large man adjusts his glasses and leans back in his chair, and I can see the label inside his jacket says Eljo's. He has the look of a Virginia good ol' boy. Mr. Pearce is across the table. He raises his drink and nods at me. I smile a little.

There is a thin man wearing a plain oxford shirt with his sleeves rolled up to my right. He is telling a story about his son, who has a master's degree and is still waiting tables. "I don't think he gets it yet," the man says, "He's gone to Africa and lived for a while, he's got his degree, he's lived in Seattle and Alaska, I just don't know when he's going to settle down and get a real job." The man doesn't talk with the same sort of gut-heavy boisterousness the others do. He seems thoughtful.

Mr. Pearce's other two companions are a taller, bearded man with a bowtie, whose hair is completely gone on top of his head and a short man, who looks more like an animal than a man, though which kind of animal, I can't decide. Something almost weaselish to him. He doesn't move from his chair and his arms stay in his lap, but he gives the impression of poking around the place, sniffing.

The fat man begins to tell a story, and the others look on.

"So, I'm down on the floor, but Mark Warner himself finds my wife and tells her, 'Look, Allen isn't going to accept this, but if there's ever anything I can do for him, here's my card.' When I get back, he's gone, of course, on the way up to Richmond and then to Norfolk, but I'll tell you something right here, the moment Karen tells me this, I say to myself, 'I would give a kidney to get that man in the White House.'"

Mr. Pearce chuckles and says "Well, Allen, maybe you can tell us, then, why he decided not to run?"

The fat man sips his drink and wipes his lip. "When he said 'Family Concerns' was the reason he wasn't going to run this year, he meant it. He wants to spend more time with his family right now. He'll be back by the next election, mark my words," and the men around the table nod. The skinny man next to me, however, gives me a look. I'm not entirely sure what it means.

The waiter comes by to check on us, and this time I ask her for a double of Johnnie Walker Black with water on the side. I loosen my tie again. The fat man grabs her arm, won't let go a moment. He wants another drink. I look away.

There is a jazz group across the room—I wonder whether my hosts think this is a tacky touch or a classy one. They have played a few generic sounding numbers already, but when they begin to play “Flamenco Sketches,” I am pleasantly surprised. I say the words aloud, “Flamenco Sketches,” and the thin man turns to me, and then to the musicians.

“A jazz man, are you?” he asks. We talk about music for a while. The guy’s name is Dave—he’s gone by that instead of David ever since he saw Dave Brubeck when he was in.

We talk about art too. He loves the way the Taubman is built. He’s seen the Rembrandt etchings they have right now. When I ask what his favorite exhibit is, he waves his hand and says that he doesn’t know much about art.

Finally I ask him about the other people at the table. The weasel-looking guy is named Frank Downey; he is a political consultant. The fat man is Allen Reuter; he is a government professor at UVa. He thinks of himself as the next Larry Sabato. The bearded man is Brian Sturges; he is a City Councilman. They are all prominent members of the city’s political scene, and they are all Democrats. I am a Democrat too, Dave guesses. He’s right, of course, and I start to wonder what exactly they’ve got in mind for me. Maybe they’ll ask me to run for something? Councilman. It has a certain ring to it. But the thought of sitting through all the meetings you catch on the local stations late at night, flipping channels, does not appeal to me in the least. I much prefer the galleries, the cocktail parties, the local music scene, 202 Market. These are the kind of men who enjoy picking out woolen suits that will make them look bigger. These are men who order custom-built office chairs. These are men who have monogrammed cufflinks, their names embroidered on gym bags full of squash racquets and Lacoste socks. Dave is a little like me, but the rest speak a language that I almost regret not learning from my father and his brothers.

As the meal winds down, I start to catch Mr. Pearce looking at me every so often. The waitress is across the room. He shouts at her to come over. For a moment, he is still looking at me and shouting to the waitress. He turns and gestures to her. He calls her a garçon. I wonder if he knows that means boy.

“Garçon! A moment of your time,” he says with a smile as she nears the table. “We gentlemen have enjoyed a thoroughly excellent meal—my compliments to the chef, of course—and we would each enjoy a glass of whisky—if you’re not too busy, that is. We’ll each have a double of your finest single malt Scotch,” he says, handing her a \$50 bill. Ulysses S. Grant stares at me for a moment. The waitress looks on. Mr. Pearce isn’t even looking at her. He’s looking around the table, nodding at his friends, as if they’ve just shared a joke.

“Off you go,” he says, setting the bill on her notepad. He turns away, but as she walks to the next table over, Mr. Pearce continues to watch her. He sits up a little more stiffly, and I wonder what has got him so on edge.

A few minutes later, the waitress comes out with a little tray and starts setting drinks down in front of the men at the table next to ours. I hear the chair legs scrape the floor and the soft rattle of forks on plates as Mr. Pearce stands up. He walks around to the waitress, who has just set the last drink down. She looks over her shoulder at him. She looks even younger in this moment than she did before.

“Miss, I don’t mean to be a bother,” he says, “but I believe we ordered our drinks before these gentlemen. And I do hope you gentlemen will excuse the interruption. But fair is fair, isn’t it now?” He looks about their table. They’re all looking up at him and aren’t saying anything. One of them looks to his friends and back at Mr. Pearce. He’s about Mr. Pearce’s age. They all are. Grown men, each of them. And the young waitress.

Mr. Pearce’s arm is still gripped around her little biceps; she looks at him and nods. “Yes, you’re right,” she says, “it was a mistake.” She pauses a moment. His grip relaxes. She says, “I’ll bring your drinks right out.”

“Yes,” he says, relaxing even more. “Right away.” He’s all smiles. He sits down and I look again at the next table over. I catch the eyes of one of the men there and he glares at me.

“Well, gentlemen,” Mr. Pearce clears his throat, “It seems like we all know who doesn’t want a tip tonight.”

The men all laugh. Allen slaps at his large khaki thighs. The flesh of his thighs reverberates a little and his gently stained napkin falls to the floor. Our drinks arrive and Mr. Pearce chuckles a little bit.

He gives the other table a look and raises his glass to them before he raises it to us. “Gentlemen, perhaps a toast to our esteemed Republican colleagues at the next table?” He smiles and takes a long sip from his glass. The next time our waitress comes over she asks Mr. Pearce if she can get him anything else. He smiles and says, “No thank you, Brittany, we’re doing just fine.” He says, “Perhaps you’d be so good as to bring the check?”

When the check comes, he waves away the other hands and takes it himself. He, winks at me and says, “This one’s on the City, gentlemen.”

In the parking lot, Mr. Pearce sees me standing by the curb and asks if I’ve not driven myself.

“I confess I’ve had my wife drop me off since I thought I might be drinking,” I say. I feel very silly.

He runs his hands over his mustache before he says, “A very prudent man. I like that.” He offers me a ride home. I nod and we walk to his car. It’s a silver Audi TT.

I stare for a moment, and he takes the opportunity to tell me all the technical things about his car that mean absolutely nothing to me. Once he starts the engine and we are buckled in, though, he is all business.

“There’s something we need a hand with,” he says. “We’ve got myself, Brian and Miss Trickle up for re-election this year, as I’m sure you know, and there’s been something of a mix-up that could cost us bigtime.”

I don’t say anything. His eyes are on the road. He doesn’t look away even once. I wonder how drunk he is, but he is driving very calmly. I know, at the very least, that with the beer, the whisky and the wine I had, I’m glad it’s not me driving. He continues to explain, “Mr. Reuter is associated with a political action committee, as you may know, the Citizens for Integrity; and it seems there’s been something of a misunderstanding with the paper about an ad they have run. Rather, have not run. It’s all quite unclear, really, but the long and short of it is that Mr. Reuter has taken out an ad against his opponent using funds from the Citizens for Integrity, however, you see, the paper has asked that a name be printed on the ad. In a little mix-up, Mr. Reuter sarcastically gave them something of a joke name, which the ad ran under. The problem, you might see, is that the Reuter campaign did not, of course, declare this as part of their official campaign. It was, after all, really quite unnecessary since Mr. Reuter was only placing the call to the paper on behalf of his friends.”

He pauses. “We would like you to take credit for this advertisement. We understand that you are a good friend to the Party and your letters to the editor suggest your own beliefs to be enough in accordance with the ad that no one would think twice, and we’d prefer this whole business to go away before anything big comes about. If you call the paper and go on their records as having placed the ad yourself, you will be at no personal risk, I can assure you. Should it become a legal situation, we have retained the services of just the right people to deal with the problem. But that is an expensive way to do things.

“It would be better for us all if you could say that it was your idea. In exchange, to make sure we take care of our own, I’ll see to it that you receive a City charge card good for up to \$10,000 in any given year to be spent towards travel, dining and wardrobe expenses—any of these will not be questioned. I

simply claim them as my own, the money comes out of a pot that all the city Councilmen are privy to for City and state business—no questions are asked.”

I don't say anything.

“Surely you need some time to think about this,” he says.

When we arrive back downtown, he pulls over to the curb in front of my apartment.

“Mr. Pearce,” I say, “I'll call you to confirm the details before I send my letter to the Times, but I'll do it for you. I don't want any card from you, I don't want anything to come my way for this. I'll just do it and be done with it. No questions asked.” It is my voice speaking, but it sounds almost like his.

In bed that night, I don't tell my wife what I have agreed to. I stare at the ceiling and the leaves that have started to turn, the trees, the unending muck. I'm praying with each step I take—because I still believe every word I say to God might come true at this point—that we won't find a deer, but we do. I have my little rifle that suddenly feels like a man's rifle in my small hands, and my chest feels heavy, full of antifreeze and too much helium. My dad watches me. I raise it halfway. My whole arms shake .

When he raises his own gun, I watch the skin of his forehead tighten into wrinkles as he trains his sights on the young buck and then his whole face relaxes—he exhales and his finger tightens on the trigger.

VI. Bright Star

Bright Star

Marty isn't a cat person. He says he's allergic to them; he says he doesn't know how to interact with them, and complains about their funny personalities; perhaps above all else though, his dislike of cats seems to stem from his ex-wife's cat Delilah.

Whenever Marty is unwinding at the end of the day—the TV going softly, its light dancing in the corners of his room while he lies flatter and flatter in the bed, until he's no longer sitting up and can only see the changing lights on his ceiling—he remembers the suit. It was back in the first months he and Vanessa began living together. He was standing in front of the long mirror that Vanessa had brought with her to his house—their house. He tied his tie, and straightened it against the starched collar, feeling sharp, and he put on his grey suit jacket. Vanessa had gotten him to take it to the tailor and have the sides brought in a little. At first, he had wondered who on earth would be able to tell the difference, but in front of the mirror, he saw how handsome he looked in the jacket—how the jacket now hung from his shoulders. He brushed at the shoulder once, then twice. Looking closer, he saw the shoulder was covered in brown cat hair.

Marty threw the jacket back onto the chair Vanessa kept in front of the half-length mirror where she put on her makeup. He looked under the bed for the cat. He looked in the bathroom. He looked on the stairs. He looked on the couch downstairs—and found more mats of cat hair stuck to the cushions.

He stomped back up the stairs. Vanessa called to him, her muted voice feeling as light as the static that clung to his clothes. He noticed cat hair on his gray pants now. On his white shirt. Everything but his necktie, which had been on a hook in his closet for months. The suit had only come out because Vanessa asked if he had an actual suit, but she had laughed when he put it on. Marty's face was visibly

red, but she put her hands on his lapels and soothed him saying that when she was through with him he would be the best-dressed man in his office.

It was a joke. Marty was working as a postman at the time.

When Marty was a boy, he and his sister Lisa would ride the bus home from school as far as the hill at the start of their neighborhood. They would then walk the rest of the way up the hill and then back down their street to their house. Once when they were coming back from school, Marty found a cat. It was more of a kitten. They chased it into some bushes, where it started climbing. Marty hopped off the ground, grabbing at the stump of the high bush. He reached the kitten with one hand and tucked it into his shirt. On the ground again, he showed his sister. His sister said they would call him Brooklyn. Marty said the cat's name was Oscar. Lisa said that since Marty got to get him out of the bushes, that she ought to get to name it.

"It's too late," Marty said. "I already called him Oscar. So he's Oscar."

But when they showed the cat to their mother, Lisa presented it as Brooklyn. Even Marty's father, when he would park the big white van out in front of their house at the end of the day and trudge across the grass of the lawn with his toolbelt slung over his shoulder—tired and grumpy as he was—seemed to delight in calling the cat Brooky. Marty kept calling him Oscar for a while when he talked about him to the others, but to them, the cat wasn't Oscar at all. So Oscar became the name Marty would call him whenever he could get him away from the others in the family.

Brooky. That was a stupid name. Brook was a girl's name. Brooky was a little girl's name, Marty would tell Oscar. But when Marty held Oscar, it only made the cat squirm and try to get away

Lisa, Marty felt, had a tendency to hog Oscar. She occasionally hid him in drawers when she was otherwise preoccupied with showers or walking down to the corner store on the river side of the neighborhood. The cat's whining would be masked by the layers of sweaters and the thick wood of Lisa's

old dresser. Upon returning, she would pluck him out and talk baby-talk to him. Marty was sure in Oscar's little cat mind that Lisa was the savior—the one who saved him from the dark drawer.

There was the time when Lisa's pretty friend Ellie came over. Marty was lying stretched on his stomach next to Oscar, who was napping on the living room rug. Marty was whispering things to the cat and stroking his ears. He heard the door and looked up to see Lisa tell Ellie something softly. They both laughed. Marty's face got suddenly hot. Lisa strode across the living room and picked up the cat before Marty could say a word. He listened to their shoes on the stairs and the slam of Lisa's bedroom door. Lisa did things like that a lot.

As Lisa got older she would go out with her friends. When she left in the afternoon or the evening, she would lock Oscar in her room, as if he were entirely her cat. She did this regularly enough that she started keeping a litter box in the little bathroom that connected to her room. Marty was ten years old at the time. He would listen by the door, occasionally scratching at the outside of the door, listening as Oscar scratched softly back.

By eighth grade, Marty began to get the reputation in school as a troublemaker. His grades were bad. His father asked him how he could possibly fail English. "Marty, you *speak* English!" he said several times, slamming his fist against the table. Marty frequently fought other students whenever he felt they had issued any kind of challenge to him. In ninth grade, Marty's school had to call his father at work to come pick up his son and take him to the emergency room. Marty's eyebrow was gashed open and blood covered half of his face. He sat with his shoulders hunched together on a little bench outside of the office, his eyes steady on the linoleum tiles in front of him. There was a small pile of crumpled, bloody paper towels on the chair next to him. In his father's van, toolboxes jangling in the back, Marty looked up at his father, who only said, "Marty, you keep getting your ass kicked. You got to either learn how to fight or shut the hell up sometime. You ain't big enough to go around fighting the whole

goddamn world.” Marty couldn’t hear anything in his father’s voice. Not frustration, not anger. Only, possibly, disappointment.

But this wasn’t the end of Marty’s troubles. By his senior year in high school, he was drinking regularly and hanging out for hours on end with his only two friends Isaac and Mason—greasy haired skateboarding kids who hated the same things Marty did. His mother would say to his father—perfectly aware Marty could hear her—“If that boy makes it to graduation, I’ll go back to church and start thanking God for a miracle.”

The story that stuck with Marty the most was the afternoon in the eighth grade when he got tired of listening to the scratching at Lisa’s locked door. She was out driving with her friends. She would not be back until late that night, after everyone else had gone to bed. As the scratching continued, Marty jiggled the door handle harder and harder until in his fury, he kicked at the doorknob, splintering the door around it. The scratching stopped, but Marty kicked again. He kicked it two more times and was in tears by the time the door swung open on its hinges. Oscar was under Lisa’s bed, hunched and wide-eyed.

Marty lay on his belly and grabbed at Oscar. The cat hunkered down and moved farther back under the bed. Marty had Oscar cornered against the headboard and some cardboard boxes of girly, pink lettered papers his sister kept under her bed. Marty grabbed hold of Oscar’s tail, where it was curled defensively around the cat’s legs. Oscar clawed at the rug, but Marty only yanked the tail harder. As Marty adjusted his grip, Oscar made a loud noise and turned on Marty. There was a moment when Marty could see the cat’s open mouth—the pink tongue and the yellowed teeth. He drew his arms back in front of him to protect his face and then he could feel the cat’s claws sticking into his arms. He could hear the cat turn and dash out from under the bed, claws scratching in the wooden floors.

Marty rolled out from under the bed, looked at his wrist and his hands. After a moment, blood began to flow. He heard the cat in the hallway. He ran from the room, following the cat from room to

room , spreading his arms wide, trying to corral it in the corners. They went down the stairs, and in the kitchen, Marty opened up the back door, thinking he would trap the cat on the porch, but the screen door had been left open. So Marty chased Oscar out into the back yard.

The cat was nowhere Marty could see. Everything was still until he heard what must have been Oscar in the next yard. The neighbor's dog was barking. There were the sounds of chasing animals in the dead leaves piled against the fence. Marty felt like throwing up. He was breathing heavily and his forehead felt very hot. His stomach had that airiness to it that was never good. He hunched on his knees and heaved once. He tasted the acid of his stomach and the salt-and-vinegar chips he had eaten earlier. When he could breathe again, things in the next yard were still. It was a hot, humid overcast summer day. He walked inside and shut the door. He went to Lisa's room. He closed the shattered door softly against the doorjamb.

When his father came home that night, he called Marty downstairs. He told Marty that the first thing he had to do was replace Lisa's door. Marty told his father he didn't think there was another door in the house—that it would have to wait until the next day at the earliest. Marty's father's face never changed as he reached across the table and snatched Marty's wrist. He stood him up and marched him to his room, across the hall from Lisa's. He pointed to Marty's door and told him to fix his sister's door, now.

It took Marty a good length of time to figure how to get the doors off their frames. They were much heavier than he had thought they would be. He pinched his fingers several times but was able to get his door into the frame of Lisa's door so that it worked. He told his father he was finished, but his father told him that he would have to put the broken door on his own frame. That that was his door and would remain as such until he went out and bought himself a new door with his own money.

"Well, the door's sorted out. But you still chased off your sister's cat. You ain't yet fixed that," his father said. Marty tried to tell his father that he would find a new cat in the morning, but he had

Marty by the wrist again. Then he bent him over his knee. Marty was almost as tall as his father then, but he was very skinny.

His father kept the practice of hitting Marty with the belt until Marty moved out of the house during the summer after he graduated from high school.

In the years after he and Vanessa divorced, Marty would every so often daydream about the moments when he realized Oscar was in the neighbor's yard—the sudden, desperate sounds of the dog leaping to its feet, barking, and the way he could hear the leaves scattering about the yard. The acid taste in the back of his throat. The hot, wet air that he just couldn't get down his throat.

Some nights he imagined that Oscar got away by climbing a tree, or finding a hole the rabbits or the groundhogs had dug under the fence. Other nights, he found himself feeling as full of rage as when he'd drawn back his bleeding hands. His fists would clench and he would picture the dog tearing into the cat, while it scratched at the dog's nose. He saw in his mind the frightened eyes that he had seen under the bed after kicking the door down, and he saw the vicious, yellow eyes of the dog.

Marty and Vanessa had a son together—Jack. Marty told Vanessa late one night soon after Jack was born that he was going to be a better father to that boy than his own father had been to him, no matter what it took. He looked, for a moment, like he was about to cry, but he composed himself. In those days, Marty and Vanessa lived in a small house in Grandin Village. He had chosen the house originally for being so near to the post office he worked out of. There were schools nearby, a very old one-theater movie place, and a few empty storefronts. It was a quiet neighborhood, and it was in a part of town Marty liked. When he looked out his bedroom window the night they came home from the hospital with the baby, he looked at the lit star on top of Mill Mountain for a long time before he felt sleepy.

Vanessa drove downtown to work in the mornings after she left Jack with her older sister. They only had one car, so she took that. Marty rode his bike to work, or walked. From there, he drove the mail truck to a neighborhood where he walked with his mailbag from yard to yard, wiping his face from time to time with a towel he hung over his arm. Vanessa worked in the air conditioning and loved to make jokes about the tan lines Marty's uniform made. She was a secretary in a law firm that had just moved downtown from Salem. Even though she was in charge of the correspondences for just one attorney, she made as much as Marty did.

Occasionally, Marty would ride his bike to meet her for lunch. One day, as he waited in the reception area of the law firm, Vanessa and one of the attorneys came around the corner joking. She giggled and her face creased in a way Marty recognized. But, when she noticed him, her face changed. That was when Marty started to worry.

The young attorney's name was Mark. Marty joked at lunch one particular day that their names sounded close enough to mistake. Vanessa told him to shut up.

At work and at night, Marty often thought about Mark. Mark was different than the other attorneys. The others were like Marty remembered his uncles to be—fat bellied and vague. But Mark was sharp. His talking was lively—quick, loud words, punctuated with laughter. His eyes were dark—they reminded Marty of a cartoon fox he had grown up watching. It always tried to get into the chicken coop, but the brave, goofy dog always saved the day. Whenever he had to talk to Mark, Marty always thought he would play things cool, give him the cold shoulder. But Mark was always able to draw him out and somehow make him sound dumb. Always laughter would follow, and Marty would feel dirty for pretending to laugh along. His stomach would sink and he would smile.

Mark had a full head of hair where Marty's was starting to thin. Mark even looked like the cartoon fox in his suits—lean and dangerous. He moved through the day-to-day life of the office like he was stalking his prey. Always tensed, always ready for something. The other attorneys lopped down the

halls like donkeys and wore suits that fit like Marty's, and they wore silly colored shirts and ties. Where the others were fat men who drank too many martinis and didn't get enough sunlight, Mark breezed into town from Los Angeles. When Marty saw Vanessa looking at Mark, he saw the stars in her eyes.

For a while, Marty tried to make a game out of it. To guess when and where it would happen. To guess which restaurants, or which roads they might drive—which overlooks on the parkway they might stop at, to look out over the valley, out at the Memorial bridge that crossed the Roanoke River by Marty's house. Marty also tried to guess which car in the parking lot might belong to Mark, as he locked his bike on days he met Vanessa for lunch.

Marty picked out a wine-colored Chrysler that he thought was Mark's. He often tried to picture the way Vanessa's choppy bangs would look blowing in the breeze of Mark's Chrysler—windows open to the bright blue of the day, the tachometer jumping as the engine raced, faster and faster.

Marty played his game when Vanessa was around too. The visions of her and Mark became stronger, more engulfing than real life. It was hard to stay focused at work, hard to focus on the things Vanessa said at home, hard to focus on what Jack needed. For whole evenings Marty would sit, sipping his drink, staring—at Vanessa, at Jack, at the wall, and he kept his silence. His eyes would narrow momentarily if the cat rubbed up against his legs looking for food or attention, but the skin around his eyes would quickly soften and his look would drift again to the wall in front of him.

In tears one day, Vanessa asked how he could act like he did.

How could he explain? Marty remembered in Sunday school, when they taught him the books of the Bible, and how his God was a God who would fight His enemies in many ways. For Pharaoh had intended to let the Israelites go from Egypt when God said to Moses, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart so that I can win the glory for me and for my people." Marty would have told Vanessa that it was God who had hardened his heart if it hadn't been the sort of thing that is true unsaid, and carries no water in the

moment it is said. So Marty said nothing to Vanessa. He watched the waves part a second time, and he gazed impassively at the bloated, drowned bodies of Pharaoh's men.

By the time Jack turned two, Marty would look at his goofy-toothed grin and sandy colored hair and think that he ought to tell the Little Man that things were a little crazy right now, but that his mommy and his daddy both loved him. That things would get worked out, that things would blow over. Marty would always have to step away and compose himself.

Vanessa had loved him—this Marty did not doubt. But he realized things now that were not entirely comforting, things that he sometimes felt proud of being able to say aloud to himself as he watched the last of the evening sun slide across the open wood floors. He would mumble, recounting the time he and Vanessa had met at a Superbowl party. He would say things like, "That was when I knew how to love somebody," barely audible, barely sounding like real words to his mind. These were things he tried not to say once the house was entirely darkened.

Whether he said it aloud or not, Marty knew that Vanessa had loved him so deeply, into the tangled cords of root and seed that Marty himself could not have anticipated it. She loved the man he was, the man he would be and the man he would always dream of being. He felt, looking back, that she had seen all three at once in him. Nurtured them each, until the day she stopped loving him altogether. Or maybe she hadn't.

Marty was sure of one thing. Now that she was gone, he loved her desperately. Marty still wondered how life might have been in the perfect world they had once imagined together—the perfect life they had laid out for each other.

They had tried to make things that way.

She told him she was unhappy. He apologized, even, as if it really were his fault, but before a week had passed, she said it again. He frowned the second time she told him, but didn't say more. When she told him she was leaving, he was shouting before he realized it.

First he said, "Well get going then, and don't forget your boy and your goddamn cat." But then he asked her not to leave with Jack.

"I'm not leaving my little boy, Marty," Vanessa said. The foundation on her cheeks looked raw and haggard. Her eyes were sharp and bright. The tendons in her jaw wound and unwound beneath her skin.

Marty said no. Marty said she couldn't have Jack, he'd fight her in court. Her eyes sharpened further, but then softened. She almost smiled.

"We can't afford that. Neither of us can. Marty—let our boy have his mother."

His eyes blurred together and he looked away.

For a moment he was quiet; he sniffed softly. Then he felt her draw close. She touched his shoulder lightly. Her fingers felt hot through his t shirt. He banged on the table and her hand withdrew. He took a breath and tried not to look angry. He let his fists unclench and laid them flat on the table.

"Don't go. This will blow over," he said. He felt he could almost see his reflection in her face. He was sitting up very straight in his chair. She leaned back in hers.

She said nothing at first, so Marty talked some more. He told her that they could work through things, bit by bit. That they would look back on this moment one day and tell each other how glad they were that they had decided to stick it out. That she should think of their son, how he would need a father in his life.

She stood up and stepped toward Marty's side of the table. She touched his cheek, then drew back, and said, "Goodbye, Marty." She walked out of the kitchen for the last time. There was nothing left to do after that.

At work after she left, Marty's fist would suddenly tighten or he would kick one of the rolling mailcarts. Then he would breathe deeply and relive the episode, each time trying to reimagine himself sitting calmly at the kitchen table, not crying, not looking helplessly around the room or out the small window above the sink that looked towards the empty gravel driveway.

In the week after Vanessa left with Jack, there came one evening when the smell and the shadows in the house became too much for Marty to deal with. He walked out the front door into the night without knowing where he would go. He ended up at the church where teenagers would skateboard from after school till way past the sundown. It was one of the only places in town that cops didn't bother them. A few of the boys were left, and he leaned up against a wall and watched them for a long time. He lit a cigarette. A boy came up with his skateboard under his arm and Marty offered him a smoke. In turn, he offered Marty the brown bag he'd had under his coat.

"My wife left me," Marty said, not looking at the boy. The boy didn't say anything back. Skateboard wheels slammed against the pavement and rolled on. The boy and Marty leaned against the wall for a while, smoking and drinking Old Crow. The boy said, "Thanks for the smokes," after a while and left with what looked like his older brother sometime around midnight. Marty still had the Crow in his hands. There was another swallow left, so he looked up at the clouds and the streetlights and said to himself, "Alright." He poured what was left onto the pavement and set it gently on the wall.

Once Marty's mother had told him in the hospital after she was diagnosed with Lupus how years earlier she had walked out of the same hospital with her quiet baby boy in her arms. She told him that he had been a good boy—the nurses had all said so—a sweet boy, who hadn't once cried. A boy who just opened his wide, blue eyes and looked sweetly around the room. Now he cried more than he ever had in his whole life.

Finally, when Marty felt he had sobbed himself out, he felt his footing grow firmer with each passing fit. His eyes stayed red from not sleeping, but still he felt he was making positive steps. He poured out all the liquor in the house. He bought steaks at the grocery store and ate them whenever he felt he needed to keep his strength up.

He changed clothes several times each day; he washed his hands until they chapped and turned red. He threw away all the toothpaste and started buying a new brand; he took the bar of soap out of the shower and set it in the sink with the hot water running. When he came back, there was only the water and the sound it made as it splashed and drained. He went to an organic store and stood for a long time next to a fifteen-year old boy looking through a rack of incense. When he got home he placed a stick of incense next to each set of curtains and burned stick after stick until the whole apartment smelled like someplace he had never been. Still, he would lie awake and watch the shadows of the curtains wind their way across the ceiling as cars passed in the night. The lights never stopped passing across the ceiling, so he started sleeping in Jack's old room, which had a window right under the floodlight in the back. There were the light blue curtains whose color Vanessa had loved, but the light came in around the edge, giving the room an uncomfortable feeling of being very brightly lit around the edges, with deep shadows in the middle. Sleeping in Jack's bed made him feel better. The bed was small, made for a boy. Marty could dangle both arms over the side. His feet poked over the end of the bed. Every so often, he would reach above his head every so often and brush his fingers lightly across the headboard. In Jack's bed, he knew which way was up and which way was down.

Marty told Vanessa a month after she left him that he would not, in fact, ever be able to forgive her for taking his son.

"Spiteful jerk," she called him.

In truth, the boy resembled her more than he ever had Marty. Everyone had said from the moment they brought Jack home from the hospital that he looked just like his beautiful mother.

What was done was done. Jack was her boy now and always would be.

Marty decided to move out of the house after Memorial Day—the first day in weeks he found himself home with nothing to do. He visited a few apartments before settling on a small, three-room apartment in Old Southwest. The lady who showed him the apartment looked like a woman Marty remembered from church as a boy. He ran his hands along the thick oak door. It was the nicest feature in the apartment. It was not beautifully finished, and there were two chains on the inside of it, and a deadbolt. But the thickness—the solidness of it—gave Marty a feeling that this was a place in keeping with his simple needs. The lady showed him the rest of it with a slight air of disinterest, but Marty knew already that when he fell asleep in Jack’s bed that night, the memory of running his hands along the thick door would play itself again and again as his mind lost track of his life, piece by piece.

The apartment was on Elm. When he looked out his window, he saw his neighbor’s window, with its empty windowboxes, but he knew that on the other side of his neighbor’s corner walls, there was the whole of the Roanoke River Valley opening up before him. The river was slow and muddy there. Mill Mountain would stand in the background, with the hundred-foot-high electric neon star that sat on top of it, dimmed red whenever there was a drunken driving fatality in the valley. The river flowed from behind Mill Mountain through the valley, where it forked in Montgomery county; farther west, the New River Valley. When Marty and Vanessa were together, they would drive through Salem into Montgomery County and eat lunch at an Italian restaurant that stood alone on a hill. The hollows and roads had strange names. The nearest town was a church house with a gravel drive and a small paint-chipped white trailer with a sign for Orange Crush soda. From the restaurant they could see all the ridges and hills that I-81 passed through. From there, the road looked more open than it really was, more neat and more manageable from where they sat, in the afternoon sun on the clear hilltop halfway between Salem and Blacksburg.

There came a point at which Marty made a habit of telling Vanessa that he wouldn't see Jack because he didn't want his boy to see the state he was in. Vanessa would pause whenever he said this, but she would not press the point. He kept the apartment clean. The walls needed painting, but Marty never could seem to find the time off work. After the divorce, Marty decided it was time to give up the job as a postman, and had started working for a local man who ran a small car wash on Cleveland Avenue by the railroad tracks. There were several small shops on the street across from an abandoned paint factory that was overgrown with ivy. The quiet of the place appealed to him. The man who cut his checks was a total lost-cause alcoholic, but a nice man and a guilty man—Marty rarely felt hassled by his boss.

There were times when he regretted leaving his job as a postman. Back then he had been, for a few minutes a day, everyone's favorite uncle, chatting with them about the weather, the news, anything pleasant and polite. He'd felt like a part of their lives. "They'd tell me things you wouldn't tell your average grocery boy, or your hairdresser," he'd said to Vanessa back in the day.

But working on Cleveland was better for him. The change of scenery, the fact that he could still walk to work from his apartment or ride his bike on days when it was less pleasant to walk. The increased hours. That was important. At the post office, he worked hard, but not enough of the time. The government kept strict standards for how much time he would spend at work. At the shop, Marty stayed as long as he liked. Most days it was Marty who closed up. It was always Marty who opened in the mornings.

There was a small apartment above the place, where four teenage boys often went. They had a band, and wore their hair long and in their eyes, dressing in girly shirts and tight pants. They all wore the same kind of shoes and carried cases of beer into their apartment that they bought at the corner store. The man at the store was never bothered for selling beer to the boys. Their music, Marty thought, was

not good. Their rehearsals seemed to consist of playing the same bits of songs over and over. Marty would listen through the walls, sitting up in his chair, not even thinking about sleep. He would hear the jokes they made when someone made a mistake during a song, the sounds that came from the guitars when someone bumped into them by mistake.

That was a different day and age in a lot of ways, Marty sometimes thinks now. Those boys might've been only 16, 17—Jack's age.

Tonight, Marty watches a cat poking around in the alleyway. It is a little cat—a kitten even, thin and dirty. It pokes around, sniffing, occasionally gnawing on a weed poking out from the cracks of a fence. thinks that if he were a cat person, in another world and in another time, this would be the cat that he takes into his arms and loves and says, "Don't worry, little buddy, you're safe—you're home," but it's a thought so far from how things really are that Marty kicks a trashcan instead. The cat jumps and turns, but immediately settles. It casts a glance toward Marty and slinks off down the alleyway.

VII. Grace Land

Grace Land

The first thing I usually hear in the morning is the birds and maybe a bit of breeze in the pines as I sit on the back porch in the sun and drink my coffee. But the first real sound of the day is the diesel engine and the gritting bulk of metal and hydraulics of the skid steer. It's the only sound I hear for a long time many mornings. It's muted by the ear protectors, but it's still quite loud. After a few minutes, it is as if your ears are out in the breeze as the machine snips, jolts and winces, making its way across the ground. You feel it too. The machine does not have shocks or any type of suspension. It is, as my friend Bruce used to say, all about the American Earth. He used to love to sit out on the rockpile during our lunchbreak and read me passages from his D.H. Lawrence book, or talk about turkey vultures. Only person I ever met called them beautiful. He corrected me every single time I ever called them buzzards. Weird habits, but he was a good man. He loved America, though, what can you say? His parents named him after Bruce Springsteen, and I guess it makes sense that all of America—the dust and the grit—always felt like it was out there, open and waiting for him.

A skid steer is about American as a machine gets. Simple, powerful. Easier to drive than a car. Right lever forward, the right wheel spins; left lever forward, the left wheel spins. Both levers forward and the machine moves forward. Both levers back and the machine goes backwards. The engine only starts if you've got the seatbelt buckled, so you can't forget that. The pedals I guess are the hardest of all, but they're pretty easy once you've got the hang of it. Left pedal does the boom; the right pedal does the bucket. You can see how such a machine is free from distraction, free from confusion. The wiring on this particular one needs reworking, but it works well enough for now, because those are all

the controls you need. The equation is simple. Diesel in, work out—“Better living through hydraulics,” as James is given to saying. He’s the man in charge of the project.

I’ve worked for James for a while now. When I got out of college, I wasn’t really ready to start thinking about my life in terms of a career. Bruce was like that too. He was a total free spirit, a kind of art-guy, and he was brave enough to say it in his heart that he never wanted a career, while I just postponed the thought of one. The two of us worked out a deal with James where we could stay a year at this property down in Blacksburg that he owned. It was in rough shape—but that was the deal, we could stay if we fixed it up. James paid us a little aside from living there, which we spent on booze and cigarettes and enough rice to get us to the next check.

The house was an interesting place to say the least. It’s still a bit of a mess, but coming together nicely. When we first started, the property was thicker than jungle. The guy who had lived there was, like Bruce and me, not particularly big on careers. He was kind of one of those crazy artists—not like Bruce who liked art but was still cool. This guy lived in that little house and didn’t cut the grass or trim anything for thirty years. He just hung out making pottery in the shade, I guess. There was a little deck made of withered wood out in the back. The only part of his yard that wasn’t overgrown. When Bruce and I took up the boards from the deck to replace them, we kept finding all these cool-looking shards of pottery underneath.

I have this scattering of memories, that if you put in sequence is like one of those time-elased construction sequences. You know the type. You’ve seen them on TV. On days when the light is right, or I catch the right whiff of something on the breeze, I’ll see one of these vivid pictures of how the yard was. I swear it’s like dreaming, not just because you see it over again, but how you feel different when you look back at real life again. In one, Bruce leans a shovel for me against the concrete steps as he heads to the trenches. We dig a trench about a foot wide, about a foot and a half deep. We fill it with

gravel and tamp until we can't lift the tamper any more. "You can never do too much tamping," James says. On top of that gravel bed, we place the concrete blocks of our wall. As he leans the shovel on the steps, Bruce tells me to take my time. The sun is already hot, but I'm still cold from sleeping next to the window air conditioner. Bruce doesn't drink coffee, but he always seems glad for me to smoke and have a cup of coffee or two before we get going. On this morning, though, I don't smoke and I only have one cup of coffee. I set the empty cup inside the back door on the kitchen counter. The blisters on my hands from the past day's shoveling remind me that I've taken the easy jobs for too long these past few months. The list James has left for us sits on the counter near the sink. We need to re-dig the trenches from where the winter deposited too much soil, and then we put gravel down. When we put gravel down, it means tamping.

Bruce starts to dig and I join him. It takes us the morning to dig the rest of the first trench out. The morning sun is the hottest. Sometime shortly after one, the trees we left standing in the front yard finally offer a bit of shade. I walk into the kitchen again and grab a gallon jug of water. I've tracked dirt onto the brown paper we're put down, so I kick it towards the door. It only spreads the dirt more. I yank a paper towel off the roll and wipe some of the sweat out of my eyes. My shoulders and neck are starting to burn a little, but I don't bother with any sunscreen. I just walk back out and hand the cold plastic jug to Bruce, who takes a long pull from it. That was summer.

I don't have a good memory for the little details like remembering to bring my grocery list when I go to the store, or remembering to fill up my gas tank before I get on the highway, but these bits of me and Bruce are as clear as day. Strong enough you can smell the diesel and the moist dirt.

I met Bruce on my first day of high school. I was waiting in line when a mutual friend introduced us. I got to know him better a couple weeks later when I tried out for my first play with the high school troupe,

on the advice of my first girlfriend. During that play, she ended becoming Bruce's girlfriend somehow. He says I need to talk to you one day, and I'm thinking, shit this is about me fucking up in the last scene. But instead, he's like. Look, here's the deal. He and this girl had just been killing time in the back while I'd been on stage, and one things leads to another, and he swears he didn't know he was helping her step out on me like that. And I said the only thing that felt right. I said "Buddy, that girl's all yours."

So me and Bruce became friends. We were natural friends, but there was always a hint of tension there since Bruce was just so hopelessly cooler than I could ever hope to be. I became the default tag-along in a lot of the things we did, but it worked out alright—without him to lead the way, there's no way I'd have done half the things we used to do. And when the cops grabbed us tagging buildings downtown, I would've spent the night in jail where Bruce talked our way out of it. It was Bruce who spoke enough Spanish and had enough confidence to walk onto the sidelines of the Honduran pickup games on Wednesday nights and get us into the game—even though I was always a better soccer player than he was, I never would've had the balls to try speaking Spanish or walking into that game like he did.

We used to rock the same fashionably-nerdy DIY t-shirts with pictures of David Byrne, the Buddha, Jack Kerouac, Charlie Parker and Paul Simon. We continually tried to outdo each other with our t-shirt ideas, and we both had broken hearts in 2003 when Tim Wakefield gave up the biggest post-season in our young baseball watching lives to Aaron Fucking Boone. But in 2004, I walked into school wearing a freshly-ironed-on picture of Jason Varitek shoving Alex Rodriguez in the face: the archetypal tough-guy sticking it, finally, to the ultimate prettyboy.

I never considered myself an actor—I'd never taken a class on acting, I didn't know who Stanley Kowalski was or who played him, and for a long time I gave a pleasant, unknowing sort of equality to the names of Stanislavsky and Stravinsky. An actor is a strange thing, anyhow. They seem to know who they

are through some mystical, internal creative force that even they struggle to talk about, much less put on a blackboard for someone like me.

But Bruce was a true actor and while the Dharma of Acting always seemed to escape me, I learned from Bruce how to stand in front of the world and accuse it with all my might of the kind of hypocrisy that could choke a man if he just thought about it too hard. The high school theatre was a great melting pot of developing sexual energies, boredom, frustration, failure and occasionally art; I feel pretty sure that if I ever made anything beautiful with my life, I owe it to Bruce.

During downtime in theatre, Bruce would go back to the choir room and play the piano, or he'd bring his beat-up old acoustic guitar. Truly, the kid oozed natural ecstasy and creativity, and made it goddamn hard to look cool next to him, no matter what you did. When he finally took the stage, though, it was a question of something else, completely different. You could feel that with each read-through he was flicking a few more drops of paint onto some great canvas masterpiece that we were still trying to work through long after he'd moved on. Even our director just stood back and let Bruce work during times like those. It was clear to anyone with half a brain that Bruce would be a great actor someday. But he told me backstage one day that he didn't want to act, that he didn't like serious actors and that when he looked at everything going on around him in our little high-school theatre, he just dug the vitality of it all, man, and only an idiot would want to leave it behind. He wanted to teach high-school theatre.

Our friend Carey, though, saw himself as a more serious actor. He skipped his morning classes, smoked a lot of pot and drank a lot of coffee while he read through his texts, annotated them, practiced monologues and studied film. He showed up to theatre with his happy-go-lucky persona on, but his jokes lasted only until rehearsal started. He was the Manny Ramirez of acting, Bruce and I decided. Then again one day Bruce also said he was like a basketball player coming back from a muscle injury, the way they'll spend their time on the sideline riding the stationary bench, chewing their gum and watching, face tensed up, just waiting for a chance to get back in the game. Me and Bruce loved Carey, but we also

loved to make fun of how seriously he thought of himself as an artist. The thing is, it was kind of a double-edged sword for me, because I always wanted to make the same jokes about Bruce.

* * *

That summer we did a lot of tamping by hand:

The tamping is my least favorite part. We're taking turns with it since there's only one tamper, but since you can never do enough tamping, we go until we can hardly lift the tamper, which weighs several pounds. My back starts aching from the strain of the angle at which you lift and start to turn it back towards the gravel again. I try to keep my back straighter, and lift with just my forearms. Every so often, especially as I get tired, I slam the tamper onto my boot toe. It usually doesn't hurt so much, but it's annoying, and sometimes because of the way the tamper is so unbalanced, the handle will whack me in the shins.

I curse at the tamper and throw it down. Bruce says take a break, man, let me do some for a while. I say OK.

* * *

Luci was Bruce's girlfriend through the last two years of high school. The two of them made a perfect couple, I couldn't deny it. She was an actress, and ended in some supposedly prestigious theatre program up North, on a scholarship, the whole nine. Bruce chose one of the state schools—egalitarian to the end. They'd decided to stay together and make it work and all that naïve shit, but if ever there was a couple full of the right mysterious energies, it would've been them, I thought. So I was a little caught off guard when he broke it off with her and dropped out of school to move out to the west coast.

Bruce ended up living with someone he'd met on a train in New York, when he'd been up there to present a one-act play he'd written. He'd been wearing a shirt he'd made with Saul Williams' face on it, and the guy on the train had evidently gone around the country doing various slams and had met

Williams. Bruce apparently dug this guy's message. He told Bruce that if he wanted to make true art, he ought to get himself unwound from life as he knew it as quick as he could—and to see the American west. Bruce was totally unafraid of being anybody's idiot, and while he might've known as well as you or I that the guy on the subway was like any other hack who called himself an artist, he was also completely unintimidated by the idea of being young and wrong. So within two weeks he'd tossed to the wayside everything that he felt had weighed him down and he drove through the Southwest on out to California, where he stayed a month or two, up the coast and finally, to Alaska. He spent a month in Juneau before he decided he'd move back down to Seattle, where he lived waiting tables for three years.

When he moved back to Roanoke, he decided to become a carpenter, and as he would say, work on "bringing it all back home." He felt the great American west was a beautiful place, that he'd lived a meaningful life in a warehouse full of dozens of other artist types, but that he wanted to live the American dream in his American hometown. "Roanoke's Roanoke, man." He must've said that at least twice every day. He asked me to be his roommate, where he'd found a guy out in Blacksburg who'd let him live in a place for free as long as he did all the landscaping work. It was awkward for me to tell Bruce that I was living with his old girlfriend Luci at the time. The whole time I was with her, I had this really strong feeling that I appreciated her in a whole new way—in a way that Bruce never could have. I cultivated this whole aura of authenticity to everything we did.

When you find yourself going out of your way to feel authentic in the things you do, clearly, you're fooling yourself, right? So the more I thought about it, the more the idea of moving in with Bruce grew on me. I drove down to see the place one morning and couldn't believe the mess it was. It was overgrown thick as a jungle. Bruce had evidently been using an excavator and had removed several trees from the front yard and piled them in an empty lot across the street. He walked me through the inside telling me what each room would become and how the house had fallen into the shape it was in. "Some

guy lived here making pottery and never cut his grass for thirty years.” The way Bruce would get worked up about the shards of pottery lying everywhere was infectious. “Dig this shit man, it’s *beautiful!* Absolutely fucking beautiful!”

I told Luci goodbye and just like that I was living in Blacksburg, riding the commuter bus to work in Roanoke every day. But soon Bruce convinced me I should work with him. “James will let us live here and pay us man, it’s too perfect. How on earth can you keep working for the fucking law firm, taking money from little old ladies and doing grunt work for fat old lawyers when you could be out in the American earth? You’re too brilliant for that stuff man, this is the time in your life to dig your hands down into the soil, wriggle your fingers into the roots of the land and see what you can push up into the sun!” How could I argue with that? We spent that first summer clearing out the largest trees, then the underbrush until we had an entire yard full of mud, rock piles, gravel piles and here and there a few trenches for drainage and another long trench where we’d lay down the foundations of a wall.

* * *

The rain has made our trenches run with mud. Bruce and I stand in the muck for a moment before giving up on saving our trenches. The whole yard is muck. We worked so hard to remove the junglegrowth, the trees, the brush, the vines, and now there is nothing to stop the rain but our trenches. We’ve got enough work to do inside for now. But I’m sitting there with the table saw going, looking out the sliding glass doors, watching the rain turn into tiny rivers down the hill thinking, “Goddamn the rain. Goddamn the rain.”

* * *

In January of our first year in Blacksburg, Bruce invited all our friends into town for a cookout in honor of what was forecast as the coldest day of the year. Kind of a belated New Years’ party. He and I got a few beers in us and, for the benefit of our esteemed guests, made a show of grilling salmon out in the cold, wearing nothing but boxer-briefs and bowties. We were both single and our house was empty

of everything but friends, beer and the salmon we could barely afford. The cedar plank and the early setting sun through the grey clouds, the smell of the salmon and the rub, the smell of spicy winter-lagers, and the low din of chatting friends. We high fived, and I shook his hand saying, "Doctor, I do believe we've built a home," even though we'd only razed a jungle.

After everybody had eaten and had more to drink, we put music on. I sat heavily on the couch, rubbing at my full belly. Luci sat next to me, flushed with wine. I put my arm around her small shoulders as she listened to the world through my chest, just like we used to do. As I lifted her chin towards me and looked into her eyes, glazed with the warmth of the room and her buzz, I kissed her and she kissed back, and we were something more immediate than words, so I took her back to my room.

In the light of the corner lamp and the hints of the city lights in the clouds outside, she smiled at me as I took off my shirt. I let the back of my hand trail down the side of her face and then I followed the line of her jaw down her neck to her breasts and I followed that line back up and ran my fingers through her hair. I kissed the top of her forehead. She looked so beautiful in the dim light. The dark circles under her eyes were still there, I knew, and she might just feel like a mess in the morning, but she was warm to hold, so I pulled her closer and kissed her again. She sat up just a bit and put an arm on my shoulder. She said, "Play some music." I kissed her again and picked out an album. "Our Endless Numbered Days," I said as I put it on, and I kissed the warm, soft light and shadows that played on the inside of her thigh as the soft finger-picked guitar rhythms played. "Will you say to me when I'm gone / your face is faded, but lingers / light strikes a deal with each coming night, each coming night, each coming night." I grabbed her closer and closer into me, but that was all.

"I must've had too much to drink," I said. She told me it was okay, and with her sympathetic looks I could feel my face growing red. I asked her to leave. The music went on.

There are names across the sea, only now I do believe

Sometimes, with the windows closed, she'll sit and think of me

But she'll mend his tattered clothes and they'll kiss as if they know

A baby sleeps in all our bones, so scared to be alone

I saw the green lawn of the house I was born in; the ferns that grew near the house, in the shadows; the way all the green in the world would stand out next to the small concrete step and the screen door when it would rain.

* * *

Late summer: Our retaining walls in the front are nearly done.

Bruce and I are stacking concrete blocks over the gravel we've tamped in the trenches we've dug out again. The manufacturer of the wall says that if we have a level surface of properly tamped gravel our wall will stand just fine for years to come. We have our levels out and they creep along the growing wall with every hour. When it comes time to drop the wall down, we use a half block so it can run the length of the driveway down to the street and to the mailbox. We also build up our wall to the house. The going is slowed when we come to a yellow jacket nest. I am stung twice on one arm and lucky not to have dropped the block I was carrying as I swung my hand at the stinging in my arm. After a few minutes of hunting out the nest, we spray it with Raid and watch the yellow jackets writhe. "Yeah," I tell Bruce, "it's some kind of neurotoxin to them." He tells me I'm full of shit, but I'm pretty sure I'm right. It's a morbid sight that neither of us is thrilled to watch, but there isn't much else to look at. "They twitch a lot," I say, and he says finally, "That's fucked up, man."

* * *

I was still sitting on the bed listening to music when Bruce came in. He sat on the bed beside me and put an arm on my shoulder. I just shook my head. My shirt was still on the floor where I'd left it. I asked if he had a good night. "Listen," he said, "I talked to Luci before she left."

"Oh Jesus," I said.

"All she said was to tell you it was good to see you."

"I'm sorry," I said, "was it awkward between y'all two?"

He just shook his head.

I don't know why I told him, but I did. "I couldn't get it up," I said. "I made her leave." He was quiet. "That's never happened to me before."

His hand went up on my shoulder again. We sat like that a while. I felt an emptiness that I hadn't felt in a long time as the room spun lazily around me. I felt like I was about to cry, and I hoped that his hand would hold back the tears and all the bitterness just as it held my shoulder now. "I don't want to die," I said, almost choking up, "not having truly loved someone. I'm scared. I've never felt so alone in the world." I didn't cry though. I took a few breaths, my shoulders rising and falling with his hand. Then his other hand touched the side of my face and I felt it get hot. He brushed some of my long hair behind my ear and he let his thumb and his forefinger follow the curve of my ear down my chin and he pulled my face to his. I let him. He kissed me lightly, his eyes down at first, then glancing up into mine. I whispered no and kept staring at him, but he was so sure and so certain and I felt my neck tighten and loosen and my shoulders tense and untense beneath his hands. He smiled and pulled me closer, squeezing my shoulders harder and tugging at my hair while I kept my eyes closed. I kissed him back and felt his tongue in my mouth and he bit at my lip and started kissing my neck.

His arms wrapped around me, together we lay back on the bed. One hand slid down my chest, first his open palm, then his fingers clenching, tugging at my chest hair and the other hand running down my belly. He slid it beneath my pants and ran his fingers up and down me a few times. I hadn't realized how hard I was. He eased my pants off and suddenly I could feel myself in his mouth. In the lamp light I wanted to call out to him, to the ceiling, to stop him, but each time was another wave on the shore, waves on pebbles and sand, they kept coming and coming and I could feel my legs start to tense, fingers wrapped in his hair, pushing him on until I gasped deeply then lay back.

He rolled me over onto my side and ran his hand along my legs. His hands slipped between my legs and out again. I could feel the wine still, warm in my stomach, when his finger slipped into me. I slapped his hand away, rolling back over, and said “Oh no man, no, no way that’s too much, no fucking way.” I could feel his hands lose their softness on my skin. He stiffened and rolled to the edge of the bed. He sat for a moment on the edge of the bed and then left.

I rolled back over. I closed my eyes a minute, and then got out of bed to turn the light off. I shut the door, my hand resting on the handle a few moments. I got back in bed and felt the weight of things starting to come back down on me.

I didn’t sleep well that night. Sometimes that happens when you’ve been drinking. You feel drowsy, but wake up an hour later and can’t get to sleep after that. But at the time I was totally convinced it was my unconscious trying to tell me something about Bruce. My dream was about a tiger.

It was where I used to catch the schoolbus. I was there with my friends from middle school. Bruce was there. The tiger watched us from across the street. We’re nervous being so close to it, so we move up the block. We won’t catch the bus, but maybe we won’t be eaten alive, we’re saying. It seems silly that I dreamed about us worrying about catching the bus, and not where a tiger might’ve come from.

The tiger follows us. But it’s not as big as we remember from the corner. But still, we go into someone’s house. It is understood that we know the owner of the home. The sky is overcast and the air is hot and thick. The tiger follows. But now it is the size of a dog. We take the gun that hangs over the mantle in the living room. It is loaded.

We shoot the tiger. I am the one who pulls the trigger. My friends scatter. I am alone with the tiger. It is still alive, still dangerous. The gun is out of ammunition. I wrap my hands around the little tiger’s neck and strangle it.

I woke up sweating, looking around the room.

I don't think I ever told Bruce about it.

I lay there half-asleep with the awful feeling still on my gut. It wasn't even light out when Bruce got up. When I heard him in the kitchen, I slipped into my boxer shorts and walked in. He looked up and then poured me a cup of coffee.

He let me sip it for a few minutes before he said, "Hey, I just wanted to say. Last night. I didn't mean to, like, I did it a few times out west, but it was never serious, you know? I don't want you to get the wrong idea. We were both really drunk and it's not like that much even happened, so. Yeah."

I didn't feel much of anything at first. But he was so damn, damn cool about it. He was almost cocky about it. I wanted to tell him that I wasn't just one of his California artist buddies, that I was feeling pretty fucked up to begin with last night, that he was a godawful jerk for doing what he did. And that I shouldn't have let him. I couldn't figure out how to say anything and I could feel my jaw getting tight and I was gripping the mug and there were some car keys on the counter. I threw them first. He looked surprised. I threw the mug at him next. It hit him in the shoulder and it shattered on the floor. Most of the coffee splashed on the counter before it hit him, but the coffee still stained his shirt. I knocked the coffee maker off the counter, and I yanked the microwave apart from its cord and threw it down beside the counter on the floor between us. I walked back into my room and put on a pair of jeans and a t shirt. I found my running shoes in the closet and put them on. The whole time he didn't move from the kitchen. I walked out the back door, looking only at the microwave and the door handle as I left.

* * *

The one that stands out the most: It is the spring of the next year. Bruce and I have started the hardest part. A long drainfield that will take up the sloping back field—it is to end in a small retaining wall. This will prevent runoff from turning our work into a swamp.

As part of the drain field, we start by ordering rocks from a quarry.

We let the pros place the first layer of big rocks by machine. Then we use the skid steer to do the rest ourselves. We've gotten through half our pile. We have the skid steer up against the rocks as far as it'll go. The boom is raised. The bucket is full of rocks. We stand with one foot on the rock wall and the other on the edge of the bucket. We pick out the rocks and toss them on the wall.

We get a short fat one, and it's even a little lighter than some of the others. The sky is totally blue. There's a bit of breeze and the warm sun. The earth is dry and there is dust caked in our work gloves, faces and hair. Bruce's foot on the bucket slips, and he falls. The rock goes with him. It crushes his chest. He's there in the dirt, bleeding out, not moving at all, and I can only stare as the moments pass on. *Just like that*, I think after a while. He was alive. We were talking about the coming baseball season.

* * *

After I left the kitchen, I stood a minute on the back porch, wondering where to go. I got my bike from under the house and started down to the gas station. I looked at the bus stop. I checked my watch. I had almost half an hour to wait for the next bus to Roanoke. I locked my bike to a sign and crossed the street to get a cup of shitty coffee from the gas station.

When the bus came I hauled my bike up on board and watched the mountains pass, watched the turkey vultures gliding in circles, higher and higher. I watched the clouds rolling in and felt the coolness of the air conditioned window against the warm front moving in, its dark clouds creeping over the mountains.

When the bus stopped in the Campbell Court station, I left with my bike on my shoulder. I stopped in at one of the convenience stores on Campbell and bought a pack of Camel Lights. I hadn't smoked in a long time. I regretted picking Camels, but it was the first name that jumped into my mind when the man at the counter asked which I wanted. Then I felt silly for buying any cigarettes at all, but I

was stuck with the pack. I had to go back in again to ask him for a lighter. He said they didn't have any more, and gave me matches instead.

I stepped out again and saw my clouds moving closer, felt the air grow hotter and wetter. I rolled my right pant leg up so it wouldn't get caught in the spokes, and pushed off on my bike into the flow of traffic. I took turns as they came, going whichever way looked easiest, avoiding cars, avoiding traffic, smoking as I pedaled.

Once I ended up on Riverland Avenue though, I knew where I was going. I decided on riding the back trail up Mill Mountain, fixed on standing next to the star and looking out over the valley. I figured I'd get on the parkway from there, and after that, I imagined I'd either end up in Floyd or at the Peaks of Otter. North and South was just another decision I'd let the bike pedals make when the time came.

I wasn't exactly counting on finding Graceland. But once I rounded the bend on Riverland, I could see the brick funnels of the industrial complex across the river. Just before the bridge that crossed into Southeast Roanoke, I knew I had to stop and see Graceland.

It was a little ranch house with fake columns framing the door and a big plywood sign painted light blue, with darker blue letters saying, "Welcome to Graceland." It had fake brick textured walls that looked more like the type of material you'd put a roof than on the side of your house. There were Christmas lights up in all the bushes. There was a three foot tall plastic Elvis in his cape and glasses from his Vegas years. There were two small, fake marble statues that looked like the ugliest lions I'd ever seen. I set my bike by the curb and walked around the side of the house. There was an inflatable swimming pool in back. I wondered if that was a coincidence—maybe their kids had tried to cool off on such a hot, muggy day, but I wanted to think it was like the fountain in The King's back yard.

I walked back to the curb. I sat down beside my bike and got out my phone. I took another look at the house and called Bruce.

"Hey," he sounded as calm as when he'd spoke to me that morning.

“Bruce,” I said, “I’m sorry for the way I left. I’m going to pick up a new microwave tonight when I get back in town.”

“And a coffee maker,” he said.

I took a breath. “I tell you what,” I said. “You let me sort all that out, but I want to show you something first. Can you meet me at the bus station in downtown Roanoke?”

“I can be there in an hour.”

I pedaled to the bus station again. I gave my cigarettes away and waited on Bruce. When he arrived he was on foot. “Shit,” I said, “I should have told you to bring your bike.”

“We can walk,” he said. “I got nowhere else to be. Or we can take the car. I’m parked down by the old train stop.”

We took the car down to Riverland. We were mostly quiet on the way over. When we got there, we parked the car and stood there a moment, reflecting on the sign, the Christmas lights, the columns, The King. I nudged him. “What do you think?” I said.

He grinned and his shoulders relaxed. “I think it’s fucking beautiful.”

* * *

They gave his ashes to his family in a lovely urn. I told them I had an idea, and wasn’t sure if they’d be okay with it. They said it was alright, though, so I took his ashes out to Blacksburg. The garden wall we’d been building in the front yard was unfinished. I left a little nook in the middle of it. I didn’t mark it and I didn’t tell James, in case he was upset with the possibility of it compromising the strength of the rest of the wall. But it was near the top, I figured. There would be one stone resting on top of the little spot. Stones on the outside. Stones underneath. This little bit couldn’t hurt, I thought.

I had a cold, so I don’t even remember what they smelled like as I poured them into the nook in the wall. I had expected it to be a big moment. I thought I might be in tears by the end of it. But it didn’t change anything.

