

Spring 2019

No Net to Catch You

Will Yarbrough
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_etds



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yarbrough, Will. "No Net to Catch You" (2019). Master of Fine Arts (MFA), thesis, English, Old Dominion University, DOI:
10.25777/2azq-3c76
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_etds/79

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

NO NET TO CATCH YOU

by

Will Yarbrough
B.A. May 2012, University of Richmond

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 2018

Approved by:

John McManus (Director)

Janet Peery (Member)

Joe Jackson (Member)

ABSTRACT

NO NET TO CATCH YOU

Will Yarbrough
Old Dominion University, 2019
Director: Dr. John McManus

No Net to Catch You is a collection of nine stories. It is about loss, love, and loneliness. It is about men, women, and children who fail to understand themselves in ways that are often tragic, sometimes ironic, and make choices that usually end in self-defeat.

© 2019, by Will Yarbrough, All Rights Reserved

This thesis is dedicated to Stavros Floratos, Zack Hawkins, Elias Kohn, Ben Mickel, Greg Nealis, Joe Ortleib, and most of all, John Lloyd.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my friends for supporting me. Thank you to Katelyn for her love and patience. Thank you to Nishat Ahmed for his talent and companionship. Thank you to my parents for their encouragement and financial support. Thank you to my classmates for their thoughtful critiques and for sharing their work. Thank you to ODU for offering me a generous scholarship. Thank you to Joe Jackson and Janet Peery for serving on my committee and for taking my stories seriously. And special thanks to John McManus, who understands what I'm writing better than I do.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|----------------------------|------|
| A PATH THROUGH SMOKE | 1 |
| SAVAGES | 13 |
| RAIN ON | 28 |
| BAT COUNTRY | 33 |
| MEREDITH | 45 |
| NESTING | 62 |
| MOUNT MISERY | 73 |
| THE CHOIR SINGER | 86 |
| NO NET TO CATCH YOU | 88 |
| PALO VERDE | 97 |
| ANNOTATIONS | 106 |
| VITA | 134 |

A PATH THROUGH SMOKE

The trick to walking a tightrope is not looking down. Focus ahead, breathe deeply, stretch your arms out wide, and place one foot in front of the other, slowly, keeping your knees bent, your posture upright, until you step safely onto the other side. Peek down at the wobbling rope, and you too will wobble. Despite your best efforts, no matter how carefully you twist and turn, eventually, you will lose your balance, and fall to whatever depths eagerly await. A net might catch you. But if not, how far would you fall? This question is the blood that beats in the heart of my thesis, a collection of nine stories entitled *No Net to Catch You*.

*

Every great or even every very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications

– Raymond Carver

I was twenty-four years old, drinking, and earning \$8.50 an hour selling color copiers over the phone the first time I read Raymond Carver. Berwyn, Pennsylvania, my hometown, had been pummeled with record snowfalls that winter, barring me inside the blue split-level house I was renting along with two high-school friends. I kept mostly to my room – an eight by twelve space with a low, slanted ceiling – where I slugged Yuengling and read books off *Time's* List of the 100 Best Novels, hoping for a breakthrough. I was writing again, having failed miserably in high school and again in undergrad. This time, I had vowed for a more serious approach; in addition to studying books on writing, I committed four hours a day to my stories, often after work at the public library. And while my stories improved in regards to craft, all optimism was quickly squashed by what I sensed was perhaps my most fatal shortcoming: I had nothing

meaningful to say. Flannery O'Connor said that anyone who survives childhood knows enough about life to write. But I was skeptical; after all, I had first taken to reading out of my desire to escape what I deemed a painstakingly ordinary and boring suburban, middle-class upbringing. Instead, my writing veered toward the underbelly of contemporary life: brawlers, junkies, a gambler who tries to win a bike for his son's birthday. Looking back, I realize my naiveté often led me to exoticize these characters. But even then, I sensed that at their core, my stories rang false.

Lucky for me, a college friend – with whom I still exchange books – had the good sense to mail me a heavily dog-eared copy of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver's third story collection. Holding the book in one hand, a can in the other, I paced about my room, the snow continuing to pile on my windowsill, and nodded my head in amazement at the honest detail with which Carver described my life. His characters – who seemed decidedly ordinary, worked unremarkable jobs, and appeared often to lack the means to change their lives, resulting in quiet desperation – belonged to the likes of my neighbors. Of course, reading about the white middle-class suburban experience was not uncommon; it is egregiously over-represented in the teaching of American fiction. However, Carver described the experience with such clear-eyed compassion and honesty. I knew beaten people like the drunk in "Why Don't You Dance?" who conducts a yard sale after his wife leaves him. Or desperate people like Duane, who in "Gazebo" fails to convince his wife that their love can be rekindled. Meeting these people again, this time on the page, made me believe my life was worth writing about.

This collection is an attempt to make sense of my life. The men and women who populate these stories fall to loneliness, loss, betrayal, addiction, and the failure to connect. The love they feel for friends, romantic partners, and family is not a safety net but rather confusing and

complex and often results in a self-defeating silence. This speaks truth to what I know, but the dour tone might also be attributed to how, as storytellers, we require unhappiness and discontent, failure and mania. To quote Charles Baxter, "every story must contain its worm".

*

The story of your life, described, will not describe how you came to think about your life

- Alexander Chee

Writing down one's life, however, can get you in trouble. Not the your-uncle-on-your-mother's-side-has-a-bone-to-pick-with-you type-trouble (though this will happen). But the more infectious, root-bound trouble that is plotlessness. "Plotless" is typically used pejoratively to describe a story that is void of narrative progression, in both the sequence of events and characters' development. Yet so much of me wants to argue the plotlessness is more true to the seemingly disorder of reality. After all, as someone who fashions himself a writer of realist fiction (which, according to the Guy in Your MFA, is the only "serious" genre), should I not only to consider the craft's finest elements: tone, diction, a palpable sense of place, interesting, complex, and developed characters? Call me brutish, but perhaps the reason more Americans watch *The Big Bang Theory* than read, say Jonathan Franzen is that the former is actually concerned with entertaining. Maybe I'm being too harsh. But I admit, I too am deserving of the same criticism.

During workshop, many of my peers described my stories as "quiet" or "sparse". These words, I discovered, when rereading my old drafts, are polite ways of saying that a story is boring. Most were intrigued by my characters' strong internal conflicts but overall considered them flat. This they attributed to the stories' episodic structures; I would often open with an inciting incident, something to befall the characters, but rarely did I allow them a chance to

regain their balance. What I needed was plot, a chain of cause-and-effect – triggered by reversals – in which the character tries to alter their fortune, ultimately resulting in an epiphany or decisive action. As Janet preaches, a character's choices are the engine that drives plot.

Here's the plot arc for an early draft of my story "No Net to Catch You":

- Because Hal is thinking about leaving his wife, he looks into renting an apartment.
- Because Hal has an unhappy Easter dinner with his wife, he decides to leave her and rent the apartment.
- Because Hal rents the apartment, he begins spending more of his time alone.
- Because Hal spends more of his time alone, his relationship with his son, as well as with his own father, are strained.
- Because these relationships are strained, and because Hal is laid off from his job, he becomes depressed and overeats and abuses alcohol.
- Because Hal is aware that he overeats and abuses alcohol, he goes out and is more sociable.
- Because Hal goes out and is more sociable, he meets a friend named Marty.
- But, because Marty later commits suicide, Hal is again depressed.

This draft has a clear inciting incident, but once Hal moves into the apartment, it quickly becomes episodic. That Hal becomes unhappy might prove satisfying, for it is not what he expects. But the series of events lacks cause and effect, hindering the plot from earning a meaningful conclusion. It also lacks any real reversals, resulting in a lag in tension.

So I revised:

- Because Hal wants to be alone, he leaves his wife.

- But, because Hal still wants to be near his son, he rents a two-bedroom apartment in town.
- But, because Hal lives alone in the apartment, he continues to act in ways that sabotaged his marriage (isolating, abusing alcohol, acting stubborn, showing hubris, etc.)
- But, because Hal isolates himself in his apartment, he becomes lonely.
- Because Hal becomes lonely, he invites his son over.
- But, because Hal doesn't want his son to think that he's not taking care of himself, he hides his alcohol, as well as his toe injury.
- But, because Hal's son is in medical school, his son demands Hal let him examine the injury upon noticing Hal's limp.
- Because Hal relents, his son finds the alcohol when retrieving a first-aid kit from the closet.
- Because his son discovers the alcohol, and that Hal's toe is seriously injured, Hal is embarrassed.
- But, because Hal is embarrassed, he refuses his son's offer to stay the night.

Better, I hope. Rather than structure the plot around several events, I cut the story so that it takes place in one evening. I also cut certain characters and relegated others to exposition, choosing instead to focus on Hal's relationship with his son. What resulted is, I think, a better story. The shape is structurally sound; the narrative drive is stronger, and the events do more to earn the resolution. But Hal's motivations are still unclear, which is again reducing the tension. Guess I'll try again.

If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them

- Ernest Hemingway

I was never an exceptional student. I can't remember ever pulling higher than a B average in any math or science class. I was never asked to join an honor society, never sat for an AP test, or even won a spelling bee. My fifth-grade shop teacher (this I'll never forget) failed me for forgetting to carve little chicken arms for my T. rex. But when it came to literature, I was at least passable. I could identify themes, explain the difference between simile and metaphor, and defend an argument in five-paragraphs. Reading was (and still is) my lead passion. I can still recall cracking the blue hardcover of my *Hardy Boys* detective novels, the worn brown pages curling under my fingers. Yet, while I enjoyed heralded classics like *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*, the obscurity of the prose bullied me into thinking the writer's mind operated on a plane much higher than my own. Adding insult to injury, I felt like Fitzgerald and Melville were being prescriptive, that they were telling me how to feel about how the world is.

Once in MFA school, I read Carver's friends Tobias Wolff and Richard Ford. I admired the clear, unadorned language, how the words linked together to convey meaning. Rather than feeling like I was being lectured, these writers were engaging with my own artistic sense to show me how things really are in only the way they could. So I began to fashion my stories after these "dirty realists", using concrete nouns and verbs, relying on surface descriptions, and omitting whatever I could. You know the old adage: show don't tell. What Hemingway referred to above

as "The Iceberg Theory." Meaning no exposition. No explanation or analysis of what's going on. And certainly no specifying thoughts or emotions.

Here's an early paragraph from "Nesting", describing one of its two central characters:

Off the boat's main cabin Luke had made a room to house his recording equipment. Among the acoustic panels, bass traps, amplifiers, microphones, and studio monitors was his floor rack of acoustic guitars, Gibsons, Washburns, Arcadias, Yamahas, his prized possessions. Catty-corner across the hall, he'd shoved a cot between the head and kitchenette, where he'd loaded the freezer with Jack Daniels, and stored his vinyl inside several rusty crab traps. Above his player, nailed into the accent wall, was a tourist map of Nashville that he'd bought for eight dollars at a roadside convenience store while on tour with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Playing cribbage at the small dining table, he would tell Becca stories about recording sessions at Studio B. After two more whiskey shots, he would read her lyrics from his songbook.

This exemplifies indirect characterization. Luke's personality is revealed through actions and appearance. We gather that he is musical, that he is ambitious, perhaps materialistic, and of some wealth. He likes to play games, as well as drink, and when he drinks he's more likely to reminiscence and offer himself up emotionally. But the workshop felt distanced from Luke. Why? The culprit (look around and you'll notice the fiction students now cowering under their desks) is what John Gardner dubbed psychic distance: the degree, to which the reader feels intimacy and identification with, or detachment or alienation from, a central character. I was writing mostly from a remote psychic distance. And it was erecting a wall between my characters

and the reader. The workshop wasn't sure as to how Luke felt – specifically, about Becca – a big problem given that I intended the story to be about their relationship.

So I revised (changes in bold):

Off the boat's main cabin Luke had **built** a room to house his recording equipment. Among the acoustic panels, bass traps, amplifiers, microphones, and studio monitors was his floor rack of acoustic guitars, Gibsons, Washburns, Arcadias, Yamahas, his **most**-prized possessions. **Catty**-corner across the hall, he'd shoved a cot between the **kitchenette and head**, where he'd loaded the freezer with Jack Daniels and **stacked fresh linens for Becca to use when wiping away her make-up**. Above his **Crosley record player**, **tacked** into the accent wall, was a tourist map of Nashville that he'd bought for eight dollars at **an unregistered body and paint shop**, where he and the band **hailed their tour bus after blowing two tires between Lexington and what they could only guess was Bowling Green based off the goldenrods losing their petals to the stiff fall breeze**. Fridays, he would cook Becca dinner – fried catfish, or if **crunched for time**, a canned country ham. They would sit at the little drop-leaf table, **shaking their heads at the day's headlines or sharing a joke overheard on the bus ride home, setting down their silverware to point out the porthole at the fireworks popping in the night sky above the black-blue bay before offering up another swig of their Tallulah**. Five more, and they would be on their feet, **swinging to the down-home twang of Lucinda Williams or The Jayhawks; his hand curled against the dip in her spine, the other locked between her strong meaty fingers, they would sail down the**

narrow passage of hall toward his closed bedroom, knocking over rubber oars and stacked life preservers, her laughter caressing the prickly hairs on his face like a needle to a groove each time he leaned to whisper, "Careful, watch your step" yet wishing them both wild.

What I needed was a closer psychic distance. More FAT – feeling, action, and thought. Stylistically, the revised paragraph doesn't differ from the original. It's longer, sure, but I intended to maintain the economy of words built off strong nouns and verbs. But the words here are bringing to life the details that light up the story for the reader. We now have a greater sense of Luke's backstory, in that he's somewhat plagued by past disappointment. More importantly, we can now see that he cares for Becca, by how he provides her fresh linens, how he cooks her dinner, as well as through his thoughts and actions while dancing. We also get a glimpse of how Becca feels about Luke, most noticeably in the brushstroke about her laughter. Everything aims at character – and in the end, isn't that what we as writers want? To, as Kafka said, take an axe to "the frozen sea within us"?

*

Remember things do not slide, glide, forge or fashion – they fall in place

- Ann Beattie

On December 16, 2017, I flew to Atlanta to visit my cousin. That fall, I had continued to work on this collection, and was developing confidence about what it was I wanted to write about. I found that my stories were about people who had fallen into trouble, and were looking for a different kind of life. Of course, I too felt that way. I had recently written "Palo Verde", the

story closing this collection, about a recovering alcoholic who struggles to stick with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). In it, I wrote: "Drinking, wanting to drink, that was just a distraction – like everything else – from what was waiting for us, no matter what, all the time." I've never gone to AA but was entered into substance abuse counseling by my parents during my senior year of high school. And almost a decade later, I was still drinking, and when I wasn't, I often found myself driving around Norfolk, merging onto the city's beautiful tall bridges, and gazing down at the moonlit water, thinking,

Go on. Jump.

From the airport, I rode in a cab to meet my cousin at Dr. Bombay's Underwater Tea Party, a cozy offbeat café doubling as a used bookstore four miles northwest of downtown. She is five years older than me, though we grew close during my childhood – racing go-karts, picking peaches in our grandfather's orchard, exchanging books on shared family vacations to Daytona or Key West. Eventually though, life happened. She moved away for college, became an English teacher, then quit to open a Terrapan drum business, write and publish a chapbook of poetry, and head a cannabis activist group. She moved to Kingston, where she met and married a man who suffers from borderline personality disorder, and home-birthered two children – both autistic. I had expected the years to have aged her, yet she looked quite as I remembered: tall, a few inches above six feet, long- and chestnut-haired, skinny as a Georgia pine, with a round marshmallow face and big stained teeth. We hugged quickly, then perused the café's bookshelves before ordering a plate of pimiento cheese biscuits and a steaming pot of Roman chamomile tea.

"And this," my cousin said, slapping onto the counter a well-worn paperback copy of *Falling in Place*.

We sat at the end of a long wooden dining table, several chairs from a large bridal shower. The women were mostly black, heavysset, and middle-aged. Some were dressed in large straw-brim asymmetrical hats, others floral sleeveless dresses, as if coming straight from church, despite it being late on a Saturday. All of them, however, were having a hell of a good time. A chorus of "oohs" and "ahs" erupted at the unwrapping of hand-knit booties or the sight of another tray of fresh lemon pound cake exiting the kitchen. I for one was annoyed. My cousin is the lone member of my family with whom I feel comfortable to the point of confiding about my anxiety and depression. I had hoped to talk with her that day about the stress of graduate school, my difficult living situation, why I had stopped taking medication without doctoral consent, and how my father was attempting to rekindle things with my mother – though now the mood seemed off. Still, I went ahead and spilled my guts, talking fast yet in a hushed tone. My cousin nodded across from me at the table, occasionally buttering another biscuit or sheepishly laughing at my grim jokes. Mostly though, she sat and listened. Understanding I was finished, she reached over and locked our fingers together. I could feel my heart beating. I couldn't stop my hand from shaking.

She then told me a story. About how her husband verbally abused her. How he ran away to North Carolina and impregnated a woman half his age then crawled home and begged to sleep in their bed. She told me about kissing her infant children, about lowering them into their plastic cribs, then leaving out the back door, keys still hanging on the coat rack. I imagine it was a frigid cloudless day, so quiet you could hear the freight trains blowing for miles. My cousin walked into the bare woods, her knee-high boots crunching over dead leaves and pine needles, until she climbed the hill that overlooks where the tracks divide the town from the river. Then she hiked down, lay on the tracks, and waited.

"I thought about me, my husband, our kids," my cousin said. "I imagined us living in a house on fire. I didn't know how we were going to get out. But listening to the river run behind me, the ground shaking underneath, I decided again on trying. I decided I was going to look for a way through all that smoke. And that's when I stood up and found the path home."

*

And I could tell the man behind me in the pick-up was upset because his windows weren't down

- Nishat Ahmed

There is so much good in my life. I have laughed atop a fifteen-thousand-foot mountain with my best friend whose mother taught me to swallow medicine. I open my eyes each morning to find myself embraced by the woman I want to marry. And I have sat in coffee shops with fellow writers – who, much like me, persist largely on faith – and shared coffee or a bite of chocolate chip cookie while listening to one of our own read his poem about hearing a homeless man trumpeting Coltrane on an empty baseball diamond on a summer night in Virginia, all because his air conditioning was busted, and was thus driving with the windows rolled down. This, I believe, is why we write: to find a path through the smoke and open ourselves to the world.

John Cheever said that writing a short story is like telling someone you love them right as they are boarding a train. So before you go, I want to tell you this: I wrote these stories for you, to wish you luck and all my love. To say, "Take care."

Take care.

SAVAGES

There was a war going on, but when Ewell met Samir under the bleachers to fight, he hadn't been following it too closely. He was only out to prove that he was tough. The crowd had been small when they arrived, but now that Patriot High had let out for the summer, it was packed. Everyone was easing out of their uniforms and shoving each other and yelling so loud the stands were shaking. Ewell could feel his veins tightening as he stared over at Samir bouncing up and down across from him on the other side of the ring.

Samir was a large Indian kid about 6'2 and 200 pounds. His family had immigrated to the United States at the start of the school year, but by Thanksgiving he had already earned a full-ride to play linebacker at Penn State. He had deep brown skin, thick, curly hair, and a wide-set nose. Earlier, in the boy's locker room, Ewell had walked in on Samir shoving his hands up the dress of a pale girl with wavy, green hair named Hailey, whom Ewell had been in love with since he was eleven years old.

While Neddy, the referee, bobbed around the crowd taking bets, Ewell watched as Samir loosened his tie and turned toward Hailey, who was standing in his corner, holding her books in her left hand and lighting a cigarette with her right. He draped his tie over her chest, which ate Ewell up inside. He wondered if he was a bad person for not liking Samir. Then Dustin came into his corner and handed him a pack of Lucky Strikes. Ewell sucked down smoke and felt a little better.

"Fighting builds character," Dustin said.

He pointed to the scar separating his left eyebrow.

"My dad taught me that," he said.

Ewell and Dustin had known each other since they were twelve. Now they were both eighteen and worked at the Wawa on the south side of New Liberty, where they grew up together, near the old water tower, and still lived. The farthest they had ever been from home was Harrisburg, and neither of them had plans on going to college. Their parents couldn't afford it and their grades were shit. They took as many of the same teachers as they could together, wore each other's Polo shirts and khaki pants, and chipped in to buy the latest video games.

But Dustin had taken Hailey's virginity inside the pink playhouse in her backyard. They had dated on and off since they were twelve and had said I love you to each other over the course of seven years.

As for Ewell, he'd dated Hailey too. But then he'd introduced her to Dustin. For the most part, he thought he treated her fine. In April, two months before, Dustin had told him he was thinking about buying a ring. Then he had a threesome and told Hailey. When Ewell asked why, Dustin said because he wanted to hurt her.

"Remember, lead left, counter right," Dustin said.

Neddy emerged from the crowd, wearing his backpack. He slung it down in the dirt, stood on it, and called Ewell and Samir to the center of the crowd so he could explain the rules.

"How many rounds, Neddy?" Ewell asked.

"Till one of youse knocked out," Neddy said.

"That's you, pussy," Samir, said.

"Shut up, asshole," Ewell said.

"Save it for the fight," Neddy said.

Ewell walked back into his corner. There was a breeze blowing down from the mountains, but it had rained the night before, and the ground squished under his boots. Then

Neddy whistled and Ewell scuttled out to meet Samir, who was bending his knees and skittering side-to-side, crablike, fists dancing little circles in front of his face.

"Hit me," Samir said.

Ewell jabbed Samir's face lightly, and Samir swung at the same time, aiming for his ribs. Ewell dropped his right elbow and blocked his swing, which surprised Samir. He stepped back, leaving his face unprotected, and Ewell hooked his left hand up into it, cutting his lip. Samir started to bleed, and Ewell felt his fear fading before Samir snorted, then sprayed Ewell with bloody mist.

"Pussy," said Samir.

With his tongue, Samir smeared blood on his teeth.

Ewell felt his fear rush right back.

Then Samir crouched low and sprung up at Ewell, landing a stiff uppercut on the underside of his chin. Ewell felt his teeth rattle, but he willed himself not to fall. He flailed a jab wildly into Samir's face, but there was no force behind it. Then Samir rushed, trapped Ewell in his arms and wrestled him to the ground. The crowd roared. Ewell tried to twist free, but Samir raised his head and bashed it into Ewell's nose. He felt the quick, searing pain as Samir pounded on his chest. Above him, he heard Hailey cry out "Blow the whistle!" Neddy blew the whistle, but Samir ignored it and jabbed Ewell's stomach, above the kidney, and his body went limp. But before Samir could jab him again, Dustin ran in and brought his fist to Samir's diaphragm, knocking the breath from his body. Samir's knees buckled, and he fell to the ground.

Neddy ran over and lifted Dustin's arm.

"We have a winner!" Neddy shouted.

After Dustin drove him home, Ewell sat and ate a grilled cheese sandwich in his parents' kitchen. He was wearing a long t-shirt, no underwear, and long white socks. His dad was standing by the sink, eating a burnt grilled cheese, and his mom was ironing Ewell's jeans in the living room while watching TV.

"Turn on the war," Ewell's dad said.

"I don't care about the war," Ewell's mom.

"You don't care?"

"No. Why should I care, it doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Because it's important."

"It's not important; it's messed up."

"How is fighting for freedom messed up?"

"We already have freedom."

"Yeah, but we need more."

Ewell didn't know what to think about the war. For a while, it seemed like it was happening someplace very far away. But now the war was in Boston. Once, Ewell had met a girl in an Internet chat room who said she was from Boston. Her username was Red Delicious and he had jerked off to her fingering herself. Because of Red Delicious, the war felt very real to him now. She was the closest he had come to intimacy with another human being.

"My nose hurts," Ewell said.

"Let's see," Ewell's dad said.

Ewell peeled the bandage off his nose.

"Leave that on, honey," Ewell's mom said.

The iron made a hissing sound.

"Christ," Ewell's dad said. His dad's face was typically very round and soft, but he was tightening his jaw in a way that made him look angry. "When somebody hurts you like that, son, remember; it's okay for you to hurt them back."

"Allen," Ewell's mom said.

"It's called self-defense, Sheila."

Ewell's dad pointed his grilled cheese at the TV.

"That's what we're doing to the terrorists," he said.

Ewell taped the gauze back over his nose. He wondered if it was his fault that his parents were fighting. It seemed to him like they never fought. He considered himself lucky to have such good parents. They did things like iron blood out of his shirt and eat the burnt half of the grilled cheese. On holidays, his dad would bring home targets from the shooting range where he worked and hang them up in the yard so Ewell could shoot at them with his BB gun.

"I'm sorry," Ewell's dad said.

"I'm sorry too," Ewell's mom said.

She held up Ewell's jeans by the waistband. On each side of the crotch, there were little round scorch marks.

"All better," Ewell's mom said.

Ewell took out the trash and went up to his bedroom. He took off his shirt, pulled the covers up to his face, closed his eyes, and allowed himself to recall the incident. The humiliation started in his face—his nose and cheeks—then seared down into his shoulders and to his chest and stomach. He opened his eyes and tossed his head back and forth on his pillow. He wondered if Hailey thought he was a pussy. Then he pushed back the covers and got up to play *Call of Duty*. In *Call of Duty*, Ewell's character performed many acts of heroism against the terrorists.

He imagined performing many acts of heroism against Samir. It made him feel better. When the game was over, Ewell crawled back in bed, turned on his side, and fell asleep. He didn't even remember his mom bringing him pain medication later that night.

"Teach me how to fight," Ewell said to Dustin, behind the register at the Wawa, while they were stocking the counter early one morning. He was wearing a visor, a red apron, and a Captain America Band-Aid over his nose. It was Memorial Day, and they were awarding free coffee to veterans or active members of the military. "Like your dad taught you."

"Let it go, man," Dustin said. "Four more months and his brown ass will be gone."

He picked up a box of Trojan condoms and grinned.

"I don't want to let it go," Ewell said. "I want to get even."

Dustin put the condoms on the shelf. "Look, Ewell; you're a little guy. If I hadn't stepped in, your nose would look even uglier than it does now."

"Fuck you, Dustin," Ewell said.

Ron stepped out from his office and droned, "Teamwork makes the dream work." There were two managers and one was Ron. Ron was the sad manager. He was twenty-three but already balding and smelled like leftover Chinese food. "I'll be out back, smoking," he said.

"Ewell go stock ice cream."

Ewell put on a jacket and walked into the freezer. There was ice spread along the ceiling, and he could see his breath. He wished Dustin hadn't said what he did about his nose looking ugly. When he finished stocking the ice cream, Ewell walked out front and through the window saw Samir and Hailey getting out of a sparkling, yellow Volkswagen Beetle with sunflowers painted onto its sides.

"Nice Band-Aid, asshole," Samir said, walking inside.

"Nice, car," Ewell said.

"Hey, Samir?" Dustin asked. "How does it feel being pussywhipped?"

"He can't get his license yet," Hailey said.

"I wasn't talking to you," Dustin said. "Just grab your shit and get out."

Samir used the ATM while Hailey brought beer, tortilla chips, and guacamole over to the counter. She tucked back her hair and when Ewell saw her green tourmaline earrings he remembered picking them out for Dustin to buy and give to her on her sixteenth birthday.

"You look pretty," Ewell said.

"Watch it," Samir said.

"He's just being sweet," Hailey said.

"You got I.D.?" Dustin said.

"C'mon man," Samir said.

"My boss's out back," Dustin said.

"Fine," Samir said, before making a shit-eating grin. "A box of Trojans then."

That ate Dustin up inside, which Ewell picked up on.

"Let me get it," Ewell said.

But Dustin was already reaching onto the shelf.

"Not those," Hailey said. She turned and kissed Samir's cheek, and as she did her hair fell back down. "He needs the extra-large ones."

When they clocked out that night, Ewell and Dustin climbed into Dustin's rusty, blue Ford pickup and gunned through the mountains of Nixon County. Beneath them the engines blubbered, while all around them, the wind, hot and sharp like a knife, bullied them, trying to

knock them from the road. A flock of barred owls shot up from the dark pines, hooting in rich baritone, as Dustin downshifted—skidding into a sharp, wide turn that hooked out over the hillside—before accelerating down a straightaway—the pickup's speed touching seventy, then eighty—until they reached the lake, where the football team drank and smoked and brought girls to have sex, and even farther—farther still—past the ski resorts and firing range, the strip malls and old water tower decreeing NEW LIBERTY in bold, gold lettering, until they reached their neighborhood of small, flat houses, each with a rusted basketball hoop in the driveway and an American flag picketed out on their lawn.

Outside Dustin's dad's house, they parked, hopped out, and peeked through the gleaming windows before going inside, leaving their boots and long white socks by the door and stepping over piles of bills and clothes and magazines pockmarked on the living room floor. The TV was on loud; there was a litter of dishes in the sink, a bottle on the table, and the sour smell of sliced lime, but no one was home. From off the grease-stained counter, Dustin grabbed the portable radio and Ewell followed, the rickety steps creaking beneath his bare feet as they descended down into the basement—a damp, unfinished room bare but for a single exposed light hanging by a thin cord from the water-stained ceiling. On the concrete floor, Dustin laid down masking tape, end to end, forming a ring. Then he and Ewell took off their shirts, cranked the radio, and fought.

Each round lasted until the heavy metal station cut to commercial. If Ewell stepped out of the ring, pussyfooted, flinched, cried, or yelled uncle, he had to drop down on his elbows and toes until he recited the Pledge of Allegiance five times—a punishment Dustin had learned from his dad, who rode a Harley and had fought in Vietnam. He'd had Dustin eight months after he came back, when he was twenty years old, with a woman who had died of breast cancer when

Dustin was sixteen. Soon after, his dad started working double shifts at the flu vaccine plant on the edge of town and was rarely ever home before midnight.

Afterwards, they drank Budweiser and played *Call of Duty* in Dustin's room, their chests heaving, bruises a deep variety of reds and blues. Ewell was sitting on a beanbag chair and Dustin was sitting at his computer.

"I'm going to die," Ewell said.

"Okay," Dustin said.

In *Call of Duty*, Ewell's character died at the hands of the terrorists. He handed the controller to Dustin and lay down on Dustin's unmade bed while Dustin took Ewell's place in the beanbag chair. The album *Reign in Blood* was playing on Dustin's computer. "This is a good album," Ewell thought, which surprised him because normally he did not like heavy metal. He scratched his Band-Aid and stared up at the concert posters taped to the ceiling. Then he thought about all the times Hailey had stared up at the same posters while having sex with Dustin. It made him feel close to her in a very distant way.

Then Dustin said, "My dad says the war's ending soon."

"I thought it just started,"

"Must be going really well."

"What do you think of the war?"

"I support it."

"My dad loves the war," Ewell said.

"So does my dad."

"My dad will probably be sad when it's over."

"Mine too."

"My mom doesn't support the war," Ewell said.

"Mine would have."

"She says we're losing."

"Nah, man." Light flashed on Dustin's face. "We're definitely going to win."

For all of June, every night after work, Ewell and Dustin circled each other down in Dustin's dad's dark, decrepit basement. Slowly, Ewell's arms, chest and stomach began to ripen with muscle. Along his face and neck grew black, prickly stubble, and the gash cut cheek to cheek along his nose hardened into a swarthy, yellow-green scab. Then came July, the sultry part of summer, when they took off from work on the first Saturday, the day before the Fourth, and chilled their wounds in the above ground pool Dustin's dad had built in the backyard while they watched the neighbors' dogs jump back and forth through the sprinkler.

Earlier, after sparring, they had ordered hoagies from Primo's for lunch. When their food was ready, Dustin grabbed his keys from his room while Ewell went to the bathroom. He peed and washed his hands. Then in the dusty mirror, Ewell watched himself pick at the scab on his nose, unearthing a gummy pink scar that he thought made his face look older, squarer, and meaner. Tough.

Dustin shouted, "You ready?"

"Yeah," Ewell shouted. "10-4."

Boots kicked up on the dash of Dustin's Ford pickup, scarfing down their oily hoagies, Ewell and Dustin plotted out their mission against Samir. He worked at the animal shelter on the other side of the mountain, where afterwards he would walk a quarter mile up PA-611 with his three-legged miniature pinscher Maxine to the mosque on the edge of town for nightly prayer.

"Initiate stakeout," Ewell said.

"Lay ambush," Dustin said.

"Neutralize Samir."

"Take the dog hostage."

They put on *Reign in Blood*, felt the car tremble from its thunderous blast. Sunlight fell through tall pines and bushels of blue spruce and puddled along the narrow roads that bent around the ridges where elk and rams scampered, trying to flee from the boys whooping and hollering, slipping and sending tiny avalanches of dirt and rock down into the frothing water fifty feet below.

Until the pickup downshifted and Ewell saw the fleet of flashing red and blue lights parked in front of the sharp, wide turn that hooked out over the hillside. Trailing up to the tear in the guardrail was a swath of burnt rubber, flecked with scraps of metal and shards of glass. It wasn't until after they parked and dashed out that Ewell spotted it in the ditch freshly dug up beside the road: facedown, a jagged petal of yellow sunflower.

Hailey, Ewell thought.

But she was right there, hurtling toward Dustin, and in her face he saw the world casting down all its pain upon her as she cried, "It's Samir!"

At the wake, Ewell couldn't help but feel cheated. It reminded him of when his character in *Call of Duty* would die, and some other marine would wipe out all the terrorists before he could enact his revenge. He walked into the living room where some of his other friends from high school were sitting watching TV. Everyone was wearing nice clothes and talking politely about the outcome of the war. It was dark outside. Maxine scurried in through the doggy door.

She started barking and Ewell almost laughed. He'd assumed Maxine had also died when the brakes in Hailey's Volkswagen Beetle went out. "That's why you should always buy American," Ewell thought, which he instantly regretted. As he watched a commercial for a new and improved type of fabric softener flash across the TV, he wondered if something was wrong with him.

Later, he got up to look for Dustin. But as he was walking through the crowded hallway, he spotted Hailey alone in the kitchen. She was kneeling on the tile floor next to the open screen door that led out into the yard, feeding leftover chicken tikka to a whimpering Maxine, who Ewell assumed had died in the crash. Her hair was cut short on the sides and tucked back behind her unjeweled ears.

"You look nice," Ewell said.

He pulled her in close to him. Through her lace dress, her skin felt cold and he could feel her pulse throbbing against his fingers. When Ewell first met Hailey, he thought that she was pure and innocent, but now he knew the world had beaten her down and that the ensuing pain had ruin her. Still, Ewell thought, Hailey keeps fighting. She struggles and fights to survive because she has no other choice.

"Oh, Ewell," Hailey said, pushing off of him. "Why are you so sweet?"

Ewell and Dustin both didn't like Indian food, so on the way home, they stopped at a 24-hour Chinese buffet that was within walking distance of both their houses.

"The football team is throwing a party at the lake tomorrow night," Dustin said, dousing his chicken lo mien with soy sauce. "You know, for Samir."

Right then, Ron walked up to their booth, carrying a plate piled high with beef and broccoli and said, "Sorry for your loss, boys." He was wearing a tie-dye shirt that had a peace sign pinned over his saggy, right breast.

"I knew it," Dustin said. "Ron's a hippie."

"No, I'm not," Ron said. "I just don't support the war."

"Which makes you a hippie," Dustin said.

"So?" Ron said, setting his tray down on their table. "What if I am?"

"Hippies hate the country," Dustin said.

"That's not true," Ron said, "I love the country."

"Well if you love the country," Dustin said. "Why don't you support the war?"

"Yeah," Ewell said. "Why don't you?"

"Because we are killing innocent people," Ron said.

"Yeah, but they don't matter," Dustin said.

"Why don't they matter?" Ron said.

"They aren't Americans," Dustin said.

"Yeah," Ewell said. "They're evil—an evil threat to this country."

"What if they aren't evil?" Ron said.

"If they aren't evil, then why would we kill them?" Ewell asked.

"Money," Ron said.

"If war makes so much money," Dustin said. "Then why aren't we rich?"

"Yeah," Ewell said. "Where's all the money go?"

"It goes to old people who already have a lot of money," Ron said before picking up his tray and waddling over to one of the stools by the window.

"He should be celebrating," Dustin said after a few seconds. "Like we're about to do."

"You're going to the party?" Ewell asked.

"Hailey asked me to," Dustin said. He slurped his tea, then made a shit-eating grin. "You know how she gets when she's alone."

A sour taste began to foment in Ewell's mouth. He tightened the grip on his chopsticks and imagined he was back down in that dark, damp basement, beating Dustin's face until it was a swollen, bloody pulp while Hailey watched from his corner, cheering him on.

"What are you so mad about?" Dustin said. "We won, Ewell."

"No, we didn't," Ewell said, and as he got up he threw his chopsticks at Dustin. "You did."

Bitter, Ewell called out of work the next morning and went to the mall. On his way to the video game store on the third floor, he passed a recruitment office for the U.S. Army. Standing by the door, in a tan short-sleeve shirt and light blue pants, was a short, well-built officer close to Ewell's age.

"Would you like to try our simulator?" the officer said.

Ewell stopped. "What's that?"

The officer smiled. "It's like *Call of Duty*, but better."

Ewell followed the officer inside. Sitting behind long desks were other well-built people his age chatting on headsets and typing away at computers.

"I thought the war was over," Ewell said.

"Which one?" the officer asked.

"How many are there?" Ewell asked.

"We're always finding new wars to fight," the officer said.

Between the rows of desks, she strode toward the back of the office. There, on the long wall was a big, flashing machine that looked like it belonged in a video arcade. On it were the words, "PROPERTY OF THE U.S. ARMY."

"C'mon" the officer said to Ewell. "I'll show you."

RAIN ON

The signs of early rains rang low from the plot. Mountains of soil had sunk down into the dirt. It was but a small plot. No time had been taken in having it, just hands to comb the rakes and plows through the hard brown, and fingers to plant the seeds, and then feet to push the seeds deeper into the ground so that they could grow. That was before early rains. From my window I could see the clumps of wet mud that had churned up from the new dirt. They looked like dung heaps and I had thought to see flies gathering around their soiled scent, like they do with the hides of horses and dirtied pigs. I could see them even though I was far away.

Daddy had tied my shoes. Just the right one though. I can do the left one. The grass was wet from morning rain, not too wet, but too wet to be called dry or close to dry. I reached down and picked a strand out from the left side of the path. It was short and fat. I bit it, chewed it, then spit it out. It tasted like wet nothing with a hint of fly and my tongue felt sour, as if I had just licked piss from the toilet seat. I felt like a cow and didn't mind.

The old barn used to be behind the row of apple trees. It had been a big barn with horses and hay. On Sundays she would take one of the horses out and ride her up the hill. The old barn was on level ground but there was a hill not very far behind it. It was an even hill. The fence is still here though. The wood is chipped and burnt and if you aren't careful you'll get a splinter if you're running your hands along it, not looking. Long splinters like porcupine needles stick out from the wood but you can't see them very well, especially when it rains.

The old barn had not been very old. It had burnt down. Daddy doesn't know who did it or how it happened. But it did happen. The lock for the gate broke off a few days before the fire and had fell somewhere in the grass. The grass was long then because Daddy hadn't gotten around to cutting it so we couldn't find it, and when the fire hit it burnt away all the grass and I

guess the lock too. It's still very short now. I don't know if it will ever grow again. It did happen, just no one knows how or who. If you go out through the fence a little ways you can find splinters of the wood still left there. I have two slivers sitting on my mantle piece above my bed and at night when I pray I ask that God keep them up there so that they won't fall on me.

We keep the lot chained off with a wire fence so that the deer can't get at the corn. To make a door we had tied the ends of the fence off with rope. You have to untie it to get in and the rope is thick enough so that the deer can't bite through it. Daddy had also gone and bought seeds for flowers that are supposed to keep the deer away. They have blossomed and are very pretty. They're red and yellow on the inside with some blackish brown spotted amongst the yellow, and they smell like damp clothes left in a laundry pile for too long. It had been almost a week since they had bloomed and I hadn't seen any deer around, but there were never many deer around, not now anyway, so I'm not convinced yet if the plants really do anything or not. They are pretty though. I went in to the lot and walked through the rows. My feet moved easily through the wet dirt. It wasn't really mud yet. It was whatever comes between ground and mud. It was wet ground or dry mud. I knelt down and put my hand to the bed floor and felt how wet it was and felt the speckles of soft combusting soil sticking to my hands. It was a dark black soil that was very rich and moist. Sometimes between the black color there are dots of white and on my hand there was a dot and I was happy to see it there on my hand. I thought about digging into the dirt to see if the seeds were still there but I didn't.

The window had been wrong. The mountains were still here. They were smaller mountains but mountains nonetheless. I laid belly down on top of the dirt so that I could see them. My eyes were at mountain level. I looked out across the peaks, moving one peak at a time, going further away, poking their peaks with my irises until I was at the gate and when I reached

the gate I went past it, through the bars and out past the grass to the tree line but I stopped there because I knew past the tree line somewhere was a circular patch of grassless earth that was cold and even more wet from early rain middle rain and late rain, it was there in the naked ground with her and my eyes said to me come back so I did, I ran back through the gate and across the mountain peaks until I was at myself again and when I was there I stood up and looked down upon the rows and suddenly I knew that there were seeds in ground. I knew, for as I tied the gate ropes behind me I could hear them chanting, "Rain On! Rain On!" and hearing them cry I looked to the sky and asked it if the early rains could come sooner. Then I went back up to the house.

Daddy told me to wash up because dinner was going to be ready soon. He was sitting in his chair in the living room. The lamp was on next to him. It was the only light he kept on in the house when there was still daylight. I asked him what's for dinner and he said not to ask and that I knew not to ask. I said ok but I didn't want to take a bath. I liked the feeling of dirt, but he had asked and when he asks for things I know that I'm supposed to say ok. So I went upstairs and bathed myself. Usually I like the water to be hot so that the mirror will get fogged and I can practice writing my name on it, and as I write each letter more of my face becomes clear and I like that too. I like being able to imagine digging myself up from beneath the mist, which can be bubbling water or very white sand. But for that day I didn't feel much like writing and took a cold shower because I was already warm and wanted to be cool again.

We had potatoes and carrots for dinner. The potatoes weren't cooked all the way through and the carrots were cold but I ate them. I drank my glass of water and Daddy drank his. He looked out the back window and said that it looked like it was going to rain again. I looked out the window along with him. The sky was growing grayer and the clouds looked black and puffy. I agreed with him and said that it did look like a rain. A lot of rain I said. My legs felt cramped

underneath the table. We ate at the small table now. I felt squished and the feeling made it hard to eat but I didn't say anything because I knew that he must have felt it even more. He is a very tall daddy. His legs are almost longer than the rest of his entire body. He took another gulp of water and stirred the carrots around his plate without eating them. Then he looked outside again and said yes I think it's going to rain. Again, I agreed with hm.

Daddy didn't finish all of his plate. He waited for me to finish and then took everything into the kitchen where he washed and dried them before putting them in the cabinet. Then he came back into the room and said that it was late and that we should be going to bed. I wasn't tired and it wasn't late but he had asked so I agreed that it was time for bed. I followed Daddy up the stairs, staying a full stair behind him. When I reached the top I realized he had left the light in the living room on and for a few seconds I thought about going back down to turn it off. But I didn't. Then Daddy told me to wash my face and brush my teeth and if I needed him to tuck me in he would. I said that he didn't and he was happy with me for saying this. He said goodnight and smiled at me and then went into his room to fall asleep. It was only eight but he was tired, tired.

That night it rained. It rained very hard. The rain pitter pattered against my window as if someone was knocking on the door and it kept me awake. I tossed and turned in my wrinkled and bundled sheets that were somehow shorter than they had been last night. They didn't cover my toes. They stuck out and the room was cold. The rain kept falling. It was a hard rain. I listened to it come up against the window and thought about how cold my toes were and how they would never let me sleep. That night I lay awake in bed and listened to the rain change from late rain to early rain and my toes were cold the whole time, the same kind of cold I get when I go into the pond in winter months. And to try and sleep I sang to myself the words "Rain On!

Rain On!” as the drops fell, hoping that they would serve as a song of sweet rest. But I did not rest. I lay awake, smoldering, and have smoldered every night since.

BAT COUNTRY

High in the pine hills, on the Georgia side of West Point Lake, big brown bats stir inside the mudstone caves. Out into the fog they pour in a continuous stream, keep pouring, roll as oil might above the outlands of Troup County. Ears broad and blackened, fur the color of rusted copper, they bomb below the linking pine and green ash branches. Down through the bluestem and Indian grass they hunt – tiger beetles, coffin flies, webworm moths, any chirp or buzz. Drumming their wings, they wind down the macadam roads leading to the Lovett's camp.

Parkie, the youngest, locks his cabin door, shakes a cigarette out his pack, and lights it. It's cold, too cold for the last week in April. Thin slices of wind strike the sunburn on his neck as he steps off the porch with his hands in his pockets and hurries to Win's cabin. The joints in his legs pop, sore from kneeling in the stiff hay. He doesn't want to, but he pictures the red barn atop Bagby Hill. Inside, a draft twirls the cow's steaming breath as they huddle between stalls, chewing maize and corn, plumping up their utters.

He zips up his jacket, inspects the cabins. The windows on all sides are broken, and kudzu tunnels in over the blades of glass and eats at the empty bunk beds and sleep away trunks. It draws patterns that look like Athens, and Parkie thinks about what he wrote in Izzy's yearbook last summer: "We'll live on peaches and love." And she up and left without him—a whole year she's been up there studying at college. She sent him a postcard with Sanford Stadium and The Arch on the front. She didn't ask him any questions. Parkie feels like a real puss for what he wrote, steps onto Win's porch.

"Get up, you bum," Parkie says.

He grinds out his cigarette, flicks it at his younger brother's head.

Win startles, nearly tips over in his rocking chair. His face is milk white, lips purple as blight.

"God almighty," Parkie says.

Win coughs. Smell of beer. "What time is it?"

"Almost five."

Parkie hands Win his Bulldogs cap hanging on its peg by the front door, sits in the rocker next to him. He notices the vomit caked to Win's cargos, watches him pick at the stains with his dirty fingernails.

"I ain't drunk," Win says, not looking at Parkie. He screws the cap down over his long, greasy auburn hair. "Okay, maybe I am a little. But who can blame me?"

Parkie nods, stares a while at the tree line. Frost dusts the purplish blight on the leaves, turns it colors. It had snowed the night before Pa died. Parkie had just come in from plowing a path up to the barn through the snow for the cows when he heard something. A scared bellow. Someone hollering from deep inside the bare woods.

He turns and looks at Win. "Told you to board up those windows."

"Won't do any good," Win says. "Bats'll chew right through."

"You at least spray the chimneys?"

"Just the girl's cabins. You only gave me enough to buy one can." He rubs his fingers together. "Cold weather drives up the price."

"You're talking out your ass," Parkie says, breath steaming like little ghosts. "How much money you got?"

"I got money," Win says, coughs. "After this summer, I'll have enough to buy new pistons."

He looks at his Ford truck parked in the tall shaded grass tilting in the wind underneath the stripped oak tree. The windshield is frosted, and a crowbar props open the hood. Pliers and wrenches lay on the oil-stained cloth furled around the engine.

"You watch," Win says, rocking in his chair. "I'll be gone from here 'fore long."

Parkie scratches his sunburn. He can't stand the way Win is looking at him, partly like a dog, partly like an ignorant child. Parkie wants to tell him that he's thought plenty on trying back at Clay County High School, applying to college if things broke right. He crosses his legs knee-over-knee, just like their pa. "You ain't going anywhere," he says.

Win grins, and it makes Parkie hate him even more.

"Went down to Pour last night. Me and Schrempf and Tuttle. Played a little spades, drank a little booze. Danced with some black girls who just quit at Huddle House. Said they're hopping the train to Nashville on Tuesday. You know, drifting—like how pa used to do."

Parkie scoffs. "And who in Nashville is going to hire a hand from Clay County?"

"Speak for yourself," Win says quickly. "At least I got a high school degree. Ain't nothing much you can do if you don't finish high school. Can't do much else besides stay here and work the camp your whole life."

It's what Parkie is thinking, and so it seems to him like Win has no right in saying it.

"You see Izzy last night?" Parkie asks. He rocks in his chair, trying to loosen his joints.

Win kicks his feet up on the railing. His boots smell funky. "Yeah, I saw her. She was asking about you."

Parkie smiles. He thinks back to last night when Izzy called. She was already bored. Her pa was on his way to pick her up from the Greyhound Station in Fort Gaines, twenty-two miles away from camp. She could have been standing on his doorstep in half-an-hour. But she was

already bored. Want to get together? Sure. Have a few brews? Yeah. Meet ya at Pour? Same old Parkie. Same old Izzy. He wanted to tell her about Pa dying, and about how Win was hell-bent on pushing Ma to sell the camp. But she kept talking out her ass, like all the college kids who left and came back, left and came back.

Win laughs. "Yeah, she was wagging her titties out all over the bar."

Parkie smacks Win's cap off his head. "Keep her name out your damn mouth if you're going to use it like that." Then he tells himself to tone down. He doesn't want hard feelings.

Maybe Izzy's a whore, but what does he care? He likes the way she cants over the bar, showing her bra and small but nice tits, knowing it, still, vaguely embarrassed. He likes how she cocks her head and nods when he tells her about cities he sees on TV. Once, he told her he was going to quit the camp and go to school with her in Athens. And she laughed at him. "Maybe you should finish high school first." She said that. Parkie had never felt so embarrassed. Nights like that he left Izzy's cabin certain she was a whore.

Win picks his cap off the porch and inflates it with his fist. "She stopping by?"

"Yeah. Gonna go boating."

"Hope she gives you some." Win grins. "Not like those cows."

They laugh.

"I'm just no good at it," Parkie says. "Doesn't make much sense trying hard at something you're no good at."

"Yeah well, you know what Pa liked to say. Somebody's still got to put things in the ground."

The wind keeps blowing, and more of the camp takes shape. Bats swoop from the trees and whisk over the cabins like spooks. Parkie listens to the little noises. Bats diving into dark hollow chimneys and kicking through birds' nests.

A voice says, "Got a smoke, Parkie?"

Parkie shivers, looks to his right. Terry's standing on the woodchip path, wearing his silver suite. His face splotches red and his glasses fog from the cold.

"Quit," Parkie says, standing up. "Just crave them now and then."

The guy forces a smile. "Aw, your pa would be proud."

Win yanks his feet off the railing, sits up. "What can we do for you?"

"Saw you at Pour last night, thought I'd check in—see about my offer."

Parkie turns his head at Win. His glare is hot enough to tan hide. "Told you before Mr. Terry, but the camp ain't ours to sell." He looks at Terry. In the dark the man's eyes gleam silver. "You'll have to talk to Ma."

"How's Cannie doing?"

"Fine," Win says. He crosses his legs, knee-over-knee. "She's thinking about moving to Savannah, maybe buying a place on Tybee Island."

It's the first Parkie's heard of such a thing, and he tells himself not to take it as truth. But at the same time, he doesn't doubt it. He knows his ma fantasizes about playing bridge at La Vida Country Club, where all the women don pearl necklaces, the men velvet smoking jackets. He feels scared, scared for what'll happen to him after Ma and Win are gone.

"I'll have to buy her some flowers when I bring the papers up for her to sign," says Terry. Light crests the northern hills, sifting a chrome haze through the bowels of linking pine and oak branches down to the tree line. Parkie looks at the shriveled old boundary post. His pa set it after

his drifting days were over. It's a southern-magnolia post and will not last a long time. He watches the fog twine the kudzu clinging to the weathered bark, and wonders if his ma will give Terry what he wants.

"Yeah, this is about the last strip of land out here," Terry says.

"Bats will get what the kudzu don't," says Parkie. He feels like he's giving in a little. Like he's letting this guy come in and push him around. He spits and sprays a little on the guy's loafers. "Sorry."

"It'll come out," he says, but Parkie hopes not as he walks off the porch

"Saw Izzy last night," Terry says. "She's real pretty."

Parkie smiles, almost waves, as he lumbers into the cool gloom soaking the woods. Silent flurries appear and disappear where the fog splits; bats, lured by darkling beetles softly thrumming, brought down from the crowns of the pines. Near the bottom of the hill, he stops on the dirt trail and stares at the cherry tomatoes pit with blight. Cold fog casts a long dark shadow over the spot in the soil where his pa fell. He lay spread-eagle in the garden for almost two hours, cardiomyopathy, a blood clot in his skull the size of a golf ball. It can go now, Parkie thinks; the blight, the kudzu, the cows—it can go when Ma signs the papers. "What about you?" he says, following the salty trace of the lake. "You could eat a whole bowl of alphabet soup and not shit out a sentence."

Mattahoochee Lake is a heavy form in the dark mist, skirting and rippling with lighter shadows of trees and cypress knees, and in the dark the water looks black and still. Ahead, not too far, a lantern hanging on a post near the dock only lightens the darkness, but Izzy seems bright. Her skin is clean and white, with bits of freckles showing like spots on a cow.

He climbs down the ladder, uses Izzy's shoulder to steady his footing. Lets her kiss his cheek.

"You look great," she says. "Haven't changed one bit."

"You chopped your hair off," Parkie says. He's never seen her wear these clothes, all this jewelry and makeup.

"Do you like?"

"Uh, yeah."

Parkie rows. The sun tries to split the fog hovering over the flat cold water, but it's only a sliver in the straw sky. Wherever there's fog, the light bruises orange.

"It's weird being back here," Izzy says. She sips coffee from her Styrofoam cup, looks up at the bushy kudzu dangling and twirling from the tops of the trees. "Kind of spooky."

"Pa called them gator wisps or something."

She laughs. "Your pa's got a funny way of saying things."

He sticks his hand in Izzy's bag, lifts out the thermos. Twists the cap and pours. The bitter smell floats to him in the steam, and when he asks Izzy if she brought sugar or milk she flips her hair in a haughty sort of way that makes her bracelets clink.

"I don't take my coffee sweet no more," she says.

Parkie tilts back his head, feels the hot liquid slide down his throat. He wishes she'd stop talking out her ass. "How long you in for?"

"Just two weeks." Izzy sighs. "Then two weeks in Fort Gaines with Daddy before I go back for summer classes. I really love it up there. It's great."

They drink, watch the wind change the tinged fog colors.

"You ever look in your yearbook?" Parkie asks.

Izzy bursts out laughing. "Gosh, that old thing?" A dragonfly tries to sniff her sweet perfume, and she swats at it. "I'm not even sure where I put it. Probably left it at home."

Parkie feels way too mean to say anything. He rows until they reach a strip of marsh that splits the lake into three rivulets that trickle over tiny smooth rocks and around the bases of cattails and cypress knees sprouting up through the mud on the banks. The first time he had Izzy was in the mud on those banks. He thinks about how close they could be then, maybe even now. He wonders if she remembers the plans they'd made for the camp. And they'd wanted kids. She always nagged him about getting a mastiff. He promised to get her one.

"Which way you want to go?" Parkie asks.

"Let's stop at your old cabin."

Parkie smiles, paddles west. The wind is howling by the time they reach the boy's camp. It whips the fog like cream, stings Parkie's sunburn as he lugs the boat's slick metal belly up onto the bank. Cold water seeps into his boots. He ties the boat to a weathered signpost sticking out from the cattails. It says FOUNDED BY BUCK LOVETT— CAMP MATTAHOOCHEE BOY'S CAMP, the white letters scribbled in his pa's cramped shaky handwriting. Parkie reads it a few times over while Izzy scampers to his old grey cabin. It's mostly boarded up. Where the tops of the trees open, a rectangle of light sun falls across the roof patched with kudzu.

She peers through a knothole in the wood. "Can we go in?"

"Nothing's in there but old bunks."

Izzy looks at him. "So?"

"So what's the point?"

"Because it's spooky and weird" She skips back and kisses him on the cheek. "C'mon."

Parkie wanders over. Bats detach from the trees and hurtle past them. He drags the rotten bench by a broken window, climbs in. Takes Izzy's hand to help her. A blade of glass slices her foot. The cut is shallow, but Parkie takes off his jacket and wraps it. Purple blots bloom quick past the cotton, and he pictures blight dotting leaves.

"Hurt?" he asks.

"Not really."

He watches a blister beetle land on the sill. Its oil-black wings flick as it scurries up the blade of glass, sucks Izzy's blood scraped on the sharp tip. Others he hears working in the walls. Shivering, he thinks about how he's learned the name of every beetle in Clay County, but doesn't know how to milk a damn cow.

Izzy stands by the other window. She wipes dirt off the glass with her sleeve.

Parkie says, "See that orange line on the third hill?"

"Yeah."

"That's the flag on your old cabin."

She turns, stares at him.

"I come here lots," he says, turning away from her, but still feels her stare as he looks out his window. Through the budding grains of light and steady fog he sees the red barn atop Bagby Hill. It's never looked so big to him, and he thinks of all the streets he'll never set foot on. Izzy comes up behind him, each step crunching glass.

"What's the matter, Parkie? Why can't we have any fun?"

He takes off his cap and leaves it on the sill. "When I was in sixth grade my teacher asked me to name the Seven Wonders of the World. I told her I didn't know there were any. But she wouldn't stop pestering me. I guess she thought I was playing dumb. I told her the Garden of

Eden. She nearly fell out her chair she laughed so hard. I was so goddamn mad. I left my books and walked all the way home.

Izzy giggles in her shy, but still sort of haughty way. "You're cute," she says, massaging his pink neck with her chill fingers. Parkie turns and kisses her deeply. She tastes bitter; her lips swollen and bruised, like the blight rotting his pa's tomatoes. Her bone-thick hips bunch in his hands as he steers onto a cot along the back wall. He knows she'll never understand.

He unbuttons her silk shirt, rubs the white bristles around her bellybutton, He warms her stiff nipples with his mouth and hears her flats strike the floor. Thwap, the left one, Thwap, the right. A tangy scent rises to him as he undoes her jeans, guides the zipper down its track. The slipcover crinkles as he works her jeans over her snow-white thighs, snow-white knees, snow-white ankles, and drapes them over the footboard. Her skin is almost too white in the light dripping off the kudzu. The joints in his legs and hips and shoulders pop as he arches over her, into her, He closes his eyes; Izzy is no longer beneath him; the hulking weight of the tractor is beneath him. He charts the grooves worked by his pa's callouses into the grip taped over the wheel. He chokes the engine, feels the years shake into his bones, his blood.

A stark light flares over Parkie's body. It drains something from him, and when he opens his eyes, the sour scent of mildew hits him. Pa. He thinks about how beaten his face looked with prints in it from the soil.

"Let me go with you," Parkie says. He knows he shouldn't say it, but he's not sorry.

"Parkie, please..." Izzy says, pushing on his chest.

He climbs off, leans against the wall. He rubs his neck against the curved wood and watches Izzy hike on her pants. "I want to go," she says. "My foot hurts."

They climb out. The sky is high, rimming with red, and the fog reflects it in places, spreading up and out like blood. Izzy tosses Parkie his jacket, gets in the boat. He looks at the purple blots in his hands, feels ache tingling in his joints. He feels old as hell. When he looks up, the boat is a silver blur vanishing into the pink fog.

Parkie shucks his jacket, rolls up his jeans. He unlaces his boots and wades the icy lake, boots tucked under his arms. On the opposite bank he plops on a stump, wrings mud and grey water out of his long white socks. He shakes a cigarette out of his pack, tries to light it, but the wind keeps taking the flame as it curves through the trees. Leaves chatter. Parkie hugs himself, pictures his pa—a young drifter with pink burns on his cheeks from the Georgia sun, the skeleton of a barn behind him. His face is hard, trounced by all the years spent drifting and fighting for a place to live, and Parkie comes to understand the peace his pa found when he nailed that post into the ground.

"Ever notice how bats only come out in the cold, never when it's hot?" Parkie says, beginning the trudge up Bagsby Hill.

He hears the train hooting at it pulls into the station, miles and miles away from him.

"They say Clay County's the only place on earth that's got lump-nose bats. I bet you'd find hundreds roosted in the knotholes."

The roof of the barn peeks over the shaggy grass, the tin spackled with frost.

"Those caves are probably millions and millions of years old. I bet if you crawl in there you'd find a dinosaur fossil."

From inside the barn, he hears the cows low. Shrill whimpers, frightened noises. Things like metal bending.

He hauls the plank off the lock, slips inside. The smell is horrible, like the inside of a wolf's mouth. He holds his shirt over his nose, watches the cows thrash in their stalls along the sidewalls, heads shaking from side to side, rattling the glass in the windows. Their eyes are tiny and black, surrounded by vivid white. Something falls and smacks the ground. He walks slowly over the hay barrels, first looking over at the shelf by the door supporting the stacks of rubber gloves and copper pails, then examining the concrete path between the feeding troughs. He stops, squats down. Picks something up. Something rubbery, something fleshy.

He looks up at the flypaper streaking down toward him. The strips are speckled with the crisp skeletons of hundreds and hundreds of little lump-nose bats. Those still alive are trying to eat themselves down. Parkie realizes he is standing in carnage, gnawed wings and flecks of claw. The trace of death curdles the air. But he doesn't feel scared. He forgets everything except now, where he is and why, what's brought him here.

Later, after he puts the bats in the ground, Parkie will milk the cows. He makes a note to clean the teats with iodine first, like his pa showed him. The bats are screeching, but he barely hears as he climbs the stepladder. He is already living a few hours from now, already kneeling in the stiff hot hay, feeling for the utters, which will be supple and squeeze easily in his fingers, and milk will splatter against the bottom of his pail. He'll feel it then: the warm release of his fears, ringing out from him through the cold.

MEREDITH

Meredith is in my living room with her ankles crossed over the arms of a straight-backed chair. She's frantic and depressed, and drinking vodka from a Styrofoam cup. Thomas Easler threw a party last weekend, and everyone discovered her secret— a facial tick. It's not much, only the minor cinch of her upper lip, but it's enough. Enough for Jordan Kline to buy her several more drinks and talk to her about his upcoming brand of energy drinks, enough for Tonya to talk about her recent purchase at an antiques auction in New Hampshire, and for David Leerman, my boss, to tell her how quietly beautiful she looks in a cocktail dress. Quietly beautiful, his exact words. I remember overhearing him saying this and thinking, "David Leerman doesn't know the first thing about beauty. He has hair plugs."

My paranoia has grown rampant. I'm at the point where I schedule weekly physicals at my doctor's office just to make sure there isn't anything wrong with me. I'm 25 years old. I've been living in Chicago for 5 years as a financial consultant for Ernst & Young. It's been 3 years since I have been in a relationship, and almost 8 months since I have had sex.

"It wouldn't be such a thing if it wasn't for my mother," Meredith tells me. "She's the one who is always telling me to be more confident around strangers. You know that."

I didn't.

"Have you ever noticed it before?"

"Noticed what?"

"The thing with my lip."

"No."

"Who told you?"

"David Easler."

“Of course.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means he has a big mouth.”

I’m not a therapist, and neither is Meredith, but the context of our relationship is decidedly heavy-handed. We drink together, and when we drink together we tend to tell each other our secrets. I’ve known Meredith for only a month, but she already knows I can’t sleep when someone is touching me (spooning is out of the question) and that I can’t drink coffee ever since I quit smoking cigarettes. She also knows that I’ve never wanted kids, and that right now I don’t want to get married, although that could change, unlike the kids thing, which won’t.

What have I learned about Meredith? She won’t date a guy shorter than her (she’s 5’ 7”), or with red hair (she’s a blonde). She once told me that if her future husband ever got fat she would consider leaving him. Meredith hates fat people. She finds them disgusting.

But what’s wonderful about Meredith is that she knows she is superficial, and often times at night, when she is alone with me and a bit buzzed, Meredith shows regret for being who she is. She worries about how dangerous she might become to those around her, and it is this fear that leads her to ask me the dreaded question I can never seem to answer.

“What is the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

I clutch her hand then take a sip of my drink. The feel of her is almost weightless, as if Meredith is no longer real but a ghost I’ve created. I have no answer for her because I am unsure if my sins are as sinister as the question demands them to be. She has come to know this about me, to understand me on a shrewd personal level—I’ve never done anything worth regretting.

“You may look like a man, Carter, but you’re just a boy deep down.”

“What makes you say that?”

“A man accepts himself for who he is, good or bad. A boy fakes his innocence. He pretends. All boys pretend.”

“But what if I’m not pretending?”

“Then you’re naïve. Very, very naïve.”

She gets up and heads for the exit, moving clumsily now that she is back in her high heels and somewhat drunk. I know I should drive her home, but I don’t want things between her and me to go any further than they already have. Meredith represents the sort of vice I can’t afford to get caught up in at this point in my life. It’s time for me to start taking fewer risks. It’s time for me to start living how my father always told me I should—but without the wife, and definitely without the kids.

“By the way,” Meredith says, turning around, “that suit doesn’t fit you.”

* * *

Interrogation is David Leerman’s calling card. He smirks when talking, as if he’s withholding a secret. He wears a suit and tie everywhere he goes, and carries an umbrella in case it happens to rain. He doesn’t eat fish, refuses to watch professional basketball, and is newly divorced. The divorce has caused him to start drinking again, highballs as early as 10:30. Old-Fashioneds by 1.

Leerman is starting to cling to me. Lunch, just the two of us, almost every day now, the same restaurant. Capital Grill. I’m afraid to order anything but steak because it’s all he orders. 20 oz. ribeye, rare, no mashed potatoes or fries. Just raw steak on a plate.

“How ‘bout another drink?” he asks me.

“I think I’m OK for now.”

“Fine, but when you go out with the clientele from Portland next week you’re going to have to have more than one. Those guys are heavy drinkers. They’ll think you’re a fag if you don’t drink with them, and if they think you’re a fag then they won’t buy shit from us.”

Leerman sees a fly moving high above his head and decides to reach for it, missing by far too much to tell. He’s irritable now, and I’m nervous to find out what happens next.

“So, no wife, no kids?” he asks me.

“No wife. No kids.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

“I was 23 when I got married. Big fucking mistake. You’re playing it right, Strouss. You’re playing the game the way I should have played it.”

I nod with my head down. The blood from the steak spreads in bubbles across the plate and divides the grease. I have never eaten rare steak before (only medium), and I worry that I am going to get E. coli or possibly even a tapeworm. I watch as Leerman tears through his steak with unanticipated precision, cutting each piece into small, block-shaped squares before bringing them to his mouth and biting down hard. The blood from the steak manages to stain some of his teeth.

When he is finished, the waiter comes and collects our plates. She asks if we want any dessert. Leerman decides no for us both. She smiles at him, a fresh-from-the-dentist sort of smile, and promptly brings the check. Leerman smiles back at her in a perverted way as she walks back to the kitchen then signs his name without looking at the price.

“Do you have any Xanax left at the office?” he asks, catching me off guard. I’ve kept a bottle of Xanax in my desk drawer ever since I was re-located to Chicago. It is prescribed by my doctor.

“It’s prescribed.”

“It’s fine, Strouss. We all have our secrets.”

I think about offering Leerman my Xanax, but I’m too nervous.

“Go ahead,” he says.

“What?”

“Ask me how I knew.”

“How did you know?”

Leerman smiles, the same perverted look. I can’t help but feel disgusted at the way he enjoys watching people squirm in his presence. “Ask me to tell you something about yourself.”

“Tell me something about myself,” I say.

“You don’t like it when the different elements of food on your plate touch or mix together. You can’t cook anything besides grilled chicken. You love art, but it’s not the same ever since you tried it yourself only to realize you weren’t any good at it. You hate having your picture taken to the point where you refuse to keep any pictures of you and your family in your apartment. And let’s not forget—you prefer living alone rather than sharing your life with someone else. You’re convinced it’s safer that way. You’re convinced that this way no one gets hurt—nothing is put at risk.”

I realize I’m sweating. My hands are gripping tightly to my legs, and the pain I’m feeling makes me think I may have broken skin. I look under the table and am relieved to see that there

isn't any blood seeping through my khakis. I take my napkin and rub it lightly across my wet forehead.

"I know everything about you, Strouss. Don't you forget that."

Leerman gets up from the table, and I follow him diligently out the door.

* * *

Meredith and I have retreated back to our normal positions by the following afternoon. I make us Old-Fashioneds—Meredith's with two cherries, because she refuses to drink it any other way. Today is her birthday and to celebrate I've allowed her the luxury of smoking inside. She tells me she is turning 28, but I have a hard time believing her. In a hollow sort of way Meredith is ageless, transparent almost.

"Mom still hasn't called me today, Carter. She always calls early in the morning on my birthday. Have I ever told you how she used to make me breakfast in bed when I was little? Every birthday, pancakes with strawberries for eyes and a large slice of melon for a mouth. I miss those pancakes. "

"I'm sure she'll call some time tonight. I doubt your mother would forget about her only daughter."

"I have a brother."

"Brothers aren't daughters."

"What's the difference?"

"It's between your legs."

"Don't be crude, Carter. You know I don't like it when you act that way."

Meredith asks me if she can see my portfolio for the Portland case, after lighting another cigarette—her fourth this afternoon. She claims to have had some previous experience in the

financial district, something about working as a consultant at Mesirow Financial. I don't believe her. The girl can barely calculate a tip. But, it is her birthday, and regardless of her age, I feel as if I should allow her to get away with pretending just this once.

"This is too conservative. You need to encourage them to take more risks," she says.

"I'm low-risk though. It's my position."

"What's Leerman have to say about that?"

"He likes it. It's the reason he requested me from New York."

"You were requested?"

"Yes."

"You never told me that."

I had.

"I bet Leerman thinks you're boring."

"He clings to me."

"Probably because he thinks you're a pushover."

"I'm not a pushover."

"I don't like Leerman. He made me feel...unsettled at Easler's. I think he is what brought about the you-know-what."

"Your tic."

"Yes, Carter, my tic."

I take another sip from my drink. I'm already drunk, drunker than I have been in some time.

"You have one too, you know."

"And what might that be?"

“You look up into the nearest corner of the ceiling when you get nervous. It’s like you’re looking for the nearest way out or something.”

“I’ve never noticed that.”

“Of course you haven’t. That’s why it’s a tic.”

Meredith takes another drag from her cigarette, and when she exhales she breathes more than just smoke. When embarrassed, Meredith often reverts to childishness, huffing and puffing to gain attention. When this fails, she turns the conversation around.

“Carter, what is it that makes you nervous?”

“You already know lots of things that make me nervous.”

“But there are others.”

“I’m afraid of water.”

“Water? Really? Water is such a silly thing to be afraid of.”

“No, it’s not. Water is very dangerous. 1.2 million people die per year due to drowning, and most of them know how to swim.”

“Can you swim?”

“No.”

“But you have a pool, and you live in Chicago.”

“It’s indoors.”

“And you can’t swim.”

“It belonged to the previous owners.”

“You’ve never tried to teach yourself?”

“Never.”

“I find that very odd.”

“The house is too big for that sort of a risk.”

Meredith finishes her drink and asks me to make her another, this one a bit stronger. I tell her yes, but only because it's her birthday, and the reminder of aging introduces sex into the conversational life we have built together.

“Are you afraid of women?” she asks me.

“No.” I catch my eyes trying to shift toward the corner of the ceiling, and I curse under my breath.

“When was the last time you were with a woman?”

“A month ago,” I lie.

“What was her name?”

“Jillian.”

“Describe her to me.”

Meredith is taking the conversation in a direction I'm all too willing to avoid, but I don't want to seem nervous. “She had red hair, blue eyes, abnormally high cheekbones and a strange sort of definition to her calf muscles. They were almost too large to belong to a woman, but I didn't mind them. I always thought they were actually quite—”

“I want you to describe her to me during sex.”

“I don't think I want to tell you something like that.”

“Why?”

“Because it's not a part of our relationship.”

“No?”

“It’s just—” I finish my drink to combat the dryness in my throat, but the liquor does nothing.

“Can I have one of your cigarettes?”

“I thought you quit.”

“I have.”

Meredith reaches into her purse and grabs her pack. She holds the half-empty box out in front of me, and I reach inside.

“Do I make you nervous?” she asks, as she gets up from her seat and moves closer. Her height blocks the sun from reaching her face, making her appear darker than ever before.

“I’m a nervous person. You know this.”

My acknowledgement of our shared intimacy brings a smile to Meredith’s face, but in the shadows her smile is frighteningly similar to the perverted look Leerman gave our waitress the day before—the smile Leerman gives to signal that he has won something from me.

Meredith takes one hand and places it underneath my shirt on my shoulder. “I think I am going for a swim,” she says, then leans down so as to say something into my ear. She whispers, “You really are missing out, you know?” and before I can even feel the skin of her hand slide against me, she’s gone.

* * *

At work, Leerman asks me about my taste in women—another test. We are in his office going over the specifics of the Portland case, having just returned from the Capital Grill. I think back to lunch and wish I had ordered the day’s special—blackened tilapia.

“I don’t know if I have a taste.”

“Bullshit. C’mon tell me. Blonde? Petite? Large cans? C’mon.” Leerman is on his fourth drink of the day—a whiskey ginger with crushed ice.

“I’m not sure if this is an appropriate conversation for work. Let’s look back at the—”

“Don’t you tell me what is appropriate in my office. Answer the question.”

I retreat back into my seat, crossing my legs and looking up into the corner of the ceiling behind Leerman’s desk.

“I like brunettes. Also, women with very tan legs.”

“What was the name of that girl you brought to Easler’s party?”

As if on cue, Leerman baits me. Although he isn’t as confident in himself as he was a month ago, Leerman can still intimidate me. I know Leerman is setting a trap for me, but I’m also aware that there isn’t any way for me to escape. You can’t run from a man like David Leerman, no matter how wounded he is.

“Meredith,” I tell him.

“Meredith. You don’t meet very many women with that name anymore. It’s much more 60s than 70s.”

“I guess so.”

“You two together?”

“No.”

Leerman smiles unexpectedly at me for saying this. “I didn’t take you for that kind of man, Strauss. Good for you. You’re young. Enjoy yourself. No strings attached. A wife is an overrated commodity these days anyway.”

I stare down into my lap, watching as I interlock then separate my hands from one another, pretending not to have heard him. No strings attached. How modern of him.

“She good in the sack?”

“I don’t think—”

“Is she?”

He looks at me in anticipation, and I mistakenly wince.

“It’s not like that,” I tell him.

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t sleep together.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not.”

“Are you queer?”

“No.”

“Then why haven’t you gone after her?” Leerman reaches for his drink and finishes what’s left in one gulp.

“I don’t know if I want to.”

“Is she crazy or something?”

“She’s not crazy.”

“Then what’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t want to talk about Meredith anymore, Mr. Leerman.”

He looks at me with disdain. “I’m having a party next weekend,” he says. You should bring her. It’ll be your last hoorah of sorts before you go off to Portland.”

“Maybe.”

“I’d appreciate it if you brought her.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“It would be good for you.”

For the next hour Leerman and I re-crunch numbers and debate whether or not Portland should increase their stock in gold. The room fills with the sound of Leerman’s voice, as I look out the window and imagine myself swimming in a pool alongside Meredith.

* * *

A black Doberman suspiciously watches Meredith and me as we walk up to the front door of Leerman’s house. The dog lacks a collar, and the greased appearance of its fur suggests it is a stray. Meredith asks me if I think the dog belongs to the house, and I tell her that I couldn’t imagine Leerman would let his dog look like that.

Inside, Van Morrison circulates through a speaker system that spans the length of the house. Meredith tells me she likes Van Morrison, that she even saw him once— with her father two summers ago at Lincoln Hall—and that she remembers that night to be one of the best nights of the summer that year. I tell her that it’s nice to be able to hold on to good memories. The caterer who let us in asks if we want to be shown to where the party is being held, and before Meredith can say anything, I tell him that we would.

The party guests have huddled into pockets of conversation. All of the men are wearing ties. I begin to feel embarrassed at having not worn one, and I become reluctant to engage in the party conversation at the risk of being exposed. Meredith doesn’t have this problem, because she is dressed just like the other women, a long cocktail dress fashioned over one shoulder with stylish earrings and a necklace to match.

We are led to the kitchen where Leerman is sitting, drinking bourbon on the rocks and talking to Thomas Easler. When he sees that we have arrived he looks only at Meredith.

“Hello, Meredith,” He starts to smile at her, but stops for some reason. Leerman then looks at me and says nothing.

“Hello, Mr. Leerman.”

I expect to see Meredith’s upper lip flinch, but nothing happens. Unexpectedly, she looks at ease in front of Leerman, as if trying to emulate his outward confidence.

“Call me David.”

“Hello, Meredith,” says Easler. “You look lovely.”

“You look...quietly beautiful,” says Leerman, chiming in. “The other women try much harder than you.”

“Give it a break,” says Easler, who gets up from his seat and leaves to show his genuine disgust. I expect Meredith to do the same, but she doesn’t. She takes Easler’s seat at the table, and asks Leerman to make her a drink. He smiles at the request, and gets up to go to the bar stationed behind us. I take Leerman’s seat.

“I thought you didn’t like Leerman?”

“I don’t.”

“Then stop teasing him.”

“It’s one drink.”

“It’s David Leerman. It’s my boss.”

Meredith pauses. She tilts her neck slightly, and her eyes grow wider. “Don’t be jealous, Carter.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“You don’t have to lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

Meredith sighs. “You really are childish sometimes.”

She strains her neck back toward the bar, in search of Leerman. When she notices that I am watching her, Meredith turns back around and winks at me. When Leerman returns, I get up from my seat and walk over to Easler, who encourages me to survey the party with him.

Easler is drunk. He tells Jordan Kline that his new line of energy drinks taste like shit, and that they didn’t test well in the 18-24-year-old demographic according to a report conducted by the Wall Street Journal just last week. To Barrett Carry (a stay-at-home dad who has three daughters and no sons), Easler recommends trying something other than the missionary position with his wife, because the missionary position only produces females. When we discover Easler’s own wife alone and half-asleep on a floral patterned couch in the piano room, Easler shows little concern. “Just like her,” he says to me between sips of his beer, “Always missing out.”

I allow Easler to lead me to the adjoining room. We grab another beer, and somehow, amidst our conversation, the Portland case comes up. After going over the details, Easler vehemently disagrees with me. He tells me that my plan is too cautious. Portland needs to be aggressive, I need to be aggressive, he says. “Because that’s what men are, Carter. They’re aggressive. Men do things.” As he is saying this, I realize I’ve forgotten about Meredith. I leave the room abruptly only to find the dining room empty but for several of the caterers cleaning up.

“The party has moved outside, sir,” one says to me.

“Could you show me where?”

“Don’t trouble him, Carter,” says Easler, stepping into the room. “We’ll find it ourselves.”

I follow him outside to the back patio. A tent is set up on the lawn, and the remaining party guests are huddled underneath its awning. Closed buffet trays steam next to the fully equipped bar, and wooden panels are placed over the grass, but there is no music. Then Van Morrison finds his way outside, buzzing through a set of speakers attached to the tent, and everyone starts to dance. I tell Easler that I feel like we have stumbled onto a movie set where everyone acts on cue, and all he can do is laugh at the absurd notion before lighting a cigarette.

“Will you look at that,” he says, pausing after he inhales.

I look out into the crowd and spot Meredith dancing with Leerman. She lets him twirl her, then pull her close to his body. Again, I expect her lip to flinch, but it doesn't. I look down at the ground in fear of what might happen next.

“Better get over there before you lose your date,” Easler says.

“She's not my date.”

“Don't lie to yourself. That's what women do.”

I start to say something to Easler, something about how dangerous a woman like Meredith can be, but I cut myself off. This sort of comment means nothing to men like Thomas Easler and David Leerman, because to them regret is something that only a boy fears to experience.

“Tell me, Strouss. What is the worst thing you've ever done?”

I look back at the tent. The music has reached an interlude, and Leerman and Meredith have separated from each other. She looks around the surrounding party guests, most of whom are heading to the bar to grab another drink before the music resumes. Her search doesn't last long, but Meredith does nothing. She stays on the dance floor, her eyes intent on what I might do next, but all I can do is meet her gaze with an expressionless face.

“I think I’m going to go home, Thomas.”

“Do you want me to drive you?”

“Not tonight,” I say, before heading back inside and asking one of the caterers to call for a cab.

Late that night, Meredith calls me from her house. I let it go to voicemail, but I can’t stop myself from listening to her message shortly after she hangs up. She tells me she is sorry for being careless, and that she hates herself when she acts like this. She tells me this is all her mother’s fault, and as I’m listening to her start to cry, I can’t bring myself to feel sorry for her. I’m too busy thinking back on what Thomas Easler said to me, and how much of a coward I am. The message ends with her begging for me to call her back, and I hang up the phone. As if on instinct, I grab my suitcase out of the closet and begin packing for Portland.

NESTING

On Friday Becca would sit on the beach, waiting for Luke to come. At five-fifteen, he would meet her by the rocks, whistling into the salt-smelling breeze, and they would talk and listen to country music on his portable stereo. "Don't you just love it here?" Becca said to him one hot April evening. The sky was broiling dark shades of pink and yellow, and the kelp and seashells washed ashore glimmered in the early twilight. Loggerhead turtles nested in the grassy dunes, digging holes in which to lay their eggs. "Florida's plenty pretty," Luke said, offering a polite smile. "But it's a big country. Even the turtles get the itch to explore." Then he rubbed a thumb over her knuckles, his touch worn rough and thin from years plucking away at the guitar, before turning the volume up on the stereo.

Becca was twenty-six, born the middle of three sisters; she was pretty only because she took the time to put on makeup with care and precision, like how a baker kneads dough into piecrust. Luke was thirty, sold bait with his best friend, Tank, and wanted so, so badly to hit it big as a country music star. Her roommate, Mary Elizabeth, who was dating Tank, had introduced them one cool March night after Luke had performed at Fishtales, a dingy boathouse-turned-tiki bar in Cocoa Beach. She was not the first pretty girl to fall in love with him. He was blessed with a handsome face: brown pupils, a squared jaw and chin, and lips so full and muscular they could have been sliced from a beefsteak tomato. Hair slicked back in a dark wave reminiscent of a young Johnny Cash and red cowboy boots poking out from his skintight wranglers, he prowled the stage with a confident, cat-like strut that even the most prudish, Bible-toting women in the audience found incredibly sexy. "It's always nice to meet a fan," he'd said to Becca backstage. He'd shared shots of whiskey and wowed her with stories from his day's roadying for The Marshall Tucker Band while Mary Elizabeth and Tank argued out in the hall.

Becca had agreed to drive Mary Elizabeth home late that night, but Luke had jotted his number down on the back of a head shot he had given to her as a keepsake.

Off the boat's main cabin Luke had built a room to house his recording equipment. Among the acoustic panels, bass traps, amplifiers, microphones, and studio monitors was his floor rack of acoustic guitars, Gibsons, Washburns, Arcadias, Yamahas, his most-prized possessions. Catty-corner across the hall, he'd shoved a cot between the kitchenette and head, where he'd loaded the freezer with Jack Daniels and stacked fresh linens for Becca to use when wiping away her make-up. Above his Crosley record player, tacked into the accent wall, was a tourist map of Nashville that he'd bought for eight dollars at an unregistered body and paint shop, where he and the band hauled their tour bus after blowing two tires between Lexington and what they could only guess was Bowling Green based off the goldenrods losing their petals to the stiff fall breeze. Fridays, he would cook Becca dinner – fried catfish, or if crunched for time, a canned country ham. They would sit at the little drop-leaf table, shaking their heads at the day's headlines or sharing a joke overheard on the bus ride home, setting down their silverware to point out the porthole at the fireworks popping in the night sky above the black-blue bay before offering up another swig of their Tallulah. Five more, and they would be on their feet, swinging to the down-home twang of Lucinda Williams or The Jayhawks; his hand curled against the dip in her spine, the other locked between her strong meaty fingers, they would sail down the narrow passage of hall toward his closed bedroom, knocking over rubber oars and stacked life preservers, her laughter caressing the prickly hairs on his face like a needle to a groove each time he leaned to whisper, "Careful, watch your step" yet wishing them both wild.

She knew very little about music when she first met him, and though she learned much about it by the time their first months had passed, she was more attracted by his passion than his talent. She was envious of his aspiration, fearing her own life lacked a clear sense of direction.

"What would you do if you weren't a musician?" she asked him once at the beach.

"That's like asking these turtles what they'd be if they weren't turtles," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't have a say in the matter."

"Of course you do. You could be a lawyer or a banker, even a fisherman. You could be anything you want."

"It's not like that with music."

"Why not?"

"Music chooses you, I guess."

"Oh," she said, dropping her voice. "That must be nice."

She had always dreamed of opening her own pastry shop. As a freckle-faced girl, she had taken great pleasure in helping her mother bake key lime pie for the fishermen at the loading docks. But after graduating college she had settled for working as a copyist for a law firm in downtown Palm Bay. She told herself that she needed to save money, that she was young and would open the shop eventually. But though her job bored her with its dull blue computer screens and half-height cubicle walls made out of coarse-gray fabric, she took comfort in its steady paycheck and meager responsibilities. Normally her work for the week was finished by Wednesday, freeing her to indulge in mid-day shopping sprees along the strip, and her boss allowed her to whisk off on vacation at a minute's notice.

In July, following a string of successful shows, Luke took her on vacation to the Bahamas. Ray Bans shielding their eyes and bodies slick with tanning oil, they soaked up sun on the pool deck by day and feasted on all-you-can-eat lobster by night. On Thanksgiving and Christmas they celebrated with her family at their house in Tallahassee, hunting for turkey with her father and carving pumpkins with her nieces and nephews. "You've got a nice family," Luke said to her one night while they were warming their feet by the fire. "Can't say I know what that feels like."

When Becca's sisters asked why she didn't move in with him, she would reply with a shy shrug of her shoulders. She didn't want to tell them that Luke had yet to ask her, so she said that his room was too small to fit her jewelry boxes and that at night he needed solitude to write. Rarely did he call her during the week. After closing the bait shop, he would stow himself away inside his makeshift studio, where fueled by pot after pot of black coffee, he would strum chords on his guitar into the wee, wee hours of night. She would come support him during his Tuesday shows at the Red Parrot, listening to him cover songs by Merle Haggard and Patsy Cline. If the show went well, he would treat her to a late dinner before hailing a cab downtown. They would catch a movie or play carnival games on the boardwalk, and afterwards stop in at Pastry Heaven to share a slice of key lime pie. "The one you make is better," he would say, smiling.

But she was also not sure if she would move in with him if he did ask her. Sometimes he gave her the impression that he was the one with serious aspirations, not she. "When are you going to wake up and start doing something meaningful with your life?" he said to her drunk one night. When his music was going poorly, his mood would suffer, sinking him into a filthy depression. He would grow despondent, reasoning with her that since he hadn't written a hit song by age thirty, there was little chance that he ever would. She wanted to be supportive. But she

worried too about the stress brought on by his ambition. What if he didn't make it? What would he do then? she thought. Nights his depression bore the brunt of its phantom weight on him, he would put on Jason Isbell records and drink himself into a stupor. She had never listened to Jason Isbell before he started playing her his records. Luke said that listening to Jason Isbell made him crave a cigarette. Other times, he said, it made him think of suicide.

Becca hoped that he was just being theatric.

For Christmas, he gave her a pendant necklace. Dangling at the end of a mesmerizing gold chain, the pearl stone sparkled against the box's blue wrapping paper. He told her that it had belonged to his mother, a fortuneteller who had moved to California shortly after her divorce from his father. Before leaving Florida for good, his mother had left him her jewelry box, a circle carved from cherry oak by her brother as a wedding present. "I think she wanted a fresh start," Luke said after showing her where he kept the box underneath his bed. Becca considered not accepting the gift; it been only a few years since his parents separated, but it looked so beautiful clasped around her neck that she couldn't resist. For her birthday, he gave her his mother's sterling silver bracelet. It was too small to fit her wrist, but she wasted no time in getting the band resized. Not a day passed by that winter where she did not wear his mother's jewelry. She delighted in the compliments she received at the office, as well as from strangers on the bus, but what she most enjoyed was how the slender feel of its weight never failed to remind her of him.

"Do you like it?" he asked her over dinner one night.

"It's the best gift anyone's ever given me."

"Good. 'Cause that's all that's left."

He had always taken an interest in her family, but she grew curious as to why he seemed reluctant to discuss his own upbringing. He shared only bits and scraps of his lonely childhood

on Merrit Island, how he had gone to bed each night wishing for a sibling, but was careful to omit any mention of his late father. There was a picture of his father onboard his boat—a crinkled Polaroid taped behind the medicine cabinet of a grim young man who had hair thicker than his waist. Because he had held on to the picture, Becca assumed Luke held his father in high esteem. One night, when they were drinking, he corrected the notion. He recounted the story of how at his fiftieth high school reunion his father had fallen back in love with an old girlfriend, wounding his mother deeply.

He explained that his father was somewhat of a cowardly man; when it boiled down to it, he said, it was safe to say he regretted much of what he'd done with his life. He told Becca about a spring trip he and his parents had once taken to Cape Canaveral. He was dating someone at the time, a college girl, who had stayed over at their house a few nights earlier. They had tried to be discreet, he said, but his father had spied her sneaking into his room well past midnight. He and his parents had been sitting on the beach, listening to the radio and just relaxing, when his father turned to him and said: "The biggest mistake I ever made was getting married right around your age." "Isn't that what everyone did back then?" he'd asked his father. "No," his father had said, laughing a little. "Some people were smart. Twenty-three is too young to settle down, let alone having to deal with a mortgage and a baby. You remember that." And then Luke had looked at his mother, who was trying to concentrate on her book, though he could tell that she had heard his father perfectly by the pained look on her face.

"How did you respond to that?" Becca asked.

"I don't remember. Probably with some stupid lyrics from a song," he said.

Becca thought to herself that this might be the reason why Luke desperately clung to his music. He was used to people abandoning him— but when he wrote a song, well or not, it made

him feel like he had earned his place on earth. Without his work, he became untethered, felt vague and abstracted, felt himself drifting away from whomever he was with. Later that spring, after a particularly lousy show, he had made Becca sit at the bar with him while he drank himself ragged on whiskey. "It's shows like tonight that make me never want to get back onstage," he said.

"I thought you sounded great," she said, putting a hand on his denimed leg. "Maybe you'll write a song out of it."

Luke huffed. "Some song that would be."

"I just don't want you to get discouraged."

"That's not the problem."

"What are you worried about then?"

Luke tipped back his head and let another warm bite of whiskey slide down his throat. "It's scary, how lonely I get on stage," he said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm about crumbling in on myself."

Slowly things began to happen with his music. For years his demo tapes packed with twangy guitar licks and nasal tenor had been met with little fanfare, but the top brass at Sun Entertainment couldn't get his latest diddy out of their heads. In late March, on the night Luke's song was to debut on the local country music station, Becca invited him to celebrate at her apartment. Buzzed off high-end champagne and the added sugar in her key lime pie, she and Luke, along with Tank and Mary Elizabeth, huddled around the radio whooping with excitement. As the song's tender opening notes crackled from inside the speakers, Luke began to sing along. Upon hearing the slight echo of his voice, Becca experienced a raw sensation, as if someone was dropping stones, lightly, into the pit of her stomach. She felt, all at once, both immeasurably

close and far away from him. "I love you," she said to him later that night. As she huddled into the warmth on his side of the bed, he pressed his lips against her forehead. It was the first time she had said the words to him, and though she herself was unsure if she truly meant them, she had wanted him to repeat the words back to her.

In April he got a call from a label executive, who said he wanted more songs. Luke asked off from the bait shop and rode the bus up to Nashville so he could hole himself away in their state-of-the-art studio. Some nights he would call Becca to ask about her day. She did not want to tell him that she had spent the entire day at work reading mystery novels and online shopping, so she would say that she'd been busy filing expense reports and cutting checks for dozens of local charities. "You must be exhausted," he would say, tightening the pressure in her chest. She began to dread his calls so terribly that she would wait until the very last ring to answer the phone. "Hi, sorry, sorry—how are you?" she would say, pretending to catch her breath. One dry May night, Becca experienced a terrible dream. It was high tide, and she was lying on the beach, unable to move. The waves splashed up over the rocks, dampening her cotton blouse and flooding her nostrils. When she woke up, her mouth stung with the taste of salt.

To alleviate her guilt, she started baking again. On Friday mornings she would wake up early to whip up her key lime pie, and after keeping the dozen or so chilled in the fridge at work, she lug them down the pier in the little red wagon she'd dug out of her parents' garage. Within a week, locals and tourists alike began flocking to the pier from as far south as Vero Beach. She began acquiring regular customers, one of whom was a crippled man named Ed Brinkley. He was an older man, who dressed in seersucker polos and khaki shorts hiked well past the waist. He was somewhere in his late seventies; the last of his winter-white hair strayed out from under his trademark pork-pie hat, and his walk was hobbled by a herniated disk he blamed on his

service in the marine corps. Ed always walked in the direction Becca walked in, and she had to walk slowly to keep in line with him so they could talk. She had little to talk to him about, but she liked how despite his ailments, he made a conscious effort to put forth a cheerful persona. He would greet her with an almost bashful smile as he labored up the pier, one hand clutching the guardrail, his green eyes always seeming like they were enlarging behind his tortoise shell glasses, as if amazed by the little life God had given him. "That's about the best damn pie I've ever tasted," he would tell her. She would smile slightly and hurry on, thinking how special it felt to bring joy into someone's life.

She and Luke still spent most of every weekend together, but much of his talk now was about writer's block and technical difficulties that were preventing him from capturing the same hit sound, and she struggled to understand what he was trying to relate to her. One night he became so frustrated that he accused her of not taking any interest in his career. He said this because he wanted to move to Nashville but she was committed to staying in Florida. "I'm not leaving," she said. Hearing herself say this, Becca wondered if part of her hoped that he would go to Nashville anyway. But when he made it clear that he would not leave without her, she became flooded with emotions, almost to the point of tears, because she was so happy that he was staying with her. "I can't do it without you," he said, rubbing her back. He thought she was crying because he had yelled at her and judged her as selfish. He took back what he'd said; he told her that despite not knowing much about music, she had developed a trained ear and often gave strong advice. He told her she was considerate, that she was always putting his needs before hers, that she managed to understand him better than just about anyone in his life ever had, and that he appreciated her patience. "What do you want? To get married? We can get married," he said, which had made her cry even more.

Later, alone at her apartment, she realized she had cried because he had never said so many nice things to her at once. Actually, very few people in her life had gone out of the way to say something kind, and it had overwhelmed her. In July, one rainy night, when she was grabbing his coat from the closet on their way out the door, she found a diamond ring in the pocket. All through dinner, she waited for him to set it out on the table, but all he did was complain about not being in Nashville. "What is there even to like about Florida? You can't even enjoy the beach half the time it's so hot. And when it's not scorching hot, it's raining."

"Nashville's no different," she said.

"How can you say that? You've never even been there."

"That's because I know I won't be happy there. My life is here."

"Nashville is no further from your parents' place than it is here. Besides, the real estate's cheaper. We could buy a house. Hell, you could even open up your own store."

"You think people in Nashville even like key lime pie?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, if we're not going," he said, folding his coat on the table beside him.

Things went on like this for about another month. Becca didn't know, but it was during this time that he wrote the song that would turn him into a household name. Months later, after he had already moved to Nashville, she heard this song on radio. She had dated a few men since then, though none of them had stuck. But she had opened her own pastry shop overlooking the ocean. One August day, when the pier was crowded because it was one of the last hot, summer afternoons of the year, and the turtles were nearing the end of their nesting season. People gathered out on the pier, leaning over the railing to watch the turtles make their slow retreat into the crashing waves.

Becca was mopping down the tables, half dreaming, when she heard a familiar voice come on the radio. "Say goodbye, say goodbye, to the blue Atlantic," Luke sang, and she knew the song was about her. Right then, the door chimed and Ed walked in with a frail looking woman, who was wearing a polka-dot dress, with binoculars hanging around her neck that Becca knew to be his wife. She knew that the woman was Ed's wife because he had told her all about her battle with multiple sclerosis, which had plagued her since college, and was now sapping at her eyesight. Ed took her by the arm, and talking all the way, moved her across the tile floor and then over the a table beside the window, saying things like, "To your left here, Emma. That's right. Now watch it, there's a chair. That's it. Sit down." Becca stood by the radio, paralyzed. Listening to the song gave her the sense that something heavy was welling up inside of her, and though she wanted to listen to it alone, perhaps in the dark of the store, she couldn't find it in herself to ask Ed and his wife to leave.

Ed said, "I want you to meet Becca. Becca, this is my wife, Nancy. I've told you all about her." She was beaming. She was holding on to Ed by his shirtsleeve.

"I feel like we've already met," she boomed.

Hands shaking, Becca cut them each a hunk of pie. She sat down with them at the table, and hearing Luke's song play in the background, watched Ed spoon the pie into his wife's mouth.

"Say, now this is a song," he said, looking behind Becca. "Who sings this?"

"I'm not sure," she said, watching the woman roll the pie around in her mouth.

"It's good. Reminds me of the country songs I used to hear growing up."

His wife moaned in agreement. "It does," she said. Then she shook her head and smiled.

"But it's nowhere near as good as this pie."

MOUNT MISERY

Buzz Fitzpatrick had always looked out for Ned Hilferty. The two grew up in the Philadelphia suburbs, near the old battlefields, where, as boys, they, howling out of their gigantic, punch-stained mouths, would play atop Mount Misery. Together, they went through grammar school and junior high, and then on to McKinley, where they shared a locker, sparred on the wrestling team, and lost their virginity to the same girl. Summers, Buzz helped Ned land jobs painting houses, hauling furniture, and weeding lawns, anything involving the outdoors and where there wasn't a boss to ride their ass. Ned's father wasn't part of the picture. So, Buzz taught him to shoot pool, drink, and perform a deadly leg sweep. They even adopted a dog together, a chocolate Labrador named Toby. They shared him. It worked out swell.

But Ned, during the fall of their senior year, got his girlfriend, Anna Leigh, pregnant. Buzz liked Anna Leigh just fine; he'd dated her too. She wrote poetry and rolled her own cigarettes. Her nose wiggled, and she wore her red hair in long beautiful braids. And while Buzz thought Anna Leigh was a good match for Ned, he worried that his best friend was about to make a mistake. Every college wrestling program in the state had offered Ned a full scholarship, yet he was considering dropping out of school to work full-time at the lumberyard.

"You're my best friend, so don't take this the wrong way," Buzz told Ned one night. Mist twisted between the naked pinewoods as night descended on Mount Misery. "But if a year from now, you're working down at the lumber yard, I swear, I'll kill you."

Ned gulped at the bottle, wiped his lips. "What're you talking about?"

"You're sitting on a golden ticket that you're too scared to cash it in."

"I'm so sick of your golden-ticket bullshit. What's wrong with wanting to stay in Philly and work at the lumberyard? Isn't that your plan?"

"Hell no. My sights are set on police academy. But if I end up at the lumberyard, then that's alright too. You know why? Because I don't got what you do."

"Why am I the one with expectations? Who's supposed to do this or that? What if I don't want to? What about what I want? You ever think about that? For Christ's sake, I don't even like wrestling."

"You think my dad *likes* welding? Or that your mom *likes* driving the goddamn bus?"

"No."

"That's right. But they do it anyway, because those are the cards they've drawn," Buzz said. He grabbed the bottle, let the warm liquid ooze down his throat. "Maybe you don't owe it to yourself to punch your ticket out of here. But you sure as hell owe it to me, and to your mom, and everybody else in this town who wishes they had your chance. Hell, if I had your talent, I'd win an Olympic gold medal."

"I don't owe my decisions to anyone," Ned said, "except for Anna Leigh."

"Look, I know you don't want to run out on Anna Leigh like your dad did to you," Buzz said later on. They had tread carefully down the mountain path, silent minus the skitter of rubble, and were now ducking through the busted fence. "But don't let one mistake ruin your future."

"It wasn't a mistake."

"You mean to tell me," Buzz said, "you tried to get her pregnant?"

"Of course not," Ned said. He squeezed on his bike helmet, buckled the strap beneath his hairless chin. Beneath the moon, his face was bright and delicate. "But I'm happy I did."

Buzz nodded in disbelief. Often, after sex, he, while dressing in the backseat of his then-girlfriend's car, would surge with the desire to speak of his affection for Ned. He would make

claims like, "We can read each other's mind." Yet the truth was that oftentimes he had not the faintest idea as to what Ned was thinking.

"Aren't you scared?" he asked, pedaling on his cherry single-speed, as he followed Ned across fields blooming with magnolias and starlight.

"Oh, I'm terrified," Ned said, laughing awkwardly. "Lucky for me, there's Anna Leigh. Did I tell you she signed us up for parenting classes at the Y? And get this – she quit smoking. Cold turkey. I swear, she won't even step within a foot of a cigarette. Can you believe that? Hell, she might even get me to quit."

"She's a great girl," Buzz said.

"We'll still need plenty of help."

"I don't know the first thing about babies," Buzz said. "I'm lucky if I manage to put my shirt on right side out."

"It's true. You're a goddamn slob," Ned said, winking over his shoulder. "But I wouldn't have a prayer in this world if it wasn't for you."

When Ned and Anna Leigh married, Buzz served as the best man. He presented the ring and danced up a sweat during the reception, twirling Anna Leigh, locking arms with Ned, and tossing back wine. But there was a moment, right as the party was beginning to die down, when Buzz turned to face Ned and saw someone much older than nineteen years old. He saw thin hair combed to one side and eyes that shone with regret.

It's not too late, Buzz thought.

And yet – in the years that followed, Buzz was pleasantly surprised by how happy Ned seemed whenever he came over to their house on the south side – a quaint, stone cottage, slate-

roofed, blue-windowed, with a patio for grilling meats – for Anna Leigh’s meatballs or to listen to Kurt Vile and the Drive-By Truckers. But sometimes Ned and Anna Leigh would argue about her perceived flirting, or his smoking, right in front of Buzz, who would step out and take Toby for a walk up Mount Misery, stopping at Toni Roni's for a slice of extra cheese on the way back. Most of the time, Ned and Anna Leigh argued about finances. Following the birth of their daughter, Anna Leigh had offered to get a job. She wanted to teach and help pay the bills. But Ned had refused, explaining that someone needed to watch after Cindy. "Let me worry about money," he told her. Eventually, Ned got promoted to foreman, and though Anna Leigh still disapproved whenever he splurged on a vacation or the latest Barbie, both ultimately felt satisfied with how their life together had turned out. Oftentimes, well before the first bottle of wine was even opened, they would stark making out in the kitchen, and Buzz would have to amble into the living room and turn the game on loud so as not to hear them.

So he stopped going over as much; after high school, he moved out of his parents’ house and went on to graduate from police academy. An adrenaline junkie, he had applied to serve in the city, hoping that by doing so his odds to bust a serial killer or a bank robber would significantly increase. However, Buzz, though unafraid to draw his gun, was not only a lousy shot – largely on account of being terribly nearsighted, requiring that he wear ungainly, thick-framed glasses – he routinely forgot to switch the safety off. He wound up in Swedesford, the safest precinct on the Main Line. Occasionally, he received a call reporting a minor vandalism or stolen car. Once, after a few years on the force, Buzz, chasing a stoned pack of teenagers outside down the back alley of a strip mall, had fallen while scaling a brick wall and separated his shoulder. In the hospital, doctors stood around looking at his chart while he ate pills. Some of the

pills tasted like chalk, others the way rain smells. Within two months, he was stealing them from the evidence room.

Off-duty, Buzz still palled around with Ned. Though now in their late twenties – big-bellied, blonde-bearded, booze-beaten – they played pool at Sharpshooters once a week. Each had money but were usually grimy and tired. Sometimes they felt nervous and strange around each other. "How's Anna Leigh?" Buzz asked, and Ned would reply, "Fine", before emptying another pitcher of beer. They had changed, were still changing, like smoke floating down a mountain. And while this scared Buzz, he considered those nights with Ned at the pool hall to be the best of his life, despite what came later.

"You catch the Phils game this afternoon? Ned asked one night.

Buzz shook his head. "Heard the first few innings on the radio."

"Oh, it was a hell of a game. Bottom of the eighth. Howard socks a high fly ball down the left field line."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Bangs the foul pole."

"Crowd must have went apeshit."

"Thirty-five thousand people screaming their heads off. Game goes eleven. Top of the eleventh, Lidge takes the mound."

"Here we go."

"In steps Jose Reyes. And the Mets fans, they're chanting his name, you know, Jo-se Oh-se-oh-se-oh-se."

"Fuckin' Mets fans."

"So Reyes steps up to the plate, and he's got that herky-jerky stance, you know, how he twirls the bat like a wet noodle? 0-2 pitch, Lidge winds, delivers."

"Slider."

"Right, except he hangs it. I mean a real slow, juicy one. Right over the heart of the plate."

"Christ."

"Reyes crushes it to right field. Pence doesn't even bat an eye, the ball's hit so high into the upper-deck. Bottom of the inning Phils go down in order. 1-2-3. Dropped us back to five games out of the division."

"Shit."

"Yeah, but it's not all bad," Ned said.

"Oh yeah, and why's that?"

"I had twenty bucks on the Mets."

Sundays, they watched the Eagles at Ned's house, gobbling hot wings as soon as Anna Leigh removed them from the oven. While Anna Leigh had always approved of Buzz, she especially enjoyed the attention he bestowed on their daughter. Every week, Buzz bought Lily a raspberry Italian ice and would kick the soccer ball with her out in their fenced-in backyard. Whenever her friends asked about Buzz, she sung his praises. "He's got a heart of gold," she told Nora, a pale, dimple-faced brunette who hosted the neighborhood book club. Now and again, Ned and Anna Leigh and Buzz Nora would ride the train downtown to catch an early dinner before hitting the dance floor or a microbrewery, and they were usually in bed before midnight. And while Buzz liked Nora – her sly wit and tiny embrace – he detected in his chest a peculiar

ticking. Once, in bed after a peaceful night at home, Nora asked Buzz to slap her, ever so slightly. But Buzz was so high that he hit her hard across the face.

"I'm not going to touch it," he said, huddled around his kitchenette with a bottle of baby aspirin.

Nora peeled the frozen bag of fish sticks from her jaw. "Is it bad?"

Buzz looked at the bruise. It was purple and ghastly, sprawling in every direction, like a wolf spider. "Oh, god," he said, "fuck is wrong with me?"

It was Saturday, the first day of spring, when it happened.

The day started out clear and tranquil. The sky was blue like a gas flame with flocks of birds spilling toward heaven. Anna Leigh and Nora were talking in the kitchen. Lily was out in the yard tossing a tennis ball to Toby, giggling, and bouncing on the trampoline. Buzz and Ned were sitting in the Adirondack chairs on the patio, drinking beer and grilling hamburgers. Buzz was doing most of the talking, about people they knew, about policing, and the Slip N' Slide he was thinking about buying Lily for her birthday.

But Ned just stared at Anna Leigh's dresses fluttering in the breeze from on the clothesline, or at the towering mountain silhouettes that loomed in the near distance. Buzz thought how Ned was becoming more detached, the way his eyes often glazed over or how he was sometimes reluctant to talk at all, like he was now.

Buzz squirmed in his chair, flipped a few burgers.

"Something eating you, man?" he asked.

Ned slugged his beer and mashed the can. "It's probably nothing."

"C'mon, tell me."

Ned shrugged, then motioned with his head toward the kitchen. "Maybe later."

Buzz nodded.

After a few minutes, Ned asked, "Want to shoot some pool?"

"Sounds good to me," Buzz said. He looked out into the yard. "What about Lily?"

"She's fine. Besides, the girls will be here to watch her. Can you drive? I've had a couple."

"I'm good," Ned said, nudging his beer beneath his chair. "So long as you're alright with riding in the back of a police cruiser."

Sharpshooters was a long and narrow place, like a subway car heading nowhere. The tables were bloodshot and smelled like a sewer. The people all seemed trapped there, like gargoyles – Buzz and Ned shook their hands with delicious joy as they climbed up to the bar. Of all days, who should be pouring drinks but their favorite bartender. Her angelic, white curls made her appear thousands of years old. She poured each pitcher to the brim, waiting until the foam settled, before pulling the tab once again. Ned threw her a dollar fifty per pitcher while Buzz saved his quarters for the jukebox. They whistled along to tunes of alcoholic regret and scorned lovers while they wagered at cribbage, smacking cash on the rail with each shot. Buzz bided his time, placing the cue at impossible angles, as he waited for Ned to relax. With each finished pitcher, Ned began to talk more freely. Over the crack of gleaming, colored balls, he updated Buzz on his mother's chemotherapy, how business was slow at the lumberyard, and asked whether he considered marrying Nora. At first, Buzz felt unnerved by the question. He had not told Ned about the accident, unsure of his response, and was now worried that he had found out through Anna Leigh.

"I might could end up with her," Buzz said, chewing a mouthful of pills as he chalked his stick. "Why? Did she say something?"

"Not that I know," Ned said, arching over the table, before gracefully knocking the last ball into a corner pocket. "My advice? Don't do it."

Buzz snorted. "Well isn't this ironic?"

"I mean it," Ned said. "You were right."

"What's gotten into you?" Buzz said, leaning forward off the back wall.

Ned stood still, raised both arms slowly behind his head, and mussed his thin, peach-white hair. Then he plucked the triangle from the table and started racking the balls. "I got married way too young," he said. "I had no idea how much stress was about to come down on my shoulders. Suddenly, I had to pay a mortgage, taxes, one insurance policy after another. Hell, do you know how much diapers cost?"

He stepped to the head of the table. "Now, don't get me wrong. I'm happy we had Lily." He eyed up his shot and catapulted the little white orb into the rack. The balls burst, scattering, a clean break. "But Anna Leigh, well, she was even younger than me, you know?"

"Ned," Buzz said. "What are you saying?"

Ned's hands shook as he tipped the pitcher. He lifted the cup to his lips then pointed a thumb at the table. "Your shot," he said.

The smell of chalk swarmed in the neon glare. Buzz and Ned silently circled the table, sighing while drumming with their hands upon their chests, as they weighed their next line of attack. And with each step Buzz's pulse ticked off the seconds of time, his heart breaking for the only friend he'd ever dared to love. He'd always had the feeling that their lives were super-connected, locked in step, orbiting each other like planets. Now, he realized that they had each

lived two different lives. After happy hour was over, he proposed they hit the road. "Don't want to keep the girls waiting," he said. But just as Buzz was fixing to close their tab, in walked a man wearing a wool-blend cardigan with shiny black hair neatly combed to the right of his stretchy, spit-colored face.

"There he is," Ned said. "Right on schedule."

Buzz turned and looked toward the door. "Leo?"

Ned told the story: He and Anna Leigh had spent a terrific evening at the Regional Softwood Gala. They'd smiled for the camera, dined on fish eggs the size of the moon. Until Ned had returned from the silent auction to discover Anna Leigh dancing with Leo to the slow, sentimental dirge of the house band. Or maybe he had stumbled in from the street, hoarse from shouting at the passing cars for a cigarette. "Doesn't matter," Ned said, lighting up. What was important for him to remember was how Leo had twirled his wife by the end of her finger, and pulled her to his chest, only to then bend her by the small of her back. Leo too had dated Anna Leigh back in high school, and had worried ever since Leo split with his wife that the two would get mixed back up together.

"The worst part," Ned said, standing under the grim light of the dartboard, "was that part of me wanted her to go through with it."

"Do what?" Buzz asked.

"Kiss Leo."

Buzz fell silent. He was utterly mystified, having not anticipated such a response. Finally, he said, "You don't mean that."

"Maybe not." Ned hung his head and spat in the now empty cup. "Because there's this other part of me, a bigger part, that's just *itching* to pound Leo into submission."

Buzz lay a hand on Ned's shoulder. The way he saw it, Leo had wasted his entire life. He was in his sixties and smelled like a fish market. He had, on numerous occasions, been booked for public urination and driving drunk. Maybe people existed who loved him. Still, Buzz doubted Anna Leigh had granted him such pity. Not that he cared. He was only concerned with his duty as Ned's friend. "What do you propose we do?" he asked.

Ned squinted down the bar. Leo was bent over his double, lapping at the rim of his cocktail glass, like a blind man lead to water in the desert.

"How's about we take ol' Lou on a joyride?"

Buzz jerked his head around. "You trying to get me fired?"

"Oh, please," Ned said. "Don't feed me that good cop bullshit. I've seen how you scarf down those pills like they're Hershey's kisses." He coiled a meaty arm around Buzz's neck, then leaned into his ear and whispered, "They don't take too kindly to woman-beaters in prison."

Buzz felt a bolt of anxiety crack down his spine. "Oh, my god. Jesus, okay. Okay, I'll do it. But only if you promise not to hurt him too bad."

"I'll be gentle," Ned said, massaging his knuckles. "Nobody gets hurt."

Buzz jiggled a heap of pills into his outstretched palm. One by one, he popped the red and blue candied shapes onto his tongue, moving his jaw patiently, waiting until he felt calm. Then he walked to the end of the bar and shouted, "Hey, Leo! How's about a round on me?"

It was starting to get dark. Buzz and Ned lugged Leo by the shoulders and carried him across the tiny, dirty parking lot. He was short and lean yet between them his weight seemed enormous. Buzz's shoulder seared with pain as they loaded his mousy, waterlogged body into the cruiser's backseat.

"I come in peace," Leo slurred, hands raised above his head.

Buzz rested both hands on his knees. "We're just making sure you get home safe, Leo. I'd hate for one of my buddies to pull you over."

At the pool hall, Leo had bragged about his son. A gargantuan, sun-kissed boy who had learned to wrestle from his mother, a heavily tattooed woman who sold baby alligators north of Wilmington. Though once they hit the road, he passed out quickly. Glancing up at the rearview, Buzz noticed Leo slapping himself across the face, as if desperate to shake himself awake.

"Think Leo's telling the truth about his kid?" Ned asked.

"Possibly."

"Well if he is, I bet you I could still pin his punk-ass to the mat."

"Is that what this is about?"

"Sure," Ned said, rolling down the windows. Heavy fields stretched all around them. The day had been molten with virgin buds blossoming on the trees and what-not, but now snow was whirling around once again in bitter, blinding squalls, and they could no longer navigate the trail leading the way up Mount Misery.

"What do you say we turn around?" Buzz said.

"Just pull over," Ned said. "I haven't had my fun."

They slowed to a clearing that overlooked a military graveyard, hundreds and hundreds of miniature graves flowering in the valley below. Before exiting the car, Buzz retrieved his gun from the glove box. He didn't know what was bound to happen. But he thought it best to be safe. Ned woke Leo, then sat him up, like a puppet. He wouldn't get out of the car. So Ned dragged him out onto the muddy snow.

"What're you going to do now?" Buzz asked.

Ned motioned him away with his arm. "Stand back."

Buzz watched Ned twist off his wedding ring. He rolled his sleeves up past his elbows before kneeling over the sleeping man's chest. Then he proceeded to flog the sleeping man's face, begging him to speak.

Buzz ran to pull Ned off of Leo. "That's enough," he shouted.

Ned kept pounding. "Say it," he shouted.

When Buzz reached under Ned's arm, Ned maneuvered out from his grip. Then, as Buzz had once taught him, Ned crouched down, seized Bud by the ankle, and swept his leg.

Buzz landed against the snow with a thump. Dazed, he gazed at the white, blank sky and realized then that it was impossible to truly know another person. When he hobbled to his feet, he was horrified to find Ned hoisting Leo by the throat, dangling him over the mountain's edge.

He drew his gun. "Put him down!"

But Ned refused to turn around.

When Buzz pulled the trigger, he was surprised to hear the crack of the bullet, having failed to hear it so many times before. He intended to fire a warning shot. But he had always been a terrible shot.

Ned spun around, dropping Leo safely to the floor. "Catch me," Buzz thought he heard Ned say, before watching helplessly as his best friend vanished down into the veil of snow.

THE CHOIR SINGER

Greenie had a voice that could turn you into a believer, but he was a sorry excuse for a fisherman. He and I shared a boat for nearly forty years, and the only thing he ever caught was a case of the willies from smoking too much dope. He was fat and lazy and cheated at cards. He gambled on everything from the weather to pig racing, and sold Bibles door-to-door during the dry season. I never read the Bible growing up (my momma told fortunes for a living), but Greenie could quote just about any verse from the gospel. He wanted to hit it big as a singer and starred in the church choir. At the bar, I would overhear shouts of "He's *good*," among the several older women who liked to sit down for coffee and pancakes after morning service.

But in our town a man's judged by what feats he accomplished out on the water. The summer that Joy and I married, the game warden posted a five thousand dollar prize to the boat that bagged that season's meatiest catfish. For the next two months, Greenie and I hunted every mangrove in south Florida, baiting our traps with fresh urgency; he was running the risk of losing a finger to his bookie, and I needed money fast if I wanted to keep my promise to buy a house before the baby arrived. Mornings we eagerly hauled our cages out from the mud-stinking water, only for our hearts to sink at the pathetic sight of yet another minnow nibbling at our last, chicken liver.

One night, I was drinking alone at the bar, feeling sorry for myself. Earlier, a boat had landed a forty-pound catfish, and since the meadowlarks had already begun to reappear along the inland, I reckoned that the money was as good as gone. But I was scared too. My wife had left and gone to her mother's with the baby, and the thought of my dirty, quiet apartment zapped my nerves with an eerie dread. I was about to order another beer when the game warden burst in through the back door. "You're not going to believe this," he said and motioned for me to hurry

outside. Greenie was standing on the dock, his gold tooth sparkling in the cool floodlights of the marina. At his feet, twitching softly, was a catfish the size of a pickup truck.

"Where'd you say you caught it?" I asked him later while shooting pool. The buttery smell of fried fish wafted from the noisy kitchen, and periodically other locals stopped by our table to shake Greenie's hand. I wanted to believe his story, of how he'd hooked the giant fish while trolling a sandy cove off Peanut Island, but I had my doubts; during the weigh-in, I'd noticed a peculiar lack of wounds in and around the fish's mouth. "The Lord works in mysterious ways," Greenie said, almost laughing, before waddling over towards the jukebox.

My wife and I don't keep a Bible in our house. But the next morning, perhaps out of pity or fear, Greenie stopped by and drove us to church. The sun hid pink and bleary behind the distant palms, but the day was already cruel and muggy, and I could feel my hangover sweating past my Goodwill suit as I stood for the opening hymn. As the organ began to play, I closed my eyes and saw Greenie standing in a boat out on the water. He was singing, while all around him fish gathered out from behind the coral reefs, following his bruising tenor, and I felt myself swimming up beside them, my soul reeling, as if dangling from the end of his line.

NO NET TO CATCH YOU

Having reached a decision – which his wife argued had all the makings of a mid-life crisis – Hal moved out of the house and into his own apartment. Though he didn't move far. His apartment was two train stops west, on the outskirts of downtown Wayne, an affluent hilly Philadelphia suburb. He had three furnished rooms and a bath, on the top floor of a three-story building. He entered from the parking lot, with a large key that opened the backdoor. Then he passed the pizzeria on the first floor, up some narrow stairs, to a landing, where he stopped to rest his feet before climbing more stairs to his door, which required a smaller key.

In his kitchenette, Hal had a combination gas oven and stove. Two of the boilers didn't light, but he didn't care to have them fixed. His wife had handled the cooking, as his culinary knowledge extended no further than scrambled eggs. He often ate at the downstairs pizzeria, a greasy mom-and-pop. He would sit at the booths furthest from the window and examine the box scores between bites of piping hot cheese. He had a friendliness about him, thanks in large to his round doughy face. But whenever he spotted someone he knew, he would lower his head or sometimes duck into the restroom. He wanted to be alone – that he had made clear to his wife. He had worked tirelessly, having stayed up into the wee hours of night with his nose shoved between thick leather-bound law dictionaries, so he could afford his wife a beautiful blue Dutch Colonial house and his son a private education. He needed to put his mind at ease – what his therapist referred to as decompression – and believed this was best done on his own. Though he knew part of the problem was his tendency to push people away, out of fear of what in him they might uncover. Once, when he was coming up the stairs, hauling in a box of Baileys Irish Cream, the downstairs tenant, who lived off the landing, had asked if he were in need of assistance. He

had insisted he was fine, that he could carry the weight on his own, only to then break a bottle in front of the man's door.

In his living room, Hal had a television and recliner. The lever jammed, but he didn't mind too much. Having spent early retirement trying to resuscitate his marriage – traveling, cycling, even yoga – he was relieved now to waste entire days glued in front of the television. He enjoyed television, the mindlessness of it. Mornings he caught up with the news. Afternoons, sports. Then evenings he took in a movie, alongside pours of Baileys and puffs from his cigar collection. Smoking was banned, but he masked the smell with a liberal use of air freshener. One night, he watched the life story of a famous French high-wire artist. Later, in bed, he dreamed of walking on a tightrope. He could not see where he was headed. Fog blocked the horizon, and he struggled to steady his footing on the rope that trembled in the slicing wind. When he peeked down, his eyes flung open, and he woke into his darkened apartment, chest beating softly. There was a time when he would have considered such a dream meaningless, something to forget. But the more he dwelled on it, the more his discomfort grew. The next morning, while out for coffee, he thought of whom he could see. His parents were dead. He had never much cared for his sister. He had met someone, a woman with whom he'd attended high school, and despite having still been with his wife, he had felt a spark for this woman, the first in a very long time, though nothing came of it. What friends he had in the neighborhood either worked or had moved to warmer climates. His wife was no longer speaking to him. Nor was his son, out of what he guessed was solidarity. Regardless, he invited his son over. He worried about him. Sure, he had resigned from being a husband. But he was still a father. Nothing could deny him that.

The one time his son, Max, paid him a visit, was at seven in the evening. It was chilly outside and wind scattered the salt put down on the streets. Hal was making the spare bed when

his son called asking to be let in. "See you soon," Hal said, his voice soft and high-pitched. He was nervous, having not seen his son since before the separation. Though even during the good years, their relationship had felt strained. He slipped on sneakers, an old pair his wife had begged he throw out, and hobbled down the stairs. He had spent the day tidying his apartment, which had required multiple trips down to the dumpster, and his toe now ached. Though it had for some time. The nail was ingrown, though rather than having addressed the ailment – either with a pair of clippers or even a trip to the doctor – he had chosen to wait for the pain to disappear on its own. He stopped on the landing and recognized the stain where he'd broken the bottle of Baileys. Then he remembered the open bottle in his refrigerator. He had always tried to keep his drinking from Max, for he knew drinking often brought about his carelessness. Once, on the drive home from picking his son up from school, he had crashed into a tree. He had bashed his nose on the wheel but his son had survived without injury, though he had coached him to say that a deer had run out into the road. He hobbled back up to his apartment and poured the bottle out in the sink. He soaped the sink with a sponge then hid the bottle deep in his closet, beside the first-aid kit, and by the time he finally reached the backdoor, he would not have been shocked had his son changed his mind and gone home.

"Foot bothering you?" Max asked as they headed up the stairs. He was wearing scrubs, having come straight from class at the city hospital.

"A little," Hal said and stopped on the landing. He hated for his son to worry, having done so over his own father. Once, shortly after his mother had died, he had found his father stuck in their attic. His father had kept keepsakes of her there – hairpins, her spoon collection – and found himself unable to come down. He had coaxed his father out, holding him by the hand

as together they stepped on the ladder, though later he had felt guilty, as if it were wrong for him to have seen his father so vulnerable.

Hal continued up the stairs. "It's nothing serious," he said.

He kept his sneakers on as he led his son on a tour of the apartment. He explained which boilers worked on the stove and encouraged him to grab anything from the fridge, though it was largely empty except for the milk and dozen eggs he'd bought earlier. He showed him the bath, the towels and toiletries he'd set out. Then he guided them further down the hall, the pain in his toe increasing with each hobbled step, to the spare room. He flicked on the light, revealing the bed's fresh linens, the nightstand lined with medical journals. On the wall hung pictures dating back to his son's first Halloween, when he'd dressed as a doctor, a mirror strapped around his blond head.

"In case you want to stay the night," Hal said. He retrieved a blanket from the closet and laid it over the bed, hobbling as he tucked each end beneath the mattress. In the window, he studied the falling snow. "You know how the deer are out here."

Max shied from the doorway. "I should be fine," he said. "But thanks."

Hal nodded. He understood, though he hoped his son would come around. "You're always welcome here," he said. He turned off the light but left the door ajar.

Max sniffed. "Stinks in here," he said.

Hal blamed the pizzeria. "Why the rent's so cheap," he said.

Max looked around. "Place is nice otherwise."

Hal smiled. "Glad you think so," he said and grabbed his son's shoulder. His toe hurt from standing. "Let's get you comfortable," he said. "I'm sure you've had a busy day."

They went into the living room.

"Have a seat," Hal said.

Max chose the straight back chair by the far wall. He looked over at the cigar cutter left out on the end table.

"Sit here," Hal said and patted the recliner. He was anxious to get off his feet but wanted his son to feel at home.

Max repeated that he was fine where he was.

"How about some milk then?" Hal asked.

Max shrugged. "Alright."

Hal set a glass on the end table. "It's skim," he said.

Max licked his lips. "Did Mom tell you to buy this?" he asked.

Hal shook his head. He was saddened by the question.

Max returned the glass to the table. "Have you talked to her?"

Hal eased back in the recliner. His toe throbbed. "I've tried," he groaned. "But she won't respond."

"She was pretty upset," Max said. "It took her a few days just to leave the house." He took another drink, this time slowly. "But now it's like she can't get out fast enough. She plans on moving to Florida. Has a house picked out and everything."

"Good for her," Hal said, though he was somewhat resentful. He and his wife had intended on moving to Florida together, once Max finished medical school. That she was going alone almost made him wish that he had broken things off sooner, for it was clear to him now that she had been equally unhappy. "How are you doing in all of this?" he asked.

"Fine, I guess," Max said and turned his head. He grabbed the cigar cutter and looking as if deep in thought, snapped the blade open and shut.

Careful, Hal thought. His son was tall like him, though far thinner and had taken his wife's brown eyes and round chin. He seemed fine; after dropping out of Penn Law, he had aced his entrance exams into medical school. He lived with friends in the city, and from what Hal could piece together, dated his fair share. Still, Hal worried. He knew his son to be sensitive, had long felt in him a deep unrest. Once, when Max was in third grade, having trouble memorizing his multiplication tables, he had slammed his head so hard against the chalkboard that he had required stitches. Hal had largely ignored the incident, chalking it up to the childish inability to contain emotions. Now though, he feared he was somehow at fault.

He motioned for the cigar cutter. "You're making me nervous," he said.

Max handed it over. "Sorry," he said. He remained hunched forward, head cast down.

"It's just that talking with you like this is..."

"Uncomfortable," Hal said.

Max chuckled. "I was going to say surprising."

"Oh," Hal said. He pocketed the cigar cutter. "That too."

Neither spoke for a while. Then Max asked, "How's your foot?"

Hal wiggled his toes from inside his sneakers. "All better," he said, though this was far from true. He thought to elevate his feet but in yanking on the lever discovered it was jammed.

"Let me help," Max said.

Hal shifted his weight as his son moved beside him. He smelled faintly of salve and antiseptic, a peculiar cleanliness.

"Try now," Max said and pushed down on the headrest.

Hal yanked the lever and watching his feet rise, lowered himself back in the recliner. His thin hair grazed his son's hand. "Ah, yes," he sighed. "Just what the doctor ordered."

Max tapped Hal's sneakers. "How about I take these off?"

Hal hesitated. Once, when the downstairs tenant was decorating his door, he had rushed upstairs with such force that his toe had bled. But though the pain he was in now felt similar, he didn't see any harm in waiting. He had survived the strenuous part of the evening and wanted to enjoy time with his son. "I'll leave them on for now," he said. "They may look worn-down but are actually quite comfortable."

"Quit being so difficult," Max said and knelt on the carpet.

Hal retracted his foot. "I'm serious," he said.

"Me too," Max said and grabbed hold of Hal's sneaker.

Hal raised his other foot. "Don't make me," he said.

But Max had already pried the sneaker halfway off.

A sharp pain flared in Hal's toe. "You're hurting me," he shouted.

Max threw the sneaker to the floor. "Damn it, dad," he said.

Hal winced at the sight of his bloodstained sock. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said, though he too was skeptical.

Max glared. "Let me be the judge of that."

Hal stewed in silence while Max examined him. He felt foolish, for the nail proved worse than he'd expected; he had clipped the nail jagged, his son explained, causing it to slice into his toe's soft tissue, and was now at risk of infection.

"I'll need a cotton ball and tweezers," Max said.

Hal directed him to the bedroom closet. He was in a good deal of pain and so embarrassed that he did not realize his mistake until his son returned with the first-aid kit, his voice ripe with concern.

"Grab hold of something," Max said. He flashed the tweezers.

Hal squeezed the armrests. He wanted to apologize. "Please," he said. "Go gentle on me."

Max said he would try. "But it's still going to hurt," he said and lifted the nail.

Alone, Hal would have cried out, for the pain seared up into his skull. He remembered crashing into the tree, how his son had crawled from the backseat to check if he was all right.

"You're bleeding," his son had said, little fingers dabbing his nose. Had he known then?

Hal thrashed his head.

"Almost there," Max said. He stuffed in the cotton.

Hal loosened his grip. Already he could feel the difference but still asked if his son had anything to take the edge off.

"Try this," Max said and handed Hal the glass of milk.

Hal sat up in the recliner and sipped while his son filled a pan with warm water. He found the taste agreeable, though he wished it were stronger.

Max set the pan in front of the recliner. He cradled Hal's foot and lowered it into the water.

Hal flooded with calm. "And to think I wanted you to become a lawyer."

Max looped on the bandage. "Glad I didn't listen," he said. He explained to Hal that the toe needed to soak for fifteen minutes, and that he should do so five times a day.

Hal thought this too much but agreed. "Understood," he said.

Max eyed the snow piling outside the window and said, "Maybe I should stay."

But Hal urged him to go. He was thankful to have the son that he did. But he was overcome with shame. He was reminded again of his father. His father had earned his living as a huntsman. Once, when Hal was home from college, helping to track deer, a twelve-point buck

had charged at him but was stopped dead by his father's rifle. But trapped among his dead wife's things, his father had appeared tiny and helpless. Pathetic. Hal did not want his son to consider him this way. He accepted that the day would eventually come. But not now.

Hal steadied himself up from the recliner. "I've got it from here," he said and shook his son's hand.

Max opened the door. "I'm not mad," he said and promised to come by again tomorrow. "Take care of yourself."

Hal listened as his son descended down the stairs. The groan of the wood beneath his son's quick steps made him tired. He dragged himself to the window and looked on as his son trudged out to his car. The snow glowed in his high beams, and as his son pulled away, a tinge of regret welled in Hal's stomach. He had suffered some humiliation, but overall he judged the evening a success. In fact, he could not recall a time in which they had gotten along better. But though his son had promised, he could no longer be certain as to when they would see each other.

He slid the cigar cutter from his pocket. Now was usually the time that he would wind down in front of the television with Baileys and a cigar. Though tonight he was somewhat surprised to learn that he had no such desires. He put away the cigar cutter and limped down the hall to his bedroom, carrying the pan in one hand, his sneakers in the other. His toe still hurt, though he imagined he would soon be able to move about freely. He placed the pan by his bed, so that he could soak in the morning. Then he turned his attention to the closet. As he was stacking his sneakers, he spotted the bottle. He figured he could get rid of some things. But given his toe, he knew he would need help. He pulled down the sneakers. Perhaps, he thought, the downstairs tenant might be of some assistance.

PALO VERDE

I was in Palo Verde meeting my girlfriend, Marta, the most kind-hearted woman I've known. But right as I reached the top of the back steps, I looked in her apartment window and spotted Marta on the sofa dabbing a rag to her ma's face. A stack of classified ads propped open the window. Light pulsed on the TV, and the smell of pickled peppers and fried chorizo stirred in the whir of the ceiling fan.

Marta and I met at Side Pockets, a smoky billiard hall a block from my house down in Ocotillo. This was back when Marta ran quality control for the Coca-Cola plant in nearby Las Braises. She would stop in to hustle anybody drunk enough to test her at nine-ball. She was tough as cactus flower, Marta. Hard-muscled, tattooed to the shoulder, with these sullen fox eyes. She would let us regulars jump out to a healthy lead before mounting her comeback, chewing the collar of her leather jacket as she cut and banked balls into every which pocket. But she made sure to bust my ass. "You'll learn someday," she'd say and wink at me from across our high table. We'd talk college football, the economy, about whether Bush should pull out of Iraq. She told me how her pa drowned himself in the Colorado River. That loosened me up. At some point, we started sleeping together. Mornings, I would wake to the cold feel of my sweat pooled against her bed sheet, her ma knocking at the front door, blank as to how I'd ended up there. But Marta's hands, which were small and calloused, felt like mercy as they shushed my chapped lips.

There was an ice bucket set on a towel beside the sofa. Marta knelt on the towel and soaked the rag in the bucket. She glanced at the TV. The forecast showed a storm was fast approaching. I waited for Marta to look out the window. But I was too far away. She crossed her chest and smoothed the rag over her ma's forehead. Her ma was sleeping. Water trickled down her swollen ruddy cheeks. Her liver was poisoned. Marta watched over her. Drove her to the

doctor. Gave money for groceries, the bingo hall. Whatever she needed. Times were tougher now that Marta was unemployed. She'd fallen to the habit of spiking her thermos. Eventually, her supervisor caught wind. She started attending AA meetings at her ma's church. But she was scared. "Please, Jay," she'd said. "I'm begging you." I told her I'd tried AA before. But she believed there was hope for me still.

I inched closer to the window. Marta caressed her ma's watery brown hair then leaned down and whispered into her ear. Marta had a name for her ma. Mi cielito. My little heaven. Slowly, her ma's eyes blinked open. How she gazed up at Marta, her eyes veiny and yellowed, made me fear like hell for my ma.

A familiar dry taste sucked at my mouth as I snuck down the stairs. Harsh light – the desert sun, filled the deserted courtyard. It was Sunday, closing in on six o'clock. Our bulldog, a scrawny brown-spotted shelter mutt, lapped with his sloppy tongue at the dirty pool water. We'd yet to settle on a name, or buy a tag. I fretted he'd run off. Marta refused his leash. She liked him wild. But I couldn't stomach another argument.

Styrofoam cups rattled under my backseat as I drove out of Palo Verde. Heat slapped my face, sealing sweat into my skin. The summer had ended and yellow leaves spiraled off the skinny trees. I worked to keep the wheel straight, guiding my ma's scraped, faded-orange Cutlass past the Chevron, the bowling alley where I got my first black eye, Fast Eddie's Liquor Drive-In. The church was coming up on my right. I thought to pull over. I could wait and pray in the sanctuary until meeting started. We were handing out sobriety tokens. I wanted that. But I wanted Ma to get better too. Up ahead, not too fair, dusk blinked inside the clouds broiling over the mesas. Candles waved in the stained-glass windows as I pressed my foot on the gas.

My pa was crazy. He thought he was a cowboy. Wore fringe jackets, bolo ties, and bleached blue jeans that he yanked over ostrich rancheros. I wager he messed around plenty on my ma. But I only caught him once. Her name was Holly. She was rich and desperate to keep on the right side of fifty; she had frosted brown hair, fake teeth, and bronzed skin that shined with prescription moisturizer. She had girls of her own but was no longer married. She wanted to marry my pa. I guess she saw good in him still. Used to be on Saturdays that he'd perform magic at the Yuma Art Center, pull coins from behind kids' ears. But he'd acted bad for too long. He'd kill a bottle before noon, miss work out at Dome Valley Raceway. What little money we could get our hands on he gambled away or spent at Coyote Coin & Pawn. Ma said he was just trying to make something of himself. He got his hopes set on becoming a photographer, bought an old Instamatic camera. "I got an eye for the beauty of this world," he'd say. Had he not left that camera out early one morning Holly might have stayed secret. I biked with it down to the Wal-Mart near Industrial Park, where I used to work the one-hour photo. The pictures printed out fuzzy, but my high school had Internet, so I'd seen enough to know what was going on.

I never showed those filthy pictures to my ma. She hurt easier than she let on. Though she probably suspected as much. Once, while cleaning the garage, she uncovered a pair of wedge-heeled shoes wrapped in a gift box. The shoes were several sizes too small, and blue wasn't her color, but every Sunday, she wiggled them onto her feet. "Lord, give me strength," she'd pray. But the lord didn't want anything to do with us. He'd wiped his hands clean.

Right around the time I turned eighteen, Pa left. He came home from work, washed away the horse track stank. Then he packed a suitcase and kissed Ma goodbye, like he was heading out on a long journey. Ma was at the piano, singing me birthday songs. She never recovered. She took up drinking full-time, lost jobs, friends, sank into crippling debt. But that day, she acted like

there were no hard feelings. From the cupboard, she lifted down the big bottle and filled him a flask. "You take care of her now," Pa told me and clasped my shoulder on his way out the door. I felt way too mean to say anything. But I fantasized mashing his face into a wet lump.

Years later, I rang Holly one night at her mansion up in Eden Acres. I was out of work and drunk watching Arizona State lose to Texas in the Holiday Bowl. But I had slipped a joint to the pharmacist in exchange for Holly's number. Her youngest answered, and when I asked for my pa, she said only girls were allowed in their house. I apologized for dialing the wrong number. "Silly me," I said and hung up. Later, when the phone rang, I had already forgotten about earlier. I yelled for Ma and raised the volume on TV. Her boyfriend, Havard, an Ex-Air Force pilot, liked to call and talk sweet. I reached under the sofa and sucked down what little was left of the bottle. Then I remembered Ma was out making a run. "What do you want?" I shouted into the phone. Pa's voice broke on the other line. "Hey, son." I let him talk. He apologized for his role in the mess. Then he said he loved me and asked for ma and my forgiveness. I could have. But I wanted him to suffer. "We're fresh out," I said and clanged the bottle against the receiver.

-

Havard's El Camino wasn't in our driveway, and for that I was grateful. I eased around the garbage bins reeking of beer and rotten produce and parked beneath the rusted carport. Under the cover of twilight, the air had cooled. Shirtless boys ran screaming next door, pinning each other in the dead grass. I debated over calling Marta. She'd left a voicemail. Her voice sounded ripe with concern. "Let me know you're okay," she'd said. She didn't like me living at the house. But Ma was all the family I had.

Strays barked behind our chain-link fence. I was too nervous to call. Marta had a way of sniffing out my lies. But I couldn't bear making her worry. I texted her assuring I was fine, that everything was under control, but explained that Ma had needed the car. I promised to stop by later and asked her to bring home my token before hiding the phone in the glove box. Cans crunched as I snuck around the side of the house. Stink bugs hovered near the flickering porch lights. The backdoor waggled on its hinges. Not long ago, Pa had broken in. He and Holly must have fallen out. He'd unplugged the toaster, the coffee maker, anything he could pawn. On the counter, he'd left a bottle, taped with a handwritten note.

Sorry. Will see about door.

Ma was flubbing at the piano, pedals groaning under her plump feet. She'd won talent shows, opened at Palms RV Resort, received a scholarship. But she couldn't memorize, the notes resurfacing as dim muted shapes, and had dropped out. Stopping, she began again, fingers stumbling to a woozy beat. I sat behind her at the table. Her voice, which was quiet and scratchy, warbled as she sang, "A little rain, never hurt, no one." When she was finished, I started clapping.

Ma spun around. Her glassy eyes squinted at me, like I was a blur. "Don't you have somewhere to be?" she said.

I kicked off my sneakers. "I wont stay long," I said. The night was like a presence in the house, the shadow of an inextinguishable urge. "It's getting late," I said, clearing my throat. "Havard still coming by?"

She folded away her sheet music. "Any minute now."

I carried a glass of water from the kitchen and drank at the table. "Bet he stopped to buy those sopaipillas you like." Though I knew better. "Where'd he say he's taking you this time?"

Her smile glistened in the long shadow of the mesquite swaying in the window. "Julieanna's," she said. She popped off the bench. "Havard used to fly with the head bartender. Said he'd seat us so close to the stage we'll know what the lead singer ate for supper." She danced around the sofa, shimmying her twiggy, milk-white arms to an imagined harmony. "I'm thinking we might even get pulled backstage." She fluffed her grey curls, creased the frayed hem of her bright sundress. "How do I look?" she said and twisted her hips.

Pity rushed over me. Ma had suffered so much embarrassment, yet still took Havard's word. He'd promised new appliances, to fly her around the world. She dreamed of London, setting foot inside the Royal Opera House. But when he did show, they never went further than the sofa. They'd pass the bottle, humming old country ballads, until Havard found something to chew about. He blamed Ma for not stocking enough hot dogs, when the cable cut out. Ma insisted he never struck her. But he was capable. I knew from experience. One time, Ma broke us up when I threatened Havard with a carving knife. I would have killed him. I'd have killed him and not batted an eye.

"Pretty as ever," I said.

Ma mussed my hair as she padded into the kitchen. She retrieved her glass from the freezer and peeked her head out the backdoor. The hinges groaned in the slow whistling breeze. "Fixing to come down," she said. "Better get moving." She knelt below the sink and hauled up the big bottle. "He'll be here any minute," she said, tapping her foot as she poured. "Any minute now."

I skidded up from my chair. "You gotta stop, Ma."

"It's outta my hands, baby," she said. She set down her glass and showed me her hands. "It's outta my control."

I stomped closer. Her face looked bruised in the fluorescent light, and I judged her a fool for acting so tough. "You're just like Pa."

Ma shook her head and laughed. "And I'm to believe you're so much better?" she said. She thrust the bottle into my chest, the smell luscious and peaceful. "When I was pregnant with you, your pa carried me to bed every night." Her hand trembled, spilling drink onto the tile, and I had to restrain myself from helping raise the glass to her lips. "Now, I hate his guts. But there was love there. I'm certain."

Outside in the backyard, puddles formed in the red gravel. The fiery flowers of the ocotillo flailed in the gusts and spattered drops on the windows. Cradling the bottle, I imagined being at church, sitting in a circle. I saw Marta, her face sunken with disappointment, as she pried away my token. Part of me wanted to drain the bottle in the sink. Help Ma out to the car and escort her to Julieanna's. Buy her an endless plate of stuffed poblanos, dance to some graceful melody. But another part of me, a larger part, understood that drinking, wanting to drink, was only a distraction, like everything else, from what was waiting for us, no matter what, all the time.

I asked Ma for a glass. "Something large."

-

Shame festered on my tongue as I veered onto the potholed road that climbed into Palo Verde. I was humiliated at having erased the past four months. But there was no way to return the stuff to the bottle. Fog wormed between the bare trees and glowed blue in my headlights. A cop car sat parked at the approaching intersection. The warm and welcoming neon signs of the neighborhood bars shimmered on the windshield. I blew the stop sign and waited for the lights to rescue me. But all that flashed in my rearview was the pounding rain.

Waves sloshed from the concrete pool, flooding the dim courtyard with wilted yellow leaves. Dogs growled beneath the staircase. I hunted for ours in the surrounding bushes, pricked by the sharp-leaved yucca, until my clothes were drenched and muddied. I reckoned Marta had brought him inside before meeting, and if not the poor creature was likely better off. Halfway up the stairs, I noticed paw prints trailing mud across the parking lot, and my chest churned at the trucks honking on the highway.

Marta greeted me at the door. She was wearing my big sweatshirt that smelled of the boxing gym. "You had me worried," she said and leaned for a kiss. I turned my cheek. I hated for her taste the sting.

I asked about the dog.

"He knows his way back," she said and swiped dirt off my jeans. "Clean yourself up." She crossed her arms. "I'll warm some food."

The peppers crunched sweet, the meat tender, though my appetite dwindled. Earlier, throwing back the bottle, I had surged with a clean and righteous feeling, as if having drank from the water in which I was baptized. But now my insides had caved full of rot. Marta talked about meeting, how her ma had stopped by. "I had to help her on the stairs," she said. The rain clamored. I felt sick to my gut and was about to head for the john when in through the door flap tumbled our bulldog. His ribs juttet against his dripping fur, and foul odor drooled from his delighted, dumb mouth.

"He needs a leash," I said.

Marta patted the dog's belly. "But look how happy he is."

The dog whimpered and released his bowels.

"Ay dios mío," she said and threw up her hands.

When Marta finished locking our dog in its crate, she sat away from me on the sofa. The fanlight had burned out, and in the dark the sour piss swelled. Uniformed men marched on the TV, followed by collapsing stock prices, an entire city underwater. The world was imploding, and I was terrified by my destruction.

Marta handed me the token. "Congratulations."

I weighed the silver. I considered keeping it, of pretending like I was still clean. But she deserved better. I handed it back and said, "Hold on to it for me."

"Good idea," she said and grimaced. She tucked the token away. "I know I'm not family," she said. She slid over and reached for my hand. Her face drowned in the wet blue glare smudged against the window. "But I don't want you living with your mom anymore."

I shoved my fists in my pockets. I was afraid of what I might do.

"Your mom isn't like us. She doesn't want help."

I promised to keep trying. Her touch felt gentle and accepting, and when she placed a hand over my chest I squeezed her wrist and knew I was a fool for not loving her more.

ANNOTATIONS

Key

H= Historical

C= Contemporary

CR= Craft

H1. *Uncle Tom's Children* by Richard WrightH2. *The Holy Bible* (The Book of Job)H3. *Dubliners* by James JoyceH4. *Big Blonde and Other Stories* by Dorothy ParkerH5. *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories* by Franz KafkaH6. *In Our Time* by Ernest HemingwayH7. *The Stranger* by Albert CamusH8. *The Sound and the Fury* by William FaulknerH9. *About Love and Other Stories* by Anton ChekhovH10. *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers* by Carson McCullersC1. *A Good Man is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'ConnorC2. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by Raymond CarverC3. *Tenth of December* by George SaundersC4. *Half and Inch of Water* by Percival EverettC5. *Yellow* by Don LeeC6. *Secrets and Surprises* by Ann BeattieC7. *Taking Care* by Joy WilliamsC8. *The Collected Works Vol. I* by Scott McClanahanC9. *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* by Richard YatesC10. *Nine Stories* by J.D. SalingerCR1. *The Making of a Story* by Alicia LaPlanteCR2. *Burning Down the House* by Charles BaxterCR3. *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* by Alexander CheeCR4. *Narrative Design* by Madison Smartt BellCR5. *Writing Dialogue* by Tom Chiarella

Aesthetic

CR1. LaPlante, Alicia. *The Making of a Story*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007. Print.

The Making of a Story is a textbook for how to write creatively. Though it speaks to both fiction and nonfiction, it emphasizes the former. Its fourteen chapters cover a wide range of craft elements: creation, description, structure, narration, point of view, dialogue, plot, character, sensory detail, and revision. Each chapter opens with a discussion of the topic and follows with a series of writing exercises, along with full reprints of relevant, previously published examples from a variety of writers, such as Robert Stone, ZZ Packer, Anton Chekhov, James Baldwin, Akhil Sharma, Lorrie Moore, Raymond Carver, and Anne Lamont.

I minored in Creative Writing as an undergraduate student but graduated feeling as if I lacked technical training in how to write a story. It wasn't until I was out of college, in my mid-twenties, that I became aware of MFA programs, let alone books on writing. Prior to applying to graduate school, in an effort to beef up my writing sample, I began studying craft books – one of which was *The Making of a Story*. This book served as a crash course in how to write fiction. It was here that I learned about shifts in narrative distance (or psychic distance, as according to John Gardner), and the importance of relevant, concrete detail. During my first two years in the program, to overcome my anxiety over writing first drafts, I read and re-read Anne Lamont's essay "Shitty First Drafts". And this year, I read and re-read the chapter on revision, which contains two versions of Raymond Carver's short story "A Small Good Thing". Because I hold Carver in high esteem, it was helpful for me to see how revision shaped his minimalist prose style.

H1. Wright, Richard. *Uncle Tom's Children*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004 (first published in 1938). Print.

Richard Wright is often associated with realism. He admired Hemingway and wrote using a similar unadorned, straightforward prose style. However, in terms of subject matter, Wright was largely informed by a Marxist literary aesthetic; he wrote about the lives of black working people vying not only with a godless world but a world that is racist and economically exploitative. "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow", which opens the collection, consists of five autobiographical vignettes, arranged in chronological order, beginning with a young Wright being assaulted with a milk bottle by a white man in his home state of Arkansas, and ending with an adult Wright encountering subtle racism on an elevator in Memphis. The following five stories in the collection – "Big Boy Leaves Home", "Down by the Riverside", "Long Black Song", "Fire and Cloud", and "Bright and Morning Star" – follow more conventional short story models. They are told in third-person, limited to the central character, progress in a linear fashion, and typically begin with an inciting incident that develops into a crisis action.

I too consider myself a writer of realist fiction. Though less political than Wright, I'm also led to write about the underbelly of contemporary life – deserting husbands, violent children, alcoholics and pill addicts – with an economy of words and focus on surface description. Wright imitates the black vernacular, and while I don't always feel the need to incorporate dialect into dialogue, I do so in stories like "Bat Country" in hopes of better developing a sense of place. I've also tried to mold my character off of those in *Uncle Tom's Children*, who often face a paucity of options, and make decisions that have real consequences for those for whom they care.

H2. *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, The Book of Job 1-42. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993 (first published in 1611). Print.

The Book of Job consists of a prologue and epilogue that frame a series of dialogues and monologues. It begins on Earth, with Job, who is blessed with prosperous crops, as well as sons and daughters. The scene then shifts to heaven, where Satan tells God that Job is pious only because God has blessed him. This set-up directs the story toward suspense rather than surprise. Ending the story by revealing that God is behind Job's suffering would likely result in us feeling cheated, as if we had been tricked. But because we do in fact learn this information, we, in turn, know something the character does not. The ensuing suspense is akin to Oedipus marrying his mother, or the scene in which Macbeth murders Claudius.

If submitted to a workshop, the story of Job would likely be called a victim story. God permits Satan to not only rob Job of his wealth but also to kill his children. On top of this, Satan afflicts Job's body with boils. That God victimizes Job exemplifies the Bible's larger message regarding God's power and our own lack of knowledge. But in fiction, while victimhood will likely gain a reader's empathy and generate conflict, it typically deprives characters of both complexity and agency. In the early drafts of "Palo Verde", "Bat Country", and "Nesting", the central characters all teetered on victimhood. I'm working to grant them more agency, to allow their flaws to orchestrate conflict rather than mere circumstance.

CR2. Baxter, Charles. *Burning Down the House*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2008 (first published in 1997). Print.

In these eleven essays, Charles Baxter sets fire to fictional trends such as epiphanies, trauma narratives, and conventional character roles. He dismisses these trends not because they constitute "bad" writing, but based on social commentary or philosophical grounds. In "Dysfunction Narratives: or: 'Mistakes Were Made'", he argues that Richard Nixon is to blame

for fiction's refusal to hold characters accountable for their actions. In "Regarding Happiness" – one of the two new essays in this collection – he posits that if a writer grants his characters happiness, then he has no story, as humans, intuitively, feel as if there is something "uninteresting, perhaps banal in the depiction of a happy individual." Often Baxter supports his arguments with examples from literature. Though for someone who seemingly fashions himself after a postmodern aesthetic, Baxter mostly cites canonical standards such as *The Great Gatsby* or the stories of Anton Chekov.

While I disagree with much of what Baxter thinks about American culture, I do believe he offers some sound writing advice. I like what he has to say regarding characterization, how characters can be placed in opposition to each other without resulting in either winning or losing a moral contest. "Characters are moved together spatially or thematically", he writes. "they give off light by being in proximity to each other, and then they part." I've tried to think of character this way in "Bat Country", as well as "Mount Misery". Most famously, Baxter argues against epiphanies, moments in which "a hidden presence, some secret logic, rises to visibility" and informs the character of a falsehood in worldly appearance. I agree that epiphanies tend to blot out the world of the story and diminish the importance of action in favor of how action is perceived in a character's consciousness. Epiphanies assign meaning onto a story, robbing it of complexity and the reader their own interpretation. "Literature is not an instruction manual," Baxter writes, to which I agree. As a result, I'm working to steer away from epiphany in my stories. In "Palo Verde" and "Bat Country", the central characters do experience epiphanies, but the story ultimately ends in a resulting action. However, I'm still working on scrubbing epiphany from "Rain On" and "The Choir Singer".

H3. Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. New York: Penguin Books, 1969 (first published in the U.S. in 1916). Print.

These fifteen stories paint a large canvas of middle class life in and around Dublin during the early twentieth century. They are arranged chronologically, beginning with stories of youth and progressing in age before culminating with "The Dead". Most are plotted as variations on the rags-to-riches tale: in "The Boarding House", a widow traps her daughter into an upwardly mobile marriage with her lodger; in "A Mother", a former protégé tries to earn money for her daughter by starring her in a series of piano concerts, but is undone by greed. Despite the heavy inclusion of Irish dialect and colloquialism, each story is structured rather conventionally – a solo protagonist, clearly explicated internal/external conflict, a sequence of events within a sensory-rich setting that ends in a climax – making it appear more accessible than *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*.

But if the collection does frustrate, it's likely due to Joyce's preference for indirect characterization. Joyce's characters rarely mediate, meaning we must infer or deduce their personalities and motivations through either dialogue, action, or physical description. Joyce is not as committed to this approach as writers like Hemmingway, or early Carver; he does, in third-person narration, use free indirect discourse – a technique in which a character's thoughts are spoken via the narrative voice. Free indirect discourse is most prominent in the collection's early stories, like "Eveline", in which a young woman weighs her decision to leave Ireland on account of her abusive father with a handsome sailor. "Escape!" she thinks. "She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too."

I don't take issue with Joyce seemingly refusing to afford his characters conclusive critical analysis. I interpret this refusal as a method toward narrator invisibility, meaning the characters can only be observed, to which I subscribe, for it seems a more accurate reflection of

reality. I'm working to rely on indirect characterization in my own stories, most noticeably in "Bat Country"

But I am puzzled by how indirect characterization coexists with Joycean epiphany. These moments, in which insight points toward a future change in character, are effective in stories like "The Dead"; the protagonist, Gabriel, stands at the window, contemplating his wife's dead lover, as he watches the snow fall "upon all the living and the dead". What makes this epiphany feel earned, by my estimation, is that it attempts to make meaning from themes developed in the story (mortality, connection, nationhood, etc.) without being reductive. Or to paraphrase Charles Baxter, without validating the character's experience with conclusive insight or a brilliant stop-time moment. More often, however, indirect characterization weakens the epiphany. In "Araby", a boy falls in love from a distance with the sister of his friend, but fails on his solo quest to buy her a gift from the Araby bazaar. Looking up into the darkness of the hall, the boy sees himself "as a creature driven and derided by vanity". But the pain of this realization is likely lost on us given how little this theme is developed prior in the story, making the epiphany seem fake and preordained.

H4. Parker, Dorothy. *Big Blonde and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995 (first published in 1929). Print.

These three stories all center on the power dynamics of male-female relationships. The first "Big Blonde" chronicles the downfall of Hazel Morse, a showgirl, from marriage to divorce to casual encounters with men. "The Sexes" almost consists entirely of a dialogue between a young man and woman, who argue over who's at fault for an unpleasant night in. The final story, "Dusk Before Fireworks", tells of a single encounter between a womanizer and one of his women, in which she confronts him about the discrepancy between what he says to her and what

he says to other women who keep calling him up on the phone. There are no epiphanies; all conflict is resolved through action.

Parker seems to structure her stories around their content. In "Big Blonde", Hazel bounces between relationships that span multiple years and locations, thus lending itself to a long and varied interplay between scene and summary. "The Sexes", with its short narrative time span and minimalist rendering of character, plot, and setting, lends itself to allegory, a mode well suited for dialogue. "Dusk Before Fireworks", however, follows a more conventional structure; it opens in summary backstory before transitioning into a single elongated scene, grounded in a single setting, that spans approximately one day, in which the conflicts laid out in the backstory are developed.

What I admire about Parker is her approach to sentimentality. Each story pushes its female character toward emotional anguish inflicted by their male counterparts. The ensuing climaxes are the ingredients of melodrama: break-ups, affairs, and suicide. But Parker prevents these emotions from dictating meaning through humor. I'm attempting to do the same in the scene between Hal and his son in "No Net to Catch You", as well as in the scene between the narrator and his mother in "Palo Verde".

H5. Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis, In The Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. New York: Schocken Books, 1948 (stories first published between 1914 – 1924). Print.

Of the approximately forty stories anthologized in this collection, the majority amount to little more sketches. Some are written in first-person, a rarity for Kafka, in a conversational, almost confessional tone that might be interpreted as mere notes for a larger story. Others, like "Before the Law", are short parables that typically consist of a small cast of characters, in a single setting, over a long but compressed period of time. A similar structure presides over Kafka's longer, more heralded stories, such as "In the Penal Colony", "A Hunger Artist", and

the often-taught *The Metamorphosis*. Written in long blocks of text, with a heavy preference for sequential summary, in a tone both banal and absurd, Kafka's stories are confounding explorations into the father-son conflict, alienation, anxiety, shame, and punishment – themes that are also present in my collection.

Despite these dour themes, many writers have gone to great length to point out that Kafka is funny. I don't disagree. David Foster Wallace, in a speech titled "Laughing with Kafka", argues that Kafka's humor is "anti-subtle" and often resides in figures of speech. To consider "A Hunger Artist" in relation to turns of phrase like "starved for attention" might bring levity to an otherwise grim tale. But what most intrigues me about Kafka's humor is the central joke that seems to permeate his entire body of work: that the human struggle to obtain a self is defined by that struggle. For many of Kafka's characters, this struggle, whose cause cannot be expressed and therefore cannot be placated, results in tragic absurdity. But in my stories, I'm working for this same struggle to give rise to catharsis.

C1. O'Connor, Flannery. *A Good Man is Hard to Find And Other Stories*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1948. Print.

Her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* was largely written during her time as a graduate student in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Catholicism and the Southern Gothic heavily influence her stories, though grotesque rural communities replace the sinister plantations of William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. Their subject matter ranges from serial killers ("A Good Man is Hard to Find") to baptism ("The River"), to greed and exploitation ("Good Country People"). All are designed linearly, and begin in present action loaded with details that breath life into setting and character. Oftentimes characters are given at task at the onset, whether it's a simple walk up the stairs ("A Stroke of Good Fortune") or escorting a hundred-year-old veteran to a high-school graduation ("A Late Encounter with the Enemy").

What usually results is an act of violence through which the character experiences some sort of spiritual transformation.

As with most writers, I consider O'Connor a master in regards to narrative mechanics. She is exquisite when it comes to layering detail, especially in "A Circle in the Fire", where she repeatedly evokes images to foreshadow the story's fiery climax. So skilled is O'Connor that in "The Displaced Person", she manages to slyly incorporate a *deus ex machina* as political commentary. I am trying to incorporate a similar re-invention with the car crash scene in "Savages". However, I do believe O'Connor sometimes has distaste for her characters. There's perhaps a satisfying irony to "A Good Man is Hard to Find" in the reversal that the grandmother's selfish aversion to travelling to Florida is exactly what leads to the doomed encounter with the Misfit. But isn't it a bit cruel that this selfish but relatively harmless act results in her and her family being murdered? In my stories, I'm working to depict all my characters as worthy of catharsis, even if they act as terribly as they do in "Savages".

H6. Hemingway, Ernest. *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner, 2008 (first published in 1925). Print.

Hemingway's first short story collection, *In Our Time* is composed of sixteen small chapters broken up by sixteen short stories, nearly half of which belong to his well-known Nick Adams stories, and explores male coming of age. The chapters are structured as vignettes, short singular scenes depicting wartime marches, skirmishes, executions, and bullfights, and often employ first-person plural perspective. And though the short stories – which are arranged in chronological order, beginning at Nick's adolescence and ending shortly after he arrives home from the war – are more expansive, they too exemplify Hemingway's talent for compression; most are kept within ten pages – well below what is now considered average length for a short

story. Such brevity is a by-product of Hemingway's style of omission, or what he famously called "The Iceberg Theory".

The bulk of an iceberg hides beneath the water's surface. This is analogous to Hemingway's prose, which is concise, tactile, and reliant on concrete nouns and verbs. By pruning language, and omitting direct characterization of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, Hemingway endowed his stories with a near cinematic quality, in which we derive meaning through setting, dialogue, and action. As a result, these stories are largely void of exposition, and what little exposition there is often gets conveyed in dialogue. Flashbacks are non-existent; the stories remain rooted in the present action, but are often void of plot and thus lack a build toward a traditional climax. "Big Two-Hearted River" is the canonical example; the story is almost exclusively descriptive in recounting Nick Adams arriving by train at Seney, Michigan, to discover that a fire has devastated the town, while hiking, fishing, cooking, and camping out. Beneath the images of the fishing trip is a rumination on the destructive qualities of war and the regenerative powers of nature. But I believe a more successful example is "The Three-Day Blow". The story recalls a younger Nick Adams visiting his friend Bill at Bill's father's cottage during an autumn storm. Nick has not come to Bill with a task. They simply sit by the fire, drinking from Bill's father's whiskey bottle, and talk about baseball, writing, Nick's ex-girlfriend Marjorie, before heading outside to join Bill's father in hunting geese. But reading this story, I'm mesmerized by how strongly I am moved by the feelings of loss and anger that these young men have been taught to suppress. I'm working to use these methods of indirect characterization across my stories, most noticeably in "Savages" and "Rain On".

C2. Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981. Print.

This collection of seventeen short stories won Carver critical acclaim and appointed his brand of realism (often called "dirty realism") as the standard-bearer for American fiction during the 1970s and 1980s. He writes using linear design, and typically opens in action, like in "I Could See the Smallest Things" ("I was in bed when I heard the gate"). His subject matter often focuses on blue-collar people, who feel sad or lost in their everyday lives, and was inspired by his own life. Perhaps it is only natural then that his stories are rather simply and somewhat shruggingly plotted: a man hosts a yard sale after his wife leaves him ("Why Don't You Dance") a man visits his wife and children – with whom he is now separated – on the day after Christmas ("A Serious Talk"). Some, like the titular story, lack any sort of plot at all. The prose is sparse, with an emphasis on dialogue and surface description. Regarding psychic distance, Carver keeps the reader at arm's length. Much of the sensory detail is filtered, and thought is presented somewhat ambiguously, like in "Viewfinder" ("It made me think, seeing myself like that. I can tell you, it makes a man think."). Of course, this styling is largely owed to Carver's editor, Gordon Lish, who made extensive cuts to Carver's original manuscripts.

I want to talk for a moment about plot. Aspiring writers are often taught to start with character, from which plot arises. And while I do find that beginning with character tends to lead my stories in more promising directions, I still fret over plot. I often worry that a story needs more action, in order to incite a significant change in character. This informs my decision to begin a story in action, often with an inciting incident, in hopes of arising conflict as soon as possible. But this can cause a story to heat up too quickly, from which the writer veers toward pyrotechnics in order to achieve the appearance of some type of development. Carver uses plots so straight and simple – consisting only of one or two links in the chain of cause-and-effect – that

they become invisible, like in "After the Denim". I'm working to achieve a similar effect in stories like "Bat Country".

CR3. Chee, Alexander. *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*. New York: Mariner Books, 2018. Print.

These sixteen essays are collected around the entanglement of life, literature, and politics. Most are structured according to narrative, braided, or experimental forms, though all speak to elements of craft. "After Peter", a narrative essay, is narrated by Chee from the position of a secondary character and can be interpreted as lesson in shifting the focus away from our selves when writing about personal experience. Braided essays, like "The Querent", connect tarot cards with thinking about shaping fictional characters – in what situation do they find themselves in, what do they want, how are they perceived, and what do they hope and fear. The two experimental essays mix conventional craft advice with the poetic. For every "They can begin with the implications of a situation", there's a "the first draft is a scaffolding, torn down to discover what grew underneath it."

"The Autobiography of My Novel", perhaps the collection's most conventional essay, provided me the most insight. In it, Chee recounts the summer of 1994, in which he began writing his first novel, based on his family life. Though he claims the idea of autobiographical fiction always rankled him, he admits that most of what he wrote then – and during his time in the Iowa Writers' Workshop – was in some way autobiographical. This was not so for me, once upon a time, but as I've gotten older, I too have found myself drawn to writing autobiographical fiction. Perhaps this is due to popular adages saddled on to many young writers: that they must "gain real-life experience" and "write what they know." Chee's first novel was lifted straight from his life that summer: a young man returns home to help his bankrupt mother move out of their family home after being betrayed by a business partner, on whom the young man later plots

his revenge. In writing "Savages", I first set out to recount the summer that my best friend and I tried to catch a giant goldfish from a creek deep in the woods of our childhood neighborhood. But like Chee, when I looked back at the initial manuscript, I could see how the plot was not a plot, but rather a list of things that had happened. In response, I reverted back to my imagination, and invited characters "like me but not me", giving them "the situations of my life but not the events". The result was characters who were more unhinged, less afraid, and angrier, more prone to act.

H7. Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988 (first published in 1942). Print.

The Stranger is told from the first-person perspective of Meursault, a French Algerian, in the days after his mother's funeral. The narration's use of simple syntax, summarized dialogue, repetition, and filtering sensory experience, often renders it toneless, or disaffected, imitating narrator's ennui. This tonelessness, when juxtaposed with the novel's events (death, failed romance, murder, punishment, execution) creates tension. "Maman died today", the narrator opens. "Or yesterday maybe. I don't know." Meursault's uncertainty directs the plot, which is largely aimless during the opening section. That the plot progresses in an episodic fashion, to me, feels warranted, for the lack of causation mirrors the novel's absurdist and existential themes. However, the first section's episodic structure is interrupted when Meursault shoots and kills a stranger on the beach. Though Meursault's motivations behind the killing are ambiguous, the action enforces a more rigid plot on the novel's second half, which ends with his execution.

I struggle when it comes to plot. My stories often suffer from a need for structure, or a line of causation on which the story builds. The early drafts of "No Net to Catch You" fell to such a trap, and thus read as episodic. Part of this, I've learned, can be blamed on the story's autobiographical nature. I've often turned to fiction as a means to understand what I feel is

inexplicable about my life. But, as Alexander Chee writes, "the story of your life, described, will not describe how you came to think about your life or yourself, nor describe any of what you learned". I'm working to imagine conflict that is active and propulsive into all of my plots. And while the point of view may keep a relatively remote psychic distance from the central character when in summary, in key scenes, I'm trying to use a much closer psychic distance.

C3. Saunders, George. *Tenth of December*. New York: Random House, 2013. Print.

Saunders is arguably our best working American fiction writer, and *Tenth of December*, his fourth collection of short stories, captures him at the height of his powers. An admirer of both Hemingway and Carver, Saunders too writes in a minimalist style, with an emphasis on dialogue, surface description, and action, and tends to favor linear design. And while Saunders too writes about sadness and loneliness amongst the middle-class, he often does so through absurdity, whether it is over consumerism, corporate culture, or the role of mass media. In this collection, prisoners are tortured with experimental drugs ("Escape from Spiderhead"); workers are extorted ("Exhortation"), and migrant woman are trafficked as human law ornaments ("The Semplica Girl Diaries"). The narrative forms and perspectives are well varied – epistolary, unreliable, rotating third-person limited – the tone satirical and philosophical, and closely aligned to the tragicomic.

During his keynote speech at the 2018 AWP Conference, Saunders reflected on how his early writing suffered from what he diagnosed as a "Hemingway Boner", meaning he understood writing to be the simple regurgitation of one's direct experience. Therefore, at the time, his fiction intended to cause the reader to feel exactly as he had felt while living those experiences. He went on to explain how he'd fallen into this imitative trap with Carver and Chekov, along with many other writers whom he admired. It wasn't until he started relying upon his natural gifts (i.e. humor) that he began to find his voice – something I'm still in search of. Perhaps this is

because I'm uncertain as to what exactly my strengths are. In revising my thesis, I grew disgruntled with my story's failings – oversimplified characterization, meaningless action, stiff dialogue (I could go on). However, there are moments, such as Buzz's affinity for Ned in "Mount Misery", or the role of video games in "Savages", where I'm weirdly excited, as if sensing that I've written something only I could write.

C4. Everett, Percival. *Half an Inch of Water*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015. Print.

Everett is a master of many genres. He's written crime novels, revisionist Westerns, retellings of Greek myth, wild capers, crime novels, and metafiction. *Half an Inch of Water* is perhaps Everett at his most subdued. These nine stories all traverse the American West, and follow plainspoken middle-class men and women – fathers, daughters, sheriffs, and veterinarians. They are structured linearly, rely on objects, surface description, and dialogue to imply meaning, and are written in such frank, clear prose as to make Gordon Lish blush. But small events tear holes through which the ordinary becomes unfamiliar. In "A High Lake", an old woman rides her horse into a mountain snowstorm, only to encounter her beloved dead dog. In "Graham Greene", the hunt for a missing man uncovers his resemblance to the actor.

I'm interested by how Everett transforms the mundane into absurdity. Doing so provides both insight and pleasure. Which, as Horace first decreed, is the entire purpose of art. I want for my fiction to move the reader to pathos. But I also want it to entertain. When I free myself more from my realist trappings, my imagination tends to wander toward absurdity, as it does in "The Choir Singer", and to some extent in "Savages" and "Bat Country". As I continue to work on these stories, I plan to explore the juxtaposition between minimalist realism and absurdity in hopes that I may discover my voice.

Technique

H8. Faulkner, William. *The Sound and The Fury*. New York: Random House, 1992 (first published in 1929). Print.

Whereas Hemingway largely foregoes exposition and renders his characters' internal conflicts implicit, Faulkner positions these elements at the heart of *The Sound and the Fury*. The novel is structured in four parts, each told from a different member of the Compson family, former Southern aristocrats who are struggling to deal with the dissolution of their family reputation. The first, April Seventh, 1928, is from the first-person point of view belonging to Benjamin "Benjy" Compson, an intellectually disabled thirty-three-year-old man. This section commits represents the imitative fallacy, meaning the prose is written to reflect the mind of a character. Benjy's narration is disjointed, with frequent jumps in time, and is characterized by abstract language and is almost completely void of his thoughts. The second section, June 2, 1910, is also told in first-person, from the point of view of Quentin Compson, Benjy's older brother, on the day of his suicide. This section amounts to what Jerome Stern calls a "bathtub story", in which a character inhabits a confined space, like a bathtub, and ruminates on the past, present, and future, without leaving the bath. The third-section, also first person, is told from Jason's point of view, Quentin's cynical younger brother. Of the three brothers, Jason's section is the most conventional; it unfolds chronologically and possesses external and internal conflicts. But like the previous two sections, it too leans heavily on stream of consciousness. The final section, the only one without a first-person narrator, is told from third-person perspective, limited to Dilsey, the Compson's head female servant. Stitched together, these four sections offer different points of view, with differing emphasis, on similar events, calling into question their reliability.

I first read *The Sound and the Fury* my freshman year of college, on very little sleep. I was awed by how the novel's form gives rise to meaning; how Faulkner's use of flashback, non-linear narration, and stream of consciousness revealed how each character is hindered by their past. Unfortunately, my infatuation gave rise to a multitude of bad writing habits, some of which I'm still trying to break. The initial drafts of "Palo Verde" were promising in that the narrator was troubled by internal conflict; he was haunted by an abusive father and at having been sent away from home by both his mother and her gambling-addicted boyfriend. However, rather than challenge the character by having him confront these traumas, the story's present action permitted him to wander into flashback – much like Quentin Compson – thus succumbing to a "bathtub" story. I'm working to restructure the plot around conflict developed in the present action.

CR4. Bell, Smartt Madison. *Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft and Form*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Narrative Design is written on the basis that form or structure is of the most valuable importance to fiction. Its bulk is divided into two sections: linear and modular design. The former dissects stories that are most common and conventional; those that start at the beginning, progress through some type of middle, and stop at a defined end point, and that bear some relationship to a more modern conception of the Freitag triangle (rising action, climax, conclusion). The latter is arranged according to theme rather than a chain of cause and effect, and is typically best reserved for novels. The text is not driven but exercises but rather by examples; each section contains a short story by a contemporary writer (both published and not), copiously annotated by Bell, followed by a more general analysis of plot, character, tone, point of view, time management, and narrative design.

I've spent my time in the program focusing on how to better structure my short stories. My stories sometimes span significant lengths of time which can require using a fair bit of summary. Writing compelling summary is a challenge, so I was interested to see how Peter Taylor managed to cram a twenty-year marriage into his short story "A Wife of Nashville". Taylor summarizes a great deal of the action, and as Bell points out, avoids letting the story plod or drag by inserting particular details – specific objects, settings that engage the senses, as well as both paraphrased and direct dialogue – to create half-scenes, which give us the sense that we are witnessing events instead of merely being told them, all while maintaining a brisk and efficient pace. I'm trying to include these elements in writing summary, most noticeably in "Nesting".

H9. Chekhov, Anton, *About Love and Other Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 (stories published between 1885 – 1902). Print.

Considered among the greatest writers of short fiction, Anton Chekhov's ranged more widely than any Russian writer before him regarding subject matter. He wrote about life in Russian provincial towns, the Russian Orthodox Church and its clergy, rural life, peasants, aristocracy, and the most common protagonists of his stories – the intelligentsia of the declining upper class. Most are told from third-person perspective limited to a central character, with a close physical distance. Some are plot-driven ("Rothschild's Violin", "The Lady with the Little Dog"). Others, according to Scottish writer William Boyd, abandon the so-called "event-plot" for something "blurred, interrupted, mauled, or otherwise tampered by life". What Boyd is here referring to, I believe, is the sentimentality of "Gustev" or the melancholy and misery of "About Love." And the story's temporal scopes range widely; those like "On the Road" or "Fortune" cover a single evening whereas "The Black Monk", "The House with the Mezzanine", and "The Lady with the Little Dog" span years. Such time periods in fiction can prove challenging; writing

within a smaller scale can limit a story from developing the conflict to a satisfying climax, whereas the larger can drag a story down.

Chekhov navigates this dilemma through his balance of scene and summary. Take "Rothschild's Violin" for example: the story, which spans a little over a year, opens in circumstantial summary, concerning Yakov, a coffin maker, who lives in a village where people rarely die. Long passages of summary risk boredom, but Chekhov holds our attention by incorporating specific lived details while maintaining a crisp pace. The circumstantial summary builds toward the inciting incident (Marfa, Yakov's wife, falling ill), a conflict, or situation, that is hereafter developed largely in scene. When writing in scene, Chekhov is patient; he slows down time, allowing space for feeling, action, and thought. I'm trying to incorporate these elements into my own scenes, and believe I have been most successful so far in doing so in "Palo Verde" and "Bat Country".

C5. Lee, Don. *Yellow*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. Print.

Lee's first collection of short stories, *Yellow* chronicles various Asian American characters living in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, California. Some characters do overlap, qualifying the collection as a story cycle, but overall, the stories are relatively self-contained. They are character-driven, told entirely in third-person limited perspective, and though plotted simply – often in the form of a relationship story – ripe with reversals. In "The Price of Eggs in China," a renowned carpenter is hired to build a chair for a famous poet, only to discover that his new client has played rival to his girlfriend for years. In "Domo Arigoto", a young second-generation Korean American is invited to Japan by his white girlfriend, only for her mother to reveal that he is about to be broken up with on account of their racial difference. Lee uses linear design for most of these stories, although two – "The Possible Husband" and "Yellow" – use

modular design. Both stories unfold chronologically, but the modular design allows Lee to skip ahead, capturing the central character both at different ages and within different relationships, thus crafting a more complete, even novelesque pastiche. I'm considering using such a design in my continuing revisions of "Mount Misery."

Lee is a realistic writer who tends to stick to a conventional linear story structure. He almost always opens in action, before moving into backstory, then develops the conflict along the chain of cause-and-effect, over several scenes that typically close with some kind of reversal, before ending in climax. A simple abbreviation for this formula is ABDC (action, backstory, development, climax). Because I'm still very much learning to write short stories, I often use this formula as a model. This is true for "Nesting". Lee has a talent for describing the internal as well as external lives of his characters using direct narrative statement. Both are often omitted in minimalist fiction on grounds that they are either unnecessary or sway interpretation. But I find the measured tone with which Lee writes these descriptors grants them an air of objectivity, thus trending them more toward characterization. I've tried to manage this balancing whenever writing in third-person narration.

H10. McCullers, Carson. *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998 (stories first published between 1934 and 1955). Print.

McCullers's fiction is typically associated with Southern Gothic; her characters are mostly misfits and outcasts, who find themselves in grotesque, sinister, criminal, violent, or sometimes mystical situations, in small towns of the U.S. South. Her characters frequently suffer from loneliness that she mines with great empathy without swaying our allegiance too far in any one direction – which I greatly admire. How she strikes this balance, I believe, can be attributed to her handling of point of view.

The collection's opening story, "Sucker", is told from a removed first-person narrator names Pete, a middling high-school boy, who has a crush on Maybelle, the most popular girl in school and shares a bed with his younger, orphaned first cousin, Sucker. Sucker is described as gullible, dependent, and lonely, but Pete's indifference, which is most prevalent at the story's beginning, holds him at a distance that not only builds suspense but also steers clear of caricature. As the story progresses, Pete's first-person point of view hones in on Sucker. This transpires in a shift from scene to summary, in which a closer psychic distance is used to deepen characterization ("When I went to sleep [Sucker] was still talking and I could feel his breathing on my shoulder, warm and close."). Our empathy later fuels the story's climax, a reversal, in which Pete, having been spurned by Maybelle, projects his anger on to Sucker. Here, the psychic distance is pushed even closer; we gain deeper access into Pete's thoughts – told from a moderate temporal distance – and his regret for having bullied Sucker ("It seemed awful to me that I had talked like that to a kid only twelve"). The tension is further amplified by the remoteness from which we see Sucker ("He had on one of my pajama jackets and his neck stuck out skinny and small. His hair was damp on his forehead."). I'm working to incorporate this seesaw effect into "Mount Misery", along with "Bat Country", through a more shared third-person point of view.

C6. Beattie, Ann. *Secrets and Surprises*. New York: Random House, 1978. Print.

Critics often consider Beattie as being spun from the same cloth as Carver, Tobias Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Richard Ford. True, she writes using plain language, with an eye toward surface descriptions, and dissects her characters while still leaving the anatomizing up to the reader. But her characters are all upper class, most of whom are disaffected, counterculture yuppies, such as the band mates in "Friends". More importantly however, I believe her styling, on full display in this early collection, helped push the genre in a more modern direction. Not so

much in regards to form: her stories – most of which concern relationships – are, despite the comic characterizations, rather conventional, in that they adhere to the aforementioned ABDC structure. And like Carver and Wolff before her, she deploys plenty of object correlatives ("A Vintage Thunderbird", "Distant Music"). I too have used object correlatives, like the radio in "Nesting" or Hal's toe in "No Net To Catch You".

But what I value most about Beattie is her use of point of view, specifically third-person perspective. Here, she inhabits a much closer psychic distance, even dipping into interior monologue, like in "Colorado", a story about four confused recent college graduates who aimlessly follow each other from New Haven to Colorado. These characters are disaffected, suffering from ennui and its ensuing anxiety and depression, and are prone to numbing themselves with alcohol and narcotics. The latter can be shown in gesture, but the former are emotions that are either painful or nearly impossible to speak or act upon – thus requiring a deeper examination of a character's inner life. Because I am drawn to writing about similar characters, I too try and intersperse my stories with moments of deeper introspection, like in "No Net to Catch You" and "Nesting".

C7. Williams, Joy. *Taking Care*. New York: Random House, 1982. Print.

In her introductory to 1995's edition of *Best American Short Stories*, Williams writes: "All art is about nothingness: our apprehension of it, our fear of it, its approach." The nothingness that she speaks of holds the collective center of her debut story collection, *Taking Care*. These sixteen stories portray characters caught in a downward spiral – both spiritually and economically – whom often fall from the middle class into disaffection. In "Traveling to Pridesup", a baby is abandoned with a quarter of elderly women. In "The Excursion", a little girl is terrified that birds will fly out of her toilet. All sixteen use linear design, and the majority are

written in third-person limited. Though Williams combines elements of both minimalism and the Gothic, she's more accepting of exposition and summary, and delves deeper into her characters' psyche by ways of direct narrative statement.

But Williams begins her stories slowly. Rather than open in action, she is seemingly more inclined to summary descriptions of characters or setting. This approach often yields a cinematic effect, in that the descriptions start from a faraway, remote distance before gradually focusing in on the central character(s) ("Winter Chemistry", "The Farm"). Sometimes the narrative distance stays relatively remote for the story's entirety ("The Lover", "Woods"). I'm not fond of writing non-named characters, as they seem to lend themselves more to allegory, of which I'm not particularly interested in writing. But I do find her panoramic-style openings, like that of "The Farm", worth implementing. The aforementioned opening combines character, plot, setting, and tone to produce an atmosphere taut with dread. I believe I've come close to achieving such an effect in the opening of "Savages", and am working to do the same in "Mount Misery" and "Bat Country".

C8. McClannahan, Scott. *The Collected Works Vol 1*. Portland: Lazy Fascist Press, 2012. Print.

That Scott McClannahan named his first book of stories *The Collected Works* may suggest that he doesn't take writing all that seriously. And he may not; in a recent interview with *Rollingstone*, when asked how his writing was affected by growing up in a West Virginian town where writers and artists are scarce, he replied: "There's a beauty in not knowing that you can't do it. There's a beauty in just doing it and being stupid about it and being country about it." Some are likely to consider these twenty-eight stories amateurish judging by the blatant author/narrator/character merge of the first-person narration. And their subject matter certainly is country: Scott's uncle takes him to a strip club ("The Prettiest Girl in Texas"), falls in love with a

phone sex operator ("Phone Girl"), and is cheated out of money by down-on-his-luck high-school friend ("The Last Time I Saw Randy Doogan"). But they're not stupid. McClannahan is a gifted storyteller, with an eye for conflict. He writes entirely in the present action, with little to no exposition, and establishes a narrative voice that is reliable, natural, humorous, and deeply heartfelt.

What intrigues me most about McClannahan is his use of minute craft components, such as frontloading, repetition, epiphany, and reversal. His story "ODB, The Mud Puppy, and Me" – which recounts a morning spent riding to school with two older male sawmill workers – opens with: "You ever hit a deer before?" This opening establishes McClannahan's guy-at-bar type narrative voice, and also frontloads the story's climax. Doing so avoids cheekiness, or worse – inviting a *deus ex machina* – and favors suspense over surprise and thus creates tension that is developed to an almost uncomfortable degree in the following dialogue – all of which is about hitting a deer. The characters are crass and somewhat gleeful at the thought of hitting a deer, but when this act inevitably manifests itself a few scenes later, they experience an epiphany, saddened and disgusted at having to put the wounded deer out of its misery, this instituting a reversal. I'm attempting to use frontloading in "Savages" and "Mount Misery", repetition in "Meredith", epiphany in "Bat Country" and "Palo Verde", and finally, reversal in "Nesting" and "No Net to Catch You".

CR5. Chiarella, Tom. *Writing Dialogue*. Cincinnati: Story Press, 1998. Print.

Tom Chiarella is the author of the short story collection, *Foley's Luck* (Knopf) and current a writer-at-large and fiction editor of *Esquire Magazine*. His craft book, *Writing Dialogue* doesn't set forth any hard-and-fast rules, but rather examines what makes compelling dialogue, and how to make stale dialogue fresh. The first chapter studies the dialogue we hear

everyday and teaches the importance of eavesdropping and taking notes to gain a better sense for context, character, rhythm, tension, and stresses. The second moves to the dialogue we read, how it is often directed by a story's tone, emotion, and underlying tension. The third, fourth, and fifth suggest methods and patterns for writing dialogue, such as compression, silence, and how "good" dialogue feed through, and grows from, character. The final chapter answers nuts-and-bolts questions, like dialogue tags, punctuation, and emphasis.

In chapter three, Chiarella writes that "the way speak defines who they are." I've tried to impart this wisdom onto my stories by using dialogue to show characterization. In "Bat Country" this is done through dialect. The sounds of the character's language spills over into the narration, and thus, hopefully, becomes a part of the sound of the whole story. In stories like "Savages" or "Meredith", I try and use dialogue to build tension, whether it be through argument, interruption, reversals, or misdirection. Finally, as a minimalist, I always have an eye toward compression. I try and write scenes using three- or five-word exchanges, in which each character is persuading – whether explicitly or implicitly – the other into getting what they want.

C9. Yates, Richard. *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957. Print.

Yates collects these eleven stories, obviously, around loneliness. But how Yates approaches this theme from various angles prevents them from falling stale. The opening story, "Doctor Jack-o'-Lantern" recounts a foster child's attempt to assimilate into his new fourth-grade class with disastrous results. Later, in "Fun With a Stranger" a similar story is told from the opposing perspective of a strict, old-fashioned schoolteacher trying to win over the affection of her students. Like "Dubliners", the stories here are arranged in chronological order, beginning in childhood and ending in the elderly wing of a TB ward. Yates covers a wide range of perspectives: omniscient, third-person limited, third-person rotating, first person, first-person

removed, first-person plural, etc. And while the majority use linear design, the final story, "Builders", is oddly framed by an opening passage in which the first-person narrator, who is clearly Yates, apologizes and asks for our patience regarding the coming story, the subject matter of which he deems despicable: the life of a writer.

I'm still deciding on how to structure my collection. I have no intention on having my characters overlap, and while several of my stories are set in and around Philadelphia they don't share the same fictional universe. Like Yates, I will likely organize around theme. My characters don't differ too widely in age, so I'm considering putting them in ascending order of magnitude – meaning arranging the fallout from quietest to loudest (or perhaps, the opposite). At the sentence level, I've tried to Yates's use of dialect in stories such as "Mount Misery", "Bat Country", and "The Choir Singer".

C10. Salinger, J.D. *Nine Stories*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1948. Print.

Of course Salinger is known for his widely read novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. But his rise to literary prominence began with the short story. Compiled in this collection, his early stories prominently feature children and dwell on themes of innocence and adolescence, including the disconnect between children and adults. All use linear design, and most are told from third-person limited perspective. The prose is realistic and sparse, its emphasis placed on surface appearances. The physical distance is often remote; sensory detail is filtered, and dialogue is favored over narration, allowing Salinger to flaunt his gift for imitating speech. Thought is rarely dictated, and the few exceptions are limited to first-person narration. Such is the case with "The Laughing Man" and "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period".

Ian Hamilton, Salinger's biographer, wrote that Salinger's spare, withheld styling teased his stories with mystery, and gave the reader a sense that his characters had been "delivered

destinies into their own keeping." Nowhere in Salinger's cannon is this effect more present than in his first (and in my opinion, finest) story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish". The story ends with Seymour, a World War II combat veteran suffering from PTSD, committing suicide at an upscale seaside resort in Florida. His suicide seems obvious to the reader, but only after the story has finished, as Salinger bars the reader from accessing his thoughts. Instead, the reader must infer his character from two prior earlier scenes – the first a phone exchange between his wife and mother-in-law, and the second in his exchange with Sybil, a young girl he meets at the beach. Each time I read this story, I'm so moved by its closing line ("Then he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple"), due to sheer force with which the story releases its underlying tension, and selfishly because I find this depiction of mental illness to be spot on. In my stories, I'm still working to imbed them with mystery by cutting back narrative statement and relying more on dialogue. Currently, I believe "Savages" and "Palo Verde" are my most successful attempt.

VITA

Will Yarbrough received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Richmond. His stories have been published in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Literary Orphans*, and other journals. In 2016, he received a Perry Morgan Fellowship upon acceptance into MFA Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University. In 2018, he won the Jerri Dickeski Fiction Prize for his story, “Bat Country.”