

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Adam L. Kroll for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on May 25, 2007.

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Tracy Daugherty

This collection of six individual writings, both fiction and creative non-fiction, is an exploration in narrative first-person voices and multiple themes, such as the loss of innocence, modernization versus traditions/myths, the California Central Valley, death, creativity, language, change, and the pressures of the future. Though abstractly linked at times, these individual pieces do formulate and gel based on these themes running throughout. The author's purpose was to experiment with various narrative voices, ranging anywhere from a calm retrospective storyteller to a raging lunatic, while examining these assorted themes. Though no questions are necessarily answered in this collection, light is at least shed on these themes, with the hope of creating an emotional and psychological sensibility caused from the situations, voices, characterizations, and language being used to describe these issues.

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Shuddering Blood

by
Adam L. Kroll

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Adam L. Kroll, Author

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Shuddering Blood

Marcello Nosferatu

My grandpa's mortuary was no bigger than an average Central Valley house built in the 1920s. It sat on Main Street and had a wooden sign in the front yard that said: *Kroll's Family Mortuary*. Across the street was the elementary school, and next door the preschool, both of which I attended from ages three to fourteen. There wasn't a day during those years I didn't look across the way during recess—maybe in the middle of a dodge ball game or a monkey bar exhibition—and wait for a glimpse of my grandpa in his black suit and greased black hair. Sometimes I'd spot him and wait to see if he noticed me. I always wanted him to notice me, especially in front of the other kids—my grandpa, the mortician. If he saw me he'd wave and call me over to the fence. There we'd meet, my friends hollering in the distance, and he'd say something like, "Where's your Beatrice? Why aren't you in love? Come on, let's get out of here." And I'd leave. I'd jump the fence and be gone. "Those teachers of yours know the drill," my grandpa would say. We'd cross Main without him holding my hand. His hands were always in his pants pockets, jingling change and a gold wristwatch he never wore. Before entering the mortuary, he would always stop and look up towards the small iron door at the crest of the roof. I grew up believing that if you just walked into the mortuary without acknowledging the iron door above, something terrible would happen. "Some deaths are better than others," Grandpa would say. "The key is to live." So we lived, my grandpa and I. And before heading into the mortuary, we'd stop, crane our heads towards the sky, and pay our respects. "Salutations, Lord Nosferatu. Salutations."

*

We called him Nosferatu instead of Dracula because of our love of foreign films. My grandpa and I must have watched three hundred films inside the mortuary walls. If he wasn't attending to a body or taking naps in a vacant coffin, chances are my grandpa was either reading some great work of literature or projecting a grainy film against the yellowed chapel wall. Together we'd watch this flickering spectacle while sitting in the floral cushioned wooden pews. I'd drink soda from a can while

Grandpa sipped brandy from a Styrofoam cup. The sound was never on. Neither of us spoke. The whole mortuary was dead. But not really. The place was more alive than anyone would ever know.

*

Inside the mortuary's attic was a secret door through which no one ever ventured. This was his door, his room. But Grandpa said Nosferatu never went through that door; it was only the outside door, the one near the roof, that creaked in the night. And so, as a child, I would sneak out of my grandparents' house late at night and sit in the bushes across from the mortuary, waiting. I'd munch on animal crackers or slurp on Otter Pops and listen to crickets, the whole time with my eye on that door. I didn't think he would be gross-looking, like Max Schreck. Why did I think this way? My grandpa talked about how he had once seen Nosferatu flying out of the door with a little boy dangling from his mouth. "The boy's blood dripped on my head," he said. But then my grandpa would say things like, "I talked to Nosferatu last night, and he told me that he would refurbish the mortuary in a Victorian style. That's why he's a gentleman and we mortals are beneath him." I pleaded, "Please tell me what he looks like, Grandpa." His response was: "You'll know one day."

One day when I was ten years old, my grandpa dragged me from the school bus line. My class was on its way to the Natural History Museum in Oakland. "You don't need a museum to learn," said Grandpa. "Let's get out of here."

The movie of the day was Fellini's *8 1/2*. Like most of the films we'd seen, I didn't understand what was happening on the wall. But something about that film stuck with me. There was a well-dressed man who seemed unsatisfied and scared, who couldn't even drive his car through traffic without being stared at and ridiculed, who had no means for escape except by holding a kite string and flying over the world until landing on a sunny beach—and even then he wasn't free from it all. "That's him," said Grandpa. "That's who?" I asked. "Nosferatu," he answered. I remember watching the rest of the movie mesmerized by this knowledge. It *was* him: that handsome, charismatic man. There was no doubt. It could be no one else. With his sunglasses and slick suit and bull whip. His name was Marcello Nosferatu.

*

Summer after summer I stood outside the mortuary, waiting for Marcello. The iron door was so small; I often wondered how he could fit through it. “He turns bat-like,” said Grandpa. “He can fit.” My friends believed me for many years, but soon they all gave up. Like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, Marcello Nosferatu fell to the wayside in the pile of shattered fantasies. But not for me. I believed. My grandpa, the town’s mortician, said he was real. So he was real.

*

I would move on from the elementary playground. I would gallop across wet small town football fields with ten thousand nations shooting arrows through the sky. I would fall in love with a girl who waited outside the locker room with hot breath drifting from her mouth. For fun my friends and I would invade the blossomed orchards of February and drink nectar with the bees. On summer nights we’d wade into the canals that crisscrossed the valley and cut our feet on rust and glass. There would be that night when we discovered the basement door under the bakery and find the dust-caked gambling hall bedecked with Canadian barreled whiskey and shell casings. I’d land that job at the gym and know everyone by their first names, along with black, dripping secrets that oozed from the walls. People older than my parents would confide in me as though my deformed, right ear was a confessional. My father would eventually move to Ohio, never to be heard from again. My mother would go crazy in her closet, slamming into hangers as though in a cave with spiders matted to her eyes. Teenage love would bubble in the I-5 California Aqueduct until water turned to glass. I’d find myself roaming alone in the walnut orchard behind Spring Creek Golf Course, looking for stray balls and a path that led out of the tangled forest. My friends would scatter into drug lairs, brothels and endless sweaty nights. I never left the forest.

But always there was the mortuary on Main Street; always there was Marcello. There were those alienated nights after high school where I literally lay between the mortuary pews, shaking from tears. Formaldehyde and the musty smell of death permeated the chapel. Eventually I stopped shaking, stopped crying, and listened to the sounds above. I didn’t breathe. But nothing. Always nothing. Where were you, Marcello? Where were you?

*

Then Grandpa died. One Saturday morning after a heavy night of boozing, I stumbled into the mortuary with two Starbucks coffees and found him already in a casket. His final nap. On my knees, I wailed at God. And then after bloodying my knuckles on the finger-smudged casket, after closing Grandpa's eyes, I went to the attic. It turned out, the door to that room was never locked; it screeched open on the first try. Inside, total blackness. Cobwebs stuck to my face. Dust packed my nose, throat, lungs. The smell of dead flowers and stale sickness, like a hospital wing. My shin smashed metal. And then a soft beating sound, like a maimed bird flailing to stay alive and fly away. It was so dark.

I walked out and closed the door, never to return.

*

The mortuary would fill with many bodies. Stacks of bodies. My grandpa, grandma, mom, dad, brother, sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, lovers, teachers, wife, kids, and so, so many more. All the grainy, translucent characters that pranced across the chapel wall would be entombed there. Jarred moments of time clanked against ivory caskets. The mortuary would crack with the weight of these bodies, these things, and I'd carry it on my back, forever. The town would forever morph and become a viscous ooze that spilled into the canals and flowed until the blossomed trees turned to ash and blew away. But still the mortuary remained for me. I'd tear it from its hundred year old foundation with my temple veins popping, and run. The rows of bodies would quake from the movement; they'd slide and fall and tangle, but in that house they'd stay. I'd stumble and trip, perhaps climbing the Altamont between the twirling windmills towards San Francisco, or ascending the Sierra Nevadas with the pines and endless valleys, the whole time searching for that plot of soil to set it all on. I'd pray to God for guidance, for strength. But in the end I'd talk to Marcello, who was no doubt comfortable as ever in his room above. I'd ask him what he wanted me to do with all the weight—that incredible, undying weight. When do I stop, Marcello? When do I let go? What is the point of all this? He'd never say anything. There was no need. I knew. If not bat wings or kite strings, then a mortuary. It was all there, jangling like the change and watch in my grandpa's pocket.

And I'd just keep running and climbing, never stopping, never losing grip. I'd keep carrying.

A Sheriff's Tirade

I started locking myself in one of the cells after Barney left at night. I slept on the cold cement. The hardness and cold felt good. But then one night Otis came through the door, stinking of cheap port and sweat. He took the key hanging between the two cells and let himself into the one I was in. I was sleeping at the time, dreaming of places far away, blue oceans and rain, when the drunken slob stumbled in and tried to lie on top of me.

That was the first of my many assaults on the fat bastard. I beat the living tar out of him as they say here in the imaginary South.

Truth be told, I don't like being Sheriff of Mayberry; I would have been more suited to being the Sheriff of Nottingham than ruling over this bible pumping funhouse. But when the cameras rolled, I smiled and talked with a twang, played my gueetar on the porch at night, fished with Opie, stuffed my gut with Aunt Bea's mashed tators, caught inbred crooks, went to church, threw horseshoes, whistled, shit like that. I kept this life up for years: little Opie got acne, Aunt Bea got fatter; Barney yellower; Goober stupider; Floyd fruitier. I would have been fine if the show had just died and gone off the air and into the oblivion of cancellation.

I saw a shore in Mexico with white sand and blue waves, but this was all in a dream; I've yet to retire, though I am long past the age. I wrote a song about the reason I haven't been able to escape this life as Sheriff Taylor, and some nights after Opie and Aunt Bea have hit the sack, I go out on the porch and smoke a joint and strum on my gueetar with my legs sprawled and sing my favorite tune. It goes something like this: *TVLand is fucking me*. Over and over I sing these words. It's catchy after you've sung it as many times as I have, especially in a good-old-boy Southern twang.

So instead of retiring, I want to die now. I want to take Barney's lone bullet from his shirt pocket and put it in his gun and blow my neatly greased black hair all over the courthouse walls. Hell yes, I've grown bitter, if not a tad insane.

Sure there are no more cameras. The crews have left, most have probably died, but still there I am, grinning like a shit-smearred mule, over and over again, in the perpetual flow of eternal syndication.

Don't laugh because I ain't joking. If you think Aunt Bea is always apple pie behind the scenes, think again. She's the Wicked Bitch of the South (stuck in Post-Menopausal Hell). And then there's little freckled All-American Opie, who, when out of the picture, is probably the biggest homosexual pederast east of the Mississippi: there was a reason our show never had small boys returning for second episodes.

Go ahead, guffaw, don't believe me. Barney? The man is actually a female: why do you think he always carried that gun of his and tried to act tough? It goes far beyond just trying to express his masculinity: the woman is trying to be a man, period—a difficult thing to do when you literally don't have balls.

I'm telling you, I wanted out of this freak show a long time ago. As early as the tenth year of reruns, I found myself very un-Sheriff-like. For instance, during a commercial break where the previous scene called for me to be in Floyd's chair getting a shave, I snapped and spun out of the chair, grabbed the razor from Floyd's delicate hand and pinned the pansy-ass fruitcake against the mirror with the razor to his neck. He cried out like a lamb, helpless, pissing his pants, but there was no one else around, just me and him, two immortal boob tube freaks.

"Andy," he cried, tears spilling down his face.

"Why are you such a bitch, Floyd? Why?" I shook the razor under his chin like the psychopath I was becoming

Now that I'm confessing, this one other time I had a run in with that dipshit Goober. He was servicing the squad car and had come up for air from the engine compartment, covered in grime, stuttering his dim-witted jive about how he couldn't believe he was lucky enough to work in a place like Mayberry. I was on him in two seconds, pummeling him, cursing him: "You brainless twit, don't you know this is all fake? Don't you know the outside world is hell? Mayberry is not real, asshole. Mayberry is a brainwashing dream. A dream, I say." I didn't give him a chance to respond: I took a wrench from that grease monkey's belt and knocked him senseless. Of course, when we came back on air, everything appeared fine: Goober was supposed to be dazed, dumb and completely lost to the phony world around him.

If you don't believe your dear old Andy Taylor could act this way, go away and hide, don't listen to me, pretend everything in Mayberry is hunky-dory, pure

bubble gum; believe what you're watching is a nostalgic trip to a past life that used to be real, keep escaping into this sugar-shit fantasyland, watch with stoned eyes, don't check your pulse or look out the windows for a half-hour a day. Hell, when there's a *TVLand* marathon, watch us all goddamn day and forget you got blood in your veins and there's a world outside your door.

And while I'm heating up, I'll tell you another thing that chaps my ass: this whole concept of giving us color. What the fuck was that all about? I mean, I was born black and white, I looked good black and white, the whole goddamn concept of the show was the portrayal of life in a small southern town in the '50s; you paint us up like clowns with this color shit and we look more like toddler-drawn doodles than Southern folk. I mean, for Christ sakes, look at Opie's hair, it look likes his head's on fire. And then there's me, I used to be handsome, a man women lusted for, now I look like some fake wooden puppet that a ventriloquist drags on stage with him. It's one thing to enslave me as Sheriff of this redneck town, but to tamper with me, to abstract me, to make me cough in the fumes of this present day smog is unforgivable. Maybe nostalgia gets old after a while, and even memories need face-lifts?

I'm tired, can't you see? My schizophrenia is bubbling to the surface and I need to run, but where? Yesterday, after we aired, I took the paddy wagon in a frenzied tire-burning extravaganza out of town, down the highway, and into the neighboring town of Mt. Pilot. I tried to push the car beyond the town's boundaries but could drive no further; I hit an invisible wall. I wound up sitting there with my foot pressed on the gas, sucking in the toxic fumes that were spilling into the cab. For a brief, angelic moment I believed I could kill myself if I breathed this air long enough. The air smelled of rubber and carbon monoxide, but it had no affect on my animated body. I cried like Floyd for an hour as I sat pushing the smoking car against that invisible wall. After a while, I put the car in reverse and drove back, the entire way in reverse, for who was I going to hit? what damage could I do? I'm Sheriff Andy fucking Taylor, I would return no matter which way I drove.

I guess, truth be told, the only way I will be liberated is if the TV dies. Just blows up and obliterates. A big old TV burning ceremony in front of the White House. For as long as there's TV, I will be forever summoned to the courthouse with

my teeth white and flashing. I know this because there are people in the world who get lost in Mayberry. God only knows why. They come and go while I stay and wonder when the screen will finally turn black. I'm tired of Mayberry and this Nazi uniform and the people I call friends. I'm tired of this cell I sleep in at night. I'm tired of the same faces and the same skies and the same plots. I'm tired of coming on and off without rest, like some sick soul in Dante's hell. (Yes, I read literature.) I wonder how it would be to turn the channel? I wonder how it would be to get lost inside a show for a half-hour and then be freed to go outside and talk to a stranger, a tree, a dog, anything you've never seen before?

But this is always what I'm told, that the world is hard out there and our show brings comfort, like a drug. They tell me this is utopia, regardless of what color they paint us. They tell me I'm the deliverer of joy to the outside, like Santa Claus or Mickey Mouse. But you think anyone would notice if I took a gun to Opie's head and blew that clown mop of his all over a wall? Or forgot Goober's name? Or ran around out of breath, naked and jacking myself off? You think anyone would notice if I just narrated via voice-over and never showed my pearly teeth again? How about if I called Sara, our town's phone operator, and had her just post my lines, my jokes, my morals, my songs, my smiles? Why must I always be here like the sun? What is it about you people that need me? I'm tired of this stage, this cracker box, this goddamn circus light beating down on me, but you can't see: my smile is too bright and hypnotic, and the anguish in my eyes has been digitally erased. Tune in, I'm here for you. Hell, I may even whistle for you. Lord knows I have nowhere to go, for both Heaven and Hell are eternal: a duality I know all too well being Sheriff of Mayberry.

Nights in the Windmill

It started with drive-bys and obscene gestures, then eggings and death threats, followed by trees on fire and our dog, Skippy, skinned and hanging from the clothesline by his tail.

“I don’t care what they do,” says Dad. “They can slit my throat for all I care, I ain’t selling.”

My dad is a proud man. Our family has owned the ten acres since Prohibition. The house, the barn, the irrigation system, all were built by my grandpa. My dad was born in a hay stack next to the cows, like Jesus. The developers could offer him a million an acre and he wouldn’t sell. So instead they firebombed our orchard and killed our harvest. Now we’re dirt poor and could use some serious dough, but the old man isn’t budging.

“Take the gun and go sit up in the windmill tonight and wait for those bastards,” he tells me now.

“You expect me to shoot them?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t expect you to play cheerleader when they come to gut Sally,” he says.

Sally’s our cow. She’s too old for anything besides looking sad, but still, we love her.

“If I was able, I’d be out there myself,” says Dad.

But he isn’t, not with one lung and oxygen tubes sticking out his nostrils. So at night I go up in the windmill with a shotgun and wait.

Our property used to be out in the country. Miles away from anything. Then the housing boom started; thousands of people from the Bay sold their shabby homes for millions and flooded over the Altamont and built mansions in the Valley. Investors ate up land; farmers became rich. Except us. We held on. And now we’re on the outskirts of town, surrounded by two-story tract homes all painted various shades of taupe with swimming pools and three-car garages. All our old neighbors are gone, cashed in, living in Monterey. The only neighborly sign we receive is from the

high school gang who smoke weed in our orchard and leave behind used condoms and crinkled porno mags.

My first night in the windmill is uneventful. I have one of the gang's porno mags. I'm twenty-nine with no wife and no prospects, living with my old man in a house that always smells of fried bologna. It's August, warm, and a big moon is out. The gang has raunchy sexual tastes, no sense of sophistication, but still, I'm bored. And lonely. And the moon is bright. I'm outside. I put the gun down and loosen my belt. Then I hear Sara clearing her throat behind me.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I shout. "You scared the shit out of me." I turn away, embarrassed, and refasten my belt.

Sara is my dead sister. She always appears without warning. She loves torturing me and making me feel like a fool, all because I played a part in her death. It's hell being haunted like this.

"Whatcha doing?" she asks.

"What's it look like I'm doing? I'm on watch. Jesus, Sara, why do you have to keep sneaking up on me like this?"

"I saw what you were watching," she says.

I toss the magazine. I know she sees this because she sees everything, but still. "What is it you want to harass me about tonight?" I ask.

"I'm hurting again." She looks at her feet and starts whimpering.

I don't know if she's really in pain, but I can't help wanting to end myself for the sake of her suffering. Dead or alive, it's hell seeing your sister in anguish.

"How's Mom?" I ask.

This sobers her up. She turns and looks off in the distance. She nearly disappears in the moonlight. "I haven't seen her lately. I think she's nuts or something."

I don't want to hear this; I have enough to deal with without worrying about the dead. I want to picture my mom when she was perfect and alive, like when I was a kid and she'd be in the stands ringing that cow bell at my baseball games, rain or shine. It was the biggest cowbell I'd ever seen. She had to shake her entire body just

to ring it. When something exciting happened, like a home run, she'd stand and whip her body as if bolts of electricity were coursing through her. Opposing teams cowered under her ringing thunder. She had amazing spirit. "Can't you find her somehow?" I ask. "Make sure she's all right?"

"She doesn't like seeing me dead, especially with this hole in my stomach."

"Well, jeez, Sara. Can't you help me out up there?"

She spins around, face contorted and horrifying. "Don't boss me around, mister. Don't forget you're the one that's responsible for Mom and me being dead and bonkers." She starts bawling.

I look at the gun sitting there in my lap and think it might be time to end all this. But then a wail louder than Sara's erupts in the night, and I turn to see Sally on fire, zigzagging through the trees. I curse myself for having been distracted. Terrified, I grab the gun and shimmy down to the ground. Poor Sally's moaning and banging into trees, and I think, "Dear, God, make her stop, drop and roll." I know she's good as jerky, so I aim and fire a couple rounds, which miss her, and all I can do is watch as Sally crumbles into a pile and succumbs to the flames.

The next day I drive into town, which takes no time now that it's so near. Main Street is now a long strip of shopping malls and insurance offices. Every day I see a new business. There's even a new mortuary as big as a bowling alley with a sign that says: *Your loved ones will never forget this experience.* I think: How true. Along with businesses, traffic signals seem to be popping up everywhere. Every hundred yards there's a light. It's midmorning on a Tuesday and traffic is backed up. I take a side street, thinking I'll bypass the mess but find myself lost in a town I've spent my whole life in. Nearly an hour later I find my way out of the labyrinth and in the parking lot of the new police station. I walk in and ask for Sgt. Hoffman. A few minutes later I'm led into his office.

"Have a seat, Levi," Sgt. Hoffman tells me.

I take a seat.

"I'm really sorry to hear about all this trouble you've been having. I know it must seem like the stars aren't aligned in your favor."

I've known Sgt. Hoffman since junior high. He was our D.A.R.E officer. He grew up on a ranch where the new golf course sits. His parents live in Santa Barbara. I'm not sure he's the right person for me to talk to, but I don't know anyone else on the force anymore.

"These people have burned our cow and skinned our dog," I tell him.

He scratches the back of his head and opens his mouth as though in pain. He's always done this open-mouth thing, like his feet are burning. It's an ugly tic. "I agree that these perpetrators have crossed the line, no denying that, and I can guarantee you that I'll bump up the patrolling around your property. But you have to understand, Levi, and I'm telling you this because I like and respect you and your family, these people mean business. What they want, 99% of the time they get. Now, of course, do what's in your hearts, but you might begin considering what's best. We can only do so much, you understand."

"So being barbarians and destroying our crop doesn't warrant police action?" I ask.

"Now, I didn't say that." He sits there and smiles. "Did I?"

Before going home, I drive out to Olde Towne Saloon and Grill. The bar is actually still in the country, surrounded by a grape vineyard. The building is an old wooden thing, with chipping paint. Rusted wagon wheels sit out front for decor, along with one of those wooden posts once used for tethering horses. I think about when we used to come here for breakfast on Sundays, how Sara and I would play cowboys and Indians while waiting for a table. Sara was always a tomboy, an Indian. Which was fine: we were country kids living as far west as you could get. It was our destiny to be wild. Mom would always hush us but gently. Dad would just smile. Sundays after church were always busy at Olde Towne; breakfast there was always something we looked forward to, a treat for surviving two hours of church. Now the parking lot is nearly empty. I walk through the swaying saloon doors and see Mr. Van Gronigan, the owner, and my Uncle Jim sitting at the bar. I think about slipping back outside but it's too late.

"Well now, what a surprise," says Uncle Jim.

He pulls out a stool beside him. I take a seat.

“This makes me feel a lot better,” he says, “knowing that I’m not the only one in the family who drinks before noon.” He slaps my back and laughs. His teeth are peppered with tobacco.

“What can I get you?” asks Mr. Van Gronigan.

With my uncle here I’ll need something stronger than beer. “Whiskey and soda,” I say.

Mr. Van Gronigan turns to make my drink. Uncle Jim lays into me. “So is that stubborn brother of mine ever going to wise up and sell?”

I glance up at a portrait of Joaquin Murrieta but the gunfighter’s eyes are averted toward the foothills. I remember how Sara and I used to try mimicking his stare, holding our stern faces as if in a duel until our fried ham came. I always wondered how it would have been to pull out a gun and blast someone to death. “You know how he feels,” I finally say.

“Yeah, insane,” he says from a mustache-hidden mouth lathered in spilt booze. “The soil’s plumb done producing. The only thing it can sprout now is dollars, and if he doesn’t get smart, he’s gonna lose his chance. This market isn’t going to last forever. You know that, you’re smart.”

I laugh. Uncle Jim has always called me Shit-for-Brains. When I was a kid, he once gave me a black doll and said, “Only a nigger toy would love someone as stupid as you, Shit-for-Brains.” I hate him, and my dad only tolerates him because he’s so loyal.

Mr. Van Gronigan sets my drink in front of me, which I down in three gulps. I set the glass back hard on the bar like all the cowboys I’ve seen in the movies.

“Damn,” says Uncle Jim.

“The man’s thirsty,” says Mr. Van Gronigan.

I think about ordering another but I just want to get the hell out of there. Before I stand up I tell my uncle, “When we want your advice, we’ll ask for it.”

“Well, you don’t have to get all twisted like this,” he says. “I’m trying to help, is all. Times are changing fast, and I hate seeing my flesh and blood getting left out in the cold.”

My uncle lives on a useless parcel of land nowhere near civilization. He's bitter, and I suspect he can't wait for my dad and me to die so he can take everything. "I'll see you around, Uncle." I head for the door.

On my way out I hear Mr. Van Gronigan saying, "Things are sure complicated now, Jim. What happened to the days when a farmer was just a farmer?"

Before I know it I'm lost again in a construction zone of houses I've never seen. As I circle, looking for a way out, Sara appears in the passenger seat. She's hysterical. "Jesus!" I scream. I pull over beside a framed house. "What is it, Sara?"

She thrashes for a while, then stops and looks out the window. "It's Mom."

"What about her?"

"She's lost it."

"What's that mean?"

"She's trying to kill herself again."

I'm silent and perplexed. I think about the day I found my mom slumped in the seat of her running car in the garage. There wasn't a note, not that we needed one to know why she had done it. "Is that even possible?" I ask.

"No, but she doesn't care. She says she's going to keep trying until all the pain in her heart is gone."

"Jesus. What's with death? I thought—" I stop and look out the window. A couple Mexicans working on the house look at me like I'm crazy. "Why is she doing this?"

Sara thrashes again.

I can't stand seeing her like this. "Please stop," I tell her.

She stops. "It's because she sees Dad suffering so much down here, she can't stand it. It breaks her heart."

"She watches Dad?"

"All the time, until it's too much for her and she goes off to kill herself again."

I shake my head. I can't believe this. "Does she ever watch me?"

Sara's silent.

"Sara?"

She's gone. I want to imagine my mom up in heaven ringing a cowbell while watching me trudge through this life. But I doubt that's happening. I see out the window one of the Mexicans approaching, holding a nail gun. I throw the car in Drive and floor it.

Eight years ago Mom and Dad were up north in the Redwoods celebrating their Thirtieth wedding anniversary. It was the first time they'd been anywhere since their honeymoon. Mom was worried that Sara and I wouldn't be able to take care of ourselves—especially with all the house invasions happening—even though I was twenty-one and Sara nineteen. “I hate the thought of leaving you kids behind, especially with your father and me off having fun,” she said. Dad was just worried about Sara's boyfriend, Aaron Dirksen, trying to pull a fast one and stay the night. (No one cared about me and my girlfriend, Sue, since it was assumed we screwed nightly under our roof.) Dad told me, “You keep an eye on that tricky dick; you're in charge.”

I did what I was told. I made sure every door and window was locked at night, even set the house alarm. For extra security, I let Skippy sleep with Sara at night. Hell, I even kept one of Dad's guns next to my bed, just in case. Everything was fine. Sara and I were even getting along, and planned on doing the yard work together before our parents came home.

But then it all went haywire. My good old Sue came along, out of the blue, and called me a loser. Where this came from, I still don't know. She claimed my job at the tallow factory wasn't promising, that my truck wasn't clean or smelled good, that she needed someone who wouldn't touch her inappropriately all the time. Out of thin air we were done. Naturally, I lost my head. I ravaged the liquor cabinet. And when all the booze was gone, I told Sara I'd be right back and drove to the store for a twelve-pack, which I half-enjoyed in the barn next to Sally. Who knows when I passed out. I didn't hear anything until the next morning when one of the officers woke me. I was sick and puked on his black shoes. Even Sally acted skittish. I swore up and down I didn't hear anything. It was hard for the investigators to believe that I didn't hear a door being kicked in, screaming, and two shotgun blasts. But it was true:

I didn't hear a goddamn thing. And if I had, what good would it have done? By then I had already sealed my fate.

When I get home Dad's in the barn struggling to unbind a bale of hay. He's wheezing and spitting. I grab the cutters and hack through the wire. I have no idea why he's even messing with the hay. Sally's dead.

"Well, what's the verdict, son?" he asks.

I tell him, "Hoffman said he'll assign more patrols around our place, but that's about it."

"That's something, I guess."

"Not enough, Dad. These people won't quit. They can put twenty houses on this land, and that's too tempting for them. We're screwed."

He spreads some hay in Sally's trough. "I was reading that taking a year off of harvesting is sometimes good for a crop, sort of like when a forest fire regenerates life in the forests. I think we stand a good chance of having a good season next year, son." He's not looking at me; he might be looking for Sally.

What was I supposed to do, take charge and become the domineering son that tells his old, delusional father how it's going to be? Have him watch as his childhood home gets bulldozed? Have him see the trees he planted by hand get chopped down, thrown in piles and set aflame? Or have him witness on that day we drive by the land he knew by heart, every hole and weed, covered with asphalt, flimsy houses, and people who don't know his name? I couldn't. I had already killed most of my family; I wasn't going to do it again.

So that night I go back up in the windmill with the gun.

It's a nice night to be in the windmill. It's warm and the crickets are screeching louder than I've ever heard them. I begin wishing that the trees looked like they do in February, and blooming with white buds. I wonder if the blossoms would look like snow under the moonlight. It's too bad that February is so cold and August doesn't have blossoms. I think how great it would be to have a choice, to be able to alter things, like the beauty of the seasons. Or bring people back to life and restore

time. My mom never had a whole lot to say to me again after Sara died, no encouraging words, let alone a smile that said life was going to be fine even though things were bad. She took Sara's death the hardest, and secretly I knew she blamed me. I grow tired while staring down at the trees, envisioning popcorn blossoms in place of the charred branches. My eyes close but my ears remain on high alert, listening to the cricket serenade. I'm just about asleep when I hear the crickets stop. I register nothing until I hear a car's engine sputter up our road, then die. Looking towards the house, I see a carload of men jump out and run like gangbusters at the house. Two of them have fire burning from their hands. I forget the gun and slide down the ladder. Then I run my ass off through the trees. The house is already ablaze. Hanging branches whip against my face. There's shouting. Car doors slamming. Tires squealing. I'm slow and hate my legs. Everything's orange and lit. Finally I'm there. Ignoring the flames I barrel through the door and find Dad slumped over in the living room with something tied around his neck. I throw him over my shoulders and run out. After laying him on the grass, I go back in for his oxygen tank, which I find has already blown up. I call 9-1-1 and wait outside, holding Dad's hand. But he's not holding back. I see that his eyes are open and the flames are reflecting off of them. I reach down and close his eyes—there's no way in hell I want him seeing this. I keep hold of his hand. I think of Mom and Sara, and grow scared. It's not until later that night, at the hospital, that I read the sign that was around his neck. It says, *You Will Not Win*. But they are wrong. They are so goddamn wrong.

Mom and Sara are buried in the town's cemetery, but Dad made it clear he wanted to be cremated and spread throughout the orchard, just like his dad. So when I receive his ashes, I climb up into the windmill and turn her on. The propellers are stiff at first, but soon start cranking at full speed, creating quite a breeze. I don't know what to say so I just think my thoughts: *I will take care of this place, Dad. I won't fail you like I failed Sara and Mom. Don't you worry. I'm sorry things worked out this way. You deserved better. The whole family did. I love you.* Then I open the box and let the ashes fly like gnats in the direction of the fabricated wind. The ashes get

sucked away and disappear. I think I see ash residue on some of the blackened trees. It's beautiful.

I live out of the barn. As soon as harvest comes and goes, I'll scrape together a down payment to rebuild the house. At night I still go up in the windmill. It's September and getting cold. I shiver in a quilt my mom made and watch my breath fade out into the trees. I hold the gun tight and never close my eyes. The crickets are withering into hibernation. Traffic goes by on the roads, and I watch every car's lights. I hear the highway and train buzz in the distance. The trees move when the wind blows. They finally come for me. I unload my gun until it's dry. I hear them clanking up the metal ladder. It takes them a while; they don't know how to climb a windmill ladder in an orchard at night. I wonder what Mom will say, if she's forgiven me. Will Sara remember our Wild West youth? Maybe they're all just up there waiting, smiling down, Mom clanking her cowbell with every fiber of her being. The trees shiver in the wind.

When Princess Diana Was Falling From the Sky

We thought it was hail. The sky had been dark, black clouds boiling up in the east, near Half Dome. I had looked out my office window and saw it brewing. An ugly sky. I don't know if I was drunk then or not, but I was drinking a good amount at the time, and in all likelihood, seeing that sky and knowing the lateness of the day, I took a swig of whiskey I kept in my bottom desk drawer and drove home. But the clouds moved fast, as if assisted by a power beyond God. I was pulling into my gravel drive when the storm hit. We thought it was hail. Loud, with thunder and lightning. It wasn't until I stopped the car and got out with my arm shading my head did I see the jeweled crown. And right beside it, her head.

*

I had lived my entire life in the San Joaquin Valley. My father drove a bread truck. My mom was a school teacher. We lived on five acres, ten minutes out of town. Surrounding our house were almond trees. The trees were there because my father liked to look at them. And in February, when they blossomed white, he liked to smell them. We didn't make any money from the trees. Like I said, they were just there for decoration. And maybe for comfort. When the trees would get old and brittle, my father would rent a tractor, and with a chain, rip the trees, roots and all, from the sandy soil, leaving large holes. And of course the windmill. At night, without the trees, the wind would howl through the house. It was cold too. My father would say, "As soon as them baby trees are grown we'll be all right again." My mom would read *The T.V. Guide* or *Reader's Digest* in her blue cotton robe by the fire, and every once in a while she'd shake like she was cold. It took the trees a while, but soon they were big again.

*

Chief Rollins called me at home. "You seeing this?" he asked. I could barely think. I didn't know where my daughters were. It sounded like my roof was caving in. "Yeah," I yelled as I ran through the house. "You gotta get back to the station; the town's going crazy," he said. I found both Avery and Jill holding each other on the bottom bunk in Avery's room. Ralph, our black lab, sat at their feet with his ears flicking. Avery was crying. Jill's face showed nothing. "I'll be there as soon as I

can,” I said, then hung up. I fell to my knees and bear hugged my girls. “Why is it loud, Daddy?” asked Avery. “Just a big storm,” I said. This triggered me to look at the window. Seeing it uncovered, I got up and closed the blind. Jill stood, hands on her hips. “What the hell is going on?” “Just a storm,” I told her, motioning with my head towards Avery, imploring her to play along. Jill was the oldest, fifteen years old. She shook her head and walked out of the room. I heard her bedroom door slam. I fell back on my knees and hugged Avery. I told myself: These girls need you; be strong. “I’m scared, Daddy,” said Avery. “There’s nothing to be scared of, doll. This storm will pass.” Her hair smelled of wild grass. Her back felt full of little bones. On her nightstand was an opened children’s bible.

*

After I calmed Avery, I went and knocked on Jill’s door. I could hear her rock music. I knocked louder. Finally she answered but didn’t look at me; she turned and sat on the floor, leaning against the bed. She was reading a teen magazine. The room smelled of cigarettes. “Can you please turn down that music a second?” I asked. She gave me a stiff stare, then pushed a button on a remote, lowering the volume. “I’m gonna need your help, Jill,” I said. “With your sister,” I added. “Jesus Christ, what’s going on out there?” she asked. “Please don’t talk like that,” I said. She rolled her eyes, then looked down at her magazine. I noticed her hand was shaking. “I don’t know right now,” I said. “But I’m gonna go figure it out and make sure everything is fine, all right?” She shook her head. “First Mom, then the earthquakes, then the black snow, now this. What’s next, the end of the fucking world?” she asked. It was moments like these I wished Janet was still there. She made it her mission in life to make sure we were fine. If there was something wrong with any of us, whether it was sickness or common blues, she would have done anything to make things right. But I couldn’t think that way. She was gone. And we were still here. “We can’t panic,” I said. “We have to stick together and ride this out. Things will be fine.” She crossed her arms and looked at the wall where a black and white poster of John Lennon hung. I wanted to hug her but knew better. “I will be back soon,” I told her.

*

Things outside had calmed as I drove down the road. I looked around and saw the landscape spotted with body parts. There was no blood that I could see. Just flesh. A leg here. An arm there. A torso. Another head. I had to swerve the car a number of times to avoid hitting these things. I thought again of the head I had seen lying in my front yard. It had looked like her, but I wasn't sure. The mouth was gaping, the tongue hanging out. It was hard to tell. I shook her image from my mind. It couldn't have been. I figured there were plenty of blondes in the world who wore crowns.

*

I remember the night Princess Diana died. I was two years out of high school. My friend Jason and I were on a wild night, walking the streets of town with no concern for tomorrow. We had been drinking beer, then switched to hard booze. After going to a couple of house parties, we landed at the Swiss Hall. The Swiss were crazy people, and threw wild parties. A friend of ours from school, T.J. Keck, invited us in as if we were family. Inside the Hall was like all the other halls in town: a large wood dance floor and a bar as long as a semi trailer. T.J. mixed Jason and me a couple stiff drinks, and off we went in the whirlwind, dancing and smoking cigars passed down by bearded men who looked like they had come from the wilderness. We knew all these men. They either coached us or rooted for us throughout our lives. Eventually we found ourselves outside, huddled around a pit of sawdust, watching drunk men wrestling each other. It was great fun. It got even better when T.J. suddenly dropped to his knees in the sawdust and started wrestling a broad-shouldered girl in pig-tails. I had never seen a guy fighting a girl before, and to this day, it is one of the most hilarious things I've ever witnessed. She whipped T.J. good, had him squealing in some choke hold. I think old T.J. liked it, though. We were all drunk and having fun. It was summer, warm, and the stars were blazing.

Soon Jason and I ditched the Swiss and started hiking over the overpass with no destination in mind. From the top, even in the dark, you could see across the valley, beyond the trees and fields, where the shapes of the Coastal Range emerged. We thought about going down to the river and climbing up on Honda Hill and waiting for the sun to rise over the Sierras. But halfway up the overpass we knew we were tired and too drunk, so when we saw Joe Cook come to a dead stop in his Cutlass on

the road and open his door, we jumped the guard rail and ran to his car. Joe was a year older than us, but as cool as they come. He treated everyone like they were his brothers. Neither Jason and I wanted go to our homes, so we took Joe's offer and went to his place. Johnny Cash blared from his car's speaker. Our heads rocked to the beat.

When we walked into Joe's house, Phil, Joe's dad, was still up in his reclining chair, smoking a joint. Phil was a Vietnam vet. Anyone who had been over to Joe's house before, who had been lucky enough to have spent the night, escaping the trouble of being drunk and having to go home to our parents, knew Phil's stories. He had been a helicopter pilot and was shot down more than once in the jungles. One time it took him two months of trekking through enemy territory and snake-ridden grasses to find his fellow soldiers again. There was this one time, after Phil passed out in his chair, Joe went to Phil's room and came back with a Polaroid of a decapitated Viet Cong. I was fascinated and horrified. The picture was real; it wasn't the movies. The head looked like it was made of dough.

On this night, Phil was smoking and eating chips, watching the Nature Channel. He reminded me of Santa Claus, always laughing and hospitable. Jason and I took our places on opposite couches and sat in the dark, watching lions and hyenas devouring zebras. I don't remember falling asleep, but soon it was light. The T.V. was still on. Phil and Jason were fast asleep in the same positions I had last seen them in. I got up and looked out the window. It was overcast. I saw the paper lying on the walkway. Carefully, I opened the front door and picked it up. This bending motion was enough to tell me I was hung over. With the paper, I lay back down on the couch, hoping by the time I was done reading Jason would be up so we could go to McDonalds. I knew the grease would ease my stomach. I unrolled the paper and spread it on my lap. And there, on the front page, was her picture, smiling with her perfect smile, her short blond hair, her jeweled blue eyes. The headline said she was dead. I don't recall gasping, but something I did woke Phil. "What is it?" he asked in a voice abused from too much smoke and jungle. "Princess Diana's been killed," I whispered. I felt like crying but no tears came. Phil guffawed, farted and readjusted himself in his chair, re-closing his eyes. "Serves that bitch right," he said. "She was

just a whore with a crown anyway.” That was all he said. I don’t know if I ever spoke to Phil again.

*

“What do you make of this?” asked Chief Rollins. “I don’t know, Chief,” I said. “Is this happening anywhere else?” I asked. “No reports yet,” he answered. “We’re in some deep shit, here, Dave.” “I hear you,” I said. I looked out the office window and saw squirrels zigzagging all over creation. Some were carrying body parts. “We got reports that some people heard an aircraft of some kind,” the Chief said. “What do you think?” I knew what I thought. I saw the clouds. I heard the thunder. “I don’t know about that,” I said. “It’s possible.” I felt my leg shaking. I turned. “This isn’t at all good, Dave. We gotta find who’s responsible. Too much bullshit has been happening around here. I won’t stand for this; not on my watch.” I needed a drink. I opened my mouth and moved my tongue. “We’ll get ‘em,” I said dully. The chief exhaled. “I know this must be tough for you, Dave. Lord knows you’ve had more tragedy than any of us. I’d understand if you wanted off this case, considering everything.” I looked at the sky. Dusk. Clear. I wondered for how long. “I appreciate it, Chief, but I’m fine. I want to stop all this madness as much as you.” “Now that’s what I’m talking about,” said the Chief, slamming his fat fist into his desk. “Let’s catch this bastard.”

*

Jill was twelve, Avery six. I was thirty-five. I had gotten a call at the station from the girl’s school, saying their mom hadn’t come to pick them up. Instantly I knew something was wrong. Janet was never late for anything, especially when it came to the girls. She was the type that the moment the morning alarm went off, she was standing up, wide awake, rubbing her hands together, ready for action. She was up to make sure we’d get up. She was our alarm. I called home and her cell phone, but got nothing. Driving to the school, my stomach knotted.

After getting the girls, I rubbed their heads as we walked to the car, telling them “Your mom’s fine. She’s probably stuck in traffic somewhere.” They didn’t believe me, or at least Jill didn’t. She looked at me with strange eyes, filled with both fear and disdain. “Can’t you get one of your officers to find her?” she asked. I told

her I had already done that, which was another lie. I drove them home and saw that her car was missing. “Where’s mommy?” asked Avery. I felt sick. The girls were scaring me. I told them to eat a snack and watch T.V. but they sat around the kitchen table staring at me. I went to the bedroom and called everyone we knew but none of them had seen her. When I came back into the kitchen, Avery was under the table with tears running down her face; Jill was outside in the swing, barely swaying, looking at the ground. It was winter and getting dark.

A week later she was found. No one wanted me to see her but I had to know for sure. I should have listened to them, though. Because after seeing her, pulled on shore from the canal and resting in a torn plastic bag, in the dirt, in pieces, not at all whole, not at all herself, I would never be able to see her as my Janet again.

*

I got home late. The T.V. was on in the living room but no one was in there watching it. I turned it off and first went to Avery’s room. She was fast asleep, her legs curled up towards her chin. Her electronic sound machine was on, loudly emitting a chorus of summer crickets. Ralph was on her bed, asleep at her feet. Janet never allowed him to sleep with the kids, but I liked him there with Avery at night. I looked at her face: cheeks rose red. Lightly I ran my hand through her soft hair and kissed her forehead. She moved, but remained sleeping. Ralph twitched a leg.

I touched Jill’s doorknob knowing the door would be locked. It didn’t bother me that she always slept behind a locked door. Whatever brought her happiness was fine by me. After her mom died, I hired a locksmith and had all our exterior doors upgraded with the best deadbolts money could buy. While he was at it, Jill asked him to put a lock on her door. At first I didn’t like the idea. I was a cop and wanted to know what my daughters were doing; I didn’t want secrets. But she said she’d sleep better knowing she was locked in, and after what had happened, and the fear and grief we all had been suffering, I let it be done. Like all the nights, I lay down on my stomach with my ear to the space below Jill’s door. Sometimes I could hear her breathing in her sleep, sometimes I couldn’t. On this night, I heard nothing. I smelt the black space below the door. It always smelled the same: cigarettes and perfume. She was there.

It was 11:30, and I wasn't tired. So I went through my nightly routine. First the girl's bathroom. I start with the sink and counters, followed by the tub, then the toilet, followed by the floor: I scrub these things until they are clean, white, and smelling disinfected. After this I go to my own bathroom and do the same. When the bathrooms are polished, I hit the kitchen, wiping the counters, the microwave, the fridge, the stove, the table, the chairs, the sink, and floor. This is followed by dusting the living room and wiping down the furniture. I take my time in here, pausing at the armoire, where Janet's ceramic angels sit in prayer positions. She made a new one every year for Christmas. I don't know the angel's names, or if they're based on Scripture. Some have wings, some don't. They're small and detailed and took her a long time to create. She'd sit on the floor in the living room, in front of the T.V., on spread newspaper, molding the figures. What she did next, I'm not sure. Sixteen of them in all. One for every year we were married. I dust these carefully, picking each of them up and wiping them. When I set them down, I make sure not to make any noise.

It's nearly 1:00 when I lose my energy. I decide to Windex the windows tomorrow night. Exhausted, I pour a half glass of bourbon over ice and go sit in the dark living room, my mind blank as the night.

I wake a couple hours later. I get up and check all the doors, then look out the windows, seeing only black shapes for trees, no moon. The trees move slightly, alive in the wind. I go to bed and try to sleep again. I'm almost swimming in a dream when I'm awakened by a bang on the roof that makes me stand with my gun pointing at the darkness. It sounds like my roof's being pelted with stones. Avery's screaming. "Daddy. Daddy." I throw the gun on the bed and rush to her room. Under my breath, I curse this life.

*

I opened the door the next morning slowly, as if a wall of snow was on the other side. There was no snow, just strewn body parts. I slammed the door and locked it. I could hear Jill's music coming from her room. She was getting ready for school. It took her so long to get ready now, applying make-up, lotions, perfumes. I'd look at her when she was through and wonder if I was supposed to say something.

“You look nice.” Or “You can’t wear that to school.” But I wouldn’t say anything. I’d just give her lunch money. On weekends I’d give her spending money. Sometimes she’d say thank you. Either way I didn’t mind, just as long as I was giving her what she wanted. But even this wasn’t always clear to me.

Avery was different. She was young. Without her mom, she needed me. This morning she called for me. “Daddy?” I hustled to her room, wondering how I was going to get them to school without them seeing what was outside. “Yes, my darling,” I answered. Ralph was still on her bed. She was gathering some drawings she had made and loading them in her pink backpack. She was smiling. “I dreamed a better dream later, Daddy. It was about you and Mommy and Ralph. You guys were riding on top of him down the road. Ralph’s tongue was long and drooping on the ground.” Ralph’s ears perked when he heard his name. I wondered if Avery could still envision her mother. I suddenly wondered if either of my daughters could. I wanted to ask them, have them describe her to me. But I didn’t. Seeing her load her backpack with a smile made me think of the trip to school. There was no way. I phoned the Chief. “Is school in session today?” “Far as I know,” he said. “We have to carry on like nothing’s wrong.” As soon as I hung up I told my daughters that school had been cancelled. Before leaving, I instructed them sternly not to go outside. Jill asked, rolling her eyes, “What am I supposed to do, stay here all the time, like a prisoner?” “Please, Jill,” I said. In the car, I screamed at God.

*

A half a mile down the road, I pulled over. In a turquoise sequined gown was a headless body. On one of the feet was a turquoise high heel. There was no blood, no horror, just a headless body, like a manikin, except with real skin. I touched the arm and it felt warm. Then something in the bushes caught my eye. A small silver crown sparkling in the sun. Next to it was a head and face. This shouldn’t have been hard for me. I was trained for moments like these. Even though homicides hadn’t been prevalent in the area until recent years, I had seen enough of them lately to harden myself in the moment. But it was her, no doubt in my mind. This time she looked at ease, her red lips closed, no strain or contortion. It was the Princess, all right. And I knew why she was falling from the sky in pieces. Before I knew what hit

me, I was on the ground, in a cold sweat. I threw up. Then cried. Then uprooted the nearest bush, cutting my hands. Squirrels were galloping all around me. Thousands of them. This wasn't even squirrel country.

*

I don't remember when I first saw Princess Diana. I was young, I know that. She was always on the news. Sometimes she'd be waving to the cameras before getting into a car in London, sometimes she'd be in Africa, walking in high heels, surrounded by people like Nelson Mandela or Mother Theresa. She was always erect, elegant, dignified. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She was truly a princess, a figure from a fairy tale. We'd be eating dinner in the living room, my parents in opposite chairs, me on the floor, watching T.V.. Diana would appear, in a crème colored business suit, legs golden. My mother would say, "Davey, now that's the type of woman you need to marry." I'd say, "But Mom, she's royalty." "So," she'd answer. "Aren't you a little prince in shining armor?" My father would laugh. "He'll find himself a winner someday."

*

The Chief still thought a human perpetrator was responsible. "We need this monster stopped," he said, and did his fist-slamming again. He called a department meeting. Everyone showed. I stood in the back, chewing my lip. "Now it's quite obvious by all the reports," he went on, "that this person is flying a crop duster at a low altitude. We need to check all the local airports. How many goddamn planes can there be?" I waited to see if anyone was going to ask, and when no one did, I cleared my throat and said, "Has there been any rise in reported missing people lately?" Everyone turned and looked at me. When they saw it was me, they shook their annoyances off and acted like it was a sound question. "I want that checked, too," said the Chief with even more bravado. "Let's go, let's go!" he barked. It seemed everyone in the room but me started scattering around as if it was a football huddle and no one knew the play. Doubt ballooned inside of me. Maybe I was only imagining her face.

*

But why could I imagine her face and not Janet's? They both had been left in pieces. I could put one back together but not the other.

*

I wasn't supposed to enter the medical examiner's lab; in fact, I wasn't supposed to be anywhere near the station. The Chief had said I could have as much time off as needed. "Make sure those kids of yours are taken care of before you even think of coming back to work," he said. But at home I was lost. I had tried warming up a platter of lasagna brought over by a neighbor one night but burned it beyond recognition and then dropped it, platter and all, on the kitchen floor, creating a mess I'd never seen in that house before. Avery wouldn't stop howling. Jill cried too, I was sure, but not when I was watching. She was always in the backyard or in her room, headphones glued to her ears. So I drove back to the station and stormed into the lab. Everything was stainless steel, except the examiner in white. She was on the silver table, naked, in thirteen pieces, randomly displayed. I fell to my knees on the cold linoleum: the floor felt incredibly hard, jagged like marble. I don't know what happened next.

*

On the drive home, I hit at least ten or fifteen squirrels. They were smashed all over the roads. The sky was black.

*

Pulling into the drive, I held my breath. I've done this since the day Janet disappeared. I'm not clear why I do this. Part of me thinks I might pull up and see her car. But on this evening, it's not what I'm looking for. I get out of the car and walk around the house. We live on the outskirts of town. We used to be far from everything, but the town spilled out and caught us. The house sits in the middle of three and half acres of almond trees. I do a perimeter check and see only a couple body parts, a hand and a leg from the knee down. I pick these up, planning to put them at the bottom of the trash. These trees catch my eye, however. They're old. Stopped and crooked, with bark that's brittle and thick like hard, flaky scabs. I walk into the first row and feel a branch. I do this as if it's going to tell me something. I'd seen my father do this. I don't think he knew what he was doing, either, but still. I

crack the branch and let it dangle. It hangs there like a broken bone. Before I leave, I see something in one of the trees. There's a hole hollowed out. Inside of it is a book with a painting of an alien screaming on its cover. I open it and see Jill's name written on the first page. I snap it shut and put it back. I'm not even to the trash can when I decide the trees have to go.

*

Jill's already made dinner. Grilled cheese with ham. Some kind of canned soup. Music is blaring from her room. T.V. is on but no one is watching. They're both in the kitchen. "Hi Daddy," says Avery, and gets up from her chair and hugs me. "Hey," says Jill bleakly, who's at the stove, stirring the pot. They each have to yell for me to hear. I do what I always do: ask about their days. But there isn't much to report when all they've done is stayed locked in the house.

Later, Avery's on my lap, reading a book. Jill asks me, "Are we ever going to be safe or what?" I wish she wouldn't ask these questions. I wish she was young again. She knows too much and yet she's not old enough to do anything about it. I think about what Janet would say. I tell her without thinking, "Why don't you try praying?" Her look says it all. I'm an idiot. I'm from another planet. I'm the worst dad in the world. "Ah, okay," she says. Avery looks up from her book. "Mommy said pray when you're sad." Mommy said pray about a lot of things, I say to myself, and look what that got her. I think: Why stop here? "Let's pray as family, like we used to." "Yeaaaah," says Avery. I don't even look at Jill. She weakens me. I know if I see her face I will take a bottle from the cabinet and go to my room. But these kids need me. "Come on," I say, "let's sit around the table and hold hands." I'm already in position, my arms spread at my sides, eyes closed. I feel Avery's little wet hand clasp mine, and wait for the other, slightly flinching. I hear the chair move away from the table, then the puff of air shoot out of the chair mat as she sits. Her hand finally touches mine, hot, maybe from the stove. I realize I'm expected to speak. This hasn't crossed my mind until now. Panic strikes. I hate myself for opening my mouth. I wonder if either of them will say anything first. But they aren't. We're holding hands in silence. Not even a creak from the chairs. I feel Ralph under the table now, bumping against my foot, panting. Even he's uncomfortable with the moment. For

once I wish Jill's music was on to drown this killing silence. Both my hands are shaking. Am I shaking or are they? Dear God. I wonder if I said this out loud.

*

When Janet was killed, I did not blame myself. What could I have done? We found the killer, we hunted him down, and now he sits behind bars in Folsom, on death row.

When the earthquakes struck for two months straight, I did not blame myself. It was just one of those things only scientist could understand.

When the sky turned gray and dropped black snow for a month, powdering the valley with something the world had never seen, I did not blame myself. It was just a freakish thing. The world had changed. That's all.

When Princess Diana's body parts rained down from above like Old Testament frogs, a hundred versions of herself in various formations, I started to think otherwise. I was being punished for something. For my thoughts, perhaps. For being a terrible father and husband. For being a part of this world and thinking that it was all going to be fine. I was being cursed by God. We all were.

*

I had fantasies of the Princess. Always had. She was ideal. The diamond. A magical celebrity by way of blood, beauty, and good deeds. There was nothing false about her, like a movie star. She was an aristocrat placed on earth by God.

But I loved Janet more than anything. To this day I'd give my own life to see her alive again. To see her smiling, holding the girls in her lap. We were going to be that American family you see on vacation commercials. On Sundays we went to church in the morning. There were so many to choose from in town, but we went to the one we had gone to since we were kids. All the elders of the town attended the church. We knew everyone. The kids loved it too, because all their friends were there. The girls would go off to Sunday school, and Janet and I would be at the service, sitting towards the front. Afterwards, we'd all go to Olde Towne Bar and Grill for brunch, just like when I was a kid. The rest of the day was board games, movies, and a big evening dinner. My parents would come over, and sometimes

Janet's. Then bedtime would come, and I'd lay there holding Janet's hand, rubbing her calluses, thinking about the following Sunday, hoping it would come soon.

But *soon* turned into never again. Many months after Janet's death, when our grief was finally hidden inside each of us, I took the girls to church. The girls went to Sunday school like before. I sat through service, this time farther in the back. Everyone was kind: firm, lingering handshakes, arms around my shoulders, searching looks of concern and wonder. I knew they wanted inside my head, my heart, to see if it had turned black. The strange thing was, many of the faces that day were foreign to me. Who are these people, I wondered. Young couples with screaming babies, dressed as if stepping off a sailboat filled the rows. I realize now how absurd this sounds, but I started blaming these people for Janet's death. We hadn't caught the killer yet, and I suspected these sharp, sleek strangers as the guilty party. Their babies wailed and they did nothing. That is the last time I went to church.

As hard as I tried picturing Janet whole, she remained in gory pieces, either in a muddy garbage bag or on that laboratory table.

At night, I started drinking and staying up late. If a pillow was out of place, I'd shiver and want to tear at my face.

On one of these nights, I had finished off a bottle and was going through my closet in an attempt to reorganize. Carefully, I'd take out a box and lay it on the carpet. I planned on restacking them once I settled on a shape for the stack. In doing so, I found wedged in the back a book my mother had bought me before she died. The book was *Diana: The Portrait*. I remember sitting on the carpet next to those precarious stacks and opening the book. At that moment, a flood of memories engulfed me. There was the woman I had grown up adoring. A hundred pictures, and not a blemish. I thought of my mom in shorts and a tank top, summertime, in the orchard with me, as we picked up the aluminum irrigation pipe, she on one end and me on the other, carrying it to the next row and hooking it into its adjoining pipe. Before long, there was a long row of silver. My dad would be at the end, awaiting our signal to turn the water on. Out the water would come, spraying back and forth. My mom would say, "Ready?" All I did was smile. Then she would break out in a run, zigzagging through the shooting arcs of water. I'd be behind her, laughing. Dad

would finally walk up in the neighboring row. “You two,” he’d say. Mom and I would be soaked, cooling from the heat and our labor. Mom would look back with her hair in strings across her face and say, “Even a prince needs to let his hair down once in a while.”

I sat there on the carpet for a long while, flipping the pages. My head started clouding from alcohol and fatigue. Before drifting off, I took the book up to bed, turned out the lights except for a desk lamp, and masturbated.

*

For two weeks, Princess Diana fell from the sky. Between the mounting body parts and armies of squirrels, the valley was unrecognizable. Whole neighborhoods were falling apart from the weight of these phenomena. People were fleeing the area. Those that stayed hunkered down in their homes and prayed their roofs would support the destruction. Some gave up doing anything, and ended themselves. Needless to say, the Chief was exasperated. “My ass is in a sling,” he cried. He was right. That day the feds showed up wearing sunglasses and black suits. Every one of them chewed gum and sniffed at the air as if the scent of death would lead them to the culprit. They briefed us, saying they had jurisdiction now. They presented graphs and charts and theories. They talked about latent evidence and DNA. Very systematic. They predicted they’d have this “madman” by week’s end. What was I supposed to do, raise my hand and tell them?

*

The paparazzi killed her. Chased her down and ran her off the road. She and her boyfriend. She was a princess. He was not a prince.

Supposedly her head split in two from the crash’s impact. She bled. Her lifeless body wrapped around steel. If there’s a photo of this, I’ve never seen it.

*

She stayed in my mind. A lot of times naked or in silk panties. With large breasts. Hard nipples. Smooth golden legs. A face like Marilyn Monroe. The whole package. I would masturbate three times on a given night. My cock bled.

*

I came home this one time and found Avery in the living room playing with the ceramic angels. She had them spread out on the carpet, divided, eight on one side, and eight on another. It looked like two sports teams ready for battle. Carefully, she positioned them. Her head was on the carpet, eyeing them evenly. She didn't know I was there, and I almost said something but stopped myself. I tried thinking of Janet, the way she looked when she was sitting on the living room carpet, meticulously molding those angels from clay. Suddenly I realized I wasn't even sure if she actually made those angels. While I was thinking, Avery turned around and saw me. "Hey Daddy," she said. She looked at me, while moving two angels through the air. "Hey you," I said. Slowly, she maneuvered the figures. Her lips were in a whistling position, blowing air, like the angels were going so fast and graceful they were emitting flying sounds. I knew it was bad to ask her, but I did anyway: "Mommy made those angels, right, sweetheart?" The angels stopped flying. Avery looked at me. Her face was contorted, baffled. I don't know why I asked this. She was too young for questions. She had no answers.

Meanwhile Jill had walked through the door and heard what I'd asked. "What are you talking about?" she asked. The sound of her voice took my breath away. "We got the angels from Grandma every Christmas. She bought them at the Hallmark store. If you look on the bottoms, it says Hallmark." She walked past me and went to her room, slamming the door. Immediately I went to the cabinet for a bottle.

*

I went into the orchard. I remember wishing we had had a windmill to burrow into and hide. When I was a kid, I would go up into our windmill and peer out beyond the trees. It was all fields and trees then. The towns looked so small and far away. In the distance, there would be both sets of mountains: one jagged and high, the other smooth and rolling. I would think: these trees, this soil, those mountains, they can't hurt you. You were safe in a valley surrounded by these things. My dad had been right all along.

What would I have seen if I climbed up in a windmill that day? The mountains were hidden behind the California smog. Most of the orchards had been torn out.

Housing and shopping malls reigned supreme. The highways were crowded with commuters, body parts and squirrels.

I sat in the dirt leaning against a tree, drinking from the bottle until my eyes burned black.

*

I went ahead and read some of Jill's journal that was hidden in that tree. I know I shouldn't have, but I had to know why she hated me. I couldn't go on living knowing I had failed at something again. It said: *I love both my parents so much. I know I give my dad a lot of shit, and I really don't know why. He's a good dad and love him a ton. I just feel like I have to blame somebody for what's happened. I can't help it. Truth is, I'm scared. I'm scared every day I wake up. I have panic attacks thinking I'm going to die. I hate living this way. No one knows anything, and I hate this. I want to feel safe again, like when my mom used to hum in my ear after a nightmare. I miss her hot breath...*

*

I rented a tractor and ripped out the trees. I put the trees in a pile and set them ablaze. For good measure, I even gathered up all the Diana body parts I could scavenge and threw them on the burning pile. It had been close to a week since the sky had turned black and assailed the earth with her body. The feds and the Chief believed they found their culprit, a serial killer in Paris, Texas who owned a plane and an excessive amount of bloody, serrated blades. I never told them that this man wasn't the cause, that it had been my fault. This admission wouldn't have been any fun, however; it wouldn't have required much police work.

When the trees were all gone, the ground looked naked. All the new houses that had leaked from the town were suddenly there, gaping down on us. I took the girls with me to the Farm Service to buy the new baby trees. When we got home, we spent an entire weekend, all three of us, and Ralph panting at our sides, planting the new trees. Jill and I did most of the labor, but when the time came for putting the milk cartons around the base of the trees, Avery was there to do it. She liked knowing that her deed was insuring the trees would be safe from the jackrabbit's tooth (the squirrel population had vanished).

At the end of that Sunday, with our hands and clothes filthy with soil, we stood admiring our efforts. “When will they be big again, Daddy?” asked Avery. “Soon, sweetheart,” I answered. “Real soon.” I stood there with my girls in that departing light, thinking, “Please God, make these trees grow fast.”

Lake Taboo

May 26, 2005

I got out of jail on Thursday. By Friday I'm reclining on the shore of Lake Taboo with a cold one in my hand. And it feels good. Nothing has really changed up here. It's still beautiful. Still small, with its one grocery store, bait shop, restaurant, marina, snack shack, and camp grounds. The lake's water level has receded some, exposing old tree stumps and ancient trash, but it still appears silver in the morning as the sun rises above the mountain peaks. On these peaks I can see charred trees from a recent fire, but that is nature, and it is beautiful. Besides, there are still plenty of healthy green pines all around. Day and night the air smells of campfires. Some days I do nothing but lie in my hammock at my camp site and smell these campfires and listen to the squirrels that chirp like birds. Other days I fish for trout from the bank, or hike the two miles around the lake. For breakfast and dinner I go to the Steam Donkey, the one restaurant, and eat and chat with the locals about anything, but mostly we talk about fishing. There are days I play video games at the store and eat soft serve ice cream. Sometimes I just walk through the cabins and camp grounds with a beer looking at people, thinking I will know someone, but I never do. Every once in a while I see a pretty girl visiting for the weekend with friends, and I watch her until I start thinking about my own daughter and ex-wife. But being here at this lake helps ease the pain. It's not bad.

In fact, things are good at Lake Taboo. It's the end of May, and the weather is turning. I don't know how long I'll stay up here, but I have nowhere else to go, no schedule to meet, so heading back down the mountain into the valley is not on my mind. I'm feeling joy for the first time since that morning, and don't want to jeopardize this feeling. I'm afraid of life in the valley again. Things are so different there. I don't know anyone anymore. Where is everyone? Nothing remains. Not even the orchard I played war in as a child. But there's this lake.

May 27, 2005

For my first twenty-three years, I never missed a trip to the lake. I was born in December, and by that June I was at the lake with my parents, sleeping with them in a

canvas tent. As I grew up, I'd go to the lake two or three times a year. Sometimes my parents would stay home and I'd go with my grandparents and sleep in their old, musty trailer. My grandpa was a great man. He'd take me out on the lake in his aluminum boat to troll for trout while he smoked cigarette after cigarette, filling a beer bottle with the butts. When he'd laugh his teeth would be silver like the shiny lure at the end of the fishing line. He wore a white fisherman hat because he didn't want his head to burn. He'd watch the end of my pole with deep lines in his face. He'd tell me to hold the pole tight and wait for the pull, but soon my mind would wander and I'd look across the lake at the mountains and trees and wonder if I could make it to the top. Then I'd feel a sudden jerk and see my pole end dip. I'd stand up and start reeling like crazy until my grandpa would come over, shifting the weight in the boat, and pat my shoulder and tell me to take it easy in a calm voice. Soon the fish would be zigzagging just below the water's surface. My grandpa would be waiting with a net. When he'd raise the net, I'd raise the pole, and then there the fish would be, flopping and gasping, at the bottom of our small boat, its small eyes fearful. My grandpa was never afraid to touch the slimy fish as he loosened the hook from its mouth. Sometimes there'd be a little blood, sometimes guts, but never too much. My grandpa was a gentle man; he knew what he was doing. After he put the fish on the stringer, I'd watch it swimming along with the boat, waiting for it to die. I'd hear my grandpa behind me: "You did it, son. All by yourself you caught that fish." Later that night my grandpa would fry the fish in butter and spices, and throughout dinner, as the fish melted between our teeth, he would brag about my catch. We always camped in the same campsite, the one with the big elephant-like boulder for me to climb, and this boulder, slightly in shadow, would be behind my grandpa as he sat and ate the fish I caught that morning.

June 11, 2005

I rent a boat sometimes too. But it's not the same trolling alone. I have to stop the boat as I try to fit the worm on the hook. Most of the time the worm gets mutilated and rendered useless. But I love the smell of the worms and the soil they are packed in. I love my hands covered in worm guts and grime. I see my grandpa and dad's

hands—knarly hands that can't come clean. Hands that are scabbed and scaly like the fish. I smell both their cigarette smoke. Usually I'll just set the pole in the boat and idle around the lake, looking at the beauty. Kids are already jumping from the cliffs by the dam. The water's still freezing from the snow runoff, but they don't care. Down they drop like boulders. Thunk. I look at the highest cliff, then over at the dam. I remember the woman from a long time ago. The one that bled and died. My grandpa and dad carried her in the boat to the marina, where the helicopter was waiting. Later I saw blood pooled in the bottom of the boat.

The kids are screaming and clapping, full of adrenaline and alcohol. I gas the boat and get the hell out of there.

June 15, 2005

I will stay at Lake Taboo until something inside of me tells me to go. I'm confident that one day I will wake up and know it's time because of some sensation in the pit of my stomach. Even though my money is running dry, I'm sure I can get odd jobs doing something. These people up here seem to like me. They've listened to my stories from when I was young; they know what this place means to me. I don't tell them why I'm here alone. I don't know what they'd think. I'm happier than I've been in a while, and this has to show on my face, in my walk. They see this. There's a good guy, they probably say.

June 17, 2005

More and more of the campsites are filling up. It's early in the season, but still, I have neighbors now. I wasn't sure how I'd react to these people. But it's working out all right. They give me something else to look at and listen to. At night the kids still scream "Elmer" at the top of their lungs. The first time I heard this again I nearly fell out of my lawn chair. I couldn't believe they were still yelling his name after all these years. I never did get the story right, if Elmer was a lost boy or a murdered forest ranger. Who cares? It was the only time in my life I was allowed to yell without consequences. Lately, when I hear the kids start in, I've been sneaking away from my fire and going down to the abandoned beach and yelling along with

pulled bowie knives and rifles and commenced to slaughtering the tribe. So much blood was spilt; it dripped down into the lake. Victorious, the settlers went ahead and mined the surrounding land and streams but soon discovered there was no gold, not a speck. All the settlers could do was piss on the rocks and trees, then climb higher into the Sierras. From that day on, the lake has been haunted by the native spirits who seek revenge on the white man.

It's a good tale, full of rich California history. But I don't believe it to save my life. Nevertheless, tomorrow I will search for artifacts. Perhaps an arrowhead will bring me luck.

June 27, 2005

I searched today for Indian artifacts but found nothing. Well, I did find an old Coke bottle—something my grandpa would have admired, since the bottle came from the era when he was fighting in Korea—and brought it back to camp. I've washed it, and though chipped and faded, it looks good. So now I'm drinking from it. I fill it with the mountain water and drink. I can't say if it tastes any better, but I like the thought of drinking from it.

Not a bad day.

July 4, 2005

The lake is bustling with visitors. I'd forgotten that it was a holiday until I was reminded by all the American flags and t-shirts people were displaying. Tonight, fireworks will explode over the lake. I don't know if I will go. No, I definitely won't go.

July 5, 2005

I went to the fireworks show last night. All three beaches were packed with families with blankets, lawn chairs, and ice chests. Little children were throwing poppers and other things that lit up the beach. While waiting for the show, some "Elmers" screamed through the trees. I sat back from the beaches, on a picnic table scarred from teenage lover's knives. When I wasn't spying on the families, I stared at

the soda machine glowing across the water at the marina like a Cyclops eye. This one Fourth of July long ago, my friends and I sat on the dock at the marina waiting for the show to begin. My friend Derek tried buying Cokes from the machine to mix with our whiskey. Turned out there were no Cokes and we had to settle for Sprite. Derek said it would be the same as a Seven Seven. I didn't know what that was, but I drank the concoction anyway. If the taste was bad, we didn't know it. The drink went down our throats and warmed our stomachs, and soon we were throwing cans into the lake and yelling "Fuck you" at Elmer. Soon the show began, and off we went bounding down the dock, rocking the boats and sloshing water across the wood planks. I don't know who picked the boat; we just jumped into one. The fireworks lit up the sky. We knew no one would be watching us. Like savages, we rowed out into the middle of the lake and sat, drunk, waiting for the falling remnants to hit our faces and burn our eyes. It was the best seat in the house. Though I can't say for sure if that was the best Fourth of July of my life.

July 13, 2005

Tonight I lay on the beach with my toes in the water, staring up at the falling stars. In the mountains, there are so many falling stars. If it was true, a man down on his luck could easily find better days wishing on all those streaking stars.

I remembered the time Derek, Ole, John and I were lying at that same spot, too drunk to move. Ole's shirt was smeared with vomit, and he stank. We knew we couldn't stay there all night because of the ranger (we had heard rumors that they were now arresting people for being drunk and loitering on the beach after hours). John recommended we roll into the water and stay submerged if the ranger came around. He said the lake would protect us. We couldn't run; our legs were barnacled to the sand. So we stayed and talked. We were very sentimental then. I said I loved them, and when it was time for me to get married, I wanted them in my wedding. They all said the same thing. I was the only one who kept my word.

I keep thinking I will see one of those guys here with their family and they will invite me to their cabin for dinner. Maybe I'd go, maybe I wouldn't.

July 18, 2005

I'm out in the water on a rented boat, trolling for nothing. There are a lot of other boats out. It seems like the lake is smaller, like it's leaking water somewhere. I'm smoking cigarettes, something I hate but feel is necessary because of the smell and coughing sensation. In the Coke bottle is a little lake water, and after each cigarette, I push the butt down into the bottle. The sky is blue with black clouds. I just idle around the lake in no particular pattern. Sometimes a fisherman in another boat will wave and ask, "Any luck?" These people must assume my fishing pole is inside the boat waiting for bait because it's surely isn't up and running. I always lie and hold up three fingers. If they ask me their size, I tell them they're big. If they ask me what type of bait, I tell them night crawlers. It's always night crawlers. I think of the threading device my grandpa gave my dad to get the worms on the hook. It was a simple tool: a small piece of wood with a very thin shaft of metal, like an ice pick. First they would string the worm onto the shaft, then place the hook end into the top of the shaft. Slowly, they'd ease the worm from the shaft onto the hook and line. The worm would never fall off this way. But one time I was supposed to keep the boat steady as my dad baited my hook and I forgot what I was doing. The boat floated into some shallow rocks, causing the boat to quake. The worming device slipped in my dad's hand and the sharp shaft plunged through his thumb and out the other side. Blood spilt all over the seats and life preservers. He told me to pull it out but I couldn't do it. He cursed me and everything around us. He cursed God and the water and rocks and trees. Finally he just yanked the thing out himself with sweat dripping down his sun-blistered face. For being so fine, the shaft left a terrible scar. This scar is the last thing I remember seeing before he left. He waved good-bye, and there it was, that red bubble on the palm of his hand.

Years later I tried finding this worming tool. My mom still had some of my dad's old things but his tackle box wasn't one of them. It was about that time when I really wanted to go fishing too, but without that device, I couldn't. So I didn't.

June 24, 2005

It's peak season now. I can't believe how many people are here. I don't remember it ever being this busy. You should see these motor homes they try to back into these campsites; it's ridiculous. Already I've seen a tree knocked over because this guy couldn't predetermine that his mansion-on-wheels was too big. He knocked the tree down and kept going. The machine finally fit, but with its tires hanging off the sides of the asphalt. I don't know what the guy did with the tree; I think nothing. I looked around when this was happening but either no one noticed or no one cared. It sounded like the forest was caving in. It was like one day I woke up and I was surrounded by motor homes and trees falling to the ground.

June 25, 2005

I was looking at that boulder in my campsite, the same one I used to climb as a child with my G.I. Joes, and decided to give it a go. I made it to the top with ease. I sat up there, looking around, feeling sick. Where were the birds and goddamn squirrels? Besides me, a graffiti scrawl in red: "Fuck You Elmer!!!"

June 28, 2005

At night I go and stand behind the movie screen. I'm free to do this since there's nothing but nature behind there. I pace through the trees smoking and listening to the movie and the laughter people make. My Coke bottle is filled with whiskey and soda. I sometimes wonder if the people watching the movie can see me back here. Perhaps they think I'm part of the film. For good measure, I dance a little drunk jig behind the screen. What can they do?

Lately when I go behind the movie I hear things. There seems to be misfits all around, deranged teenagers, hecklers. Twice I've been hit by rocks. When I stumble out into the forest looking for them, I find nothing but giggles and jeers. I smell marijuana. Right next to the theater, those families. I'm vowing right now to find these rejects. I don't know what I'll do once I catch them. Maybe I'll smash this Coke bottle into their eyes?

August 1, 2005

I met a woman at the Steam Donkey last night. Her name was Cheryl, I think. She was homely and easy. Her orange, bruised legs were long, fat and dimpled. Twice I saw her crotch inside her short black skirt. The old taboo legend man was there egging me on. When the woman would go to the bathroom to powder her body, he'd elbow me and tell me to go for it. "You're young," he'd say. I am young compared to him, but still, not young like that anymore. What would I say to her? The woman would come back and I'd look her over, pondering. Her skin was beyond tan in a bad way, like she was trying too hard to be young again. Her cleavage was impressive, but wrinkled and blotched with black alien shapes. Even her hair was highlighted with blond streaks, like my daughter's. The next time the woman went to the bathroom I left before she returned.

I had sex twice at Lake Taboo. Two different times, two different women. I drank beer all day long and through the night. In the middle of the day I did push ups and curled stones to make my muscles swell. We rented a party boat and drove around the lake with rap music blaring. Tupac and Warren G for all to hear, real Californians. We all danced around, nearly capsizing our ship. I don't remember much. It was fun, that's all I know. There was a group of girls in bikinis. I jumped off the side of the boat with a half-full beer can between my teeth and floated on the water like I was not human but a drifting log. These girls laughed and took pictures. I don't know what I'd do if I saw those pictures today. Maybe tear them up, maybe pin them to a tree. Later everyone jumped from the cliffs but I stayed below in the boat, watching, drinking, and burning in the sun. This one girl stayed with me. She was small with brown hair and perky breasts. Hard, dark nipples showed through her top. This is all I remember about her. That night we all went to the Steam Donkey and danced and drank. The girls were even dancing behind the bar with Mike the bartender. I bought many rounds; I had so much money then. The bar closed and we landed in our campsite, huddled around the fire, still in our bathing suits. Everyone went to bed but me and the girl. We lay right there on the ground next to the fire in the dirt and ashes and made love longer than I ever made love before. She made sounds I had only dreamed about. In the morning I was incredibly dirty and smelling

of booze, B.O., bad gas and the sex from this girl. I crept away like a predator and drove down the mountain without telling anyone.

August 4, 2005

I'm having trouble sleeping. There's this constant hum coming from somewhere. A couple nights ago I went and searched for this sound without luck. I know it's one of those goddamn motor homes. Probably its generator. When I reported the noise to the ranger station, they said they'd investigate. The rangers looked at me funny when I asked, like my face was painted or something. I've tried asking my neighbors about the noise but they never seem to come out of their motor homes. The noise is so god awful it sounds like an ailing cow mooing without rest. It's warm at night, so I sleep in the hammock, with cigarette butts in my ears, a trick I learned from my grandpa from his Korea days. Sometimes I think about my tent from a long time ago, how my mom used to complain about how bad it smelled. My friends and I used to fart in our sleeping bags until the putrid air couldn't be contained any longer. We called it a "Dutch Oven." I'm Dutch-American. Mom was right, it was very bad. But we didn't care. We were camping. Our only showers for a week came from our dips in the lake. It was only later, when we started getting serious about the girls, that we took our quarters to the showers by the store. This reminds me that I should probably shower again soon. Tomorrow perhaps.

August 7, 2005

I just tried getting a drink at the Steam Donkey but it was overrun by a bachelorette party. At first I figured I'd stick around and watch, thought maybe something real crazy might happen. But I couldn't get to the bar for drink, not with all those girls in my way. No one would serve me, either, like I was invisible. I started getting restless. I needed a drink. So finally this group of girls—one of whom I presumed was the bride-to-be since she was blindfolded—danced by me. All I did was reach out and touch one on the arm, that's it. She looked at me, horrified. To make her revolting face go away, I asked if she'd mind getting me a drink, and if she didn't, I would buy all the girls a round, even though that round would take all the

money I had left in the world. I didn't see anything wrong with this proposal. Apparently the girl did. She looked down at me and sneered: "Oooh. Are you fucking kidding me?" Then off they danced in their little train of perfume and legs. I high-tailed it out of there. I'd rather drink beer back at the campsite than be treated like that. In the Steam Donkey, no less.

Eleven years ago, I had my bachelor party up here. We had rented a cabin from a man we'd known from our town in the valley. Our plan was to do what we always had done: go to the beach during the day, maybe rent a boat in the afternoon, and go to the Steam Donkey at night. We brought enough booze to kill Bigfoot. We wound up drinking twice that much. But the beach wasn't the same. The girls in bathing suits were still girls. All we could do was stare through our sunglasses and suck in our guts. We tried renting a boat but a sheriff was now patrolling the waters, looking for drinkers. Since none of us wanted to be sober, we stayed off the water. The Steam Donkey was still the Steam Donkey, but by that point in the day we were too sun-drenched and faded. A couple of my friends got laid, but it was never anything you wanted to talk about the next day or remember for the rest of your life. By the end of the trip, we drank just so the time would fly by. I still enjoyed myself, but only because I went off alone and hiked through the woods looking for something I don't remember finding. It was too hard seeing those guys weighed down and slumped in chairs with their foreheads and eyes creased as if some stone inside of them was passing and ravaging their insides. We all were thinking about different things, no longer on that Lake Taboo wave length. We now had decisions to make, and yet at the same time, we really didn't.

August 8, 2005

Today's my birthday. There's a meadow down off the main road, on the way to the ski resort. Last night the old legend man told me to search there for native artifacts, so that's what I did. The meadow's like a small valley running through the forest. Nearby is the Cal Bears summer camp. The tennis courts are still there, the same ones my dad and I played on before the security guards chased us away. My parents always made sure I was up here for my birthday. My grandma would bake an

apple pie; I don't know how but she did (I secretly hoped it wasn't in our "Dutch Oven"). It was a day of celebration, and my grandpa would fry fish in beer batter. This one time my dad went to give me my birthday spankings, and in doing so, ripped off a scab I had healing on my hip from a skateboarding accident. He didn't know it was there. It bled through my pants and I cried. The scar is still there. It looks like a comet.

Anyway, there were kids on the court today. A lot of noise was coming from the camp, noise that only means recess and blacktop and grass and balls in the air. And sunshine. With a stick, I dug into the ground, overturning wild grass, searching for ancient things. I looked around and believed the meadow to be a perfect battlefield, the kind you see in the historical movies. The camp's noise made the hours fly. I dripped with sweat from the digging. The work felt good. Soon the sun was getting low and the meadow looked worn from my labor. I desperately wanted to find something, something to take with me back to camp. I didn't want this to end. I didn't want to go back down the mountain. My hand blistered and oozed. I felt nothing. It was only when the sound of the camp stopped that I stretched my aching back. Suddenly it hit me. I looked at the camp and knew they were all staring at me, all those kids. They stopped playing, and with their eyes shielded, they stared at me. Who was I, this dirty man digging in their meadow with a stick? Part of me wanted to run over and explain myself, tell them how I played on their court when I was boy even though I wasn't supposed to. The silence was unbearable. It was as if they all dropped dead or turned to stone. I threw the stick and jammed.

August 12, 2005

Last night I heard that droning sound again. It sounded like a whale was being stabbed and burned. I'm running out of money. I'll live in the forest before I go back down.

August 14, 2005

Last night I staggered down the pitch black road, drunk. When I saw the headlights approaching I veered off to the side. I made sure to walk straight in case it

was a sheriff. It turned out to be a truckload of deranged teenagers. They flashed their lights and honked their horn. For a second the horn sounded like that fucking midnight drone. Next thing I remember is being hit in the head by something hard, then laughter and swearing. I lay there for a while, seeing if they were coming back. When it was safe, I got up and felt the blood running down the back of my head where the beer bottle struck. I kicked the ground, searching, until I heard my toe strike glass. I picked the bottle up and took it to camp. In the firelight I saw it was a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. I've placed it on the log, next to the Coke bottle. I'm still bleeding, and don't know what to do. These people won't come out of their motor homes to save their lives.

August something

Last night I woke up in my hammock with a ranger leaning over me dressed in green with glowing blue eyes. He neither smiled nor frowned. His face needed a shave. A silver star shone dully on his chest. I didn't do anything. I looked at him, frozen, then closed my eyes again. It wasn't until this morning that I was afraid. My skin quivered. I've searched and found no footprints. The Coke bottle is gone. Tonight I will sleep in the car. Fuck you, Elmer.

August something

This one time black clouds came over the mountains, the blackest clouds I've ever seen. I thought the sky was going to rain oil. It was just me and my dad then. We were fishing from the bank, near the dam, the cliffs. He saw those clouds and said we were done. I tried to keep up with him as we hustled back towards the camps but I was slow and skinny. When I finally made it to the marina, he was standing there, waiting. He looked me over and grabbed my hand firmly. It started to rain, drops the size of pinecones. When we got to camp we were soaked and shaking. My dad told me to get into the tent. It was the saddest tent I've ever seen. It was old, faded, with holes. I got inside of it and my sleeping bag and shivered, watching my dad's shadow outside. He was building a trench around the tent to keep the rain out. I could hear the shovel blade digging into the earth. When he was through, he came in smelling of

rain and mud. He tried to smile; he wanted our trip to be fun, just the two of us. I was hungry and cold, my pillow wet from my dripping head. But my dad reached up in the tent pocket and got out Rook cards, and we played, and I wasn't hungry anymore.

August something

The drone woke me again last night. I went out in the dark searching for it. Every campsite held a motor home except mine. On the outskirts of the grounds, in the forest, I saw a fire. The noise intensified. I stepped over the log border and approached the fire. A woman was bending down, warming her hands. I thought my ears were going to break, it was so loud. The woman noticed me and looked up. It was then that I saw her body was broken. Her legs, arms and neck were twisted like she was made of sticks. When she smiled, something black and viscous oozed out of her mouth. It was all over her teeth. The drone was coming from her, from her wounds. Then she fell in the fire and burned up, and that's all I remember. I ran so fast, I forgot about the log border and tripped and skinned my chin. Now I'm bleeding from the front and back. What's this all mean? Why couldn't that drone be a savage cry from the mountain, a beckoning? Or the kids at Cal Bears camp pleading for me to come and play? And where's the fucking sun?

August something

I scouted the cliffs today. It ain't that high.

August something

This one time my buddies and I got lost coming back from a girl's cabin. Her name was Morgan. She was the queen of our adolescence. We were old enough to know better, but the power of that flesh, that proximity, was overwhelming. It was late and we were lost in the cabin's area, with the twists and turns and lack of light. There was no moon. All our parents were waiting for us. It was that year they all came, an organized event. My parents were the leaders. We had no doubt they were worried, but it didn't matter, we sat around that bonfire next to those girls and their smooth legs that were so dark in that scattering firelight. We were walking along and

John opened his mouth and mentioned *Fire in the Sky*, that movie about alien abductions. Well, that did it. We were all scared shitless. It was so dark. And quiet. We all looked around, including at the sky. Suddenly this man ran up to us out of nowhere. He was shirtless, sweaty and breathing heavy. His eyes were wild. In his panting voice he said to us, "They're coming! They're coming!" He tried to reach out and grab us. So we ran as if wild dogs were at our feet. We tore through that sheet of black night. I was the fastest, and they all followed. It was like I suddenly knew the way without seeing, just feeling my way. Five minutes later we were on the main road. When we got back to camp the sheriff's Bronco was there. Our parents had sent him looking for us. I never saw my dad so mad. In the firelight, his large body looked like a bear. That was the last time my friend's families came camping.

August, maybe September

I woke up and the Coke bottle was sitting on the picnic table. This didn't strike me as strange. I looked around. All the motor homes were gone. It was just me again. Quiet. Still. Enormous.

I'm going to roll these papers I've written on and put them into the Coke bottle as soon as I'm through here. After that, I'm going to throw it into the lake with the native's blood. I'm not going back down the mountain into the valley. It's not a valley anymore. I've haven't decided what I'm going to do yet. I'm going to rent a boat, I know that much. I'm going to cruise around the lake for a while, looking at the mountains and the sky clouded with ships. In fact, I'm going to fish some. I'm going to troll for trout. And when I've caught my limit, I'm going to climb those mountains, all the way to their peaks. That's what I'll do. That's it. I won't come down, either. I will stay. The only option is to go up. Don't look back. Just hike and think about your steps, your breathing. Think about your campfire and gathering sticks. Think about trapping an animal and ripping its fur from its bones. Shut off your mind. You won't go down the mountain again. There's no fish to catch there. There's no fucking fish.

Sometime later

Apparently there's no Coke bottle, either. It's gone again. No trace of it anywhere. I've combed this campground, on my hands and knees, crawling through dirt soiled with bacon grease, my chin like a plow, carving tributaries between the picnic tables. The bottle up and vanished. Hell if I know? Now I don't know what to do with these papers. It's all just trash in the wind anyway. Trash. Who knows where it'll all blow, these words, this life?

Shuddering Blood

Well, I knew it, I had AIDS. It struck me one night in my sleep. I got out of bed at 3:30 and logged on to the internet. You can find anything on the internet. You can become a brain surgeon by studying the internet. I needed confirmation. What were my symptoms? Well, for one, my chest; I couldn't breathe. It felt like a gorilla was on my chest, jumping and pulverizing me. I was an athlete; lungs shouldn't be the size of thumbs. Unless I had AIDS. Then it made sense. Things like that happen when you have AIDS. Everything changes. Your body is wasted. Lungs shrink; heart and liver balloon. Then you die.

But maybe I only had HIV. I was getting ahead of myself. Slow it down. I was going to die, true enough, but not yet; there were stages, hoops to jump through. I needed time to wither, to be shamed, to be a leper. I wasn't past GO yet. But did I really have HIV or did I have some other STD? I searched a medical site (there were thousands) and clicked on them all: *Gonorrhea*, *Genital Herpes*, *Chlamydia*, *Syphilis*, *Trichomoniasis*, *Human Papillomavirus Infection*, *Pelvic Inflammatory Disease*. I scanned the symptoms: swollen testicles, burning piss, cheesy snot-colored discharge, severe anal itching, bleeding bowel movements, flaming eye sockets, crops of sores, bile vomit, blistered penis head, puss pockets, patchy hair loss, paralysis, lesions, rashes, blindness, insanity, dementia. I had none of these. Then I did a stupid thing and clicked on *Images*. Jesus! I mean, what the fuck! Are you kidding me? That's just not right. Not human. It looked like something rotting in a butcher shop. Dear God! My balls cowered towards my asshole. I logged off. Went to bed, my mind a glob of hamburger melting behind glass, flies swirling above.

In the morning I still had AIDS. I couldn't breathe. It made no sense. Unless— Fuck! I logged on to the internet again. I wanted answers, concrete proof. I read everything about AIDS. Goddamn, the internet was great. And awful. Too much information. What I didn't know wouldn't hurt me. Now, because of the internet, I pretty much knew I had AIDS. I knew everything about the disease. For instance, it originated from apes that bit African soldiers returning from a civil war in Zaire. The apes had contracted the disease from blood sucking bats migrating from Tasmania. The soldiers, too long in battle, fell upon one whore after another until the

entire glory trail home was a long gauntlet of infestation and writhing veins. Before long, the sickness jumped borders and seas. Imagine a cartoon depiction of Napoleon's conquered lands and apply it to every square inch of earth. AIDS was victorious, a bastard conquistador. In some places, people panicked and started locking up their children, boarding windows, wearing masks and rubber bags over their genitals. If you had so much as a mosquito bite on your forehead, you were quarantined, shot, then burned. And, of course, you had to be gay, for how else was it possible to be infected than by a penis violently inserted into another man's anal cavity? But that didn't quite make sense. All these African soldiers couldn't have been gay. I wasn't gay. Never once had I thought about another man—

Back to the internet: After the HIV hands the baton to its older brother, AIDS, parasitic infections and tumors ravage the body until there is only a wet, moldy towel of a person wadded up in a sweat-drenched bed, pale-faced and wheezing. It is only a matter of time before these tumors burst and the infection boils over, a gushing black river, sparing nothing. You will be mourned, but from afar. Not until the green turf has been laid over your grave will your loved ones—people who kissed you at one time and couldn't wait to be in your presence—come near you with flowers and tears. Who knows why they cry?

I went a week or more thinking this way. Feverishly I poured over internet research. But still I didn't know. Not with certainty. My lungs were two nerf baseballs soaked in petroleum. Yep, I would be dead soon. I would be loathed. My family would change its name and move to Greenland where AIDS is only known as a sickness of the imagination.

I started wondering how this happened. I'm from a small town in California, nowhere near San Francisco or Hollywood or any other place where gayness and AIDS are as common as the cars congesting their streets. There's nothing but farmland, orchards, vineyards and open fields where I'm from. It's Steinbeck country, for Christ's sake. People are clean there. I know everyone. For fun we drank beer and took slugs of whiskey and ran naked with our penises slapping against our legs through moonlit orchards. Sometimes we'd climb the windmills in the orchards and smoke weed and crank 2Pac from car stereos and yell "Westsiiiiide" and "Fuck the

Poe-lease” for all the sleeping birds and gophers to hear. We’d go to my grandpa’s mortuary at night and take photos of dead people with our party paraphernalia spread amongst their coffins because it gave us satisfaction knowing these stiffies were rockin’ it into the afterlife. We’d go to the gym after hours and make vodka protein shakes and dance to the aerobics’ house music on treadmills in our underwear with ten thousand mirrors reflecting our drunken surrealism. We’d go to the Bethany Home, our town’s convalescent hospital, and follow our young nurses through their rounds of changing diapers and propping senile heads with pillows while we drank rum and Coke from 7/11 44-ounce cups and tripped over life-preserving cords. We fell in love in my town with virgin blond girls and promised to marry them under trees of white blossoms. Never in my life had I seen cocaine or junky needles. And now I had AIDS?

Of course I thought about my sexual liaisons. I mean, how could I not? There weren’t too many, not compared to some, but enough to have to stop and rack my brain. It wasn’t long before I had a list of possible culprits. My money was on a girl from Manteca, California (quite possibly the dirtiest town in America). She was a blond girl with love handles who I met one night when my parents were out of town and I was hosting a bash. She laughed at everything I said. Soon we were in the laundry room with our tongues down each other’s throats, her hand on my crotch and mine on her ass. The night ended there, but I was starving for sex—I had hit a frigid cold streak—and I was determined to take advantage of my parent’s absence. So she came back the next night.

Typically, I planned my maneuvers well. First, I got blitzed. It’s true, I had a tendency to drink before anything that required nerves. And not only that, but if I knew I was going to romp someone for the first time, I preferred being bombed; it kept me loose and ready for that awkward moment when strange bodies collide. Secondly, I took six tablets of Horny Goat Weed along with an Enzyte and Cialis pill. (If I had Viagra, I would have taken that too.) Mix all those fuckers with alcohol, and it was a dynamite concoction that guaranteed monumental lays. Or so I pleaded with God to make happen.

She arrived at eight, and by nine we were moving from the couch to my bedroom. I didn’t bother turning on lights; I didn’t want to see this girl naked. She

knew the drill. Quite the pro, she was. That must have been the horniest night of my life. I was a slobbering beast. We did it three times in succession. No lie. Well— Each time I had a Trojan strapped on and ready to burn. Except that last time. Suddenly Love Handles grew bold, and flipped over on her stomach with her blossoming ass in the air and said the words—oh those fucking words. Well, that's where I lost my head. I went at her like a hog at a slop trough, forgetting to strap anything on. Sure, *This is bad, What are you doing?, Oh Shit! You dumbass!* crossed my mind, but once you're in, you're in; it's not like pulling out and slipping one on would have mattered by then.

Yep, she was the vessel that held the plague. But there were others that could have been guilty. In fact, besides my high school girlfriend, I started doubting them all. It was true: in the end, you just don't know. What was I supposed to do, call these people? “Hey, how's it going? It's been too long. What have you been up to? That's great. Did you infect me with AIDS?”

By then, if they had it, they already knew. And since they gave it to me, they had had it longer, which meant they were closer to death. My confession and questions would only be adding insult to injury. No, I would fight this out alone, with no one to blame but myself.

Again I went to the internet. If I had AIDS, so be it. I was going to diagnose myself. Screw waiting rooms and the agonizing ordeal of lingering for the death news. Screw sitting naked on a cold metal table as the doctor lifts my unit with rubber hands searching for abnormalities. Screw the drawing of blood and the thought that this strange person is going to tell me I'm dead. Screw the sympathetic eyes that are as shallow as my days left on earth. Screw the brochures and drug information that will cost more than my contaminated life is worth. Screw the quick looks from the medical staff as I leave with my head hung low and shriveled like my devastated penis cringing between my legs. Screw the drive home where I am neither here nor there nor anywhere but instead outside of myself and floating beside the car, ready to stab the tires and run me off the road to my quick and triumphant death. Screw that. Call me Doctor.

The website wanted to know my symptoms. There was only the one: I couldn't breathe. My lungs were the size of my plague-riddled testicles. But nowhere could I find anything about breathing difficulties. *Do your genitals itch?* No, goddamn it, I told you: they don't fucking itch! But did they? Did my package itch even slightly? Of course it did. Whose doesn't? It's an itchy region, let's face it. But did they itch more than average? What constitutes too much itching? How much itching does it take to know you are cursed and sentenced to death?

And wouldn't you know it, as I read the article, my nether region started itching. I tried ignoring it. But soon it was unbearable. It felt like red ants were ravaging my entire unit. I itched so bad, I fell from my chair and lay on the ground, writhing and tearing at my infected balls. I knew it I knew it I knew it. I was fucking dead. My blood was spiked with a school of microscopic piranhas and all I could do was wait until the bastards devoured my skin, eyeballs and ass, leaving me soiled in my own steaming waste. I turned onto my stomach and started crawling across the carpet, dragging my member like a plow through a dry field. I wanted my dick rubbed off of my body. I would take sandpaper to it if necessary. No longer would I be forced to acknowledge its presence, its culpability in my demise. If it meant pissing out of a tube implanted in my hip, so be it. If it meant an embarrassing scarred region instead of my deleterious man stick, so be it. If it meant no sexual mechanism (I would only be pleasuring myself anyway; I'm not a sadistic murderer), so be it. I wanted it separated from me and left in a sordid prison cell in the middle of a Mexican desert where it could sit and waste away with flies and ponder its error. It had to know it was responsible, that it fumbled the ball on the ten yard line and picked up a rotting skunk in its place. It had to know it ruined a young life. It ruined an entire family. It ruined an entire relationship. It ruined a goddamn entire small town in America. It was responsible for so much devastation. It needed to be thrown in a cage of starving rats. I wanted it off. But after crawling across the carpet and grinding my balls and dick until they were raw and bleeding, I knew it was attached for good. There would be no separation. It was my fucking dick, and together, the two of us would die, be buried and rot.

*

Now my package was throbbing and stinging from the carpet burn. It kept bleeding and oozing and sticking to my underwear. The AIDS was soon making me do crazy things. The disease had spread to my brain. I knew this now. All my bodily functions would shut down. I would shit on myself and claw at my eyes. But before this happened, I got back on the internet.

My lungs were like peanuts. To eat a kernel of corn meant my stomach was so full it constricted my breathing. To walk up a flight of stairs meant breathing through an airway the size of a cocktail straw. This was incomprehensible. My senior year of high school I caught 68 passes for 1,133 yards and 15 touchdowns. I was a fucking gazelle, a machine. I didn't even know I possessed lungs; they were just things I was told were in my body, like a liver or a kidney. They never heaved or fluttered. They were silent and numb. They were perfect. Now they were revolting and thrashing and screaming "fuck you" at me. I knew they were there every moment. Their hibernation had come to an end and now they were starving. Why? What did I do to them? Never once in my life had I puffed on a cigarette. I had always exercised and eaten right. I had never inhaled toxic fumes. What have I done, Lungs? Why are you suddenly ruining my life?

I searched the internet until my eyes started blurring. I realized I may have to do the inevitable, that my hope of discovering my fate was beyond me. I could barely see the screen when I noticed the word *Tuberculosis* under a subheading. I clicked a link and read that nearly fifteen percent of people with AIDS contract TB, an infectious disease that ravages the lungs. Well, there you have it. No more mystery. The internet had confirmed my worst fears. It would be only a matter of time before I started hacking up bile and blood. Soon my athletic physique, something I had cherished since my high school days, would be melted away, leaving only bone. I would look like one of those African people with flies caked to their eyes.

I logged off and sat in my dark living room, nursing a beer. I panted like a dog. I could feel my heart racing. What was I going to do? AIDS: I said the word over and over in my head. It was the dirtiest word I knew, worse than fuck, nigger and cunt. It was a word I always saw at a distance, in a world so far away, and now here I was, stuck to it, like one of those blood-sucking bats from Tasmania at my throat.

I drank four beers with three Advil PMs. Soon I was asleep on the couch, my lungs laboring to keep me alive. Tomorrow would be another day. I would wake up with the knowledge of my demise but I would shower anyway. It was too soon to quit. I would load my backpack with books and walk out into the bitter morning cold, trying to convince myself that everything was fine, that a future was still possible. I would still graduate. I would still land a job. I would still get married. I would still buy a house. I would still have kids. I would still live long. I would die of old age. I would live. My mind tried screaming louder than my roaring bird lungs. I would live, goddamn it.

The next day I went to school. I was a graduate student at Oregon State University, studying writing. By then, I already had one Master's degree. I had big dreams. I was going to complete my final degree, land a teaching job somewhere, and write manically until I made a name for myself. I wasn't going to stop until I was in the end zone again. I was going to spike a ball on life and dance a touchdown jig and pump my fist to the crowd. You see, I had support, I had a following, I had people back home who would take a bayonet through the eye for me. They expected Egyptian pyramids from me. Whenever I'd go home, I'd stop by the old gym I used to work at and visit with my people. "You playing football up there in Oregon?" Ted Duere would ask me. Ted wore tank tops and mesh shorts year-round and liked to tell stories of his pickup basketball games. He knew how many yards I gained per reception since my freshman year. He ate the sports page for breakfast. "No, just writing now, Ted. Pure academics," I'd tell him. Ted would shake his head and grin. "Write about this crazy town then," he'd say. "And make sure I get the first signed copy." His hairy, fat arm would curl around my shoulders. He smelled like a locker room. "You'll make us proud; you always have been a bad motherfucker."

And then there was Emily, my fiancé. What a woman. She had dyed auburn hair I would literally feast on. I would take her hair in my mouth and chew on it. I would feel her hair in my mouth even after it was pulled from my lip and all I could do to forget the texture on my tongue was exhale and moan like an animal. In the mornings she would be on her side, turned away from me, and I'd snuggle close to

her, forming my body to hers, my hardness pressed against her buttocks, my nose entombed in that hair. The new day was in her hair, that intoxicating feminine smell, a sweet mix of everything: drawers, closet, bathroom, skin, the sun. I wanted her hair stroked across my naked body slow like feather clouds because there was no softer touch in the world. I wanted to be buried alive in that auburn hair. Suffocated in it. Tangled. I wanted to feast my tongue on the dandruff of that hair and lick my lips and cry. If given the chance, I would have made love to that hair and that hair alone. Emily.

Fuck, I was screwed. I had a fiancé I would eat bullets for and now it was over. No more hair. No more dreams. And not only that— Dear God! It hit me. She was as good as dead, too. Her blood was a boiling stew of lethal scum. No doubt I infected her. She trembled with pleasure as the germ spread through her body like cobwebs. She squeezed me and pressed her cheek against my chest, our wet limbs entangled. God must have looked at us from His cloud and said to Himself, “Now that’s what I call a Cocoon of Eternal Damnation.”

Halfway to campus I took a detour and went behind the basketball gymnasium and threw up. Kneeling on one knee, I stared down at my sizzling yellow puke. My head slumped against the building, first lightly, then with more force. I started banging my head into the wall; my eyes flamed with tears, my throat and nose coated in acid. God, please, I thought. Don’t allow this to be. Don’t take my life away. I’m sorry for everything. Not Emily, God. I’m sorry I’m sorry. Please don’t do this. Give me another chance. I kneeled in my puke for a while, praying. I said all the things everyone says when their balls are in a sling. I promised the world, so long as my veins weren’t feverish with the unthinkable, so long as my life continued on course. I promised to shitcan my vanity, my pursuit of glory. I would be a new man. I would follow His path. I would love Emily to the fullest. I would be the greatest husband, father and son in the world. The smaller things in life would become a giant school bus yellow balloon floating over my head. The scent of tree moss would make my limbs go slack. The sight of children running across playgrounds would make me weep. I would smile every morning when light cut my eyes. To feel tap water

running through my hands would give me goosebumps. Dear God, I swear this. Purify my veins.

I may have kneeled for a half-hour or more before getting up and dusting off my knee. My lungs pumped like hummingbird hearts. I focused on my breathing, collecting myself. I wasn't going to die, it was that simple. I was being dramatic. I was stressed from school and the thought of the future, that's all. I was suffering from allergies. Pull yourself together. There's no way in hell you have AIDS. The modern world has scared you into believing you have AIDS and cancer. You haven't lost any weight; you're still strong. You're healthy. You're still a bad motherfucker. I convinced myself of being AIDS-free. It was Oregon and the clouds and living alone and being away from Emily and my family and friends and fearing failure that was playing tricks on my mind. My lungs would heal and return to form. The bird eggs inside my chest would crack and sprout huge cocks with broad chests that screech "Cock-a-doodle-doo" with throaty soul each morning. I was still a bad motherfucker.

But why couldn't I breathe? The internet kept failing me. Nothing conclusive. What the fuck was in my body? Shredded tissue paper lungs. Dear God, it was that girl, that fucking girl with the spread ass waving in the air like a cannon waiting to fire. I readied myself for the blood-red phlegm to erupt from my throat. Soon I would be pale, my lips dried earthworms dusted in chalk. I looked at myself in the mirror. My thighs appeared sunken and bruised. My cheekbones seemed sharper. I was becoming skeletal. Look at my ass: it was wrinkling and flattening. And yet the scale said I still weighed the same. At the gym I lifted with the same ferocity. I felt fine. Except for my lungs. I had TB. Like Keats. I would die like Keats. I would pine for my love like Keats. I was not Keats, however. I had done nothing with my life except plow a bloated, dead cow that turned my dick into a weapon of futile destruction. Yes, she was a cow corpse left too long in the summer sun. It's a good metaphor, believe me.

When I was a boy, my father took me to Lake McClure to fish. The lake was only an hour from our valley home. To get there, we had to drive through dairy country. I remember having my head out the window—I loved the smell of cow shit.

It was a fresh smell I had grown accustomed to. Years later, when I first went away from the valley, I would desperately miss that scent. Cow shit was the perfume of my home, a sign you were among the great tradition of California farming.

So my head was out the window being blasted by this rich aroma, when along the side of the road, a bloated, dead cow appeared. It seemed larger than the goddamn Goodyear Blimp. The corpse was on its back, its legs erect in the air. The rest of it was so full of gases, a bee sting to its hide would have set off an incredible bomb. I don't know what I did, but somehow my dad got the impression I wanted to see this phenomenon up close. He pulled the truck over and together, with my dad holding my hand, we walked towards it. The cow shit fumes were gone, replaced with a wall of stench that bent my ears back. "That's bad," said my dad. I answered with a cough. But we were determined to study this ridiculous spectacle. Finally we reached it. The corpse's tongue hung out between its square, yellowed teeth. Flies covered the tongue and open eyeballs. The dead cow looked scared. It was the grossest, most absurd thing I had ever seen. I wanted to laugh, puke and cry all at the same time. And yet I was fascinated by it. I wanted to load it up in the back of the truck and take it home and watch it expand until it lifted from the ground and floated in the air above my town. I figured one day the cow would fill up with so much air that it would eventually moan and fart and sort of live even though it was dead. I wanted it on a rope as it flew above my town and bring it to school to show my friends. All the kids would ride on its back. Its name would be Bloated Dead Cow.

My dad pointed to the ground where a colony of maggots was burrowing into the cow's flesh. "Can we take it home, Dad?" My dad smiled and said, "Come on, let's get out of here." I stared at the corpse while my dad led me by the hand back to the truck. It was rotten. It was gross. It stank. It was dead. And it was beautiful. Just like that girl who infected me with AIDS.

I logged on to the internet, this time searching for the Oregon State University Health Clinic. I found the phone number and dialed.

A woman answered. "Student Health Services, this is Tina."

I hung up.

My balls started itching again. First just slightly, then severely. I couldn't scratch them enough. I clawed at them frantically, cursing God and Tina from Student Health Services and the disgusting whore that ruined my life.

Then my mom called.

"Hey Mom," I said, one hand still strumming chords down my pants.

"Hey there. Where have you been hiding, stranger? We haven't heard from you in a while."

"Sorry, I've been busy lately."

My mom's voice weakened me. If she found out about my condition, she would kill herself. I couldn't even tell her about the time I was arrested for being naked and drunk in public. She would be ruined. I might as well have cut her throat.

"Gary and I were wondering if you were still flying home for Spring Break. We need to figure out a ride for you from the airport."

Home. What home? There was no home anymore. If my suspicions were true, which I was 97.6% sure they were, I wouldn't be going back home ever again. It would be better that way. Disappear. Wither in a cave by the sea.

"Adam, did you hear me, dear?"

"Yeah, Mom. I still plan on coming home."

"Are you okay? You don't sound too good. Do you have a cold?"

Could she tell? "No, I'm all right."

"You sound like you're wheezing."

Oh God! "It's the phone, Mom. I'm fine. Don't worry."

"You getting enough rest up there?"

Jesus. "Yes, Mom."

"I worry about you up there all alone."

"There's nothing to worry about."

"Well, I can't help it. I'm your mother."

"I know. It's okay."

"All right, I'll change the subject. How's Emily?"

She's dead, Mom. And you'll be dead soon, too. We'll all be dead. And I won't see you in Heaven. You'll never see me again, at least the son you knew and

“Sounds good.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.” I’m so sorry.

“Bye, dear.”

“Bye, Mom.”

It was too early to cry. But I wanted to anyway. I was frustrated and scared and disappointed. I needed purging. My stomach was boiling.

I sat on my couch and told myself to cry. Cry, goddamn it! Not one tear came. I thought of Emily. I pictured the glow on her face as we walked through the wedding hall we had finally decided on. She took my hand and rushed me out on the sun-beaten courtyard and kissed me where we soon would become man and wife. Her albumen smile. Her creased eyes blinded by the sun. Her hand like a slow wiper blade on my back. Fuck me. No tears.

The bottom drawer in my kitchen was reserved for tools. Originally I was gunning for the hammer. But then I saw the steel wrench. With the wrench in my right hand, and my left hand planted on the cutting block, I struck with thunder. Three consecutive blows. I felt nothing until I was through striking. The skin broke immediately and bled. In minutes my hand was the size of a grapefruit. Finally I cried. I sobbed, actually. Big gallon-sucking sobs. I let my hand continue to bleed and throb. But the pain wasn’t what made me cry. It was the sight of my mangled hand; the knowledge that I had just done this to myself. First my raw dick, now my hand. Fear had driven me to self-destruction. I was becoming a lunatic, a howler at moons. I bawled at the thought of losing control of my life—of losing everything. I cried at the thought of losing.

Five beers and two Advil PMs. Blood stained sheets. Day over.

The university’s Student Health Center is located in the Plageman Building. From the outside, the building looks no different than all the other buildings on campus: ancient brick with newly laid sod and bark in front. Before entering, I sat on a bench across the way and watched the place. For an hour, no one entered or left the clinic. Was it even open? I looked at my hand, still scabbed and swollen. I wondered

about the doctors. Who were they? Why weren't they working at real hospitals? Would their diagnosis be any better than the one I could find on the internet? My shirt felt loose around the sleeves. My biceps were liquefying.

Finally a girl entered the building. She looked ordinary enough. Nothing about her suggested the clinic was reserved for outcast degenerates. How bad could it be? You walk in, go to the receptionist, give her your name, whisper your problem, sign some forms, and wait to be called. A gray-mustached doctor will come in and flash a smile and go about his business as though pouring himself a bowl of cereal in the morning.

I got up from the bench and started towards the building. I looked up at the sky: gray. Rain pegged my eyes. The trees rocked in the wind. If these trees could talk, their voices would screech like rabid bats and they would say: "Hell awaits your shuddering blood." I wanted an electric bolt from God to come down and smoke these trees but only rain fell. Oh well. Fuck these trees; fuck it all. Fuck this receptionist and fuck this doctor. Just give me the word: yes or no. After that, well, nothing will matter after that.

I walked inside, expecting to be lost in a labyrinth of hallways and doors. Instead I was standing in front of the receptionist's desk; a middle-aged woman with a stone face stared back at me. I froze in the doorway. I wasn't prepared for this; I wanted time to sniff the premises but now this woman slowly rotating gum in her mouth was gawking at me. She half smiled.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

It was here that I noticed the waiting room to the right of the entryway. Four young women—at first glance, all healthy looking—were sitting in chairs reading magazines. At the sound of the receptionist's voice, each of them turned to look at me. One of these girls had auburn-looking hair pulled back in a pony-tail. Time collapsed. I stood in the doorway, gazing at this girl's face, straining to see the color of her eyes. Could they be blue? We'll say a full minute went by where all I did was gaze at this poor girl's face—this girl that was no doubt waiting for a vitamin B12 shot to improve her studying endurance. Unfortunately, she averted her eyes before the receptionist's voice broke my daze.

“Sir?”

I turned and looked at the receptionist. She sat straighter in the chair and stopped chewing her gum. She turned her head, searching for help.

A cold draft touched my neck. I turned around and saw a tall black man in Oregon State apparel brush past me, knocking me off balance. A toothpick sprouted from his mouth. He looked me over with flared eyebrows and then moved on to the desk. While the receptionist assisted the black man, she'd periodically look past him to see if I was still quaking like an idiot in the doorway—which I was.

Finally I moved. It wasn't drastic, but at least my legs had loosened some. I roamed the small area between the doorway and the desk, pretending to read the posters on the wall: *Got Insurance? We Can Help. See the Receptionist for Details.* Who could afford AIDS? Only the rich. Only Magic Johnson. People like me, whose mom still scrubbed other people's toilets so she could fly her son home on holidays, were dead. At least \$60,000 a year was needed to keep an AIDS victim breathing. I was nearly that much in debt from school. So, you die. There's no pharmaceutical life support. I would go and die on the glaciated mountain where I first met Emily. It would be January. I would rent a four-wheel-drive SUV and plow up Highway 101 through the Sierras. Past the snoring town of Strawberry, near Lake Taboo, I would turn off and zigzag through snow-caked roads until I found that ivory mountain. I would trek through the whiteness and find the cabin and break down the door with a skull-shaped boulder. Once inside, I would make a fire and sit, watching Emily mix me that drink made of snow and vodka. She still wouldn't know me; she'd laugh again at the absurdity of my outfit: jeans, camouflage t-shirt, cowboy hat, blue Asics running shoes. Like before, the fire I make with magazines and dead tree limbs will flare up, and everyone will laugh except Michelle, the renter of the cabin. Then, after I am covered in a thick fur of drunkenness, I will grab Emily's hand and lead her out to the sledding mountain where the two of us will climb and slip and fall and laugh and feel no pain until reaching the summit, where we will then gather on the toboggan, the two of us, she between my legs, leaning against my chest, her auburn hair grazing my lips, and let go in a swoosh and fly down that cold, concrete mountain, air and ice spraying our faces, her hair in my eyes and her hands pressed into my hips, my left

ring finger scraping to the bone on the frozen surface, bloodying the mountain, a red comet tail, until spinning—the starry night close as apples above—and stopping and falling off our sled in each other’s arms, cushioned by the newly fallen snow. We’ll kiss; not long or hard, just a soft smooch with our eyes open, reflecting the moon. Eventually we’ll be soaked and shivering and forced inside. Everyone will be sleeping already: some sprawled on the floor, some in cots, a few in beds. Emily and I will find an island of carpet near the now flickering fire and lay together, our hands embraced. She’ll fall asleep first, emitting a growling snore. I’ll stay awake for awhile, my damaged finger staining the carpet red. Soon I will be asleep. I will do these things until I am dead.

“Excuse me, sir. Is there something I can help you with?”

The black man was gone. The receptionist was standing now. Two other women in nursing scrubs were behind her, holding clipboards. The black man, now sitting in the waiting room with large headphones stuck on his ears, was also looking at me with his toothpick swirling in his mouth. Only three girls now sat with him. They glanced up from their magazines sheepishly. I moved forward as though still treading through thick snow.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” asked the receptionist when I reached the desk.

“Yes,” I murmured.

“Are you a student here?” When she spoke, her nose wrinkled and her nostrils flared. She seemed either in pain or she was smelling something foul. Black hairs protruded from her nostrils. The birth of her child wouldn’t make this woman smile.

“Yes, and I teach as well.” I don’t know why I said this. Being a teacher only made things worse. This woman would think I corrupt young lives, that immoral people such as me should be left in the cold, away from the final hope for America.

“Okay, what seems to be the trouble?” After saying this, she sighed and bent her head to scratch her pale, mole-riddled neck. I hated this woman. Why would someone like this be working at a university health facility? Where was the bubbly blond with perfect teeth and squinting eyes that told jokes and wrote with a Bugs Bunny pen? Where was the jar of suckers? Where were the flowers? This place had

no color. If it wasn't for her cold brown eyes and puffy hair, the receptionist would have faded into the walls.

I could feel the eyes on the back on my head. I cleared my throat, leaned over the desk and whispered, "HIV test."

The woman didn't budge or squirm. Instead she announced to the world, "Okay, STD test. Let's see what times are available."

I wanted to jump over the desk and shit on this woman. You fucking bitch!

Right then a nurse came out into the waiting room and called one of the girl's names. The girl averted her eyes until the last moment before she was led around the corner and out of the room. She glanced at me. The look could have meant anything. But not really. Everyone was a judge. And precisely because of this, I would be forced to that cold California mountain alone to sled down its slope with my face being grated like cheese on the ice until hitting a tree at 30 mph and dying. The tree would say nothing.

"What day is best for an appointment?" Now she whispered? She was talking as though a slumbering baby was plopped on her lap. And there went her nose squashing again. Who smelled, lady? You or me? And why are you talking quietly all of a sudden? This lady had a funny bone after all. Inside herself, she laughed until tears and snot ran down her pale face. She was bent over inside, crying, holding her stomach. I wanted to cut a vein and bleed into this lady's mouth, smearing her coffee teeth red. Now who's laughing, bitch!

"Hello? Sir?"

I turned and walked out. This beast of a woman, this clinic, could go to hell. It was a sign from God: Your worries are foolish; live your life, stupid. Outside was thunder and rain. God, I hear you.

So my lungs were squirrel testicles, so what. That's not the worst thing that can happen to someone. I could still breathe—barely, but still. It wasn't like I was still running forty yard dashes. I didn't need stethoscoped doctors, I needed a shrink. My head was diseased. But curable. No doubt about it. I would be thirty soon. Tough age to be. The new mid-life crisis point. It made sense.

That day I breathed easier. Or I just think I breathed less. My head was the thing blowing into a brown paper bag, gasping for air.

The campus counseling service was located in Snell Hall. The building was made of faded red brick, five stories high. My therapist's name was Janice. After an hour of chatting about my recent medical concerns, she suggested I get an AIDS test.

"That's your advice?" I asked. I wanted to dive into my family history, my busted psyche, my intellectual insecurities, my sexual inadequacies, my fear of failure. Why would I need an AIDS test when it was all in my head?

"To clear your mind," said Janice, "I think a test would be best."

"You don't think it's something else?"

"For now, I think this is best. You'll sleep better if you know for sure."

Would I ever sleep better, Janice? Did I sleep before waking up at 3:30 that morning with the fear of my blood on fire? When did my lungs shrink? How long had it been since Emily stopped calling me after her shifts at Strings Italian Cafe, excited, clownish, calling me "B-a-y-b-a?" What day was it when the future decided not to rise above the mountains? When did my athletic swagger fade? When did God start playing possum? Who sleeps, Janice? Who? Tell me.

"Where else can I go for a test in this town?" I asked.

"There's a free clinic downtown. Sacred something or other. It should be in the phone book. Give them a try." Was Janice judging me? I didn't believe her smile. Her eyes were not genuine. Only her mouth creased when she smiled. Was there anyone on this campus who was qualified for something?

"Okay. I'll do it tomorrow. You're right. I want to sleep at night." I got up to shake her hand, and the unthinkable happened. She refused.

"Please don't be offended," she said. "I make it a policy not to have any physical contact with my clients. You understand."

Oh I understand, Janice. I understand perfectly.

I swore that if the results proved positive the next day, I wouldn't waste time going to my frozen mountain in California. A swan dive in the Willamette River would do.

I left on foot for Sacred Heart Health Clinic early on a Tuesday morning. The sky was clear and a deep blue you don't see in the California Central Valley due to the smog and swirling tractor dust. Birds, squirrels, dogs, people: they were all out prancing and sucking in the air. Old couples hand in hand breezed by me with smiles and hellos. I wanted to stop these people and ask them how they managed to stay in love so long. How did life's brown cloud of shit not unload its fury on them? How do their wrinkled clasped hands feel after all these years? If I have AIDS, will you still smile at me? I fucked a fat whore of a girl; she smelled and was diseased. Is there anything wrong with that in your eyes? Help me. Take me home. Feed me mashed potatoes and carrots. Hide me in your basement. Tell me what to do. Smile at me. Just don't walk away.

They continued down Monroe Street, heading towards the college, their tangled arms swinging. I walked the opposite way, towards the river.

The clinic was downtown among the old buildings. This neighborhood was the closest I would ever get to Mayberry. Not a speck of trash littered the gutters. Cars drove by, slow. The Post Office and the hardware store were vital social spheres. People on the streets knew each other and laughed and gestured towards the sky. I walked through this world with my legs turning to sand at the knees. What would the hefty, benevolent nurse say when I strolled through the door carrying the scent of these clean streets on my tainted skin?

I almost walked past the place without noticing it. I was expecting a facade of stainless steel, something modern and clean, not an aged wooden box suited for a German deli. Was this right? I read the chipped painted sign on the glass door and saw that it was in fact the right place. Instead of rushing in like a fool, I kept walking, then crossed the street. While on the other side, I stared at the building. People came in and out. Most of them were shabbily dressed with long stringy hair and beards. Some of them held dogs on rope leashes. They'd come outside to share a smoke, then head back in. Through the window, I could barely see the crowd inside. They all seemed to be lounging on couches, like it was a Super Bowl party. They were homeless.

Why were homeless people at the clinic? They couldn't all be sick, could they? And why were their goddamn dogs allowed inside? No fucking way I'm going in there and exposing my open vein. If I didn't have a disease before walking in there, I'd sure as hell have one afterward.

I started back towards the college. Maybe I'd wait it out. Focus on the positives. Emily. Family. Friends. My education. My dreams. My fucking adolescent dreams. Writing Art Movies Love Health Security Acceptance Contentment Love. Dreams. *You can do anything in life*. What does that mean? *Le Mepris*. Bring me to my knees, Lord. Fly me over the California traffic holding the kite string and bring me down on that beach of sand where two lovers roll and turn gritty and metallic in mud and evening light with the Hiroshimas of the world in the distance. *Mon Amour*. Make these Mayberrians laugh at me from their Volvos so I can dance across the desert plain with trumpets and flutes, hand in hand with those who loved me. I felt sick and dashed into an alley.

An hour or so later, I went back to the homeless shelter/health clinic. There was simply nothing to lose. I walked in, thinking everyone would stop what they were doing and stare, but that didn't happen. In fact, no one noticed me. I didn't know what to do. There wasn't any sign of a receptionist or someone taking names. In the main room to my right, there were homeless people sitting on soiled couches, watching *Pulp Fiction* on a television propped on a TV dinner tray. The volume was loud, and every time Samuel L. Jackson said "Fuck" the room erupted with cheering. To my left looked to be a kitchen or a break room. This room was also full of gaunt folks with stained and torn clothes. They sipped from Styrofoam cups and debated the merits of the Corvallis Police Department. A spotted, mangy German shepherd sniffed at my shoes. The entire place smelled like a wet dog that had been gang pissed on. There was no sign of a doctor. I stood nervously by the door.

Finally, a woman came by wearing green sweat pants and a Portland State t-shirt. She held a cordless phone in her hand.

"Excuse me," I said, "do you know if there is a doctor here today?"

Her smile revealed three top teeth. “Yep. He’s with someone. You need to see him?”

“If possible, that would be great.”

“What is it you need?”

The place was loud. “HIV test.”

“Okay. There’s quite a few ahead of you. Probably take two hours before he can see you.”

I didn’t want to wait two hours. What would I do? Where would I sit? There were no magazines. Samuel L. and his congregation ruled.

She must have noticed me surveying the premises. “You can leave and come back in a couple hours. I’ll hold you a place in line.”

I had come this far. “Okay. Great.”

She took my name but didn’t write it down anywhere. To leave, I had to step over the German shepherd, who was now sleeping and writhing from a dream.

I wandered the streets of Corvallis for an hour with my balls itching. I tried sitting on a bench across from the courthouse but had trouble staying still. The itch had moved from my balls down my leg to the heel of my foot. It was excruciating. I tried rubbing my heel against the bench but it didn’t assuage the army bayoneting its way out of my skin. The crust on my heel was too thick. I started crying. Not with tears or anything, just head-slumped-with-my-hands-in-my-lap-I-hate-the-world-please-let-me-breathe-in-sunshine-away-from-this-hell-and-bird-shit-that-just-splatted-on-my-jeans kind of crying. Then my phone buzzed. It was a text message from Emily:

Why aren’t you here to laugh with me?

It was too much. The two hours, the day, the life ahead—it was all too much.

For the remaining hour I went to Tommy’s Bar and sucked back three rum and Cokes while listening to a marathon of *Guns & Roses* blaring from the jukebox. I have no patience, Axl Rose—no patience for living, no patience for dying. Jesus Christ! What was happening?

Walking back towards the clinic I prayed. I said it all. There's no need to explain. I was a man on an airplane falling from the sky with my fingers dug three inches into the seat. I prayed my ass off. The only thing I was sure of was Emily. God, please don't let this ruin us. I begged.

Back in the clinic, things had quieted down. No longer was Samuel L. preaching profanities; no longer was the kitchen gang spraying spit at one another. The lady with three teeth saw me walk in and came over to me.

"He'll just be a minute," she said. She pointed towards a closed door. "Make yourself comfortable."

Comfortable? That was the word. It meant everything. Because of that word I was there to get my blood analyzed for parasites. Because of that word I went to college for nine years so I could obtain a stable life. Because of that word I got on a knee in Monterey, California and cemented love. Because of that word I had let so much of life pass me by. And now it was all about to end.

I sat on a pea soup colored couch and stared at the fuzzy TV screen. A talk show was on that I had never seen before. A man, presumably the host, was kneeling by a female guest and holding her hand. The woman was crying into a tissue. "It's going to be all right," said the man. "I'm going to make sure he'll never hurt you again." The woman's head dropped into her lap and she started shaking. Seizing the moment, the man stood and turned to the crowd. "We won't let this man hurt her again, will we, audience?" The crowd erupted. I turned away.

Thirty minutes later, after sitting on crumbs of food and dog hair and playing gatekeeper to the insidious thoughts trying to sack my mind, a large dark skinned man with a shaved head similar to mine came out the secret door and smiled and waved me over. He wore khaki pants and a black polo shirt.

Fuck, here we go. Put your cards on the table. Nut up. Either way, at least you'll know. After that—well, after that is after that.

The doctor shook my hand and led me into a room no bigger than a janitor's closet. Cramping the space were bottles of strange fluids, machines, tubes, and bags of needles, cotton swabs, Band-aids, and biohazard waste. We sat down in chairs and exchanged names. He made small talk to put me at ease. His voice was foreign (later

he'd tell me he was from the Caribbean). He asked me if I was having any health problems that would lead me to believe I had HIV. I told him about my breathing and how I read about TB. He shook his head. There was no way I had AIDS-related TB because that occurred in the late stages of the disease. "Probably allergies," he said. Okay, okay, I thought, don't get your hopes up. I told him I was getting married and how I wanted the test done for peace of mind. He smiled. "Of course," he said. "You're doing the right thing." He patted my knee. "Just relax and think of your fiancé. We'll be done soon."

Here's what happened: No large-scale drawing of blood, just a finger prick. The speck of blood was placed in a small container and then the container was put in a small machine. From there, I don't know what happened. The machine cooked the blood or something for twenty minutes, and depending on the color of the blood sample after it'd been cooked, the doctor knew if I was dead or not.

For those twenty minutes all I did was stare at the machine that was cooking my blood. Was my blood changing colors? I had to prepare myself, mentally. What are you going to do? Who will you call? How are you going to carry this jagged weight? The doctor tried chatting with me. He told me about his life, which seemed interesting if I was in a state to actually absorb it all. He asked about my life. I told him what I could with one eye on that machine. A red light blinked. I watched this light, waiting for inconsistencies in the blinking pattern. Every once in a while the doctor would peek at the machine. Were his eyebrows contorting? Did he bite his lip? What the fuck is it, Doc? Tell me. Shatter me. Yes, I'm clean cut. Yes, I'm healthy looking. Yes, I have the world at my fingertips. Yes, I'm about to be wed. But hit me, Doc. Give it to me straight. Stop smiling. Quit your fucking pacifying—

"Hmmm," he muttered after looking at my blood.

My vision grained white.

He looked at me and noticed the hole in my face. "Oh, jeez, sorry. Did I scare you? It's fine. Your sample looks good."

Breathing again—labored, but breathing. "I'm fine?"

“Well, it’s not finished yet, but normally for a sample to be positive, it would have showed signs by now. Yours hasn’t changed. We’ll give it a few more minutes just in case.”

I could taste her hair gliding over my tongue!

My baking blood never changed colors. “Get your lungs checked,” said Doc. “This valley is one of the worst places for allegeries.”

I wanted to kiss the shaved scalp of this man and cry at his feet. “Thank you so much.” I was practically weeping.

“My pleasure, Adam.”

I walked out of the clinic with sheets of rain driving into my face. Some of the homeless people I’d seen earlier were loitering out front with their dogs and cups of coffee. They all looked sad and freezing. But they would live. We would all live. I bid them all good-bye and they smiled.

I started home. But after a block, something urged me to turn around. So I did. I needed to see the river. I wanted to see the brown rush of water curling and collapsing while the rain tore like talons into the river’s flesh. I wanted to hear and smell this violence. I was cold and wet and suddenly thirsty. My tongue thickened. But I walked on, my posture never more erect. I opened my mouth and drank the rain. It wasn’t enough. I was so thirsty. It was the three rum and Cokes from earlier. When did I last drink water? It didn’t matter. I could hear the river. It was right there, that big fucking river. So big. Bigger than any river at home. Only canals where I come from. Everywhere. Sometimes they’re full and determined; sometimes they’re dry and littered with things no one wants to see again. Who knows where all the water goes anymore? Swimming pools, maybe?

I found a spot under a tree on the shore. The rain had lightened. The sky was solid gray with no sign of clouds. I sat in the mud and watched and listened as the river pounded its way towards the Pacific. Dear God, I promise I will be a better person now. That poor girl wasn’t a whore, God. She wasn’t. It was me, God. It was all me. But no more. You have my word. Believe me. No more.

I tried calling Emily but her phone was off. (Why was her phone off in the middle of the day?) So I left her a message:

“Hey babe! I just wanted to tell you a crazy story. You won’t believe it. I promise it will make you laugh. And it’s a happy ending. Call me back. I miss you and love you.”

She would eventually call me back. She would call me back another 238 times. But that would end. We would end. No more “bay-ba;” no more hair. Nothing in my blood could have changed that.

In the days following the test I would walk straight down the sidewalk with my limbs loose and my back and shoulders square. My eyes would squint from the sunlight and I would smile. Sometimes I would stare at the sky while walking and find myself dizzy and nauseous. I’d sit on a bench or a curb in a cold sweat and wait for the breeze to cool me. In the distance would be the mountains covered in snow. They were so close.

I would fuck up again. God would find Himself bound and gagged in the trunk. Blond hair would slide across my tongue leaving a bitter grease trail. I would puke for no reason. Back in California, I’d wallow with old friends through bars trying to relive or sustain the power of worth. Everything about me became an illusion on a horse-drawn pauper’s stage. I knew better than to strike the heroic gaze towards the Pacific holding my sword. There was nothing in the sky. Traffic was everywhere, going nowhere. People would stare with dead eyes. Dreams were no longer exciting. Nothing mattered beyond me. The world was so small. I gave up.

On the flip side, my lungs improved. It might be a stretch to say I could run like a flaming antelope again, but still, I could breathe without clenching my fists and wanting to Donkey Kong my chest to a pulp. And like my lungs, life would get better. Every deep breath I took, the world got a little bigger. Avenues cleared. People looked the other way. I started watching the sky again. On good days—I’m talking days when you clap your hands before getting into the shower while you’re humming your favorite tune, days when the only way to erase your smile is by grinding it on asphalt, days when you drive slow down the highway because you don’t want to miss a single detail of the staggering world—I look at the sky and see my bloated, dead cow

floating grandly over the rooftops. My playground friends and I are on its back, jumping and hollering. The hovering dead cow lets out a massive moo. Sometimes it farts. We all cheer and slap hands. It's incredibly big.

