

WYOMING WAS GOOD TO US

By

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by

Jonathan Luke Brown

This collection is dedicated to Charlotte, Tucker, and Allie Sue, my little girl.

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This collection of nine stories pivots on the notion of characters moving emotionally and physically from one landscape to another. Throughout each fictional piece I tried to give a voice to characters who are incapable of separating themselves from the past. Many of these stories open with absurd, almost ludicrous circumstances, and move into a deeper state of suffering. However, in other stories, I began with a serious tone and later brought comedy into focus. My intention in this collection was to verbalize the diversity of human emotion, while recognizing the impulse, the need, to appreciate life. The purpose of this thesis was to artistically express how human thought and human emotion do not exist in a vacuum.

WHAT YOU LEFT

I leave the baby in the backseat of the car by accident. You come home from work with our two-year-old son squeezing your shins and you ask me, “Where is she?”

I rub my palms together and I say “In the backyard?” because I don’t remember where I left the baby, and I want to be funny, and I think funny might fix this. But it doesn’t work that way. “Did you leave her in the car?” you demand. But you don’t wait for an answer. You turn and you power down the hallway and the front door swings open and it doesn’t shut.

When you walk into the kitchen, the baby on your hip, you close your eyes and say, “You forgot her.” And that’s when I know that we are done.

Before you leave for Chicago I catch you packing one of my t-shirts into your suitcase. I sit on the bed and say, “This can’t be right, you leaving like this.”

“No, it can’t be,” you say. You press down on your bras, your diaphragm, your spaghetti noodle dresses, and you zip the luggage.

The taxi picks you up and a man with a moustache loads the suitcase, the stroller, and your handbag into the trunk. The cab drives off and no one waves out the back window.

After you’re gone, I stand and wait in the driveway and think of you:

At the airport you board a flight for Chicago. In the sky you hold our two kids on your lap. Your mother waits for you at the baggage carousel and when you arrive she kisses you on the cheek and pulls the baby out of your arms and says, "I can't believe this." You bend over the spinning luggage and pull your suitcase up off the carousel and say, "Mother, please."

That evening I teach my night class at the community college. I write a few sentences on the blackboard and I make my students repeat them. "The town was destroyed by the storm," I say out loud. A girl in a pink miniskirt raises her hand and wiggles her fingers, and I call on her with a ruler, and she repeats the sentence and makes it active. "You're quick," I say. I erase the form of "to be" and replace it with "destroy."

After the bell, the girl in the pink miniskirt walks up to me with a spiral notebook pressed to her chest and touches my hipbone and says, "I see what you're up to."

"You do?" I ask.

"You're trying too hard."

As I walk out of class she surprises me by giving me a pinch on the butt.

I'm walking home when I start thinking of you again. Only this time you are at your mother's house, your feet on her lap, a wine glass in hand. She is rubbing your calluses and it makes you squirm. You take a sip of wine and your mother tells you to relax, to let it ride. Then she says, "You have so much more ambition than that guy."

When I get home I see something horrible. The toys are unused and scattered everywhere. A bulldozer on the rug, a rubber duck stuck to an ice tray, a fire truck in the sink. I go to the bathtub and sit inside it with all my clothes on. Then I squeeze off my shoes and fill it up.

That night I go to a rooftop bar. People talk in cigarette voices, a glass of beer spills on a fog machine, a dancer jiggles her boobs. I sit down at a table with a woman who replies, “No, we’ve never met at the Pizza Hut.”

“I’m sure of it,” I say.

She dips three fingers into a daiquiri and scoops up a wad of cream and licks it off and dives two knuckles back in and pinches out a cherry. Then she pulls it off the stem with her two front teeth and looks at me closely.

“You look like a ghost,” she says. She picks up her purse, sticks a dollar bill under a saltshaker, and scoots off.

A waitress in a tube top walks up to my table and asks me if I need something.

“I’m not sure,” I say.

“To drink,” she adds, and she pulls her tip out from under the saltshaker.

Something about the direction of the conversation feels tricky, but I say “yes,” and she comes back with a pitcher of foamy beer. “Keep them coming,” I say, and she does.

I get drunk immediately and tip her enormously. When I run out of cash I spread open my wallet and empty out all the change onto the table. I ask the waitress for the ATM and she points to a machine and I withdraw everything from our account.

But then, when I get back to the table with two fives, a different waitress is standing there. Only this one is wearing a paper apron and holding a barbeque sauce tray. She smiles halfway and her braces make everything inside her mouth look mechanical and gummy. She stacks the empty beer glasses on a round tray and says, "I'll be your server now."

"No," I say. "What about the one in the tube top?"

"Her shift is up," she says. Then the lady with the braces walks off and I nod my index finger at her back and I say, "Don't you do this to me."

After the rooftop bar I take a cab home and fall into the house. That's when I discover that my left foot refuses to move in front of the right foot. So I give up on my feet and I take to the floor and I drag myself around the house with my hands.

I haul my body through the kitchen and flop onto my back and pick up the phone and try to dial your number. The battery is dead. Then I flip back over and get on my knees and dig through the laundry basket and fish out your ventilated jogging shirt and I press it around my face. I can sniff you, the sweetness, and I crunch my eyelids shut and try to will you home.

When I call you the next morning, I ask you to come home.

“The grass is yellow outside. It hasn’t rained in months. It refuses to,” you say.

After that, we don’t get past “the kids” before arguing.

For a very good reason, I call up my student in the pink miniskirt. I can’t explain it to her, so I just say, “Could you just do that? Come over?”

She answers, “No.”

Ten minutes later she arrives in a black convertible. I open the front door to my house and she walks under my arm and through the doorway.

“Have a seat,” I say.

“Is there something wrong, Teach,” she says.

“Possibly.”

She sits on the armrest and snaps off her heels. She is wearing pantyhose.

“You’re married?” she asks, and points her toe at the wedding photo.

“Oh, that old thing. It’s staged,” I say.

“You, like, have kids don’t you?” She picks up a rag doll and dangles it by its red hair. “I love kids so much.” Then she lets go of the doll and it drops to the carpet.

“Uh huh, me too. Right.”

“So. I know why you called me, Teach.”

“You do? Well, we can go over that. ”

“Look, this is the deal, Teach.”

“Right. The deal.”

“Where’s your wife?”

“Out to lunch.”

“And the kids?”

“Daycare.”

“It’s got to be fast and I need an “A” out of it.”

“I agree with that.”

“Perfect,” she says, and claps her hands and pulls off her pink miniskirt.

I sit and wait and look out the window.

Then she bends over and hugs my neck and her arms feel thin and I don’t like it.

“You are so hot,” she whispers into my ear. She is only wearing a bra.

“Thanks,” I say.

“I mean, like, so hot.”

“Okay, you’re overdoing this.”

“Sorry, Sorry.”

After it is done we shake on the “A” and she hops into the convertible and drives off and her hair blows to one side of her face and she honks.

I sit down at my desk and fire up the computer. I try to write a letter to you but all that comes out is the word “stop.” I type it out, look it over, and decide this will work. When I’m done I print, I fold, I lick, I send, I wait.

I'm not sure how long it will take for my letter to reach you. But when it comes through the mail you will notice that it is from me. Our son will be running around your mother's house. The baby will be crawling and have one more tooth. You will pat her back and she will fall asleep on the floor. Your hair will be slightly longer and your skin slightly more fair. You will sit down at the table with a cup of tea. Then, at the right moment, you will take out my letter, unfold it, read it out loud, and the next word that comes out will be for me.

THE WOODS

People walked on the sidewalk with plastic cups of beer. That meant it was around 2 when we left, because that's when bars unload, and that's when we thought we could blend into the crowd and go up into the hills unnoticed. I have no idea what people do after the bars close, but it has something to do with snow covered cars and driving too fast and music and tires and being alone and loaded and feeling fuzz in your head.

On our way to the hills we drove past a beer joint where I saw my father, Doug, in a hurry. He was walking on the sidewalk on his knees for a couple of girls. He is a true dumb fuck, but I like him for the most part, because unlike myself, he's not afraid to shed his shit. I like my father and I don't want to go into it.

In Wyoming people take after my father: they sing, perform, dance, get drunk. Or they wail and moan straight from the gut. I'm exaggerating. But that's what we do here. We juice things up and then get drunk. That's Wyoming. People exaggerate and get drunk and do whatever it takes to get as fucked up as humanly possible. Which, believe me, is the best you can do for yourself.

Tonight Cindy and I are trying to find out what perfect feels like. That's why we park in the snow at the top of the mountain and look out at the Wyoming sky and the Wyoming moon and the Wyoming clouds. Out front the pine trees are stuffed with snow. Cindy takes my hand in hers and says, "Do me." I am promising myself I will never live anywhere outside of this state.

"I will never live outside of this state," I say.

“Me neither.”

“I’ll do you, but on one condition. We have to stay in this car, right here, all night,”

I say.

Cindy squeezes my hand. I’ve known Cindy since I could count fingers.

“The thing is, Tom, I’ve got to talk about something. About Joe.”

“The prairie nigger?”

“Right. But don't say that.”

One thing about Cindy is an ex-boyfriend she had. Joe was what in Wyoming we call a prairie nigger. I’m sure that in other states they call them that too, but here it sounds worse. So the prairie nigger, Joe, Cindy’s ex-boyfriend, turned up dead in the hills. They found him lying on a plastic bag and some rocks. And when they flipped him over, blood was coming out of his eyes. He was involved in something, but no one knew what, and then they found him dead, and they figured it out quick. Meth, they thought. But it wasn’t Meth because Indians don’t do it. That much should have come easy, but it didn’t. The next day the police brought in ten people. I was one but then they let me go after they had a look into my eyes and determined they weren’t yellow from fertilizer.

So Cindy was the target. But she turned up spotless on the pisser and blew a clean blow. She was questioned and brushed off into rehab for the next six weeks even though she had nothing to do with it. In Wyoming it’s easy to be thrown into rehab. And so that’s what happened to Cindy. Around that time she started putting a lot of dick in her mouth.

One blowjob, she told me, was with a man from rehab. He was nice to her when it served him. Then one night, Cindy said, “Sure, sure, fine, fine, whatever,” and gave him a blowjob in the back row of the Valley City Cinema.

After that she wiped her face with her palm and they took off to his friend's house. The friend lived in a basement. But the basement had no windows or stairs and so they had to open a latch and climb down a ladder to get inside.

Down in the basement, a man Cindy had never seen before turned on a light and looked at her from behind the lampshade. This surprised Cindy and she stepped back. The man said, "Hello, Cindy." There were beer cans stacked in a pyramid on a green pullout poker table. The concrete floor was covered in liquor bottles. A Styrofoam egg crate was spread out in a corner and had dog bites and holes in it. He told Cindy to "Simmer down."

The boy from the movie theater said, "Here you go, man."

Then the man who said, "Hello, Cindy," took out a three-foot bong, flicked a lighter, and pulled up bubbles and smoke. He took his lips up off the ring, tilted his head back, held in the smoke, and blew out a tunnel across the room. Cindy said, "Give me one," and pulled one up too.

That's when the guys started getting ideas. And the two guys had a buzz going and they were taking down beers and cracking jokes and this made everything seem doable. So the guy that said, "Hello, Cindy," tells her to *come over here*. He pulls out a wooden chair for her to sit down on and kicks it over to her. Then he cuts up a big, fat line of Meth with a razor and offers it up. It's yellow and chunky and it would kill a grizzly bear if it got a whiff of it. Cindy says, "I'm feeling kind of sick." Which she was. She was feeling faint and dizzy and she got on her knees. Then the guy who said "Hello, Cindy," unzipped his fly and put it in her mouth.

When he was done, the guy who said, “Hello, Cindy,” zipped up his fly and goes, “Don’t do a bump if you don’t want to. I’m just tryin’ to get you relaxed.” And he sniffed up the line and stood up. He didn’t have a shirt on and his leather wallet was hanging down from a chain and he had two nipple rings and a tattoo of Jesus on his back. But Cindy was already up the ladder, and she shut the latch and disappeared into the prairie.

“So that’s the guy that killed him,” Cindy tells me. “I know it.”

“The prairie nigger you mean?”

“Don’t call him that.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Don’t call him that.”

“Sorry.”

But I believed her. One thing Cindy is not, is some broken up, nasty, lightbulb smoking crank head. I can pretty much let the other stuff fly. She has a good eye, that much I know. Also, I trust her when it comes to people. Not so much judgments, but people.

I’m staring at the moon and sky and it feels empty, like you could make an echo from up this high, hear a thousand voices yelling back at you, one big “Hello, Wyoming.” I want to turn the subject away from murder and drugs, either to echoes or the “do me” thing.

Cindy pulls out a Twizzler from her purse and peels off the plastic package, takes a bite, chews on it.

“That’s the one who killed him,” she says, and nibbles softly and swallows some of it down. Then she zips her purse. “It’s freezing,” she says. Her hair is hay-colored and long and some of it is sticking out from under her scarf.

“Hold on, baby,” I say, my Mafia voice. I turn the car back on and throttle the engine and hot air pushes out of the vents. I crack the window and blow out smoke. It’s windy outside so the smoke vanishes. The headlights are on and they purr and illuminate the snow and the pine trees in front of the car.

“Okay then, baby,” she says, mocking me.

Once, I had a robot voice going for over a year and she let it slide. “I respect that,” she told me. Another time I saw her at the public pool in a bikini talking to a lifeguard with muscles and hamstrings and a six-pack you could strum a spoon down. I walked over to them and poured a carton of milk over the lifeguard’s head. “That was fucking funny,” Cindy said, in her bikini. And the lifeguard was all white and wet and ghost colored and opening his hands and reaching for me.

“Feel warmer,” I say. I want to see if her face says, *Take me home*, so I look at her hard. It doesn’t. It says, *Keep me here*. I smoke to the butt and I light another. I smoke and look at her. I smoke and I smoke and I smoke.

Cindy says, “This car is a piece of junk.” She’s rubbing her hands together.

It’s a junk car, admittedly, and I know that. The drapery hangs from the ceiling. The oil leaks. And the car is only fast down hills and you have to pump the brakes to play it safe. But I’m relatively happy with it.

“I’m relatively happy with it,” I say.

“I'm happy with it too,” she says, and smiles. I can tell she means it because when she smiles like that for no reason she is really, truly, absolutely happy.

Outside, the wind is spraying snow into the headlights. This makes two tunnel shapes that dart out and dead-end in the sky. A breeze plows through the trees and the snow dumps off the branches in large bread loafs. Then the wind picks up and tosses the pine trees back and forth. The car windows vibrate.

Cindy catches a chill and she shakes it off.

“It'll heat up soon,” I tell her.

She loops the scarf around her neck a couple of times and tightens it with a tug. I'm not cold. Cold does not register for me. I am immune to cold. Cindy is next to me. I am not cold. I could give a fuck about the cold.

“Better,” she says, and stuffs the twizzler into the ashtray and shuts it. “Let's do it,” she says. “Just to say we did.” She pinches the skin on my knuckle.

“Okay then,” I say, and I touch her thigh. She has said this to me before and will probably say it again.

“All right,” she says.

“Good.”

“I've got to warn you. I'm a bit rusty at this,” she says. Which is a lie, but I appreciate a lie from time to time.

“Right. Me too.” Which isn't a lie.

“This is as nice of a place as any, right?” Cindy says. She is petting the inside of my wrist.

“There is nothing here,” I say, which is also true and the reason I chose this spot. No people. I don't want to be around people. I never want to be around people. People, if they could, would pick Cindy up by the ankles and dangle her off a bridge and then let her drop. They would do that because in Wyoming, in the valley, Cindy has a reputation for putting dicks in her mouth. And when you have a reputation for putting dicks in your mouth, people have problems with you. You make enemies, burn bridges, lose power. I don't care if she puts dicks in her mouth. That's her choice. All I care about is that we are out here in nothing land.

“I like it,” Cindy says, and puts her head on my shoulders. Good. Stay there. Keep your head on my shoulder.

“It's kind of out of the way, I know, ” I say. I want her to laugh, but she doesn't.

She keeps her head on my shoulder and sighs. There are mountains and woods and snow and sky.

I roll the window down a crack and hold the lit portion of the cigarette outside. Then I roll the window back up and the glass cuts the cigarette in two and the ember falls off into fluff and I rotate the handle all the way back up and the glass seals and vibrates. Cindy shivers and her head bumps against my shoulder. Then I put a fresh cigarette in my mouth and let it dangle from my lip.

“Let's do this,” Cindy says.

“All right,” I say.

She looks down at my crotch.

“Not there,” I say, and spit the cigarette on my lap.

“I want to do it the real way.”

“Me too,” I say, but I have no idea what I mean by that.

Her face moves to mine. Her eyeballs zoom up closer and they are white and solid with little red wiggles. Her breath is sweet and taste likes milk coffee. Her lips are pink and quick and thin and suckable. Her breath slows down and touches my nostrils and lips and eyelashes. I like this kind of thing. Give me sugar and snow and night and girl breath and I will be in fucking heaven.

“Should I turn off the lights?”

“I’m worried,” she says.

“You think my parents know?”

“They do,” she says, and she touches the back of my neck with fingernails. A witch’s touch. “Certainly.”

“All right,” I say, and wipe her hand off my neck.

She moves closer. Her hair is wavy and tan and smells like shampoo. Her eyes are puddle gray and I want to see myself in them. She kisses me and slips her tongue in a little. Then she stops kissing, leans back, and looks down.

I take the time to look her over: white shoulders, collarbone, skin, squeezables, firm runs, soft spots, seams. She is warm and close and I can smell her shampoo hair. Outside, the mountains and snow and trees and wind are making crackling sounds and that fits in too somehow. I pull at her scarf, down to the thin spot on her neck, right above the chest plate.

“I want this,” I say.

“I know,” she says.

We are speaking in code. I hate code talk, but I talk it anyway.

I reach down and slide my hand between her thighs. This makes her eyes open and her legs spread a touch. Then she pinches my hand with her legs and the pressure of it feels good.

So I keep going with it and move my hands to Cindy's side and up her ribs. Lift the shirt, feel the skin.

She stops. "If we are going to run away somewhere, it might as well be now," she says.

"Where to?" I say. Take me anywhere. Let's go. Let's run. Let's drive.

"There," she says. She nods her head at what looks like a cloud behind a frosted window.

"I don't see it," I say.

She pushes my chin in the right direction and wipes the window with her palm.

"There," she says.

I see a white puff of industrial light. A city.

"Fuck no," I say, and look at the side of her face. I know where she is pointing. I recognize the glow. I know that is a place we do not need to be, but that is where we will go. Because that is where we can check into a motel room and have sex together and sleep it off: skin, kiss, spread, scratch, hair, liquid seam.

"Crystal City," she says.

With its beer joints and neon lights and prairie niggers and middle school girls who pull up their plaid skirts to their hip bones and flip their tongues at you.

“Sort of like a honeymoon,” Cindy says. And sticks her finger into my side and tickles me on the rib.

I stare at her. “No. Not really, Cindy.” I hear a pile of snow drop from a tree and thud on the roof.

Cindy snaps her fingers and says, “Your move.”

Her legs are crossed. I snap my fingers back at her. Her mouth opens and I see the tops of her teeth.

“Drive,” she says, and points to the city.

“No,” I say.

She smiles, holds it, touches my cheek. We go.

* * *

I know Doug like the back of my mouth. After the bar, he would make it through the frozen prairie and to the porch and hold on to the railing and climb the steps. There's a swing chair hanging on chains and Doug would find it with a hand and sit down. He'd catch his balance and jiggle his foot inside his boot and attempt to pull it off. But the boot wouldn't budge and he would tip over. “Goddamn it, boot,” he'd say.

This would go on for a while: falling on his ass and cussing the boots and laughing out loud. Out in the prairie there would be a zigzag trail carved out from the snow. That would be the path that Doug cut out on his way home from the bars. There would spots in the snow where the boots punctured the crust, and then there would be craters where Doug struggled and fell over and fished around on his back. A tiny herd of elk would

graze the prairie, white steam blowing out their nostrils. They would notice Doug, turn their heads, sum him up, and go back to pulling grass and snow with their teeth.

Doug would pull the boot again and this time it would slide. So there's Doug sitting on the porch, cussing at himself. And there's the zigzag path out in the prairie with the elk eating the grass under the snow. And my mother would open the door and add it all up. It's a giveaway. She would pull a string and a naked light bulb would twinkle and she would walk right up to him.

“You're drunk,” my mother would say, and slaps him across the face.

“Well, yeah, sure. There's circumstances involved,” Doug says. Steam clouds his face. He would stand and wavers and looks at my mother.

“Like what?” my mother says.

“Well there's Tom, for instance. Take our son and the deal he's in. Chasing after Cindy, trying to get in her underpants. He's going to wind up with someone else's baby. You watch.”

“What deal? He doesn't like school, Doug. He doesn't like you, Doug. So what? He doesn't like cows or guns or potatoes or hunting or any of that. He is a typical seventeen-year old boy who likes a girl. Give him credit. You, on the other hand, are a fat, old cow: moping around from one bar to the next, spilling your guts, running your lips, coping a feel. The nerve.”

“That's a tad harsh,” Doug says, and holds in a belch.

“I bet you were even doing the walking-on-the-knees routine. Weren't you, Doug? I bet you were.”

“I was shooting pool.”

“Ugh,” my mother exhales, and slams the door. The light bulb would spin on the cord.

Doug would hear the dead bolt and dig inside the tube of his sock and fish out the house key and jiggle it in the keyhole and roll the doorknob and pop it open and stagger inside and un-loop his belt and fall to the couch. The television would be on and he would leave it that way.

On the couch, his smooth, whale belly would rise. His chest would inflate with air. His little male tits would slump down and he'd pick one up and squeeze it. His face would itch and he would paw at his cheek. The television would be on, something about a car bomb exploding in the desert. Doug would turn on his side and push a pillow between his knees, and he would snore and choke a little bit and regain his breath. At some point during his sleep his penis would engorge with warm, thin blood that would flush to the crown and harden into a flagpole, and then within seconds would soften into a tube of limp skin.

* * *

Cindy and I are standing in nap weed next to a creek. Water is tumbling and bubbling up under the ice along the bank. We're just outside of Crystal City and I can see factories and buildings with pollution hovering above. The wind is warm and sluggish and the snow is melting. Cindy and I are waiting for someone. I don't know exactly who or why, but we are.

Cindy says, “It won't take long.”

“We should check into a motel,” I say. “Drink some beer. Get some sleep.”

“Tom. It'll just be a minute.” She puts her lips up to my ear and whispers, “He'll be here soon. Then we can go.”

Her breath tickles. “Who?”

“They guy from the basement. I'm going to ask him a couple questions.” Cindy reaches for my hand. It is soft. The clouds roll off the mountains.

“I don't want to meet him. I don't want that.” I am a coward and always will be.

“He knows what happened. I can tell. I'll talk to him and figure it all out and then we can go. Deal?”

“Fine, deal,” I say. And leave it at that. Whatever the deal is I don't want to be a part of it, but I'm stuck.

I pull out a cigarette and smoke it and look at the creek. The nicotine is not as good as the kissing and the whispering, but it's a buzz, and the best I can do for now. I spit something brown into the pebbles. The ice water from the creek washes over it and melts it away.

“Is this going to be good or bad?” I say.

“Mixed up,” Cindy says.

“What does mixed-up mean?”

“It's means neither good nor bad. It'll be quick. If he killed him, he killed him. If he didn't, he didn't. I just need to know, you know?”

“What will be quick?”

She's frustrated. “Our talk. It'll be quick.” She turns.

I hear gravel and a car pulls up and parks by mine. A man shuts a door and walks up to us in the nap weed. He's got a diamond stud stuck to his ear, and a beeper and a cell

phone attached to his belt. His Adam's apple looks like a rock. He's wearing combat boots and a black jacket. To be honest, I expected more from him.

"Who's this?" he says.

"Tom," I say.

"I'm hungry. Let's go somewhere," Cindy says, and pulls my sleeve.

"Funny," the man says. "Because you called me, Cindy." He pulls the cell phone off his belt and looks at the screen for calls. Satisfied, he slides the phone back into his back pocket as if it were some kind of gun. He is wearing a fake gold watch that is heavy and fat and sparkles.

The wind pulls a piece of plastic out of the nap weed and into the creek. I follow the wrapper downstream until the plastic presses into the water and disappears.

"Is he getting the royal treatment or what?" the man says, rubbing his hands together, staring at me.

There are people who take matters into their own hands. Then there are people like me who leave their arms wide open and watch everything fall through.

"Did you do him in? Did you kill him?" Cindy asks, and starts to break a little, and kicks at the sand.

He crumples a Burger King Whopper wrapper up in his hands and throws it in the water, as if this proves things. The wrapper soaks up and turns soggy and sinks. "No, I didn't," he says. "I wouldn't be here if I did." Then he pauses. "I like you, Cindy," he says, and he means it. He puts his hand in the nap weed and picks at it.

Cindy's face begins to heave. Her eyes are wet and she is standing in the sand shaking.

"I'm going for it," I say, and I start into the water for the Whopper wrapper. Cindy chews her knuckle.

Then the man with the combat boots sees me up to my shins in ice and water and pulls me back by the forearm.

I say, "Cindy, lets get out of here. Anywhere. The fanciest hotel we can find. A suite with caviar and a Jacuzzi and champagne glasses and a big, fat bed. That's what we need. And a pair of fluffy pillows. You know what I mean, man?" I look at the guy with his beeper and his combat boots and his fat, fake gold watch.

"I do. I know exactly what you mean," he says.

"Good," I say. "Because I am this girl's neighbor and she wants to be with me and I want to take her home."

"Who did it?" Cindy says, and she starts crying and punching the man's chest.

"No clue," he says.

I pull Cindy off him and drag her to the car.

"Let go of me, Tom," she says, and jerks her arm free.

Cindy ducks into the passenger side, stands the purse between her shoes, crosses her arms. Then she wipes the back of her hand across her eyes and says, "Get going, Tom. We're wasting valuable honeymoon time." She slams the car door. The man in the nap weed squats down and looks at the creek.

I start up the car and spit up some gravel and we coast down the road. Cindy watches trees and rocks and trailers move past us out the window. I need to smoke when I

drive, so I do. Cindy needs to sit and stay quiet, so she does. No more blow jobs, no more dead Indians, no more mountains, no more chunky lines of Meth, no more waiting around, no more Wyoming. Just the sound of the car and the road falling behind us.

* * *

“Tom isn't here,” my mother would say, shaking Doug off the couch.

“Huh.”

“Tom's is missing. Get up, Doug. Get up.” The room is black. My mother flicks a switch and the light explodes into Doug's pupils and he rubs his eyes with the butt of his fists.

“He's probably under the covers. Check there.”

“He's not Doug. I called Cindy's already. Up, up, up,” she screams, and shovels the air with her hands.

“Call the school. Maybe they're at school.”

“It's Saturday night, Doug.”

“Don't jump to conclusions. I'm up.”

My mother hands Doug a cup of hot coffee. He takes the cup, sip its, burns the tip of his tongue. The caffeine jumpstarts his body and he pull his pants up. When he's done buttoning his shirt he would take another sip. My mother would take his hand in hers and looks up at him.

“Okay, okay,” Doug would say. “I’ll get him.”

* * *

Cindy is examining her finger. She has string wrapped around it and the tip is turning purple.

“You’re going to cut off your circulation,” I say, and look back at the road.

“You missed the turn,” she says, untangles the string from her finger, cracks the window, and lets the string fly out. I look in the rearview mirror and I see the Flamingo Motel sign flashing. It is pink and flamingo shaped, with a couple of light bulbs missing. The building is made of pink stucco and has antennas poking out from the roof. The Flamingo Motel in all its fucking glory.

Cindy sucks the blood up her finger and reaches into her purse. I pull a U-ee and turn into the pebble parking lot.

There is a plastic flamingo outside our motel room in a square spot of gravel. It’s standing on two legs fashioned out of wire.

“How tacky is that?” Cindy says, and tries to laugh.

Cindy has the key because she looks older and she pushes the door open. Inside the ceilings and walls are pink, and everything is flamingo colored, including the lampshades

and curtains and bedspread. All of it seems unnecessary and ridiculous and just right. I walk in and fall on the bed.

Cindy picks up the remote control and starts jabbing it at the television, but there is no reception, just fuzz, and she gives up and throws it.

"I'm taking a shower," she says.

She looks down at me on top of the covers, my arms crossed behind my head.

"Is he coming here, you think?" I ask.

"No. Tom. He's not."

"Why did you get me involved in all this?"

She pushes her palms on the bed and the motion bounces me. My body rises and falls with the mattress springs. Then she stops and stares and straightens her back.

"I'm not getting you involved in anything," she says.

"You're not?" I say.

Then she does something unexpected. She slips her jeans down, with the underwear bunched up inside them, to her ankles. "No, I'm not."

I should be flattered, but I'm not. I want to walk to my car and leave her here. I want to drive and think this over. Doug, if he were here, would blow a kiss and unbutton his shirt and kick off his boots. I want to go. I want to run. But then I want to touch her, and make her breathe hard, and reach around her, and slide my hand down her back. I need to run. I have to run.

Cindy picks the controller up off the carpet and zaps the television off. Her white T-shirt hangs down to her waist. Her jacket and scarf and pants are clumped up in a pile

by the bed. The television sizzles and an electric rainbow twists and pops off the screen in a white dot.

“I want to be somewhere else, you know,” Cindy says. “Outside of this,” she says.

I do know. This is what we do in Wyoming. We do everything we can to get as fucked up as humanly possible.

She pulls her shirt up over her head so that her face is captured behind a cone of cloth. Her tummy is soft and firm at the same time, and she yanks the shirt off her head, lifting her hair. On her stomach there are several wild pubic hairs that crawl up toward her bellybutton. Down below, a patch of hair is bunched up in a triangle between her legs like soft moss.

“I don’t want to mess with you and I don’t want to mess with me,” I say.

“Let’s just get it over with,” Cindy says. She unsnaps her brassiere so that her boobs fall out. “I’m sure about this. This is what I need. This is what I want.”

I lean forward and touch my toes. “How sure?”

“Enough sure.”

“That’s a disclaimer.”

“Oh come on,” Cindy says, and rests her hands on her hips.

But it’s too late to take it back. “I don’t want it this way.”

“You sound childish,” she says.

“You sound cold,” I say. I want to take that part back, but I don’t. I want to say that I am sorry that she has had abortions and dead boyfriends and dick after dick in her mouth. I want to say I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Cindy. But I don’t.

“I’ll get a condom,” she says, and flicks the light switch off. The curtains are closed so everything is dark and shaded and enclosed.

I hear her unzip her purse. I see her pull out a little square package and hear the metallic foil crinkle. She slides into bed with it. Her legs are cold and smooth. She pulls my pants off. We both go under the flamingo sheets.

“You are my neighbor,” I say.

“Excuse me?” she says, and pushes my chest.

“You are my mixed-up neighbor,” I say, which sounds silly and dramatic, but that’s what I say. “This is bad.”

“Fine, I’m taking a shower,” Cindy says, and slides out of bed and picks up her clothes and I watch her white butt as she walks off.

I point a finger at her back. “You are my neighbor and nothing we do is fixable.”

“I know that,” she says, and slams the bathroom door. A bar of light illuminates the space between the door and the floor. I hear the shower run and I close my eyes.

I can still hear the shake of the trees and the tumble of the creek. I can feel it. And I can see her dead boyfriend up in the hills. It makes me want to vomit. I want to push this image out of me. I want to get out of these sheets and get into my car and drive home and open the windows and get it all out of me. I live in Wyoming and that’s what I want.

The shower stops and dribbles to the floor. I sit up and find my shoes. Doug, if he were here, would pull the flamingo sheet up over his gut and yawn into his shoulder. I open the phonebook, put it on the bed, pick up a pen, circle a taxi number, lay down a twenty. Goodbye Cindy. Then I split.

* * *

“I had a wonderful time,” I tell the motel manager.

He raises his eyebrows at me. The manager has donut powder speckled on the corners of his lips.

“Good for you, kid,” he says. And sips from his Styrofoam cup of coffee.

I flip him the cash from my wallet. I will go back home now. Back to my parents who are nibbling their fingers, couched in the living room, worrying and shaking over me. I will tell them I am sorry. I must have lost track of time. And they will know that I am lying, but I won't care.

I open the motel lobby door but before I go I look back at the manager. He is holding a donut up to his lips and is about to chew into the side.

“I'm leaving now,” I say to him.

He raises a hand to acknowledge my departure. I turn and walk out the door. The plastic flamingo is under my arm and I have it by the head. The wire legs are sticking out behind me. I take my time and continue to the car in a nice, warm, even stride, the flamingo under my arm. Cindy is still in the motel room. She can figure out what she needs to figure out on her own. I am leaving.

I get to my car and the manager screams “Stop, stop you little shit!” But I ignore him. He is trying to convince me to give up my flamingo. That I won't do. I keep going and open my car and get in and wave at him through the window, because I want him to know, for certain, that I am stealing this.

* * *

When I get home it is late and my parents' car is gone, so I park the car in the port. The wind is shaking the metal roof and rattling the poles. Inside, the house is empty and quiet and dead. I walk into the kitchen with my flamingo and there's a note scribbled on a piece of notebook paper stuck to the refrigerator door. It reads:

“Tom, if you are reading this, you are in a heap of trouble. Stay where you are. Don't move a muscle. We will be back to deal with this. Doug”

I take the note off the refrigerator and the magnet falls to the floor. I hop up on the kitchen stove and stare at the sink, the note in my hand, the plastic flamingo beside me on the coils. I look at the last part again.

“Doug,” I repeat. “Doug.” What a good name.

I hop off the stove and look inside the refrigerator for something to eat. There's a cold six-pack of beer on the bottom shelf. It's Doug's. I reach into the plastic holes and pick the pack up with my fingers. The plastic cord feels fake and stiff and I like holding the beer, the weight of it. I've got half a pack of cigarettes in my pocket. So I take the beer and reach up in the pantry and pull out the flashlight and I walk outside. Beer, cigarettes, flashlight. The flamingo is still on the stove. It's just a piece of junk: pink plastic, wires, ribbed wings, fake eyes. Fuck you, flamingo. Arrivederci.

It's windy and cold and I walk straight into the woods. There's a trail that I like and I follow it. That's what's important: doing what you need to and following through with it.

The sticks and pine needles crackle under my shoes. I can't see anything except a faint opening where the trail goes. When I get far enough in I stop and walk to a tree and place the six-pack on the ground. Then I feel around my pocket and pull out the flashlight.

I turn on the flashlight. I shine it back up the trail where I walked. Nothing. Then I turn and face the tree and point the light directly on the bark and look up. And everything I'm thinking and feeling and seeing and wanting to get out me just kind of stops.

My parents' car pulls into the driveway. The headlights beam into the woods toward me, into the spaces between the trees, and the light finds me, and flashes over my face. Then it retreats, disappears, and I hear the car door slam shut and I stand perfectly still.

THIS IS HOW TO LISTEN TO MUSIC

In the morning, wake up, the rain stoning the yard. Down the hallway the stereo blinks. Pick a record, something good, evil even, and press the arrow. If it sounds too loud, don't worry about the neighbors, they can deal, you cannot. The music swells and bangs out of the speakers. Pay attention to this: it didn't turn out the way you wanted it to; people hurt each other to recuperate; you are a surprisingly astute dancer. Find the keys, a soft pack of cigarettes, a jug of cold coffee. Now drive somewhere, it doesn't matter where, the river maybe, just go. But before you walk out of the house, soak up the music and turn your chin toward your shoulder. On the kitchen table a head of a flower has detached and dropped from its stem; the water in the glass vase has turned milky. But don't throw them away, not yet. These flowers still belong here, in this house. The music on repeat, walk out. And when you return, the silver key into the knob, the knee push of the door, the music will still be there, waiting for you.

SHOTGUN

In Bed

Ted is sitting on a bed with a shotgun on his lap. He lives in a one-room cinderblock house in Florida. Linda is lying next to him in a black dress and heels.

“I’m dead,” Linda says. She is hung over and she sighs and she will refuse to get up.

Ted rests the barrel of the shotgun on his shoulder.

“What happened to you?” Ted asks.

“The dress? I went out.”

“Then what?”

Linda sits up, rolls her neck, places a blue plate on her lap, dumps a bag of marijuana over it. On the bedside table a cigarette sits on top of a paperback and Linda takes it and taps it and scratches a match and smokes it.

“Did you sleep with anyone?” Ted asks.

Linda hands him the match.

Ted shakes it out.

“Yes,” she says. “Put that shit away.”

“No,” Ted says, and cocks an empty round.

“Well, I thought I might run into my parents. That’s how it started. They have a house out on the coast and it’s something to see: near a golf course, pretty beach, a water fountain in the driveway, that sort of rich. But the Toyotas were missing. So I went to a

bar and I found a man who looked drunk enough and I asked him if he was ready for this, if he was ready for me, and I took him into a bathroom stall and he unzipped my dress.”

Linda’s hair hangs over her face and she clutches a handful and stretches it back. She pushes off her heels with her toes and the shoes clunk on the floor. Then Linda twists the joint, licks the paper, and looks at Ted with one eye.

“I see,” Ted says.

The Way Ted Met Linda

On the beach Linda was smoking weed with the surfers, throwing palmetto stalks into a bonfire. The surfers had Ted’s shotgun and they were taking potshots at the ocean. Ted smoked from a glass bong and it bubbled up and he did a keg stand and a surfer held him up by the legs. When he came back down Linda pulled at his beer soaked t-shirt and spoke to the side of his head and they left.

They walked into the dunes with a bottle of rum. The wind in the sea grass smelled like salt, sun lotion, skin. The moon made the foam on the beach look fluorescent and they decided to go in. Linda ran into the ocean and dove. Ted did it by falling in on his back.

The ocean was deep and swirled and they went out to the undertow and Linda held on to Ted with her entire body. A wave moved in and they separated and they waited for it and they pointed their hands and they took it. Afterwards, Linda walked up the beach and laughed and spit a seashell out of her mouth. They sat down in dried foam and seaweed. The tide moved in and dissolved the sand underneath them. Then the tide washed back into the ocean and the sand hardened.

The bottle of rum was still on the beach, so Ted picked it up and walked with Linda. A dead shark had washed up on the shore and they stared at it and poked it with sticks. Ted could hear the surfers clapping and screaming around the bonfire. He could see the glow of the fire and the smoke twirls and so they kept walking.

After a while Linda said, "I'm exhausted," and fell down on the side of a dune. "Just so you know, my parents are loaded," she said.

Ted sat down in the sand beside her and his elbows sunk into the dune.

"Turn around-driveway, wine cellar, three cars, folded linen. That kind of loaded," she said.

Ted had the bottle of rum in his hand and they passed it back and forth.

That's when Linda told him a story.

Linda's Story

Linda dropped out of college during her first year at school because she could. She mailed her mother fake transcripts, bullshit-ed her grades, wasted her father's tuition money. When her parents came to visit she walked them around campus and pointed at the gothic buildings and told them that that was where she went to class. They said they were proud of her. And for a minute Linda believed it. She had to believe it.

When it came time to graduate Linda's parents called and said that they were flying in. They wanted to be there. *We can't wait to see you, darling.* That was the way her father talked. So Linda said, *Dad, I don't want you here. Please, please, please do not come.* But they flew into town anyway. Just because they wanted to see her walk in a black robe. Just because parents expect children to continuously push forward.

When they called from the airport her father said, *We'll see you soon, Linda*. But then Linda, instead of going to pick them up at their terminal, got into in her car and flipped the visor and put on sunglasses and drove for hours on a sun-baked highway.

For a week she lived in a small city without trees and stayed at a youth hostel. At the hostel Linda met a man who wore combat boots. He read almanacs and showed Linda photographs of the earth from outer space. She told him, *Beauty is wisdom*.

During the day Linda stayed inside her room and read magazines and travel guides and horoscopes. At night she watched pornography with the man in combat boots. He found it, *Entertaining*. Linda said, *I can see that in it too*, because she wanted to agree with him, because she wanted him close.

One night they were sitting in a small room on the couch eating bowls of popcorn, drinking coke through straws. A woman from Budapest cracked open the door and saw them watching porn and she sat down beside Linda. This woman had an accordion and she said, *It's better, you see, in Budapest. The women have more of the hair on the vaginas. Much better*.

After the porn and the popcorn, the three of them sat around a table and took shots of Vodka from Styrofoam cups. They made up stories and slapped knees. At one point a chair broke apart and the woman from Budapest fell on her accordion.

It will be fun. A good time, the women from Budapest told Linda. But Linda said, *I'm not that kind of girl. Not normally*. But she was slurring and no one understood a word of it. The women from Budapest said, *Ahckk. Who cares?*

Then the Budapest woman closed the door to the room and locked it and the man with the combat boots said, *This will be good*. The two of them stripped and hung their

clothes on the television antenna. The woman from Budapest took Linda by the shoulders and bent her over the couch. She put her hands up her skirt and pulled her underwear down to her feet. After that she strapped on a plastic dildo and railed her to the couch. Linda cocked her head back, fisted the couch, and grinded her teeth. She wanted to deserve it.

After that the woman from Budapest switched off with the man in the combat boots. He pumped her slowly, mechanically, carefully, like it mattered, like it was important, like it had to be done just right.

When it was over Linda pulled up her underwear and stumbled out of the room. She locked herself into a tiny bedroom that was just big enough for a bunk bed. She sat on the top bunk and bit her palms and put her mouth on a window. The owner, he heard her, and he knocked on the wall, and Linda yelled back, *Go the fuck away!*

Outside of the youth hostel was a community-shared spa. Backpackers were sweating and steaming in the water. The woman from Budapest, her feet in the bubbles, squeezed music out of her accordion. The people in the spa laughed and splashed because she had a bleached moustache and her music was horrible. The man in combat boots was in there too, smoking a cigarette, his arms spread out.

And then Linda remembered her parents. How once, at the YMCA pool, her mother refused to go underwater. How her mother said, *No way. I'm not doing it. You couldn't pay me.* But Linda wanted her to, and she said, *It's easy. Just once.* And her mother said, *Just once.* So they took a breath, held on to each other's forearms, sunk to the bottom, popped open their eyes, and their hair was standing up, moving around in all directions.

How they Left the Beach

After Linda's story Ted said, "I'm going back to the surfers." He knew that by the time they got back, the surfers would have already piled into cars and driven out drunk into the night. But he said it anyway.

"You can't leave me here," Linda said.

So Ted flung his arm over her shoulder and they walked back together like that. At some point they stopped, looked at the wide-open ocean, and Ted tossed the empty bottle of rum on the washed up shark. Linda moved out from under his arm and said, "What the fuck was that for?"

Get Back in Bed

"Let's get out of here," Ted says. He sits on the side of the mattress and pulls up his socks.

"Why get up? It's stupid. Why do it?" Linda puffs the joint and it fuses down.

"You're right. It's stupid. It's stupid to worry," Ted says. "I'm just a fucking idiot. You're right. You nailed me on that one."

"Get in bed," Linda says, and grabs his forearm and pulls him onto the mattress and rolls on top of him and giggles smoke into his face.

And the weight on top of Ted feels good. Feels right. So he reaches around her and unzips her dress and it spreads out from her spine and it opens up and she slides out.

Ted's Story

Ted also has a story but it is the kind he can't talk about. It is the kind *you* can't talk about.

Ted loves Linda and he thinks that he will forever, and that this has to do with the fact she saved his life. But it doesn't. It has to do with the fact that she comes to see him in his cinderblock house.

And that's what she was doing when she saved him. Ted was sitting in his underwear on the couch watching the television, drunk, fucked up, hypnotized from the electronic pulse of the screen.

"No," Linda said. She was in a bathing suit and barefoot and she kicked open the screen door, because she had come to visit, and she saw him and she rushed into the concrete house. Ted pushed the handgun into his mouth. "No, not that!"

His finger was on the trigger. He leaned over his legs. His chest thumped. His knees knocked. He could do it. Ted, he had a worry condition, and it would never go away. A game show flashed on the television screen. The audience laughed and clapped and a silver wheel circled around. Ted stared at the television screen and Bob Barker smiled at him and Ted started to squeeze the trigger.

"Don't!" Linda said. She was standing in front of him with her hands over her mouth. She dropped to her knees and squeezed his feet and her hands felt warm and it made him stop. The gun slipped out of his fingers, bounced onto the cushion, and Ted felt the tightness of his underwear, soaked in piss.

Get Out of Bed

“That was perfect,” Linda says, and kills the joint and balls up her dress in her fists and mashes it to the side of her head.

Ted is naked except for socks.

“Just plain perfect,” Linda says.

“It might have been everything else, but it was not perfect,” Ted says.

“Whatever,” Linda says, and smoke slips out of her nose. “It was perfect.”

“I’m getting up,” Ted says.

“Help me.” Linda says, and raises her arms above her head.

“I can’t,” Ted says. And he drops down onto the wooden floor and lies on his stomach.

Linda snakes through the sheets, slides out of the bed, and reaches for his face.

Breakfast

Ted is frying eggs when Linda taps the kitchen window. She has been driving up the coast all morning looking for her parents. Ted holds up a finger for her to wait and unhooks the screen door.

“Had enough of me?” The screen door slaps shut.

“Probably,” Ted says. The eggs fizzle and pop and he flips them.

Linda sits on the washing machine and the laundry tumbles and she lights a cigarette. “They’re not there,” she says.

“Call them.”

“It has to be for a reason.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Ted pinches her cigarette, pokes the egg yolk with the corner of a spatula, pulls on the smoke, and passes it back. “I’ll call.”

“Never,” she says. The laundry rolls and swoops and cuts out with a thud. Linda turns the dial, bangs the top, and the dryer starts up again.

“Want to go to the beach?” Ted asks.

“Sure,” she says.

“Good,” Ted says. He twists a knob and the blue flame dissipates. He lifts the pan from the rails and reaches into a cabinet and pulls out a plate and the eggs slide.

“They hate me,” Linda says. She holds the plate for him. “I cheated them. I squandered their affection.”

Ted takes out a fork and a knife and holds them in both hands. “I doubt it,” he says, and takes the plate back.

“I don’t,” she says. Then Linda pushes Ted’s shoulder because she wants him to think she is being funny. She wants him to think that she is just joking around. That she is always like this. That she is wearing heels, hoop earrings, a hair clip, a squirt of perfume, and a black dress just because she can. Not because she plans to face her parents.

“You shouldn’t agonize,” Ted says.

“*You* agonize.”

“Mine’s different,” he says.

“It’s not.”

Linda shakes out her hairclip and digs the plastic teeth back in and pushes it back tightly, so it will stick, so it won't come out in front of her father. "We need weed and sunglasses."

Ted nods.

"Alright then," Linda says. And she knows now that she can trick Ted. She knows that she will not go to the beach. She will find a way out. She will locate her parents at their house. She will knock on their front door and they will wait to open it. They will pretend not to hear her voice. Not to recognize Linda. They will stand behind the wooden door and wait and shake their heads. Linda will press her forehead to the door, bang the wood with her fist, and tell them that she hates this. That she can't stand this. That she refuses to let this go on. Then they will open the door and let her in. That much feels certain.

Linda tucks a paper towel into Ted's collar and smiles at him.

There is a plastic tablecloth over a stack of red milk crates and they sit down with the eggs, a watermelon, white bread, and a glass of milk. Ted moves it all in front him. He wants to devour it. Consume everything. Feed.

"You all right?" Linda asks.

Ted ignores her.

He pounds a butcher knife through the watermelon and cuts it in half. He runs a fork through an egg and the yolk splits and spills out. He scoops the egg up to his mouth and the egg dangles on the fork spokes and he slurps it up. He stabs into another egg and eats that one too. Linda unrolls a bag of white bread and pulls out a square piece and hands it to him. Ted takes it and stuffs it in his mouth and swallows. He starts to slice the

watermelon in quarters but he gives up on the knife and he chucks it across the room and it sticks out of the dry wall. He looks down at the watermelon and lowers his face into it. He chomps and sucks and slowly he gets deeper. All the way to the rind. Then he cracks the shell and sucks the juice out of the white parts. Linda hands him the glass of milk and he chugs it. Some of the milk leaks out of the corners of his mouth and dribbles down his cheeks. Linda hands him more bread and he sponges up the yolk on the plate and he sticks it in his mouth. He chews. He swallows. He opens his hand for more. She gives him the bag. He dumps the bread out on the plastic plaid tablecloth. He picks up the bread and punches it flat on the makeshift table and stuffs as many pieces into his mouth as he can fit.

“Yummy,” Linda says.

He lights her cigarette. “More,” he muffles. “Give me more.”

She shakes a box of cereal into a bowl and pours milk over it. Ted takes it from her and spoons it. Then he tips back the bowl and finishes up the milk.

Linda rubs her cigarette out in an ashtray and says, “Let’s go.”

Drive

“No. Don’t get that near me.”

The shotgun is wrapped up in a towel under his arm. “We’re bringing it.”

She punches his shoulder and they walk outside and the clouds are flat. The car is parked next to an empty swimming pool. Ted lays the gun in the carpeted trunk and shuts the top. Linda says, “I want to surprise you.” They shoot off down the road: past fields

and fishponds and wooden canopies and sinkholes. At a stop sign Ted rolls down the window and the insects in the trees buzz.

After a while, they stop at a gas station. The metal sign: a horse with wings. The pump makes a *tic-tic-tic* sound as the gas tank fills up. Ted wants to get drunk and he tells Linda that. He goes and pays for the beer and the ice, and a man with a toothpick takes the bills and counts it all out in his hand. Ted cracks the trunk and dumps the beer into a Styrofoam cooler. Then he bites open the bag and pours the ice in a circle over the beer.

“Let’s hurry,” Linda says.

Linda digs her hand into the cubes and pulls out three bottles of beer and shuts the trunk with her ass. She carries the beer with both hands and sits down in the car and squeezes the bottles between her thighs.

“For the ride,” she says.

“Right,” Ted says. He opens a beer between her legs and turns on the radio. She points down a road with a dog walking across it. He goes that way. When he’s done with his beer she hands him another.

They are driving alongside a river and Ted mentions to her that he is drunk. That’s when Linda tells him that they are not going to the beach anymore. Ted swerves off the highway and takes a bridge and it lifts them high above the water. Ships and barges float by. Industrial cranes stand alongside the banks, high up into the air, motionless, like constructed dinosaur bones. Ted lights a cigarette and looks at her.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“I mean I want you to come with me to my parents house. Keep driving.”

Ted's jaw slackens and the cigarette flies out the window.

At Linda's Parents

Linda's parent's house has stonewalls and a gate and a tiny black speaker box and the place looks like a mansion, not a house. He parks the car in the road and flicks the headlights off. A few windows in the house glow.

"Wait," Linda says, and holds him down by the thigh.

They can see someone inside a kitchen pulling drawers open. Ted asks Linda, "Who's that?"

"My mother," she says.

They sit in the car and watch her mother and wait.

"I'm going in first," she says.

"Don't do that," Ted says.

The garage illuminates and the door retracts and folds. A Toyota backs out and reverses down the driveway. That's when Linda closes her eyes and covers her face and says, "Shit."

The Toyota moves down the driveway, but it's dark and they can't see in the window. All they can see is a reflection of silver-colored trees on tinted glass.

"That's my father. Don't get out," Linda says.

Ted wants to talk to him. Ted wants to run to the window and tell her father that his daughter is in his car. He has to tell him that. He needs him to see her. He puts his hand on the door latch.

"Don't," Linda says.

The Toyota stops at the end of the driveway and the window cracks an inch. They see an orange flicker and the outline of a head and a plume of smoke and they realize that he is stopping to light a cigarette. The smoke trails up along the side of the car and the Toyota moves forward the smoke blows off the roof. The Toyota coasts up a small hill, through the woods, out of sight, and they watch the taillights flicker and disappear into the trees.

Linda bites her knuckles.

And Ted wonders if her parents fight. If they ever curse, throw plates, sleep apart. If Linda's name ever comes up in a conversation and both of them have to look away. If it is even possible for Linda's parents to sit down at the couch and zap on the television and have a meal and cut the food into cubes and not think about their daughter.

But Ted keeps that thought away from Linda. Not because he doesn't think she should hear it, but because in a small, small way Ted wants it to be true.

Linda says, "I want to go home." She climbs into the backseat and Ted drives and she falls asleep. The suburb, the bridges, the boats, the trees with insects, all of it moves past the window. It is a fast drive and it doesn't last long except for one minor stop. Ted pulls up to a sinkhole, pops the trunk, takes the shotgun out and throws I in.

Home

Ted wakes Linda up by the shoulder when they back to his cinderblock house. Linda walks inside and sits on the side of Ted's bed and looks at her feet. Just to look at them. As if that's all she can possibly do.

Ted stands next to the bed and stares at her.

“I have huge feet,” Linda says. She says this because she doesn’t want him to go. “Clown feet.”

“That’s because you’re looking down on them,” Ted says. Then he walks out of the bedroom and leaves her there and he sits on the kitchen floor and he asks her how things were for her. Before she lied. Before she cheated her parents. That’s how he says it too. Just to see. Just to test the waters. And she doesn’t respond. But Ted wants to keep talking. He wants to press her for information. He wants to get it all out of her. He wants to talk for hours.

“You have no idea,” Linda says.

Then Ted hears her start the shower. And he thinks about getting up off the floor and walking in on her and opening the curtain and firing off a round of questions. But instead he just stands up and walks to the kitchen sink and outside the window something wild stirs.

JELLY BEAN

I don't think I will ever die. After dad tipped over, my aunt told me she wanted to be cremated, and how upsetting it was that we actually went to see my father in his open coffin, and how he looked fat with glycerin, and fake with clown makeup, and stupid with glasses, and how awful that is, and how when she dies, when she really dies, she wants her ashes to be sprinkled in the ocean with the fish and sea shells, and I said to her at the time, "me too," but the truth was I was lying because I never think about that sort of thing. I don't even start to imagine myself dead.

She used to make jellies. In the morning we would float in a rowboat out on a tiny canal behind her house, which was thick with thorns, magnolia, and cypress trees. The canal was a natural one, which snaked down to a group of bushes where we picked berries for mayhaw jelly. If you ever taste a mayhaw plain it is sick and bituminous. However, as soon as it solidifies into jelly, the neighbors knock at your door and start following you around town for a spoonful.

The company I work for pays me to check movie theater revenues to see if they are paying the appropriate amount due to Hollywood production companies. When I arrive the owners are up front and they usually give me free tickets, goobers, popcorn, or whatever I want, no hassle. I don't wear my sunglasses until I get into the picture show. The glasses stay parked on my forehead while I drive through marshes, and ponderosa pine tree farms, and I don't slide them on until I arrive at my job. After I enter the theater, and take care of the little business part there is, I settle down with a coke, the previews

pop up out of the black, and I go blind with yellow circles for the first three seconds. I then tip the sunglasses down over my eyes.

When the movie ends I stand up, my chair flips, I keep the sunglasses on, and I wait for everyone to leave. Once they exit, I walk down the red velvet aisle, face the screen, and stare inches away from the plastic dots. I don't know why but the screen has this force near it, which makes it spine-chilling to touch. When I do touch it the screen itself feels like hot vinyl. The possibility that someone watches me from the booth devours me. They could switch on the projector, spot me out, and I would sweat out ice. I then leave out the back door and drive to a highway hotel with some lousy food and sleep with the TV on.

The theater I had to go to that day was in Ponchatoula, Louisiana. At one point my distant family all lived here but now only my aunt remains. Everyone moves away from towns like this. In this town the only things permanent are the daiquiri drive-throughs, a "Bootsies" twenty four hour diner, billboards advertising strawberries, one movie theater, and in the center of town, the alligator cage. The green cage sits in the sun by the railroad tracks, under a giant flagpole with a limp strawberry banner. The cage's roof is covered in tarp and inside is a small pool. An alligator with pennies on his back lies half emerged in the water. His tail has a hole in it and the pool is littered with straws and pennies where the kids missed their shot. His limousine shaped head is snapped shut. There is a palm tree for him and the only way you know he is alive is that the pennies on his back rise up every ten seconds with his alligator breath. When my aunt took me to the

cage when I was seven it was the same alligator and he was in the other corner of the pool. It is good to see he has moved.

I was not expected at work until that evening. I imagined my aunt would be frying chicken or working in the garden, digging holes for seeds, when I knocked on her door. But I heard her come to the door slowly, as if she were taking her time. She was not taking her time. She was making her way to the door.

“Hello sweet-pea,” she said when she opened the door and the lizards scattered off the cement porch. “Come on in.”

Her back was hunched over and there was too much skin for her body and it hung on her like ice-cycles. She was pale now, and the politeness in my voice was a giveaway that I had noticed the walker. She sat me down in the kitchen. The shape of her back was no longer straight and flat but was bent over like a cave. Her shoulders were two bones sticking out underneath cotton. She looked like a lizard ready to shed.

“Tell me about your job,” she said. This was routine. I should have left her alone but I followed the conversation like I was supposed to do.

“I basically make sure the companies are paying what they should. I travel from town to town, and there are benefits like free movies.” I do consider myself lazy but this job was a killer. I can’t stand for more than two minutes.

“That is wonderful. That is just wonderful,” she said. There is nothing wonderful about myself anymore. “Do you like the picture show? I haven't seen a picture show in years. I’m afraid it would just make me dizzy now,” she said.

“Actually, I am a bit tired of movies,” I said.

She looked exhausted and rubbed her eyes. But she laughed and asked me if I

needed anything.

I said “no thanks,” and she reached down and squeezed my fingers in hers and smiled at me. That is when I knew, she knew, that I had not forgotten how she used to be young and collect rocks, and pick berries, and cook church dinners. She filled up a glass of buttermilk for me and sat down.

“Do you want to see your daddy?” she asked.

Without tasting the milk I said, “Not really.”

She told me to drive her car, and when we walked outside she wore a heavy sweater that I thought would be too muggy, and she used a cane to brace herself. I imagined how she must have felt on the hospital bed when the doctor came in with a cane and told her she could probably use this. I opened the passenger door and she used her hands to get in the car. The kind of care I’d use if I were climbing into bed with a girl. She dropped her body in the seat, it crunched like uncooked rice, and she put the cane between her legs. I reversed out of the driveway, which had a strip of grass running down the middle. Once on the road, I spun the wheel with both hands. The car felt wobbly from my driving and that was because I had someone beside me who looked famished. She told me where to turn and on the second right she missed it and I had to back track.

The cemetery was called Garden Meadows. Somewhere out there was my dad waiting in his coffin for us. The majority of the resting spots were mausoleums, which were above ground in case of flood. We walked out of the car and paced down the lanes of graves, inching past tiny castles. The mausoleums differed in height, but most of them

were waist high. In general, the graves were black, sad things, and I walked slower to pay some sort of respect. In general, I don't believe in respecting things out of principle. It is sort of a principle of mine. However, the taller gravesites looked quite impressive, and the slots where the deceased go were exactly sized for coffins. After about a hundred feet the mausoleums ended and the rest were tombstones stuck halfway in the ground. My aunt told me that it was now illegal to bury the dead and that you had to be raised above ground. I asked her if my dad fit that bill, and she said at the time it wasn't clear, and that he was buried. She said this as if it was perfectly normal that I didn't know the particular mode of depository for my father. We walked through the fingernail-cut grass and tomb markers and it felt like we were walking on a giant stage with props and people underneath.

My dad's tombstone had an empty space reserved for someone else's name beside his. My mom was meant to wait and lie by his side. My aunt stood her distance and I walked up to my dad's grave. The dates and his full name were encarved in the stone. The brown marble was smooth like an apple but I decided not to touch. I didn't even bend down and kiss his spot of earth. I just stood there, and looked at the grave, and thought how my dad was enclosed in Styrofoam underneath me with his eyes up to me, and that he probably had longer hair now. When I looked back at my aunt she was holding her cane in her two hands and she wasn't crying. She looked at me. I was between her and the tombstone and I looked back at the grave. My aunt did not look surprised or saddened that I was in front of her brother's grave. She was not drawn to tears, or shaking, or coaching me through this. Why should she? This might not have even been her brother or my dad. He certainly wasn't now. It could have been anyone.

Behind my dad's rectangular house stood a bird pool which had caught rain and had collected some pollen along the inside rim of the dish. The entire place looked asleep. I suppose that is the point of the complex, to rest in peace. I dug my hands in my pockets.

Here is the story:

I am not ashamed of myself for being this way and I do not hold grudges. It's not my style. My dad left my mom when I was six. He had no hair at the time, and he told her, "I have brain cancer, and I just want to spend the rest of my life with the woman I love," who wasn't my mom. The woman he loved was the mother of his two illegitimate children, who he assured me before he died were waiting to see me in the city of Chicago. When I think of Chicago I think of an old man, the kind whose hands are withered, wearing a blue hood, he can't talk, and he is standing in a puddle of gasoline. I am watching him. A woman with a purse walks between us and the puddle doesn't ripple. I don't know why I imagine this. I also imagine a penny falling from the Sears tower and bulleting through a taxicab.

After my dad's funeral, at the reception, we all stood by my aunt's garden, our arms linked, and smiled for the camera in our black suits, tuxedos, and dresses. My aunt, she wore a laced dress and drank fruit juice. The cameraman even said, "say cheese." I said cheddar and disappointed the photographer because I didn't smile. I mean, I didn't even know this man but I felt guilt for being a poor sport. Then we went back to the porch. My cousin, whose lips are too big for her face, talked about her boyfriend's goatee. My dad was missing, and I got plenty of condolences and pity, not as much as

mom, but that was to be expected.

My aunt spent most of the time on the porch drinking punch out of a margarita glass, speaking to people I didn't know. The thing about it was I knew her. Eventually, when I wasn't thinking about her she came up to me by the tire swing and said something which was not important. What was important was that she saw me and we were alone. I think what she said was "I'm with you." The other woman from Chicago, of course, didn't show. That's how it went.

My aunt looked better now and she did not use her cane for support. We walked back to the car and read the epigraphs on the way. One mausoleum was purple and orange and had confetti at its head. It read, "Here lies a clown. A sporty lad who left behind a cherry nose and a fighting chimpanzee." Another: "Here lies Sir, William the third. Brave at the time of death." The last one said, "Here lies Doctor Irwin the Dentist, having filled his last cavity."

My aunt took the wheel. "Let's go to one of your movies," she said.

"All right," I said.

"It's a block past the gator," she said, pointing the grip of the cane in that direction. I turned the ignition.

The movie was about fat people who love to eat. Felda and her mother Maureen eat anything. Maureen is generous, and humongous. In the movie she says, “You know me, I’m happy wherever I go. You can drop me off in a Kansas prairie and I’d be divine.” Throughout the film she says, “You know me,” to anyone, but dropping her anywhere would be a mess, especially from a high distance, unless you enjoy a body-made-crater followed by a splash, which I would have. Felda, the daughter, lives with her mother Maureen. Unfortunately they consume the little bit of money they receive from disability, child pension, and social security checks on Snickers, Ben and Jerry’s Wavy Gravy ice cream, and an assortment of Doritos. Felda is only thirteen. She alone could wipe out the monkeys if she were air lifted and released over a jungle.

Felda, against her mother’s advice, goes on a diet. The food stamps run out. “Way to go Felda,” the children beneath her say to her at school. “You’ve lost about a pound and a half. Go big-mix.” They aren’t really her friends. After school lunch, which unlike the other kids Felda actually enjoys, she ties on her old Reebok-pumps, plugs her body through the chained-linked door, and thumps out to the black top. The black top is hot and the tennis court is turning into desert. Surrounding the recess area is a barbed wire fence, which prevents middle school kids from running off and killing themselves. Felda watches her friends play basketball and she whisks around the playground in her pink dress and braids, sticking her fingers in the fence holes. She chews on her thumb until it becomes tender and purple.

My aunt looked at me in my seat and raised her eyebrows. “Hungry?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

She smiled and resumed watching the movie vigilantly. Under her breath she said, “This is something else.”

One day while Felda sucks on a number two pencil, a man with a turban walks around the recess area and looks for coins on the ground. He is skinny and malnourished by Felda’s standards. He nods at the teachers, looks back down at the pavement, and roams the recess area like a metal detector. Felda watches him and decides to help. He suggests she quits eating, which she does, and she starves herself. They become best of friends.

Her Mother, Maureen, finds out about this from a teacher. She starts to resent her daughter for dieting and takes her out of school. “You know me,” the mother says, “I am fat and we must stay that way. I’m ashamed of you. Skinny people are useless.” The mother gorges herself even more and ends up being rolled down the street by her splintery daughter who then sails her down a river of Jell-O. Well, Felda feels bad about all this and eats her way through the Jell-O to save her mom.

In movie theaters people look better in shadows. I looked at my aunt and she was sucking on a Gobstopper. She turned to me and ran her milky fingers through the buttered popcorn. When the credits rolled, I took a while, leaned back in my chair, and discovered my sunglasses. I slid them on because I had forgotten earlier, and my aunt stared at me.

“What did you think of the movie?” she said.

“It was kind of funny. What did you think?” I said.

She then stuck two jellybeans in her ears and told me that if I did this I could hear the ocean. I popped in two red ones and sure enough I heard the arctic. She smiled at me and I hooked her arm in mine and we fingered out the beans.

The movie room was dark and they had forgotten to twist the lights on. She told me that when we got home I could have a jar of her reserved jelly. She quit picking mayhaw around the time I moved, she said. She told me, on our way out of the theater, that she didn't like followers. Me neither, I said, though I don't have any, and we walked outside.

The road was orange from the heat and we stole some shade beside the alligator cage. The pennies on the alligator were rusting. Inside the reptile looked cooler than we were. A fan above him waved the palm tree. My aunt tapped her cane on the cement and whispered to me that she didn't think that alligator would ever die. I told her I didn't either. My aunt and I stood up and the alligator sunk down deep into the pool.

On my way out of town there was a sign in my rearview mirror that read, “Entering Ponchatoula, so sweet you'll never leave.” Actually there wasn't a sign that said that. I made that up. The road I had to take to my next theater was a ten-mile bridge that stretched over marshes and rivers. The entire landscape was soaked in water with cypress tree skeletons poking out. I stopped my car and looked over the bridge into what is known as the Tickfaw river. The Tickfaw has salinity content of 75 percent fresh, 25

percent salt water. Near the mouth of the river the contents reverse and the water turns the color of milk. This is where the alligators pop up. I looked out into the white water spying for green flashes. All I saw was mud and seaweed swirling underwater, but I knew they were out there.

MINNOWS

I count people. My job involves checking the blue monitor for evening flight numbers, slipping behind a magazine, and jotting down the number of people who arrive and depart on American Airlines. One is a girl hanging on chairs. Two is wearing a baseball cap. He is laughing with number three and four about a guy who didn't make the trip, whose arm got cut off in a tractor. Five is divorced. Her arms are crossed. Six, seven and eight are crammed together on a leather chair watching a coin operated black and white television. At about fifteen, a handicapped woman spinning herself in a wheel chair, I stop. But then I notice number sixteen. She is wearing an orange sundress and a pearl necklace and I have seen her at my neighbor's house, the old lady next door.

The intercom signals medallion members to board first. The people I've just counted do not look over to see what medallion members look like. The girl in the orange sundress walks over to me and sits down by the window. I'm pretending to read a magazine. There are ten medallion members and six first-class passengers. They board the airplane, and then all the people in coach follow. The plane detaches from the accordion terminal, rolls down a runway, and then, poof, they disappear, and what's left is the number 52 written in Sharpie on the magazine cover. The girl in the orange sundress watches the planes lift into the air, her palms stuck to the window, and she doesn't notice me. At work I'm someone else. I never see myself in glass reflections or consider that I am counting people unjustly. Her fingertips tap the glass. It sounds hollow

out there. The planes blink off into thick black clouds.

The old lady next door sits in her truck all day and stares at me. The broken down truck is peeling with rust and is camped out in her backyard. She lives by herself and wears the expression of someone who has been waiting around since the last time someone visited her. It is the look of empty-nest-syndrome. The same face which doesn't want you to leave when you get there, and after you do, she waits as long as it takes for you to come back: days, months, years, never. She doesn't see me even when I wave to her. She just stares from the passenger seat of the truck at a pear tree. Today I will get her out of that truck.

I walk into her yard to see her.

“How are you?” I ask, faking a window-handle-rotation with my hand.

She rolls down the window halfway and says, “Fine. Help yourself to some pears.”

Her voice sounds like a food processor slowed down. I nod without picking a pear. The pear tree hangs over the wire fence into my yard and the limbs are weighed down like dumbbells. Some of the pears look like disfigured grapes, but most of the pears are shaped like lop-sided tennis balls and are the color of bruised muscles. The thought of eating them, with their squishy insides, makes my stomach turn.

“What time is school?” she asks.

“I don't go to school.” I say. “I count people. It's a job. Do you need to go

anywhere right now? How about groceries? How about the doctor?"

In her truck she rubs her lips. "Someone does that for me."

I start for the silver door handle with my left hand and she watches it approach. I pull back.

"But if you need anything? If you need anything," I say, and I step on a pear.

"I'm alone and I like it that way. I don't need help," she says.

"You'll be fine." I say, and instantly regret it. On Sundays a man mows her lawn and the girl in the orange sundress holds her by the elbow and walks her around the neighborhood. Old people get attention somehow.

She steps carefully out of her car, balances herself with a cane, and picks a pear at eye level. She says, "It might be wormy" but lifts it up to me to eat anyway.

"Thanks," I say and I squeeze it. It is hard and pale.

"My son is a lawyer. I haven't seen him in three years," she says.

I don't say anything to that because lawyers don't count.

"It's time for my walk."

"May I come?" I ask politely.

"No," she says.

Sleep is my favorite part of the day, but today I watch them walk. The girl in the orange sundress knocks on the front door of my neighbor's house. "It's Sonya," she says, and the door opens and they grab hands. Outside it looks like it is going to sprinkle. In this town every day looks like it is going to rain but it never does.

The old lady walks beside Sonya. This time she holds the old lady's hand in hers. Sonya's fingers would feel smooth on skin. They walk slowly, their hands fit together. After they are gone I hear kids and small rubber shoes beat down the pavement and I hate myself for counting the steps. The school is close enough for me to hear the roar of recess, kick balls, and slides. Three girls with orange straps over their shoulders run down the sidewalk. A boy skips after them in a one-two, one-two rhythm. I stop counting.

After Sonya drops the old lady off at home, she walks into my front yard and stands there,

“Nice day for a walk,” I say, from the porch.

“I don't like stalkers.”

“I'm not a stalker. I'm a counter. I work at the airport”

She jiggles the air in her palms by her little breasts and says, “One plus one is two.”

“You want to come upstairs?” I ask.

“I don't know. I don't think so,” she says, and I don't either. “Why don't you ask me to dinner or lunch. That would be a good thing to do. We could talk about your neighbor and how she thinks you are a sweet young man.” She says sweet as if it were sour and walks to her car. The next thing she does bothers me. She gets into the car and then pushes the passenger door open. “Come in.”

Her dress rises up her thigh and she pulls it back down over her knees. She starts up the car and drives us to a highway that I didn't know existed. It is getting late and she weaves in and out of slower traffic barely nicking a school bus. I don't comment on her driving because if we are going to die it might as well be now. She pulls off on a gravel road and kills the car. The trees shake around us and the wind picks up. A plane climbs up in the air above us and we both wait for the Doppler effect to dissipate before we get out. I don't know how many people are up there and it bothers me.

I follow her into the woods and I think that there is a chance we could kiss here. I've been with three girls. After the second one, who I never had sex with, I tried to die. Not over her, but because I wanted to die and when you want to die, like I did, you can't. If you don't want to die then you can do it. When you die you don't feel weightless. When you die you feel pressed down for good. That much you can count on.

The first time I tried to kill myself I loaded a nine millimeter I stole from my uncle, went into my old bedroom in my parents house, took three pain killers, drank two Coors, rested my head on a pillow, and bit down on the muzzle. I waited for ten seconds with the gun in my hand, the barrel in my mouth, sweating through my fingers. When I pulled the trigger, it clicked, and nothing fired. I heard a tumbling sound on the stairs so I hid the wet gun under my mattress. In the bathroom mirror I smiled at someone whose teeth were black on the bottom edges, whose face was pale, and who looked like a wet corpse, and it smiled back at me.

Once out of the car, I followed Sonya through the woods and towards a lake. It

was dark and the flashlight tunneled over to a patch of grass by the bank. Mosquitoes were dead this time of the year. I don't understand why we were suddenly alone in the woods together, except that maybe she was used to having sex with strangers. I had never met someone who could do that so I went with it. The woods were quiet except for the wind hissing through the trees. Near the water we sat cross-legged. She had been here before, maybe another boy showed her this lake, but I didn't mind. I could see the white triangle of her underwear and she didn't care.

"You know that I own this lake, or at least I will when Mary dies," she said. I had never heard the old lady next door to me referred to as anything. "All of it," Sonya said and she shined the light from one bank, over the water and rocks, to the other bank. "I don't want it," she said.

I've also never met someone, or even thought of someone, owning a lake but it seemed like a good thing to have.

"All of it?" I said.

"Every drop. I'm not related to her. I just work for a company that takes care of old folks, that's it. Meals-on-wheels sort of a deal. She thinks I should have the lake when she dies. She thinks I deserve it because we go on walks. She thinks I could swim in the Olympics."

"Take it," I say. "Sell it after she dies." I'm kidding here but it's not funny.

"What if somehow wanting the lake kills her? It could happen like that. Suppose, I want the lake and then she's flat out dead the next morning," she says.

Little steeples of waves crash under a dock and I like the idea of lying next to her on the grass and listening to water hit wood, her skin by mine. We are supposed to be

able to do this kind of thing. We are supposed to be new enough to the world to allow ourselves that.

“You don’t seem like a killer,” I say.

“Maybe,” she says. She stands up and directs the tube of light from her flashlight towards the dock and we walk that direction. It’s raining now and we walk up the dock. It extends far into the lake and we keep going. A trash can lid is nailed to a post and is spinning from the wind. An abandoned canoe is bobbing up and down in the water with its nose sticking out. Sonya sits on her knees at the tip of the dock and the sky turns and the forest around us becomes dark blue.

“You want to go swimming?” I ask her.

“I don’t want to do anything,” she says.

She presses the flashlight on the dock and it makes a red circle on the wood. I look with her in between the wood panels. The light beam between the crack tornadoes down into the water. In the beam of light thousands of minnows swim and dart over each other and I start counting instinctively. Ten of the minnows catch the light and reflect back silver. Eleven is a bigger minnow whose eyes I could scoop out with a spoon. I recount her several times and make it to twenty before I catch my breath, rub my eyes, and move closer to the space between the wood. The light illuminates thirteen more minnows that barrel into the group and stroke in circles. The thirty-three minnows I’ve counted swerve aside from each other and never collide. I count forty more but I might be recounting. I reach my fingers over the dock to shovel up the goggle eyed fish whose eyes look like the number 8. They dart away from my hand and the space they leave for me fits like a glove of water. I lose count now. They look like sparks and I can’t count

fire. Pellets of water bounce off the dock like thrown gravel and the rain comes down. The sky zips open and raindrops fall on us like marbles, and the minnows swarm off beyond the light.

A bead of rain drips off Sonya's chin and slides down her chest.

"We should probably get going," she says. "We could get struck," she says. But neither of us move.

I can feel the heat of her face near mine. Our heads are close enough that we could suck rainwater off each other's lips. She turns off the flashlight and I can't see anything except the outline of her face. And right at the right moment, when I imagine it happening, when risk turns into touch, her breath against my lips, soft near soft, and I look right at her, and she does the same, and right when it will happen, it doesn't. I can't bring her in or count the seconds between us fast enough.

We run back to the car and the actuality of not kissing temporarily erases everything positive that could of come out of being with someone in the rain, watching minnows, and running back drenched to a car.

Mary is not dead. I go and visit her just in case. From the bathtub, she calls for her son, the lawyer, but he's not here. I'm worried about her so I walk in and reach into the water, find her armpit, and lift her up. She makes it and steps out of the tub. I stand her up and take her in both my arms, her aging wet body pressed to my chest. Then I brace her with my hand on her back and wrap a towel around her. Her skin feels like thin paper. She is going to die soon.

I help her put her pajamas on and she tells me she “can’t afford another fall.” When old people fall by accident, which happens frequently, they break hips and shatter bones. If no one sees this happen and the paramedics arrive late, they look like spilled milk on the kitchen floor. This makes me worry. I realize Mary would be a good grandmother and I love her for that. Everything in her house, unlike mine, has been accounted for: the framed pictures of family, the biblical-verse-magnet on her refrigerator, and all the kid’s drawings on the freezer. I think she has counted them all in her spare time, which is probably most of the time. She offers me a cookie, which I eat in a napkin there, and then I go back to my apartment.

When I open the door Sonya is holding a butcher knife inside my kitchen, looking down at my silverware.

“Hi,” she says raising the knife by her head, faking a stab, and then placing the knife down on the counter. “I like knives.” she says.

“Do you like breaking in?”

She walks over to me, grabs me from behind my head, and brings me into her. Her small fingernails touch the back of my neck. We kiss and her lips are as cold as knives. Her hair smells like shampoo. After a few seconds of kissing our lips warm up and I imagine slitting off her dress with a knife shaped like the number 7. When we break I feel ready.

We don’t have sex. She likes to do something else. She lays me on the floor and gets on top of me. Then, without making much movement, she spreads out all of her weight on me evenly, her arms on top of my stretched arms, and her legs directly on top of mine. The best feeling in this world is someone's weight on top of you. On the

floor, with her weight pressed on me, we lie motionless. Then she counts my breaths rising underneath her ribcage. “One...two...three...four...”

EQUATIONS

The night Travis was granted the John A. Phillips Mathematics Education Award, he walked home under a Montana sky, his gold medal looped around his neck, the moon looming over the bald hills, listening, as he staggered home, to the flap sounds of porch awnings tossed about from the wind that blew down the mountains.

At his apartment building, a ranch house that stood beside a pastry bakery, he found an envelope on the rough doormat postmarked Seattle. Travis—a cigarette nudged between his knuckles, the smoke floating up the hallway—picked up the letter and stepped into his open apartment. In the kitchen he cut into it with a butter knife and the paper crackled in his fingers. They had slept with each other on sleeping pills, he remembered, but she was not a stunt, not anymore, because Travis was, the letter read, “a father.”

He sat on the floor, no furniture, and thought this word over. How to him, “father” sounded more like mortgage, a family car, an old, leftover oak tree, a dead person’s name. Then he read on:

She was suing him for child support. He owed “thousands” in payments. The tone was conventional: unnecessary exclamation points, lipstick anger, uneasy demands. She wanted him to return to “Washington State and appear in Seattle City Court within thirty days.” What a cutthroat presentation, he thought.

This woman, as he remembered her, was curled up inside his friend’s houseboat that floated off the Pudget Sound; how she had poured over his mathematics books in the

bobbing corner of the boat; how he hardly knew this girl; how she listened to him talk, swallowed pills, rocked her head to death rock; how no one on the boat the next morning could place her name; how in a terrible reversal of fate she was prepared now to destroy him.

A square photograph fell out of the letter and on to the linoleum floor. He looked down at the snapshot of a six-month-old boy sitting on fake grass in floral trimmed pants, a forest of Beech trees poster-ed behind. The child looked up at him from the picture, an optimistic smile on his face, and Travis peeled the photograph off the floor, held it in his palm, this creature, his baby, slanted eyes like his own. Then he flipped the photograph over and written on the backside was the boy's name: "Derrick."

He placed the photo down on a stack of graded quizzes. Then he detached a dry-eraser board off a thumbtack, set it on the floor, and scrawled out an equation: integrals, polynomial rings, variables. And as he swallowed down a glass of faucet water, the numbers surfaced, the problem gave in, and he solved it.

Afterwards, he tore out a piece of notebook paper and wrote, "Not to worry." Followed by, "Come and visit. I'll have the money for you by then." And then he signed it, "Thanks," folded the paper, licked a stamp, walked out into the road—the smell of warm pastry ovens—lifted the metal latch to a blue box, and mailed it off.

The girl from Seattle arrived at his apartment building in a coat, a slip dress, knee-high combat boots. In her arms was Derrick. It had snowed that night, then hailed, and now, teeming sheets of sleet.

“Come in,” Travis said. And squashed a cigarette out on the porch step with the ball of his foot.

“I need the money or you are going to jail. For the life of me, I promise you that.” The baby was bunched up inside a blanket, a breathing lump.

“Here, come inside . . . the winter.”

So she followed him into the building and Travis led her up the hard wooden steps to his one-room apartment. She put the baby on the floor, and with the back of her hand she fluffed her hair out from the inside of her coat collar, and the hair landed on her shoulders in curls.

The heater was broken so Travis had the oven on high, steaming up the windows. Two wooden planks sat on top of cinderblocks and served as a table. A Spider plant hung from a nail punched into the ceiling. The rest of his apartment was empty. His lack of possessions equaled mathematician. And he assumed she'd pick up on that, respect him, give in a little.

“Sit,” he said. Though there was nothing to rest on except the broken radiator.

“Take him,” she said, and held out the limp child.

Travis took the baby in his stiff arms and there it dangled. It had his looks: large eyes, knotty wrists, a soft, doughy tummy. But the hair was from someone else, curly like monkey tuft, but softer. Then the baby farted and Travis handed him back to her.

“Stay here for a while,” Travis said.

She reached into a leather purse, pulled out a baby bottle, crossed her legs, and said, “For a week.”

That night, the baby lying in a bed Travis had constructed out of a cardboard box, a flattish pillow, and a damp towel, he told her that he was broke, but that if she wanted they could play some music, fuck around, talk this over.

“Talk what over?”

“I’m not sure exactly,” he said.

“You’re not sure exactly,” she said. “That’s your problem, isn’t it?”

But he said he couldn’t respond to that. And for a moment he remembered the houseboat, the side of it rubbing up against the dock, and how under a heavy blanket he had touched the inside of her wrist and said, “Hello.”

At the all night gas station he bought her a few things she said she needed: tampons, a bag of potato chips, a half-gallon of milk, and one more item she hadn’t asked for—his idea—condoms.

Inside his apartment, Travis spread the items on the floor.

She pointed with her socked foot at the condom box. “What are those for?”

Travis pulled off his gloves. “For us. Just in case.”

“You expect me to sleep with you.” She giggled. And she crushed a potato chip in her lips.

“Stay here with me,” Travis said. Then he pushed her shoulder, a joke, and she stiffened.

He told her his schedule, included his office phone number, the best times to reach him, and so forth. He was rarely available, he admitted, because he did things on the run, or wherever possible: the bar, the classroom, an open field. He said, getting math done was important to him, more so than to others, it was a place to be one's self, to do things right, to think out loud.

“Ah,” she said. “Enlightening.”

The baby whirled awake inside the cardboard box.

“Is he hungry?” Travis asked.

“His name is Derrick.”

“Derrick.”

“It's my father's name.”

“That's nice. I like it.”

“You don't know my father. Don't pretend to.”

“You want a drink?”

“And I don't want Derrick to know you. That's not why I'm here.”

“You seem proud of yourself.”

“Go to hell.”

“A proud little girl.”

Later he said she could sleep on his futon. He didn't mind, his back could use it, not a problem. She said, “Then thank you,” and she pulled off her dress, scooped the baby up out of the box, got in the bed in her underwear, and laid the child on her chest. If

she needed anything there was milk in the refrigerator, cash on the table, tea in the closet, a cigarette on the radiator.

“I’ll be fine,” she said.

“Good. I’m going out for a little,” he said.

“Go,” she said.

“Forgive me for my shortage of funds.”

“Huh? Right.”

“There’s a bakery next door. Maybe you want some croissants? Maybe a cup of coffee? Would you like something like that?”

“I’m a big girl,” she said.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to rob you.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

“You should be.”

“I’m not.”

“But you might not see your son again. We could leave just like that. That should hurt you. That should pull you under.”

“How do you know it’s mine?”

“You’re hilarious,” she said. Then she stroked the baby’s small back. And the baby turned his head, yawned into her chest, and gripped his mother’s finger in his tiny, primordial fist. “Do the math,” she said.

Out on the road, the sky was black, with clouds underneath, the color of fresh smoke, spreading apart. Behind the bakery, two homeless women stood in a rusty kitchen light, leaning against a hollow dumpster, holding beers in paper bags. One had hair the texture of broom needles that stuck out from her headband. The other wore a hat made out of a grocery bag. The baker stepped outside, pointed down the alley, and the women stumbled off.

A car drove down the street and the headlights swept over the road. Travis stared down at the tops of his shoes and no equations came to him. Instead he thought about going back to his apartment, taking the baby, holding him close, even if he cried, even if his mother woke up. It didn't matter. Just as long as he could make this baby his own for a little while, rock him back to sleep, say the word, "Goodnight." And so he turned around, climbed the steps back up to his apartment, and opened the door.

"You're back," the woman from Seattle said. She was sitting on the floor, Indian style, smoking a cigarette, a piece of ash, the texture of pollen, rubbed into the waistline of her underwear.

"Put that out," he said.

"I can't sleep," she said, and dropped the cigarette into a jar.

"I changed my mind," he said.

She moved her hand inside a lampshade, pulled a loose chain, and the light popped off. "Believe it or not," she said in the half-dark, "I thought I might convince you.

That somehow you'd come back to Seattle with us. Start over. Begin a life. That is what I thought."

"Surprise," he said.

"I'm not," she said. "I knew you wouldn't."

And then, as she stood up, reached for his forearm, a loud thump at the door.

Travis stood up, turned the knob, and the homeless woman with the headband and the broom hair rolled over on her side, stood up, and stumbled inside.

"I use your bathroom?" the homeless woman slurred.

"No," Travis said.

"I'll be in and out, no thing at all. Promise." And the woman took Travis by the shoulder, squeezed it, and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. Her eyes were watery, not from crying, but from a lack of sleep, a need to see all things before her.

"I can't," Travis said. "Get out."

And then the woman from Seattle stood up, walked over to the homeless lady, looked her over, took her by the wrist, turned to Travis, and said, "Let her in."

THE HOLE IN HER MOUTH

I met Anik at the public pool where I used to take my brother. The man ahead of me, a black guy, climbed up the diving board ladder. Two bullet wound scars, the size of pancakes, stretched across his back. He ran down the board, spanked into the sky, spread his arms, flipped around, and cut into the pool like a switchblade. Not everyone, but most of us, gazed in after him

“I bet you can’t pull that off,” a voice said behind me. And I turned my eyes from the water. The voice belonged to a fat girl in a bikini with belly rolls that jiggled. It was cold and lumpy like a bag of potatoes. Something I could poke my hand into and grab a fist of. I ignored her and stepped up the ladder. If my three-year-old brother had been there he would have waved at me from the kiddy pool. But he was not there. He was dead. All I saw up on the board was the sun on the water and women in blue miniskirts holding tennis rackets. The kiddy pool was drained and empty.

It is important for me to mention my brother, Robby, because he was the first person I ever met who at one point existed, and then did not. He never counted to ten, ran through the street, lit a fire, got drunk in the woods, fucked a cheerleader, tied a tie, flew across the country on a jet, or attended a funeral. Those things never happened to my brother. They happened only to me. It happened like this: someone tossed a white sheet

over my brother, let it sit there, yanked it off, and my brother disappeared.

Pellets of water dropped off the diving board and dotted the pool. The board was hot and granular like an unshaved face. Then I spun the wheel, tested the spring, and walked to the tip. I always tested the spring and walked to the tip.

My brother never got a chance to do that. I would have taught him: “Test the spring, walk to the tip, and dive.” He did whatever I told him. That was what made him my brother.

“Just dive you loser,” the fat girl said behind me.

I leaned over the board, looked into the water, and the black man hiccup-ed out of the deep end.

“How’s it done?” I asked him.

He opened his eyes. “I couldn’t tell you. Just got out of prison,” he said. Then he stroked to a spot directly under me and treaded water.

The pool was stuffed with people that afternoon. It looked like an aquarium packed with human fish.

“First dive in about thirty years,” he said, still treading. His hands, the size of plates, padded at the surface, and his legs wiggled underneath like large tentacles.

A lifeguard with nothing productive to do whistled. “Swim to the side,” the lifeguard yelled.

“My name is Daryn,” the black man said to the lifeguard. But that was all he said. Daryn could have done something else, something more aggressive, but he didn’t.

Then he floated across the water and pulled himself out of the bubbles. He didn't go up to the lifeguard. He went back to the diving board line.

I decided right then that if I died my life would have almost been worth it. My brother might have agreed. Although my brother never had a chance to see what my life was worth, I'm sure he would have endorsed me.

"Only thing is-," Daryn said, before I jumped off the board

Daryn was not in line anymore. He was off to the side, shaking water out of his ear. An open spot in line was available for him if he wanted it. That was a given. Everyone knew what it meant to dive the way he did. So I listened.

"I don't fear shit," he said. And he hammered out the drops from his ear. "Except the lord," he said.

I didn't believe him.

"How about bullet shots?" I called down.

But Daryn did not hear me. And he walked to the front of the line. A belly sucked in and Daryn tucked into a vacant spot.

Good, I thought. I can do this. I stomped on the tip of the board, sprung into the air, kicked my legs up toward a cloud, and waited for my body to rotate. Unfortunately, my body did not respond, and my hands scrambled for something to grip. On my way down, I saw a collage of upside down heads. Then I heard a giggle and I splashed.

Underwater a hand pressed against my back. I opened my eyes, but all I saw were flecks of light. I flapped my feet, spread the water open, and sucked in the air. A lifeguard stood on top of his red chair, blew his whistle again, and I looked around the pool, dumbfounded.

Then I saw what I had done: a woman popped up beside me and a red dot trickled out of her nose.

“Forgive me,” I said to the woman I had dived onto. We were both on the concrete now, dripping in the sun.

“You didn’t mean it,” she said. She took my hand in hers and sandwiched it. Her fingers were long and pull-able. Her name was Anik. Water dribbled off her legs and formed a pond below her feet. Her bathing suit was the color of wood. She reached down, pinched a wad of it, and the nylon snapped against her hipbone. Her lips were the texture of a grapefruit peel. Her mouth was open, just barely; a soft hole wide enough to poke a pinkie through.

The lifeguard said something into my ear but I ignored him. Then Anik did something that made me want to hold her. She pressed the napkin she had dabbed her bloody nose with into the lifeguard’s palm. The lifeguard looked into his hand, as if he had just been given poison, his hand stiffened, and he shook the Kleenex off.

At that moment, Daryn flipped off the board and slugged into the water. He spiraled down, pushed the water to his side, and skimmed across the bottom.

The locker room smelled of chlorine. I twisted my towel into a screw and the water seeped out. I heard a toilet flush inside a stall, and when I looked up I saw a naked boy. His penis looked like a shriveled up hotdog. He smiled at me and said, "Hello,

Sparky," but I did not respond. Instead, I dropped my towel in a puddle, walked out of the public pool, and hacked into the hedge.

The little boy from the bathroom stall knew my brother. And as I stood in the bushes, forcing the liquid up from my chest, rhythmically gagging, little flashes of my brother's image came back to me. And the more I puked the more my brother appeared; jumping on top of my stomach in his diaper with a cowboy hat pulled over his head.

When I got to my car the windows had clouded up into pools of platinum. A car engine ticked under a Sycamore tree. I was tired and my chest stung from the up-chuck. Crows hopped in the Sycamore limbs and tickled through the leaves. I slipped my car keys out from under the windshield wiper. Then, as I gloved the door handle, Anik's finger came down and tapped me on the shoulder.

Everything after that was meant to be. Anik needed a ride back to her apartment and I obliged. "It's the least I can do," I said stupidly. Electricity lines laced from pole-to-pole alongside the road. Yellow lines shot back. Speed limit signs shuffled after them. Anik cracked the passenger window and the air gushed in. Then she pointed her finger at her apartment building, and I turned.

"Accidents can kill," Anik said.

"That's what I've heard," I said, and I pulled to a stop.

Anik got out of the car and shut the door with the back of her foot.

Then she walked up to the driver's side window, squatted her legs down like a

frog, and faced me. "Walk me in," she said.

When we got to her apartment, her cat was curled up on the kitchen floor. Suddenly, it jaunted up on all fours, hissed though its curled tongue, and hopped on top of the washing machine. Anik opened the refrigerator and tossed me a bottle of beer. I plucked it from up in the air and the glass sweated in my palm.

"You're my first crush," she said.

"I must have really fallen for you," I said.

We were on a roll.

Then the cat jumped on top of the table, right in between us, and Anik brushed it off with the back of her hand.

Anik and I whirled back and forth with each other. We stood together in lines, bumped into each other as we walked under doorways, tugged each other into closets, kissed at the top of stairways and looked at each other across large dining rooms.

One night I told Anik something that made my stomach twist.

Outside the rain poured out of the sky and spilled down metal steps. The water swiveled through the gutters, rattled like hard candy; dumped out the chutes, and spread across the white sidewalk.

"I used to have a brother," I said.

Anik sandwiched my knees between her legs and flipped my hand over in hers.

“That’s a good thing,” she said. Then she swirled her fingertip into the hard part of my palm and looked at my mouth. I was still watching the water drip off the rooftop. Her fingertip was warm and incandescent, hot enough to burn through plastic. The tendons in my wrist tightened. That was when I slid my hand out from hers and placed it directly on her hip.

One day Anik took me to the grocery store. Metal carts clicked, cash registers opened, ice-smoke spilled from freezers, buggies wobbled down aisles, and old ladies squeezed fruit. As we walked through the store a camera zoomed in on the two of us and projected our image on a black and white television screen. A man in the customer service box, behind tinted windows, looked at the image of us, and bit into his pear.

The cashier swished our groceries over the scanner. I listened to the items beep: a banana, a coke, a box of cereal, and a magazine. They zapped, slid down the belt, and were stuffed into plastic bags. Anik dropped a chocolate bar onto the conveyor belt and the candy floated up to the cashier. The total rang up and the price triggered up onto a green screen. I opened my wallet and unfolded a bill.

“Sparky? You’re Sparky. Aren’t you?” A boy said behind me. It was the boy from the locker room.

My body froze. The cashier plucked the bill from my fingers.

“Sparky,” he coughed. “Zzzz,” he said. And he poked his finger into an imaginary socket. “I know who you are.”

I can safely say one thing about children. Stories are passed along to where they shouldn't go and are stored like weapons.

I considered kicking him with my leg. But instead I twisted the plastic bag around my wrist and walked off. A red, eye dot flashed and the automatic doors slid open. A little girl beside the coin machine pulled her helium balloon down by the string. In the parking lot, the pavement sizzled under my sneakers, and the sliding doors clapped shut.

“What’s wrong with you?” Anik asked. I stared out at the orange dumpster where I parked.

“I’m not a good person,” I said, and I took her by the arm.

“I’m not either,” she said. “Though, I’m glad you told me. Just in case.”

“I didn’t mean to. It was an accident,” I said.

Then I told her about my brother:

One night in bed I heard something pop, and I opened my eyes. The lights outside my door pulsed, blacked out, and I sat up. I flicked the switch but nothing happened.

I walked to my brother’s room and his window was open, the wind blowing in, and a breeze picked up the curtain and twirled it in the air.

When I found my brother he was on the floor holding a fork. The fork was connected to an electric socket. The hair on his arm was standing up. He had electrocuted himself. That was how he died.

After I was done with the story I told Anik that I wished my brother was still alive.

“Take me home,” Anik said.

And so I did.

When I got back to my apartment I picked up a t-shirt and held it out in front of me. Then I thought of my brother poking his arms through the holes and filling up the shirt. But that was just wishful thinking. My brother could not have worn shirts that large.

The telephone twittered on the floor. I beeped the talk button and said, “Yes?”

“You sound different,” my mother said. A cigarette-voice.

“You’re probably right,” I said into the receiver. My mother lived by herself.

After my brother died she divorced my father and moved to a beach.

“I am right. I am always right about you,” my mother said. “Don’t you realize that by now? How long does it take for you to get to the beach?”

Each time she asked me that I was expected to give her a fresh reply. “Four hours,” I answered.

“On the dot,” she said. “Exactly four hours.” Then she said, “You have someone, don’t you? I can tell,” she said.

“No you can’t,” I said.

“Bring her with you,” she said.

Then she hung up the phone.

The next morning I opened Anik's screen door and walked into her kitchen. Anik was standing beside the refrigerator, holding her cat. Her arms unfolded and the cat dropped to the linoleum like a wet mop. Then her eyes split into popcorn. She still had that space between her lips, that lovely little hole the size of a pea. I reached over, stuck my finger into her mouth, and her face bucked. Then I popped my finger out. I walked over to her refrigerator, cracked open a bottle of milk, and poured myself a glass. The cat leapt up on my lap and licked at my lips. An hour later, Anik and I left for the beach.

Fog crumbled over the rocks, tumbled across the bank and floated across the sea. Sailboats bobbed along the shore. Birds swooped down, bounced off the water, and trampolined into the air. Anik unzipped her purse, pulled out a tube of Chap Stick, and carved a bar of pink petroleum over her lips. Then I drove the car down a trail covered in sea grass.

When the tires hit the sand, I flipped on the headlights, and ground to a halt. The waves snapped against the shore, but it was behind the dunes, so I couldn't see them. Then my mother appeared in the high beams, under a palm tree. I killed the engine and Anik stepped out of the side door.

"I love her already," my mother said, and she nodded at me. That was her style. The ocean smelled salty, like the past, like memory.

My mother took Anik's hand in hers. Her fingers wrapped around Anik's palm like a tight shoelace and then unraveled. I had never seen hands shake that way before.

The three of us hiked up a dune, sat on the top and watched the ocean slosh. My mother uncorked a bottle of wine and rummaged through her tote bag. The water flogged the sand, fizzled, and reversed into the ocean. My mother pulled out three plastic cups, kissed the bottle to the brim, and poured clear liquid into the glasses.

"I'm happy for the two of you," my mother said.

She passed each of us a cup full of wine and we clicked them together. Then she tilted hers back and the liquid flowed down her throat. Up above the ocean, a black cloud scudded across the sky, slid over the sea, and hovered over a city, somewhere like Hong Kong.

"Cheers," I said. The sun gurgled into the ocean. Anik ran her fingers through the alluvium and sunk her plastic cup into the sand.

"Be good to each other," my mother said. She pointed her two index fingers at my head and dabbed it. A wave rolled up the shore and broke apart. The sand on the beach sponged up the water and then dried into toast. "It comes from up top," my mother continued. And she touched her bangs to her forehead.

"What?" I asked.

"The inspiration to understand each other," my mother said.

"Right," I said.

My mother thinks that humans are predisposed to creative relationships. They aren't. Humans are prone to private embarrassment, public tiffs, and spontaneous dancing.

“He is my only son,” my mother said. And she looked at Anik. I didn’t think Anik would respond to that, but she did.

“And he is my only boyfriend,” Anik said. That might have passed over most people, but I heard what she said, and I pulled it out of the air, and stored it into my heart.

After my mother was done with her glass, she handed me the empty bottle. I dropped it in the sand and it flashed. My mother opened another bottle and gave me the cork. I pushed it down into the dune with my finger.

The sky looked obsidian. That was when I stood up and stepped off the dune, crossed the beach, and walked and into the ocean. The foam popped against my shins and spread along the shoreline.

“Come in,” I hollered up at Anik and my mother. But neither budged. They couldn’t hear me.

“You are shark bait,” Anik yelled. And she fell back into the sand. When Anik spoke she mocked me and I liked it.

“Your loss,” I said, but they did not hear that either.

I swam into the water and dunked under the waves. Once I was out far enough I floated on my back. When I looked at the beach I couldn’t make out the dunes. All I saw was the chop of white caps and the spread of bubbles. The water rolled under me, wave after wave, and I considered falling asleep to it.

Then I wondered what it would be like if I did fall asleep. Floating across the sea above a hidden ocean kingdom. Millions of tiny fish mouths sucking my back. Coasting up to the Poles and bumping off the icebergs. Then I rotated and swam back to the beach.

“We’ve come to rescue you,” my mother said. Anik and my mother were standing on the beach. I stepped on the sand, faced the two of them, and sank down an inch.

WAIT HERE

On the ride to the Jacksonville airport my wife pulled on a cigarette and said, “I want to be cremated.”

“Is that right?” I asked.

“That’s exactly right.”

It didn’t bother me, the talking about dying part, because it seemed unlikely, and the conversation was appropriate, since Henry, our friend from Idaho, had just died, and that was what they were doing to him. Chloe was flying to Minneapolis by herself for the ceremony; she loved Henry to pieces, and I to death, but we were deplorably poor. So I imagined her there, on the bow of the boat, lined with women in white pearls, and the men in starched shirts and wind-whipped pants, and the captain of the boat would say a few words, and a gust would splash water up on board, and then they’d all watch, as the girl in the diamond encrusted dress dumped our friend Henry out of a porcelain pot and into the open water of Lake Minnetonka.

“You should come with me,” Chloe said.

Then she looked down at her lap, as if there was something important there, which there wasn’t, just her e-ticket. And she moved her hand to the soft part of her neck, and squeezed her throat a little, not that she was choking, but just checking her breath, as if there was a knot tied up somewhere inside there, and then she let go.

The airport was close and the planes rumbled over the traffic. It was rainy so the jets disappeared quickly into thunderclouds. We only had a few moments left, and I wanted to dare her, so I asked: “And where would *you* like to be spread?”

“In a river,” she said. “In a river in Idaho.”

“That’s a good place.”

And then she bumped my shoulder with her pack of cigarettes and made me promise not to bury her. I took a hand off the steering wheel, held the back of hers, and said, “I promise.” Then she made me swear on it again, just to make sure, so I squeezed her thigh, and she nodded.

* * *

The night we found out about Henry we couldn’t talk and so we just sat there on the bed without moving. The next day we had sex, the morning sun lightening the windows, and when we were done, Chloe got of bed, and her head left a crease in the pillow. I heard her run the faucet in the bathroom. So I stood up and walked over to the door and it was half-open. She was sitting on the toilet, her knees touching, her underwear pulled around her ankles. I took a white t-shirt off an adhesive hanger, looked down at her, and pulled the shirt over my head. She smiled, as if that expression alone made up for the fact that Henry was now dead, and she said, “Idaho was good to us.”

“Henry,” I said, “was good to us.”

* * *

I followed the signs to the passenger drop-off lane and the cars ahead scrambled for spots.

“You’re making me fly out there alone.”

“You’ll be fine,” I said. “But don’t look down.” And I squeezed into the curb.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I know,” I said.

“Then circle around and walk me into this fucking airport. That, I think, is the least you can do.”

“Look,” I said, because we were there now, and the cars had piled up. But she didn’t wait for me to finish.

“For God’s sake,” she said, and opened the passenger door and stepped out on the curb.

A van full of basketball players unloaded. Businessmen rolled luggage across the street. Then a baggage clerk pulled Chloe’s suitcase out of the trunk. I opened the door and an empty plastic bottle fell on the road. Then I walked around the car to Chloe, pulled her up close, and kissed her on the lips. But her arm was shaking, and she moved her head to the side. I leaned against the car and she walked into the glass terminal and then she was gone.

* * *

On the highway I sucked on a cigarette and the smoke sunk deep, filled up the vacant parts. But when I breathed the smoke out, it slithered through my nose and left the taste of bark inside my mouth. I flicked the butt out the window crack and it caught air, lobbed back, bounced off a windshield, and the cherry burst into a thin trail of sparks on the pavement.

The car behind me, a low-rider with titanium spinners, pulled up alongside my Pontiac and honked. The driver, a black man with two gold teeth and a skull wrap, made his fist into a gun, aimed it at my head, and said, “Bang.” I pressed on the brakes and melted back into traffic. I drove the rest of the way through the soft Florida scrubs, under an outrageously orange Florida sky. The seat next to me was empty, so I put my hand there, on the fake leather, and it felt ice-cold and terrifying.

* * *

We worked on the border of Idaho at the Snow Rabbit Ski Resort. Henry ran the kitchen. I was a ski instructor but not very good at it; the kids fell too much. Chloe’s job was to stand by the chairlift, check tickets, and brush the snow off the nylon seats with the back of her mitten. “Good luck,” I remember she said once, as she pushed my kids in the iron chairs up the mountain. Henry, he’d come out of the kitchen for cigarette breaks once in a while and look for us. I remember him too, but not as clearly, only that he was alone, and that he wore his paper chef’s hat out in the cold, and that he always squinted up at the mountain.

When the ski resort closed for the day, Chloe and I would pull Henry out of the kitchen and tell him, “It’s now or never.” He’d drop the dirty dishes in the sink, walk out of there in a stained apron, and we’d put on gloves and warm coats and snow hats and snap on skis and glide to the lift.

The chairlift clacked around, Chloe always sitting between us, and we climbed up the side of the mountain. Up on that lift, Henry would unzip his parka, pull out a flask of liquor, and we’d throw a few drinks back, the three of us ascending—the snow covered trees slumbering underneath us as we sipped the booze—until the cold wind slapped our faces, and we’d cover up our runny noses and chapped lips, swoop off the lift, and ski down the hill.

* * *

One night in Idaho Henry showed up at our house on the back porch. Chloe and I lived in the valley in a bungalow with a sloped roof, surrounded by potato farms. He knocked on the glass door with his fist and Chloe got out of bed in her long underwear, put on a robe, and slid the door open. The cold blew in. The snowflakes twirled under the porch lights. I was naked because that was how I slept, and I sat up in bed.

Henry clicked off his boots, stepped inside, and took a seat on top of the stove. Our bed was next to the kitchen, and he looked at me under the covers, and he said, “I’m sorry, Jim.”

I asked him, “About what?”

And he said, “I hit a deer, blew it apart, and it’s alive in a ditch, breathing.”

“No,” Chloe said.

Henry looked at my face, even though I was naked and standing up now, and he said, “Jim, the two of us have to go back there and finish him off.” Because he couldn’t do it alone, refused to put it out. And then he did something surprising. He slumped over, put his face in his gloves, and sniffed as if he might cry.

Chloe threw her arm around his neck and tugged him close to her collarbone and said, “Just leave it.”

* * *

We tracked out into the snow in boots. A storm had dumped down all night and my truck wouldn’t start, so we walked the road. We carried a chain, a scoop shovel, and, over Henry’s shoulder, a sledgehammer.

When we got there, Henry’s pickup truck was parked off to the side, the bumper caved in, the windows shattered, the hood popped, the light on inside, the snow falling down like pieces of tissue paper, melting on the engine.

“See it?” Henry asked.

“Nope,” I said.

“The blood.” He pointed.

“She’s vanished. The deer is gone,” I said, and I scanned the potato fields.

We followed the drops of blood in the snow out past a ditch and into an empty field. By a pool of blood we squatted and pressed our hands into the white fluff. Henry picked up a clump of fur, rubbed it in the palm of his glove, opened his fingers, and let it

fall. Then we found some more blood that led out toward a barn. Near the barn, a pile of white swelled and stuttered, and we walked over to the lump, gave it a kick. Steam shot out the nose, and it was the deer.

“You kill it,” Henry said, and he brushed the snow off the deer’s head.

“Give it to me,” I said, but he handed me the shovel. “The hammer,” I said.

“I can’t,” he said.

“Then step back,” I said. I pulled the sledgehammer out of Henry’s arms, swung it over my shoulder, brought it down on the skull, and smashed the life—fragile as glass—out of the animal.

* * *

After I dropped Chloe off at the airport, I got lost in Lake City, Florida. And I thought, as I drove, about Idaho. Our old house would still be there, covered and caked in snow. The Snow Rabbit Ski Resort, no doubt, would have expanded, with more lifts, more trails, more places for the tourists to shop. And the workers would be younger looking, in their twenties maybe, with a different taste in music than we had, I don’t know, and maybe they’d smoke pot, but who can tell? Part of me thought that Henry, if he were still alive, if he were still in Idaho, could adapt to all of that. I’m sure of it, actually.

And when I got tired of driving around endlessly, of dreaming of Henry in Idaho this way, I turned the radio all the way up so that the thoughts would rush out of me. But it didn’t work that way and the radio signals crackled. So I pulled over at a run-down gas

station, the worst one I could find, the kind with bars on the windows, grocery carts tipped over on their sides, an old black guy standing by a lit door. And then I flipped the engine off.

* * *

The way Henry croaked out on us was stupid. Years ago he liked heroin. “The bus pulled up, I stepped on board, and I didn’t get off”; that was how Henry talked to Chloe about addiction.

“Addiction?” I said. “That’s the rehab in him.”

“Certain people have addictive personalities,” Chloe said.

“Everybody has an addictive personality,” I said.

“At least Henry admitted it. At least Henry got to the heart of the matter,” she said. And then Chloe shrugged her shoulders, and did the dishes.

* * *

I know that in Idaho things were right for Henry. In Idaho, he had his own house, his own kitchen, body building equipment rigged up in the basement. In Idaho the city of Minneapolis forgot all about him and it didn’t matter. In Idaho he was content, awake. Probably more so than ever. On top of that, a chef, in my mind, is a respectable job. So of course he should have stayed.

Chloe and I didn't. We moved around the country, picked up jobs, got a dog, and eventually got married. That's natural. That's how it is supposed to work. But Henry, he quit Idaho and moved back to Minneapolis. Which Chloe said was a "dead end." But why should he listen?

And then one night in Minneapolis, Henry's father couldn't get ahold of him. And he knew something was off. So he took a taxi to Henry's building, climbed the steps up to his apartment, pushed the door in, and a compact disk was skipping, but nothing else, no answer. And his father was terrified, searching in the closets, pulling the sheets off the bed, crawling on his hands and knees, because he knew what to expect, he had to know what was next. And then he opened the bathroom door and the tub was overflowing, and one of Henry's legs was hanging over the side, his head slumped on his chest, a needle stuck out of his right arm, and that's so fucking ridiculous, the whole thing. He probably deserved it, Henry did, for being such a fuck.

* * *

I got out of my car and stood in the gas station parking lot and listened to the trucks thundering by on the interstate. A barbed wire fence surrounded most of the plot and a bird I couldn't find twittered inside a patch of thorns and thickets. Out in the road, in the median, the palm trees were on crutches, and the tops of the trees swooshed around in the dark as if someone had come down from above and blown into them. At the illuminated door to the gas station, the black man had a cigarette between his fingers, and

a stream of smoke rose in a thin line, and I thought about asking him for directions home, but I didn't.

And it occurred to me, for the first time, the amount of “awful” people are willing to hold inside themselves: Chloe up in the sky, speeding through the clouds, toward Minneapolis, toward our dead friend Henry. And then there was Henry, and the way he carried the word “addiction” inside of him, while secretly it was a burning sensitivity to the world. And for this reason, I probably avoided the funeral. It seemed like the right thing to do. To take what was dealt, soak it up, and keep it there. I think that's reasonable. Human even. But perhaps even more than that, the only other possible explanation, was that I did not want to see Henry—the only friend that Chloe and I ever shared together—dead.

* * *

One night in Idaho, just before we left it for good, Henry pulled up to our house in his truck to wish us well and send us off. Chloe invited him in and immediately got drunk, because that was *her* way of saying goodbye. She must have been happy that night, because she was smoking in her long underwear, and singing to Henry, pulling the collar of his shirt, making him swallow down more wine. And then Henry said, “Wait here,” and he put on a James Brown tape.

And I heard the music, which was quick at first and then softened, so I sat up in bed and I watched them: the lights off except for the orange glow of the wood burning stove, Henry and Chloe dancing, their hands squeezed tight, warm blood passing through

them, the music swelling up and receding, moving the two of them in circles around the room. And Chloe watched her feet, so as not to step on Henry's cowboy boots. And I considered cutting in, taking Chloe by her elbow, and saying, "Now, dance with me." Instead, I kept to the bed, and watched the two of them. And when the music was over and it was quiet again, Henry let go of Chloe, and this, I admit, made me smile.

After Chloe came back to bed, I saw Henry's truck lights pass through the windows as he backed out of our driveway, headed through the potato fields, and disappeared down the snow packed roads for good. And so I curled up close to Chloe, and she moved on her side, and pushed her back hard against me, and she was warm, and I slipped one hand under her head, the other on her ribs, and she turned around, and faced me.

** *

In the gas station, the cashier, a woman with four fingers, pulled a map of Florida off a rotating rack, spread it open, and drew a line with her thumbnail indicating the way I had to go. I told her, "It's nice of you to do that for me." And she said, without moving her thumb, "It's nothing." Then I stepped out into the parking lot, heard a girl shout in the street, and I turned toward my car.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonathan Brown graduated from the University of Montana in 2001 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. He lives with his wife and two children.

â€” We founded the Gobstones Club. How do you like Gobstones? â€” Gobstones are my favourite food. Ben. Let's join the Gobstones Club â€” Let's join the Death Eaters. How do you like Gobstones? â€” Let's talk about You-Know-Who. What if I lose?â€” You might be better than me â€” I'm a better Curse-Breaker too. Don't try to distract me â€” McGonagall is right behind you! Penny. Why was your brother expelled? â€” He broke school rules. What does Filch love most? â€” Mrs. Norris. Why does Dumbledore leave? Apparently, the Wyoming gun laws benefit everyone; SafeWise. reported that Wyoming's crime rate is 45 percent lower than the national average, and some of the safest cities in the state have even lower rates. 11. We have just one university. Powhusku/Flickr. That means no division among the residents. No matter how our football and basketball teams are doing, we root for our Pokes together. 12. Breathtaking scenery. Tim Lumley/Flickr. With numerous state and national parks and forests, Wyoming is the place everyone comes to appreciate natural beauty. 13. Amazing wildlife. Art G./Flickr. Wy... Uh, to us, those goody-good people who worked shitty jobs for bum paychecks and took the subway to work every day and worried about their bills were dead. I mean they were suckers. They had no balls.â€” He's a good fella. He's one of us." You understand? We were goodfellas. Wiseguys. But Jimmy and I could never be made because we had Irish blood. It didn't even matter that my mother was Sicilian. To become a member of a crew you've got to be one hundred per cent Italian so they can trace all your relatives back to the old country.