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Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Hangtown

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Brandon Joshua Williams

June 2014

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the professors and mentors: Dorothy, for starting it all; Charmaine, for showing me how these characters might coexist; Susan, for never letting me settle, and for everything else; Andrew, for seeing potential from the start; Michael, for the first and the last lessons; Tom, for the experiment that showed me what this book was going to be; Dwight, for being there, from '06-now.

Thanks to the colleagues: Brett and Paolo, for holding the line year one and raising the bar from there; David and Greg and Sara and Eric and Kate and Angela, for the lessons in specificity and clarity; Amanda and John and Andrew and Aleks and Peter and Kris, for all the edits and critiques and lunches and conversations.

Thanks to the family: K. and S. and M. and J. and R. and M. and A., for knowing they will be written about and sticking around anyway.

And a special thanks to my students, who hold me to the principles I tell them writers should aspire to.

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Land O'Lakes

In the kitchen, holding a box of butter, Rosalind watches the rain. The first storm came the day after Marilyn Ruth died, and it's been raining ever since. Before, the county had been dry: the Cosumnes River trickling from a broken tap, the American River dangerously near to showing its undergrowth after a full summer of drought leading into a balmy fall and a warm winter, all the small creeks baked into emptiness.

Now, the rain falls as heavily as she's ever seen, and it tilts Rosalind's perspective until the world outside her window looks like it's fallen into the ocean. She's making a simple yellow cake, following directions on the back of the Duncan Hines box that leans against her toaster. She bought the Duncan brand because back when she and Marilyn were in their twenties and still had things like girls nights a few times a month, they'd watch that old Highlander TV show for Duncan McLeod without a shirt and take turns saying, "I could make do with a man like that." Rosalind never quite managed to speak with full conviction, but Marilyn's eyes would be painted fire, righteous and certain.

The butter in Rosalind's hand is the wrong kind. She can't stand generic butter. Her mother blames this idiosyncrasy on her weak constitution, but the box of Land O' Lakes isn't impossibly expensive, and Rosalind is fine with store-brand for everything else. She's only particular about her butter.

It was always Marilyn who could bake, who used to bring slices of the most delicious pies -- boysenberry or prickly pear, apple cream or lemon, with fine latticework crust -- to work every day at the Buttermilk. On break, Marilyn would unwrap twin slabs of butcher paper, then hand one to Rosalind. They'd eat in the back storeroom, Rosalind

deep in the ecstasy of home cooking and Marilyn off in her private darkness. Finished, Rosalind's face would be stained, crumbs sprinkling her apron. And Marilyn, she'd still look perfect; she'd toss her paper, would barely need to wipe her mouth before sweeping back to her tables. Stub of a pencil behind her ear, and her curving waist tapering to legs long as Monday. No patron could crack her face, smooth like an iced-over river, though the boys all tried. Tried and failed, and left tips so good they swore she'd remember them on the next run. Rosalind took down orders while watching the tongues wagging in Marilyn's wake, and she pressed her fingers against the heavy quarters that settled against the bottom of her apron pouch.

Rosalind slides to the edge of the kitchen, where she can see her husband Buddy sitting on the couch. He has his hands in his lap, both feet on the floor, like a prize student paying attention to a lecture. She's borrowed a pan from her mother, and though it's been a couple years, the oven still works. Buddy's watching football. She's not the cook Marilyn was, but she can crack a couple eggs, plug in the mixer, watch all the individual ingredients turn over into a single unified mass. For Marilyn, she'll bake a cake.

Buddy's a Tennessee Titans fan because he used to like the Houston Oilers because of Warren Moon, and that convoluted history is not the most ridiculous thing she's learned in six years of marriage. She watches for a moment, waits until Joe Buck's voice is replaced with a Papa John's commercial, then slides into his line of vision. She holds up the box of butter and waves it. "This is the wrong butter," she tells him.

"I disagree," he says. "It is butter, which is what you asked for. Ipso facto, it is right."

His face is broad and looks stupid. He is aware, and overcompensates as a defense mechanism. He's looking straight at her, waiting for her to ask what ipso facto means. She won't. He must have heard it in class.

"Besides," he says, "it's a little late for recriminations. The Ravens are up by three."

"It's the one thing I ask. Just get me my Land O' Lakes."

"It's the fourth quarter. Flacco in the fourth, you kidding me? "

"You know I trust that little Sacajawea."

"You are blowing this entirely out of proportion."

The game is on again. There are seven minutes left in the fourth quarter. The funeral is at 5:00, with a gathering at the Buttermilk after. She's bringing the cake. Rosalind insisted on dessert, invoked her status as best friend of the deceased to make sure she got it. The yellow cake, Duncan, it'll be a tribute. And she's standing in the doorway of her kitchen, holding the wrong butter. "This is important," she tells him. His eyes are floating back to the screen.

"Have you considered," he says, "that it's not? Perchance?"

"You're not better than me."

"I never intimated that I was." His tone makes it clear that he was intimating exactly that, and that he was intimating she wouldn't know the definition of intimating.

Buddy's just resumed taking classes at the junior college, political science. It's important, he'll say on nights when his arm is wrapped around her and they're watching her sappy television shows instead of his sci-fi flicks, to know the world outside of their small bubble. He's got aspirations: city council, maybe vice mayor. He tries not to dream bigger than that, he says. Which means he's thinking much bigger. Probably thinks he'll be mayor someday. Rosalind can imagine him jacking off to presidential fantasies. He always did like Condi Rice.

Since he started classes, the arguments have gotten meaner. More personal. "How much are tips these days?" he asks her. "What can I get for seven dollars?" This, he tells her, is an example of humor.

The box of butter is light in her hand. It feels cheap. The picture on the box is of a silver pitcher, milk streaming from the funnel. The milk is so pure-white it's almost blue. Rosalind watches Joe Flacco throw a heavy spiral deep toward the end zone, into a scrum of heaving bodies, the black-and-yellow uniforms of the Steelers' vaunted defense smashing against vibrant purple wide receivers. Buddy is leaning forward, his eyes wide. He's holding his breath. In a few short hours, Marilyn will be in the ground.

Rosalind lets the butter box fly.

As soon as it's out of her hand, she knows she's thrown it true. There is a feeling like exultation that settles in the pivot of her shoulder. When she was a kid and still studied karate under Marilyn's dad, a grandmaster who called himself Haunches, he would have called this moment a focus point. In the middle of the action, the vastness of possibility, the opportunity exists to consider all that is. For instance: the baseboard

trailing into the entertainment center is warping from the wall, Buddy's eyes possess red veins, a dog is barking, Buddy's hand is tight to his hip and ready to punch the air in victory or claw in pain, there is wind whistling through a window she has forgotten to close in the bathroom. Buddy has never in his life worn glasses.

Then the box lands flush against his eye, and his face blossoms. Rosalind discovers herself staring at blood, at an empty hole in the upper segment of Buddy's face. His eyeball has popped free of its socket. She watches it arc through the air, roll onto the carpet, and she thinks, *I haven't vacuumed this week*. Everything feels tremendously, craterously, cavernously normal.

Buddy pushes to his feet. He stumbles toward her, a small man grown large in the hulking desperation of pain. She can't look anywhere above waist-level, and also can't look anywhere below knee-level. In high school, she failed biology twice.

Three steps bring him beside her. He grabs her arm. In the years they've been married, he has hit her twice, what he calls corrective measures, but she's never feared him like now. His eyes are brown, or one of them is and the other used to be. He is holding her, just a shade below painful. The butter lies on the ground. One square of butter has escaped the confines of the box, and Rosalind stares at the precise lines on the side of the wrapper. There is nothing but certainty.

"Help me," he rasps, and releases her arm. "Please."

She could call 911, but the fire station is ten minutes away at best if traffic plays along. Whimpers push out of him. She started this mess. The hospital is just a few streets down from the house. It'll be faster to take him herself.

He can barely walk. She bends her knees and pulls him onto her back in what Marilyn's father once called a fireman's carry. Marilyn. The funeral's at 5:00, the gathering at 7:00. Rosalind has to be there. It's just like Buddy, she thinks, to go and get himself hurt by ticking her off, especially today.

She gets her grip squared, holds tight to the horde of muscle and fat above her, sets her feet, and starts to move. "Come on, help me out here," she tells Buddy, and works with a free hand at lifting his knee in a pantomime of walking. But Buddy refuses to raise his feet, refuses to move at all, so she carries him, step by 180-pound step. The living room feels lengthy as Donner Pass. Buddy's chin presses against her shoulder, his mouth close to her ear. "Goddamn," he growls at her every few seconds. "It hurts."

His weight is not insubstantial. She is nearly doubled over trying to hold him. His feet drag against the carpet, adding to the resistance. "Can't you walk?" she asks him, and he groans. He has never in his life made anything easy for her.

"Goddamn," he growls at her. "It hurts."

She flicks the lock and wrenches open the door, forces herself over the jamb and spends a few seconds struggling to close it behind herself without hitting Buddy on the head or catching his foot. Outside, the world looks like an egg in a frying pan under siege by an electric mixer. The rain comes down so hard that Rosalind's Thunderbird is rocking. It's five plodding steps to the passenger door. As she fits the key into the door, he tells her, "I hate this car."

Rosalind bends her knees and works at tossing him into the vehicle. She manages to get him off her back in a fluid motion, but he lands awkwardly, mostly though not

entirely in the car, and he will not adjust himself. She has to swing his legs inside, then scoot his hips, then work on his shoulders. He sits, and lets her prod at him.

"Well," she says. The rain is a translucent barrier between them. "This car is getting you to the hospital. You can handle the seatbelt, I'm sure." His jeans are bloody, his face is painted red. If she doesn't get this resolved, and soon, she'll be married to a pirate. She's not prepared to deal with a husband who can use the word booty in a sentence without sarcasm.

The roads are slick with new rain, so she drives carefully, slower than she'd like. Buddy's got a hand up in the general direction of his face, and his moans are those of a dog in need of putting down. She thinks about reaching over to grab his knee, but it's only two quick left turns and they're there.

The hospital is up a steep grade and offers street parking, but Rosalind pushes through into the Emergency section where the ambulances congregate. She parks against the curb, cuts the wheel sharply, and sets the brake. "Stay here," she tells him.

Buddy's head is lolled back against the vinyl. She's not worried about bloodstains. He moans, a soft hum like trying to match a tuning fork. She'll come back to check the headrest when he's in a room. They'll take good care of him. There are towels in the backseat she can use.

She runs inside. She hasn't been in the emergency room in years -- she wasn't expecting it to seem so calm. There is a man with his arm in a sling, another with a hand looking gangrenous, and a woman whose head looks like a turnip in color and shape. All three appear composed, in pain but quietly waiting their turn. The receptionist is behind

glass and a too-tall desk, framed on both sides by thick doors. "Hey," Rosalind says to the woman behind the glass. "Get a doctor. This is not a drill."

"Registration." The woman is thin and has black hair with bright caramel highlights, though only on the left side. She's wearing a LIVESTRONG bracelet on each wrist. She is fiddling with the mouse that's wired into her computer, watching the screen. Her left hand props up her head. There are goose bumps flickering across the exposed backside of her arms. She does not look compassionate.

Rosalind has lost control of everything. Marilyn had always been her safety valve, and that is gone and she's not even going to get to pay her proper respects. "There is a man in a car in this parking lot without an eye. He is bleeding. Also crying. You want to maybe get him a doctor." The receptionist blinks. She blinks again. Then she reaches for the phone.

Rosalind steps back from the counter. She sits in a plastic chair. A man in scrubs rushes out of the thick gray door, then two more follow. A gurney flies by. Everyone is in white.

The gurney swooshes past once more, surrounded by doctors. Over the squeak of the wheels and strange medical language, she hears Buddy groaning, "Goddamn." She knows, it hurts.

The men who take their breakfast at the Buttermilk Pantry loved Marilyn for the way she filled out her flared uniform skirt. Rosalind and Marilyn had been friends for more than fifteen years, since Marilyn came into the Buttermilk begging for a job. There are others around town who've made Marilyn a hero, who think her shining hair and

angeldust smile could heal wounds. Rosalind has seen her ride the float at the 4th of July Parade, and she watched Marilyn's divorce go final and her smile tighten. Buddy's even tried to slip a few dollars into the wrong waitress' smock a few times when he thought Marilyn was lowdown enough he might have a chance. All that, and Rosalind covering every missed shift, always about twenty dollars' less tip and a bus ride home because her husband needed the car he claims to hate. For all those years, Rosalind might have been Marilyn's only true friend.

The funeral will be starting soon. There is a spot in the front row reserved for Rosalind. She's wearing a yellow dress that Marilyn complimented a few times. She was going to read a Charles Wright poem that had once reduced Marilyn to tears, a poem Marilyn had discovered in her English class the first week she'd gone back to college. The cake is still a collection of ingredients, fully formed only in her mind.

Rosalind could leave. She could be back at the hospital in an hour and a half, dabbing at the tears still framed in the corners of her eyes, or she could put in an appearance at the Buttermilk. They're closed all day, in memoriam, as the sign says; even snowstorms have never put that place out of business more than a few hours. Electric outages, they still serve coffee, eggs, and pancakes off old propane grillers. But this is Marilyn.

She toys with the idea, but the moment is gone quickly. A woman in a blue business suit, buttons buttoned to the neck, sits down in the red chair beside her. Rosalind's chair is blue. The seats are organized in primary colors. "It's really too bad,"

the woman says by way of greeting, "that they can't spring for cushions. I mean, people have to sit here for hours."

"I haven't filled out the forms yet."

The woman sweeps Rosalind's comment away like a fly. Her gloves are the color of milk, reminding Rosalind of butter on the ground, a pitcher of milk pouring into perpetuity. The butter is a puddle now, no longer measurable by those precise black lines. "That's not why I'm here."

Rosalind does not ask, Then why? She sits with her back straight. Her hands are in her lap. There is a folder, full of papers, the woman has brought. Rosalind keeps her eyes down, looking at her hands, at her wedding ring spotted with blood. There is so much blood. The way Marilyn went out, in a tub with Einstein hair and no blood at all, seems remarkably prudent. Rosalind has not considered the blood on her body much until now, but sitting in children's chairs, in a too-bright waiting room, the burnished copper that's ruined her dress, that's all over her hands and deep into the slit between her third finger and her wedding ring, it seems damning.

The clock on the wall clicks as the hands come about to a full rotation at the start of a new hour. Rosalind looks up. The funeral has begun, or will soon.

"Did he hit you?"

The question comes out of nowhere, out of a blue suit colored like a child's sippy cup, out of a chair red as a Tonka fire truck. The woman looks so earnest, her eyes bright and piercing, her lips clamped tightly together, that Rosalind wants to say yes. There is a bruise on her arm where he grabbed her. She saw it while lumberjacking him across the

living room, the imprint of two knuckles against her pale skin. If her skin was a shade of paint, she would be Linen White, according to the Benjamin Moore Paint Color Chart. The bruise looks like the legs of a stick figure. It is covered by her sweatshirt. She can feel its heat.

"Did he touch you at all?"

Rosalind and Buddy never fight over anything big. They fight over the minor, and they fight hard. When the fight is over, it's forgotten. Through glass doors, rain strikes the pavement and bounces. But this one is different. She's never going to forgive Buddy, and he'll never forgive her.

"Look," she tells the woman, shuffling all those papers. "His eye is on the carpet. I haven't vacuumed this week." The woman in blue doesn't know a damn thing. "It looks like a grape. A sweet white wine grape." With a hint of cranberry, she doesn't add.

The look Rosalind receives is withering, scabbed with disbelief. It is a complicated glare that requires two fully-functioning eyes to perform. Buddy may never again be able to throw it. There is a time limit, she thinks, on procedures of this type, how long after severing a body part can be reattached. She read that once in an article about Lorena Bobbitt, one of those late nights after Buddy actually had hit her.

"Also," she says, "we have a pug. He hasn't eaten yet." That's not true. They're not ready for pets. It feels good to own the conversation.

Everyone in the emergency room is looking. She stares back. Her best friend is dead, her husband buys shitty butter. What can they do to her? Arrest her, call her victim, claim bad luck -- there aren't many options. Perhaps it won't be so bad, a husband with a

single lens. She relaxes into the seat and closes one eye. Her face feels sticky, rain mixed with blood, baked on her like the cake she's never going to make. Marilyn loved this dress, and it's ruined. She's missed the service. But that's all right. Through the black-tunneled vision of a single lens, the concerns of the world seem halved. The woman in blue is watching her, mouth hanging open slightly. Rosalind turns her head until the woman is hidden from the sightline of her one eye. It's just a reorientation of perspective.

Fermentation

It's 2:00 AM, eight hours into a twelve-hour shift, and Gerald Winston stands behind the counter of the Flyers gas station on Prairie City Highway. His feet are sore. There is a cole slaw stain on his company shirt from the KFC dinner he shoveled just before he started work. Every time he looks up, his neck cracks. This is his every night.

A few weeks ago, Gerald splurged on a tablet computer, and he's finally figured the damn thing out. He's got it playing that old Merle Haggard song, "Mama Tried," on a loop while he scrolls Cabelas.com. The "Just Added" section of his cart currently lists seven items, totaling \$284.36, and he's not close to done. There's a subzero sleeping bag in there, rope, a four-person tent, lightweight cookware, and a large pack of multiple battery varieties. When the world ends, Gerald is going to be ready.

Occasionally he'll look up to watch Charlie Scott, the only shadow that'll fill the store for hours, stare at the chips. Gerald has four more hours to burn standing behind the register, scrolling on his tablet. The internet connection only works here in town, and the Flyers owner, Earvin, couldn't care less how Gerald keeps his eyes open overnight.

Charlie picks up a bag of Cheetos. The bag is family-sized, and it is not on sale. Charlie selects nothing else. He stands in the aisle, staring at the snacks like he's forgotten what they are. Gerald should go over there and help him. That's what Earvin would want. Instead, Gerald leaves him alone and clicks out of his online cart, back to the main page. He's halfheartedly considering purchasing a bow. They seem useful: easier to make arrows than bullets, probably less cleaning, quieter, all important points when society breaks down. He's never fired one -- shot? Released? -- so that's a strike against, but the

county sponsors hunter's awareness courses before deer season. He adds one to his cart, a slick camouflage number. Maybe it'll stay.

The electric doors open with a swoosh, but there is no one to step inside or out. Charlie's still over fussing with the chips. It happens sometimes, the push of wind heavy enough to simulate humanity. Outside, the rain is so thick it makes the gas station look like a water park. It's been raining, hard, for a week. Since Marilyn Ruth died, exactly, like even the weather needs to eulogize her. Knives. Gerald is going to need a knife.

Marilyn lived on Gerald's street, on Deer Run Road, tucked way back in the hills and buttressed against the swoop of the Cosumnes River. His porch offers a view of her home. She would come over a few times a month to ask after his mother's health. Marilyn was a good woman. Even the old curmudgeons like Gerald can admit that much.

Lightning splinters the night. For half a second, Gerald can see outside clearly, and the world seems emptier than it ever has. Against the flash, Charlie flinches and says, "Oblivion."

Charlie's in the Flyers at least twice a week. He even spends some nights burrowed in with the lumber Earvin keeps behind the store. The man can still speak, if barely. He has a few principal fascinations, and for them he seems able to push through the trapdoors in his mind. A little bit, at least.

Gerald nods. The darkness has converged again, and the only light remaining is directly above the gas pumps and the heavy fluorescents inside the store proper. "Sure is," he agrees. He's thinking about the end of the world, searching for why it couldn't be this exact moment, stuck in purgatory in a slaw-stained shirt and staring at Charlie's

forehead, those strangely enticing eyes and perfect hair. As far as reasons go, he's coming up dry. "That's exactly what this is."

Zap, Steve Boscomb says. He was working with Charlie when the accident occurred. Zap, pow, presto -- it sparked like lightning. The whole town's heard the story, the whole town hears the story every time Steve gets drunk over at the Downhome Brewery. Worst thing he's ever seen, Steve says. Gerald's heard the story ten, maybe fifteen times, sitting over an empty glass debating another Tom Collins, and he feels for Charlie, he does. It's criminal, what the man's been through.

Charlie Scott is one of the saddest cases Gerald's ever seen. He was on a construction crew, working double shifts to buy a house for sweetheart Marilyn Ruth. It was a fairy tale's fairy tale, until somebody forgot to throw the breakers and Charlie went too deep into the wall with a saw and caught a live wire with those metal teeth he was holding. Steve Boscomb was eating a sandwich waiting for the sawing to be finished, because the crew was behind on the contract and not taking lunches. Thick-cut turkey on rye, Steve explains every time, though no one ever asks. Thick-cut, slices right off the bird. On rye, then zap, pow, presto -- it sparked like lightning.

To be honest, Gerald rather likes lightning. He likes the abruptness with which it strikes, he likes the power that it wields. He likes the way it remakes the world after its own image, a jagged, forked thing ready to begin anew. And he's never been partial to Charlie, for all the arguments human decency can muster. Gerald's got his own world to worry about. But something was beaten out of the young man in that accident -- this thing standing in the Flyers, staring at a bag of Cheetos like he can't figure where that crinkling

sound in his ears is originating, has nothing of the human about him. Gerald has heard it said that the measure of mankind can be found in the way that one treats the infirm. Personally, Gerald doesn't see much sense in judging a man by their response to someone like Charlie.

He changes his mind and takes the bow out of his cart. The questions that Charlie's presence brings up in Gerald are not new. They come and go while he minds the store, while he gets out the weed whacker and keeps all flammable objects at a safe distance from the waiting tinderbox that he and his mother call a house out on Deer Run Road. What is it that makes a person a human being, in this crazy messed-up time of living? Why does Charlie have to be human? Why couldn't he have lost whatever that is, soul or synapse, when the electricity blew its way out his ears? And there's morality to consider. Gerald's spending his twelve-hour shift looking at weapons that he may, one day, use to kill a man. He's never killed a living being, not on his own. What does that add to the conversation?

Gerald considers himself a survivalist, though he hasn't been able to act on it much, yet. He's got a basic bug-out bag in his truck. The basement where his mother keeps all her jams and pickled vegetables, he's thinking that could serve as a bunker in case of holocaust or tornado. This country's going to the wolves, and when the government falls or China attacks, Gerald plans to be ready. When the Miwoks band together with all the other tribes to revolt against the United States, there won't be much room for morality anyway. The end of the world is coming, and maybe soon.

His fascination with the end of the world is, for the most part, new. He's always liked science fiction movies, and as a kid he read all the horror comics he could find, but this is a different animal entirely. It's come on since he started picking up extra shifts at the Frosto, taking orders and listening to Arnie ranting over chicken strips and French fries about the end of civilization. But Arnie's got no imagination, is just spewing the same crap that Gerald remembers his father's generation screaming into the wind. Gerald, though, he's been thinking it through in a logical direction.

Arnie talks in generalities, kids these days and generational differences. But to Gerald's eyes, the kids that live on his street look like zombies, slow-moving and out-of-sorts. So do the drunks he shares stools with at the Downhome Brewery, as well as the folks who stumble into the Flyers in the dead of night jonesing for a cup of coffee. There was one this morning, an out-of-towner with his Levi's tucked into cowboy boots like a prize prick and a pearl-snap shirt, what else, who brought up the state senate and water rights and asked if there was a radio station that carried Lakers games this far north of paradise. Of course there's Gerald's mother, too, her pain-riddled shuffling walk, how long it takes her to answer even simple questions. They're all empty husks of people. The world looks more apocalyptic every day. He needs to add a new shovel and hammer to his Cabela's order. He's got an old hammer in his toolbox that he used to shore up the pigpen last summer, but the metal head of it is starting to come off the wooden base, and the two-pronged claw is rusting over a bit. The shovel's sitting in the dirt outside the barn, has been there for three seasons now. It's worn through.

And of course, there's Charlie. Charlie's on his way out the automatic doors, still holding the Cheetos, when Gerald finally steps out of his thoughts. Earvin has left explicit instructions for these moments: catalogue what Charlie has taken. When he shows up in the morning, Earvin will pay for all charges accrued. A simple system, but Gerald throws a five in the till and leaves Earvin out of the loop. This, he tells himself, is a way of asserting control.

Outside, Charlie stands alone in the rain, face aimed at the sky. If a bolt of lightning comes spiking to finish the job, what would be lost? He disappears behind the blinding rain, and Gerald turns his attention back to his tablet. The bars have all closed, now. If there's a rush, it'll be soon. There won't be one, but if there is. Charlie is walking now, all the way out on the highway, just barely still visible against the lights over the gas pumps. His chips are unopened, held in his left hand. Gerald searches for rifles. Results are plentiful.

#

He doesn't have to go in to his second job at the Frosto, so Gerald sleeps until noon. He wakes up hungry, but there's nothing decent in reach. His mother has gotten rid of everything he enjoys. There'll be fresh-grown vegetables in the fridge: cut-up carrots, green beans and cucumbers soaking in vinegar. There might be a few raspberries in there for dessert, some blueberries, but nothing he wants. No meat, no bread, no pasta. No bourbon, no vodka, no burgers or potato chips or candy. The diet is doctor-approved, but Gerald's been able to work around it with a combination of snacks from the Flyers and grease-brown fast food meals, sometimes sneaking a shake from the Frosto. If anything,

he's gained weight since his last appointment, but he hasn't been back to check on his blood pressure or cholesterol -- there are more immediate concerns.

He wanders into the kitchen, then the living room. The old record player is playing "We Can't Make it Here Anymore," by James McMurtry, off his *Childish Things* album. Gerald bought her that on vinyl after the CD player in his truck kicked the bucket and chewed through the disk she'd owned. She doesn't play it often, anymore -- there are only so many miseries a person can handle at one time.

Out the window, Gerald sees his mother working in the garden. The rain has subsided somewhat, is a soft stain with the sun as weak backdrop. He can see pools of rainwater twinkling in various depressions about the property. Beneath the haze of rain, all twenty-five acres look sharper, more in focus than they have for years.

Gerald steps outside, lets the screen door screech closed behind him. His mother straightens up at the sound and rests her hands on her hips. She's three rows in, dirt on the knees of her jeans. The basket beside her is loaded with peppers, squash, and zucchinis, nothing he'd touch and nothing she'll eat. She might nibble on vinegared cucumbers, perhaps gnaw on green beans salted in garlic. For the rest of her diet, she'll chew a few softer pieces, maybe make some soup, but the majority of her garden will be preserved and canned, stuffed onto a shelf deep in the ever-fuller cellar.

She's standing on a soft incline, so as Gerald steps up to the border of the garden and opens the gate, she towers over him. Even up close, he has to push his Kings ballcap back to look at her fully. She's bareheaded in the rain, not wearing the floppy sunhat he bought from Orchard Supply last week, the one she's supposed to have on every time she

steps outside. She's weak in her old age, pushing ninety and angling for a second broken hip the way she's standing, one foot resting high on the mounded slope. The rain is a Seattle drizzle that barely seems to touch her. It spits against her skin but rolls off easily. Her shoulders are crooked forward, her hips pushed back to hold herself upright. Her knees are locked. A good wind could push her clear to Auburn.

"Doctor call?" he asks.

Her face is slightly sunburnt -- he can see it through the soft sweat-sheen of wet that glazes her skin. She's got her hair tied back in a loose ponytail, and there is sun damage on the side of her neck as far around as he can see, and on her arms as well. Her walking stick lies in the dirt at the edge of the garden.

Into the dead air of her not-answering comes the awkward rumble of a small engine trying to manage the curving seven-percent grade that finishes up the gravel section of Deer Run Road. Gerald and his mother watch an orange Taurus burst over the hill and take the downgrade at something approaching sixty miles an hour. Dust rises in a cloud, and it settle over Gerald's grapes. He wonders where they're from. Locals slow down, like he's asked them to -- those are wine grapes he's growing. There's money in that fruit.

The Taurus slices into Marilyn Ruth's driveway and rolls to a stop. Gerald turns his attention back to his mother, and asks again, "Did the doctor call?"

She's still staring across the road, at Marilyn's property. "Did you believe?" she asks softly. The air nearly catches her words before Gerald can.

"Where's your hat?"

"I wanted to believe in her." She pushes at a strand of hair that's escaped her ponytail. "I think I may have, for a while."

Marilyn is not magic. Some people say she heals pain. Healed. There's a small group of disciples that tied themselves to her beauty, convinced Marilyn could sap their sadness from the world. The way Gerald's heard it, his young neighbor Perry seems to think that in laying out his troubles for Marilyn, she took them upon herself, placed those same concerns squarely upon her petite shoulders. It's like confession, Perry has said, exactly like confession except no one would ever cover Marilyn's gorgeous face.

Gerald can't be bothered. The hero worship Marilyn has engendered, he never felt it. His attention has always been elsewhere. Some people on Deer Run Road, they talk about Marilyn like a religious figure. They did before she died, and now she's a martyr. They followed her around, unloading their miniscule troubles on her as if she was the pope. They'd preen under her perfect smile, and they'd swear to anyone who'd listen that her kind ear was more rejuvenating than any mineral springs.

He's never considered his mother one of the believers. That was always the younger folk, who'd watch Marilyn's agelessness and the grace with which she encountered all the obstacles of her life and think she must exist on some other plane. Even the word, believer, sounds strange mixed with Gerald's image of his mother. "How long have you been out here?" he asks.

"It's not impossible," she tells him.

"No," he says. "It's not impossible."

The Taurus doors open to reveal a single penitent, a thick-shouldered teen holding a Safeway brown paper bag. Gerald recognizes him, a bagboy named Norman. Nice enough boy, but a bit of a slow mover. And he never double-bags the heavy stuff, which has been a problem once or twice. He sets the bag down on Marilyn's porch, then pulls a cake from the bag. Probably the bakery was going to throw it away if he didn't take it. Nobody's ever brought Gerald a cake.

Since Marilyn died, there's been a steady stream of these visitors. Mostly men, in the religion of Marilyn and her face, and all of them carrying foodstuffs. It's a shrine, a shrine of beer-battered frozen cod and fruit baskets, three-for-\$10 twelve-packs of Coke Zero and bagged lettuce. She used to leave food out on her porch, large plastic bags from the Buttermilk. There are others who know the story and her reasons behind it. Gerald never asked.

Norman grabs his bag and returns to the Taurus. He kicks up more dust in his wheel-spinning quick exit. Gerald and his mother watch him go.

"I think," his mother says, "that maybe she could."

"Where's your hat?"

"I'm tending the garden."

"I can see that." Gerald grabs her basket. It's heavier than he expected. He doesn't quite need two hands, but almost. "How were you going to carry this?"

"I get by."

Her name is Mabel, and life even beyond that hasn't been kind to her. The broken hip, high blood pressure that runs in the family, a full set of dentures before she turned

sixty, a lung removed --and worse than all that, she's lived past her life expectancy and beyond any sense of logic. She used to say that she would die the day her husband hit the clover, but it's been twenty-four years of nonstop motion since he stopped sleeping on the left side of the bed, and she's still here. Praise be, and all that.

"The doctor called?"

"Let's go inside," she says. She pulls her eyes away from Marilyn's porch. "It's getting hot, and I'm not wearing a hat."

He lets her deflect the conversation and follows her inside. He watches her head roll to look at Marilyn's.

"I haven't started any food," she tells him. On the stove, there's an extra-large pan of water, where she'll can the vegetables. She turns the broiler underneath the pan on high. "Do you want me to make you lunch?"

Gerald is sixty-three years old. "I can handle it," he tells her. He's going to leave in a bit, head out to Fantasia's for a crap burger and a beer. He'll watch the girls do their version of dance until it's time to man the Flyers counter again, and he won't look at Marilyn's father, Haunches, working security at Fantasia's front door. He'll just eat his burger quietly and live in his small slice of misery like everybody else.

He sets the basket down on the counter where his mother likes it and watches as she starts picking through the vegetables. There's barely a single thing in there either of them will ever taste. It's so conversational he almost doesn't hear her when she says, "The doctor called."

His heart stills. He thinks of his Cabela's shopping cart, of binge purchases and the havoc that he could create in the throes of misery. The flame on the stove makes a noise like rubbing whiskers. That is the only sound.

She breathes only one word. "Benign."

"Oh," he says, and feels his heart return to beating.

"Yeah, oh."

The words burrow further into his brain. "So you're going to be okay?"

"Yeah." She pushes a squash from one square tile to another. "I'm still here. Unfortunately."

#

Gerald goes out to feed the pigs. They're Yorkshires, meant for meat exclusively. His neighbor Picket used to be a butcher, would come over once a year for the slaughter, take the carcasses back to his shop and have the slabs of bacon and ham and chops and tenderloins ready in a few days, wrapped tightly in crisp white folds and held together with clear tape. Now, he's got a guy in town who charges a little more for a little worse quality, which Gerald just chalks up to the way of the world and goes back to scrolling his tablet.

There's another car pushing down Deer Run Road, wandering its way up to Marilyn's empty house. Gerald is holding a small garbage bag full of discarded slops for the animals, skins and bruised sections of vegetables his mother couldn't mix in with the rest of her garden preserves. This one is an older car, red, a hatchback. Gerald sashes the refuse into the trough.

The pigs eat their slop and they stand dumbly in the mud. The rain droops onto them, and they take it. Since he's picked up the shift at the Frosto plus the night shift fulltime at the Flyers, they're the only animals left that Gerald can handle. The sheep have been sold, and there's no chance at cattle. Even the grapes are almost too much for him. His father never needed extra hands or hours in the day, and he never went without beef. Although, his father had five boys to help. Every one of them but Gerald has run from the hills. The closest is Gerald's youngest brother, Samuel, who settled in San Leandro, a CPA or some other title he can put on his mantle to call himself useful. Now, it's just Gerald and the pigs. And Mabel.

Most of the pigs are nondescript, ugly things caked in mud like every pig in every field, but there is one Gerald likes. He calls it Pig, because it's still a pig, even as it stands alone in the corner of the enclosed pasture and seems to survey the other swine with something approaching a sneer. Pig is white like all the Yorkshires, with a small band of black that girds each leg and a tuft of hair above the snout like a Hitler moustache. It waits for the rest of the animals to eat before ambling to the slop trough and taking what's left. The others scatter when Pig comes past, as though acknowledging that it's a different thing entirely, some new mutated genus of hog.

It's never been nuclear weapons or the battles of nation-states that terrify Gerald. Rather, it's the more fantastical, the remnants of childhood playtimes that have grown more horrible and adult right along with him. He can see the world ended by a strain of flesh-eating bacteria. He can completely get behind a vampire epidemic. Alien invasion, sure. Or perhaps most like, Perry and his kind will start a revolution, form a new religion

based on Marilyn or the old gods of nature. He can see the same possibility of revolution everywhere: in the frustrated sigh of the bank teller when he asks to deposit his checks, in the rolled eyes of the woman at the Flyers on her lunch break when she had to re-slide her card because it didn't go through the first time. Something is coming, Gerald's convinced, something that will make him sit up for once in his life and say, "Goddamn."

Gerald has been waiting all his life for something to happen, and it never has. He took the first job he found, and he's been working at the Flyers for forty-some years, since before Earvin bought it, before Earvin even worked there. He never met a girl, never bought his own farm, never drove to Sacramento on a whim. He's never been to Reno, never left the state. He's just sat in the same spot for sixty-three years and watched everything deteriorate. And now, with all that certainty, his mother tells him that she believes in Marilyn. And she's going to live.

It's not that she wants to die, exactly. If she did, there are plenty of ways to make that happen on the farm. And it's not that he wants her to, though he's been ready for it for a while. That woman hasn't wanted to live since Gerald's old man passed on.

Done with their food, the pigs are looking at him like he's invading their space, so he lets them be. He walks the few hundred feet to the bank of the Cosumnes River. He sits against the base of an old willow tree his mother planted before she got into her gardening phase. From here, he can see the water, and off to the side he can see the road, his rows of grapes built up against the slender dark curve of Deer Run Road. Maybe he wouldn't hate it if she took some of her gardening energy out on the grapes so he didn't have to find the time to stumble out there every day, but she's got her walled-in space for

vegetables and keeps that to herself, and Gerald's mostly learned to accept it. The grapes are his responsibility, and for all his complaints, they're not that bad: the man from the Chateaux de Hillbilly wine shack comes out with about a dozen hired hands and picks them all, takes them to the shack and does whatever he does to them, then lets them ferment for years. Each year, he brings out a new vintage, great heaping oak barrels of sweet white wine that have been aging. There are a few bottles in a wine rack in Gerald's kitchen, one even from 1989, the year his father passed. The Chateaux de Hillbilly is an enterprising business, and Gerald's managed to convince the Downhome Brewery to make yearly purchases. They've sold out a few times. Fantasia's is playing at making an order, as well, though they've been a tough sell. That's all he's doing when he goes to the bars, he tells himself sometimes, marketing. For the grapes that grow weak and wispy around the edge of Deer Run Road, for the continued livelihood of his father's farm.

Gerald unties the laces of his shoes and pulls them off his feet, then takes his socks off and deposits them inside. His jeans he gives two full rolls up his calves. Then he stands up and walks into the river.

Even with all this new rain, the river is neither high nor wide. Eight full steps would bring Gerald to the other side, but he takes two small paces and stops. He does this occasionally, when he feels the brunt of reality like a crick in the neck. The water laps around his ankles. It is not cold. He bends over and runs his fingers along the silted bottom of the river, slowly, exploring each crevice.

There's gold in this river. Twenty-seven years ago, Gerald's neighbor Picket Hargrove crawled into the water for a spit bath during a power outage and tripped over a

gold nugget the size of his fist. Gerald's never found anything, but he tries once or twice a week.

The cut of the trees allows Gerald, this far into the water, to see Picket's house. The old man is nowhere to be found, but Picket's son, Perry, is sitting on the porch. There is newspaper spread out beneath him. He looks like he's in the middle of an art project.

Except for the knife in his hand. And some sort of inflatable contraption beside him, not a balloon or mattress. And the Cocker Spaniel laying on the porch beside him: nude back, shorn hair settled on the ground like snow, bright eyes liquid and wide. At first, Gerald can't figure out what he's seeing.

Perry flips the Spaniel onto its side, grabs a hind leg, and strops the knife from stomach to ankle in a broad, sure stroke. The dog whimpers. It is trembling. Perry's whistling an old cowboy tune. Notes flutter across the sky, and only a few settle against Gerald's ears, enough to recognize but not identify the song. Perhaps Marty Robbins' "Big Iron."

Perry buzzes the entire leg bald, then lets the animal drop. It's quivering, and there is a wet puddle in the newspaper against its backside. He swipes his blade against an old leather strop and shakes off a few last hairs. Then he grabs the other hind leg.

Gerald's hands are still worming through the muddy bottom of the Cosumnes River, crawling deeper from him in the inevitably failure-laden search for gold. He looks down every few seconds into the new-moved earth, praying for that soft shine. Just one nugget, and he could click the "Buy Now!" button on his Cabelas.com shopping cart next

time he's in town. Then he could start preparing for real, rather than imagining it. Just a bit further, another possibility.

The inflatable raft beside Perry has legs and arms. And a face. It's wearing jeans, and a shirt that Gerald has seen before, one he wouldn't be able to place but for the final piece of clothing: a waitress' smock, sky-blue and emblazoned on the arms with the Buttermilk logo. Marilyn's. And the Cocker Spaniel is white, the same daffodil-white that Marilyn's hair has been since she was fifteen. Marilyn always kept her hair short, fitted tight like a helmet over her scalp and cut at the nape of her neck. The longest of the Spaniel's fur will fit perfectly.

Old man Picket was a great butcher. Perry can handle a blade well, naturally, though in his hands it's not quite the art it always seemed when Gerald would stand on the first rail of his fence and watch Picket quick-slice one of those hogs into meat enough to last a season. But the dog is terrified, and slippery without the easy grip of its long white mane. Perhaps the knife slips. Perhaps it's Perry's hand that slips, or the Spaniel manages to kick out. Whatever happens, Perry's blade sheathes deep into the leg he was attempting to shear. The animal howls wildly, and catches Perry in the jaw with a fractious kick. Perry responds quickly, viciously.

"Oh, Jesus," Gerald says. He's reaching a good ways, his hip aching at the angle, when the silt on which he's standing gives. It feels like a tiny earthquake, but might simply be a rock quivering under his weight, and then he's down, splashing in two feet of water. Not much, but Gerald's heard that Johnny Cash song about Ira Hayes enough times to know that a man can drown in just about anything.

He pushes himself up, and dares a look back toward the house. Perry is looking. The dog is silent. Red smears the newspaper and Perry's clothing. But what stays tight to Gerald's mind as he climbs out of the river and out of Perry's sight, as he grabs his shoes and walks past the pigs, back to the house, what he can't get out of his head is the way that with blood spattering everything, the blade remains perfectly clean.

#

Gerald showers and dresses for work. He's planning to head out, but he finds his mother sitting on the couch and can't convince himself to leave. She stares into the twisting shapes of her old lava lamp. He sits beside her.

"Do you think Marilyn could have?" she asks.

"Are you in pain?" he tries, but she will not be diverted.

"Be honest," his mother tells him. "Do you think she could do it?" Alleviate the sadness that has mocked her for years. The lava lamp looks like two animals taking slow potshots at each other. Take away that misery. The colors hurt Gerald's eyes, but his mother loves them -- in younger years, her hair was that same shade of fire. Maybe even let her die. There are not many things in the world that give her pleasure. Her garden. The grapes, and a short nip of that 1989 sweet white wine. And Marilyn. It's always Marilyn.

Gerald has never understood the fascination with her. Maybe it's seeing her every day that's soured him on her, or perhaps something less positive. He's got a wart on his nose that looks like Louisiana, and one of his legs is slightly shorter than the other. He's had sixty-three years without a woman, and Marilyn, daffodil-white hair and eyes like the rainwater-fed leaves of oak trees, spent thirty-seven years smiling thanks at every man in

Hangtown. Even as a baby, they were cooing on her. When she moved into the house at the end of Deer Run Road, a newlywed, the traffic doubled overnight.

"Honestly," he says. "I've never gone in much for religion."

"Do you have to be so hard?" she asks him. Sitting, her jeans ride loose around her hips. She's lost so much weight. Her hands are shaking, and he imagines that motion of trembling as desperation, as something beyond her conscious mind grabbing at hope.

"We all do what we have to," he tells her.

Gerald's online shopping cart at Cabela's is getting close to \$1,000. He's got everything from lanterns to water purification tablets in there. Once he can buy them, he's going to be ready for anything. If he has a hope, it's to live another day, another week longer.

"How can a person die?" she asks him.

Gerald can't think of a thing to say. He pinches the flabby underside of his arm until the pain bites through the emptiness. "What can I do? How can I help you?"

"I don't know," she says. "That's the problem. I don't know what to do."

When he was a kid, Gerald used to pretend that he was running away. He'd pack his rucksack with Ritz crackers and walk out to the backyard, stare into the forest. One time he walked for an hour, out further in the trees than he'd ever been. He stopped to eat a cracker and found himself staring down a wolf. The crackers were stale, and crunched loud against his eardrums, got stuck in the cavity on the right side of his mouth. This was before the buildup, before there were houses every quarter-mile all the way from one end of Deer Run to the other. Each time he bit down, another spot of pain flared. Gerald was

holding onto the stout handle of his flashlight as if it could protect him. Later, he would be diagnosed with two separate cavities on that side of his mouth. The wolf looked at him and sniffed the air, then turned and trotted back into the wilderness. If that meeting happens now, Gerald thinks, some do-gooder is charging out of an A-frame with rifle spewing bullets.

"In the absence of something better," his mother says, "at least she was here."

Gerald nods and pats her hand. "I've got to go," he tells her.

"So soon?"

She clutches at his arm. Her hands are thin and empty. He can see the blue veins pulsing with each pump of blood. There is something firm in her grasp, a desperation that pierces him. Perhaps there is a moment to be had, here. It hurts to look at her.

It's getting toward evening. He wants to get back to town, back to Cabelas.com and his shopping cart, his preparation. The nubs of her fingers are white against his skin. The apocalypse he's been expecting has been waylaid by the doctor's call, but there will be others. There may be gold in the river, but it won't reveal itself to his touch. She holds to him tightly, but it takes barely any effort to dislodge her. He stands, and watches her wilt away from him.

When he gets outside, keys in hand, he finds Perry standing by the pigsty. "You little shit," Gerald says, and takes a step toward him before the full brunt of the situation catches up. Perry is tall and thick, and Gerald is not a strong man. The world exists in half shades: almost-white clouds, almost-gray rains, almost-black hair beneath Perry's hat. The almost-silver of the blade Perry's holding.

The rain, Gerald notes, has a distinctive smell. It's nothing like the smell of the river water, and there's nothing of the cleansing smell that appears in the hard rainwater that hits the earth after a thunderstorm. Rather, it smells stuffy, cramped. He watches it collect in the brim of Perry's hat and then trickle down as a spouting fountain.

"You weren't supposed to see that," Perry says. He's changed his clothes, though his red t-shirt reminds Gerald immediately of the blood that had splattered his previous uniform.

"I didn't see anything," Gerald tells him. Gerald has \$1,000 worth of survival materials sitting in his shopping cart, and none of that is going to do him a lick of good. Perry is tall and mean, and he was born angry the same as his old man, and he has a temper like a wildfire in dry brush, and he holds a blade in his hand so long it looks like it could cleave California if Perry wanted to. Gerald has a single measly old .22 that hasn't had a bullet in the chamber for seventeen years, and that gun is over in the woodshed where it won't be any kind of help. "I won't tell anyone."

"What would you do in my situation?" Perry says. He sounds perfectly reasonable. "Burn it all down? Believe me, I want to."

Gerald hears the back screen door, on the other side of the house, screech open. Perry scales the fence over and into the pig pen. He walks with a hulking ferocity, snarl ensconced deep over his chin, shoulders stooped, that blade catching every glimmer of sunlight that ekes past the soft clouds. His feet glide over the muddy ground. Gerald has never before seen anyone glide in mudboots.

In his peripheral vision, Gerald sees his mother, slipping out the door, walking across the dirt, crossing the street. Perry has separated Pig from the rest of the pigs, has cornered him between the fence on one side and the small sty on the other. His mother is carrying her basket, with both hands. She can barely lift it off the ground -- he can see the muscles straining in her shoulders and arms.

"What you saw," Perry says. "That did not happen."

"Of course not," Gerald agrees. He is terrified. He can feel it in his toes, in his knees, in the joints of his hips and elbows and in that spot on his left shoulder that knots up into pure misery anytime he tries to type on the desktop computer for more than a minute at a time. Things would be different if he only had some cash, if he could browse a website and then purchase what he's found.

Pig tries to squirrel between Perry's legs, a desperate leaping attempt to freedom that has no chance. Perry catches it easily, and laughs as he flips the hog onto its backside. Those puffy little legs kick at the air.

Gerald's mother has made it across the street, and she turns up the driveway to Marilyn's house. She's moving slowly, the big basket full of her garden resting on the dirt between steps, and he realizes that she's trying to save him. Giving up those vegetables as an offering to the closest thing Hangtown's ever had to a saint, and praying for the blessings to rain down upon him. There's nothing Gerald can do.

"You need to understand," Perry says. He's bent, a knee in Pig's belly stifling the squeals. "What I do in the privacy of my home should be allowed to stay that way." His blade rests against the socket of Pig's leg. Across the street, Gerald's mother is on the

porch. Perry lines up the cut, then brings his eyes up to Gerald's and holds his gaze while slicing. The animal screams. Perry slices three more times, three different legs, in quick succession. She sets her basket down among all the other foodstuffs that Marilyn has received and sinks to her knees. She is praying.

Pig's legs dangle uselessly. Gerald can see bone through flapping skin. The creature tries to roll over and stand, but cannot.

Perry stands up. He tosses the knife at Gerald. It clatters against his feet. In the mud, it looks barely more than a table knife. All the power it possessed sits in Perry's hands. "Now you have a decision to make."

There is a .22 in the woodshed. There are knives in his shopping cart. Perry stands in front of him, bare-handed, and stares him down. All the weapons in the world wouldn't change what's happened here. Like Perry's dad, Picket, always says, sometimes it pays to be meanest.

Perry turns his back on Gerald and walks away. Nobody's going to know his secret, the doll made out like Marilyn or the Cocker Spaniel. Gerald looks back to Marilyn's house, but his mother is gone. The vegetable basket sits in the center of the porch, as though framed by the other offerings. He picks up the knife and weighs it in his hand. It weighs absolutely nothing.

The other swine have come out from their shelters, are again nosing about for food. The rain is thick as a movie theater slushy. Gerald climbs the fence and walks up to Pig. The animal is mewling softly now, desperation given over to despair. Gerald touches

it with a soft hand on the stomach, pets up to the head. The hog looks him straight in the eyes, and he looks right back.

Along the Cosumnes

The first time Jersey saw Faye, she was sitting on the bank of the Cosumnes River, over by the cliff where kids dove in the summer months. It was twilight, the forest awash in light the color of grapefruit orbs. Her toes were in the water, a hand brushing softly over the emerald surface, ripples trailing her fingers. Between her knees she clasped a homemade fishing pole, line drooping in the water, trawling for dinner. Her right hand held a flashlight. She was trying out the old deer-blinding strategy on the fish, strobing her light across the Cosumnes trying to freeze them while enticing with worms on her line. “The carrot and the stick,” she’d tell him later. “That’s his whole thought on life in a nutshell.”

He was twenty-five and angry, and desperation clung to her like perfume. He first saw her while parking his Toyota, the clearing devoid of other vehicles. She was wearing yellow, he noted, and her hair was long enough to float on the breeze. An early evening chill encircled the sun and sapped all heat from the quickly-ending day. Jersey caught glimpses of her through the trees as he walked the deer path down to the Cosumnes, soft flashes of yellow and brown before she flittered out of sight again.

On the river bank, he settled on a moss-grown stone and wrapped his arms around his knees. He'd been planning to skip rocks or swim or crunch worms under the heel of his boot if he'd been alone, but instead he watched her with his peripheral vision. She wore a denim skirt beneath her yellow top. With the moonlight and the Cosumnes River and the way she was sitting, curled up on herself, she had a certain presence, or a lack thereof, as if her body was a foundation on which Jersey could wrap the image of his

choice around that base model of a person, an empty vessel on which he could fill in the pertinent details. It was gorgeous, Jersey decided. There was a washed-out glow to her like she was coming from another universe entirely, only partially attached to this one. Jersey tried to imagine himself fading to her shade of existence, living in half a body. If the moon slivered just right, she'd disappear. It sounded like everything he could want.

She ignored him. Her eyes were fixed to the water, darting like the fish in the current. They were slate-gray, almost devoid of color, her eyes, and they were what finally locked it in-- with only a small twist of the mind, Jersey could plant Marilyn Ruth's body over hers. The fit was incredible, as though this girl had been brought to earth to serve as template for exactly his fantasy. He'd dreamed of Marilyn for years, Jersey and every other man in Hangtown. And here, nosing her toes into water, was a perfect substitute. It sounds cruel. It probably is.

She was Marilyn's sister, more than a decade younger but the same gray eyes, the same slender build and slant to the shoulders. She even sat the same way, with her foot tapping on the muddy bank and her head pushed forward intently.

Jersey cleared his throat to catch her attention and tried to think of something to say as an introduction while she aimed her flashlight at ripples. Hard, he decided, was the way to go, strong and sure "Well, aren't you a toothpick of a girl?" he finally said.

She didn't respond. She didn't even look up at him.

"Didn't think I'd see anyone here this time of night."

She shrugged. "Overpopulation," she said. "There's always somebody somewhere."

“I might have a solution for that,” he told her. When she turned to him, Jersey pushed the words out in a rush, as if he couldn’t believe what h was saying even as it slid out his mouth. “For the overpopulation,” he said. “If it gets too bad, you’d probably fit perfect in the pocket of my jeans.”

He paused, took a deep breath, hoping she would say something. She did not. His eyes were wide. He was terrified.

“Or at the very least, you’d look great in the crook of my arm.”

“Has any girl ever gone for that?”

“I’ve never tried it before.”

“Now that, I believe.” She broke into a grin, and he felt himself relax. His fingers uncoiled. “You almost saved it, there at the end.”

“You’ve got a great smile.”

She laughed out loud. “There you go,” she told him. “That’s how you do it. Keep it up like that, you might even get what you want.”

The fishing line pulled against her knees, and she grabbed for it. With little effort, just a few spins, she captured a little brook trout, so small it was barely worth the effort. She held it up like a prize fisherman, and Jersey clapped.

"It's not much," she said, "but that's dinner."

"Want to share?"

"Don't think there's enough," she replied.

She laid the fish on the stone next to her and flipped off her flashlight. She set her pole on the ground, and the flashlight beside it, then pulled a Swiss army knife out of a

bag he hadn't previously noticed and got to work cleaning the trout. The moon slinked into view, pushing away the last of the daylight.

"Want to take a little drive?" he suggested. His voice filled the darkness, the stars hidden high up in the air. "Be a shame to let the night end this early."

She shook her head and kept her face down, toward the fish.

"At least let me take you home," he tried. "I don't see another car up there besides mine."

"Maybe someday," she told him. "But I don't take rides from boys in foreign cars. Call me patriotic that way." She wrapped the fish in a piece of butcher paper that came out of the same bag, and stood. "Still, been nice talking. My name's Faye." And she walked away.

So a few nights later, he grabbed a cooler and filled it with a salmon he'd bought at Safeway. He took his grandmother's Ford truck keys off the wall and made his way back down along the Cosumnes. He'd set it all up beforehand, even loading up the back of her F-150 with a few essentials for the evening.

As he was parking in the clearing, close to the dip in the trees that marks the trail down to the river, Jersey saw her trudging up the incline, another trout in her hand. She had that same halfway-there look. He could almost see the trees through her shoulders, and he filled her emptiness with Marilyn, the soft wrists and the pluming white skirt, devil-smiling gray eyes and thick lips.

He caught her attention with a wave, then stepped out of the truck and climbed into the bed. He pulled back the ancient blue tarp he'd tied down, showing off his red

Igloo cooler and the little kielbasa griller his family almost never used, plus a bag of charcoal. "Opening a food truck?" she guessed.

"Only for you," he said. "How about a barbecue?"

Faye held up her tiny trout. "It's not even worth the match you'd be wasting."

He grabbed the lid of the cooler and opened it, sifted through the ice and came up holding the salmon. It was still in its shrink-wrapped Safeway packaging. "How about now?"

The intention was, give her no good reason to say no.

She said, "My dad's expecting me," and Jersey shrugged.

"So am I," he told her.

She seemed to like that. She stayed.

#

Barely a month after Jersey met Faye, Jersey's father left the family. That morning, the sun was over-bright, like a television with the contrast tuned too high, the kind of muddy orange that seems to force laziness. Jersey was halfheartedly leafing through the tax prep correspondence course booklet he'd ordered with money from raking pine needles, easy cash he made following the fire department as they made their rounds handing out citations for improper fire protections. The booklet was 200 pages of exercises and memorizations, and he'd never had a head for either of those things, but he had a plan. He figured, almost everybody needs taxes done. That's a skill that can translate. There's an H&R block twenty-five minutes down the hill in Cameron Park, and others in every decent-sized town in the nation. Get in, get a transfer, go anywhere.

A kid he'd played football with in the peewee leagues had done it, shipped out to Omaha and never looked back. And yeah, who wants to go to Omaha, but when you start thinking New Orleans or Boston or Boca Raton, it doesn't sound like a bad plan. Especially when the other ways out are the same as they've been for generations, army or the CCC. Every third eighteen-year-old spent his spare time target-shooting clay pigeons decorated with painted turbans. That's not for Jersey.

He'd been keeping the idea a secret, something to sweep across his eyelids at night, clearing his vision of the future like windshield wipers. He held onto that booklet like an electric blanket, curled beside it, believed in it when the winds slipped along deep snow groundcover and his mother was yelling to stick another log on the fire if he was cold, because this family wasn't the kind of rich to go and waste electricity on something as basic as heat. But dreams never lasted long in his house. Like the firewood stacked next to the sliding glass door, they burned quick and sailed away.

That morning, his mother had woken up with a vengeance. Jersey's grandmother caught him in the kitchen pouring apple juice while his mother was in the shower, and she said, "It's a headache day." His mother's migraines were legendary, hours-long affairs that affected the mood of the entire house. Mostly because they guaranteed her anger, and there was nothing anyone could do to avert or assuage it. Jersey opened his throat, swallowed the juice in a long draught, and slipped back to his room.

There were pancakes for breakfast, pineapple chunks cut into the batter. The smell infused the house with a warmth that seemed to seep down from the ceiling, sopping up

all the oxygen. Jersey heard the front door open, and his father's thick work boots clomp into the kitchen, and then that low, deep voice ask if there was any coffee on.

“I'm making breakfast.”

“All right. I'll make a pot.”

“I'm a little busy at the moment.”

“I said I'll do it.”

That's how the fights started. His mother would find some perceived slight, something to harp on his father for, and he'd shake his fist, and she'd say something like, "Real big man, aintcha?" and he'd pummel a hand into the palm of his other hand and say, "Big enough for this chat we're about to have," and then Jersey's grandmother would slide into the conversation and it would devolve into near-incoherent shouts, splashes of senseless rage. Usually, Jersey would sneak out in the middle of the yelling and come back to find dishes in pieces on the floor, a door hanging halfway off its hinges, or a hole in the wall and his father wrapping his hand with gauze from the medicine cabinet. The old man would look at Jersey when he came in and then look back down like there was nothing to say.

But Jersey couldn't skip out this time. He'd given himself a deadline, five pages studied before he put down the booklet. There were send-away tests at the end of every chapter, the first of which he was nearly ready to mail away for, compete with shipping and handling. The goal was to send out for it in a week, two at the latest.

So he sat there while they shouted. He let his eyes roll over the page, occasionally talking to himself, mumbling memorizations. He wanted to take it straight-up, no notes.

He could take the test again if he failed, as many times as need-be to pass, so trying the first time on his own, n aids, was no big risk.

Mostly though, he zoned out, let his eyes slow and sometimes close, imagining the cool swell of wind through the pines, the lapping of the Cosumnes River against his bare feet. Jersey tried to transform the yelling into coarse chatter from birds in the trees, and succeeded so well he didn't hear his mother calling for him until she was already knocking on and then opening the door to his room. He was in his chair, tax prep course in his hands. She looked at the book and then she looked at him and then she looked at the book again. "What is this?"

"I'm studying," he told her. "For a job."

She had been under the impression, since Jersey was seven and Ms. Mendez sent home that standardized test that said he was in the twenty-fourth percentile of students his age, that he was going to spend his life manning the Flyers gas pumps as soon as Uncle Earvin called it quits, whenever that might be. Earvin's been threatening it for years, and hasn't given it up yet.

She didn't say a thing, just looked at him, at the book in his lap. He couldn't tell what she was thinking -- if she was too stunned at the idea of study to respond, if she wanted to yell at the thought that Flyer's gas pump wasn't good enough for Jersey even though Earvin had had no problems wiping the boy's bottom as a baby, or if she wanted to throw out one of her lines about how the only reason Jersey had gotten Bs his senior year was because he could 'be' on time for class. She liked that one, and the one about how of course he she was amazed he got Cs, since he couldn't 'see' his way through a

fraction problem if he had calculators for glasses. That was why he'd kept the book hidden in the first place.

She was still undecided on her reaction when Jersey's father wandered past. His cheeks were still an angry red, but his voice was mild. "Don't take it out on the boy," he said. In his hand was a monstrous energy drink, black can thick and out of place against his quiet voice and hunched shoulders, the way he shuffled his feet when he walked. "He's just looking to make his own way."

"Way out, you're saying." Her voice snapped like a birch branch. "Which is something he'd learn from you. Did you teach him that, that this isn't good enough a life for a young man?"

Jersey's mother could find fault everywhere, insult in every word. Most of the time, his father took the bait -- his eyes would flame, his back would straighten, and he'd spit venom for venom. And she was waiting for it, spoiling to keep the fight going.

"Well," she said, "you teaching our son to run away from his family?"

The look the old man gave her in return was one of consideration, a slow-dawning thought. "Maybe he's teaching me," he said, and shuffled down the hallway. She followed him, talking the whole way, trying to pull a fight out of him.

Jersey stayed in his room, trying to mumble through memorizations, but the sounds coming from the front bedroom were different from the normal arguments He couldn't tune them out -- clothing pushed around and folded, the hard clatter of plastic on tile. He caught a glimpse of his father on his way to the door, a rolling suitcase trailing behind.

Jersey's father came back once, to grab a few odds and ends. He heard him grabbing books off the bookshelves, toiletries off the sink in the bathroom. He wandered into Jersey's room at the end, looked at the kid in the chair he'd hammered, sitting at an uneven desk propped up by *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, black paperback third edition. He said, "Keep studying," like it was supposed to mean something more than it did when Great Aunt Rita it every Christmas and Easter from preschool to graduation. Then he turned and left.

#

Hours later, Jersey found Faye in a copse of trees by the corner of Prairie Home Road where the yield sign had been spray-painted over with the word "Never!" and the sheriff hadn't bothered to send in a work order because he considered the message political discourse. She was small and empty standing against a big pine, hands at her sides. He parked on the shoulder, went up to her and wrapped his arms around her and as much of the tree as he could manage.

"I've had the worst day," he told her. "You wouldn't even believe."

"Grandpa Jones died," she said. "My dad's got a week to clear off the farm. I'm homeless."

She hadn't spoken about herself much, but in Jersey's arms she cried and told him the whole situation. Faye and her father had been living with Grandpa Jones for a few months, since the house had been repossessed and Marilyn had died. They were little more than squatters on his property, sharing a one-room shack under a rusty tin roof that was wedged tight between four jack pines. The shack and roof boasted three metal walls

her father had raised himself and a fourth made out of thick orange tarp held tight by bailing wire. She had a tent that served as her bedroom, and when the winds were heavy enough to whip the tarp from its moorings, she could slide into her sleeping bag and feel almost nothing. After the eviction from their old house on Canal, her father had begged his father for the sake of pity and bloodlines, and the agreement had finally been that they were allowed to stay as long as they were looking for something better. Grandpa Jones just didn't want, Faye repeated three times, his granddaughter living on the street. The shack wasn't much better, but she could come over to the main house for lunch a few times a week. And now he was gone.

"All right," Jersey said, and stopped hugging the tree, pulled his arms around her entirely. "All right, yours is worse. You win."

She nuzzled into him and offered the first smile of the night, a smile that barely existed. Jersey saw Marilyn's smile above it, full lips and the sweep of pure white hair that curled around her ear. He leaned down and kissed her, Faye into Marilyn, filling out those fleshless lips with imagination like collagen.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked her.

"Come on," she said. "I feel like a drive."

Jersey watched her climb into the cabin and look around. The truck was old. The hand rests had been ripped out over the years, and the passenger side window stuck when she tried to roll it down. His grandmother always said the truck was lived-in, and watching Faye out of the corner of his eye while he slides the key in the ignition and lets the engine turn over three times before it catches, the phrase cuts at him.

They could go anywhere. While the engine warmed, his hand fiddling reflexively with the stick shift, he turned to Faye and smiled. "Where to, my lady? Anywhere you like. Anywhere at all."

"Just drive," she said. "We'll figure it out later."

The truck took off like a jackrabbit. They rolled around back toward Deer Run Road and curl around the river, over the one-lane brick bridge that floods once a year and turns a two-hour drive to town into an eight-hour process for those who live far enough in on Deer Run to so much as know that bridge exists. They breezed through Coloma, rattled over the train tracks by the continuing education school in Mt. Austin. They drove along Main Street in Hangtown for the long straightaway that lets the truck ramp up to its full 80 miles per hour.

Eventually, they flashed out to his grandmother's property. He pulled off on a gravel side road adjacent to the driveway, then shut off the lights and engine. There were no stars visible above their heads. Faye's window was still unrolled, and looking out, Jersey couldn't see much beyond the outline of her hand raised to push against the wind. The squiggle of trees that were visible, lopes of darkness of varying shades set heavily against the gray emptiness of the rest of his vision, stood like sentinels, and the swaying branches took on the appearance of steps. He watched as she let her hand ride the waves of the breeze, losing sight of it as one shadow among all the rest. There was nothing strange in the forest sounds -- deer with their soft chattering, animals making their various ways through the trees, once or twice the howl of a bird and more often the hoot of an owl. The sounds were as familiar as the darkness, at once peaceful and alarming.

There was a sharpness to them that warmed him. He could feel his skin crackling, an eerily pleasant sensation that traveled up the length of his body like fire along dry brush.

With his right hand, he reached out to find her shoulder, weightier than he imagined. He said, "I love it when the stars are covered," and he could hear the dreamy quality of his voice.

"Why?"

"This sound could be anything," he told her. "This voice could be anyone."

"It's you," she said.

"But it doesn't have to be."

"Tell me," she demanded.

"This right here," he said, and his hand reached out for her, caressed the thin ribbon of her leg. "This is the hand of an escape artist. He will set you free." His hand moved further, reaching behind her and pulling her closer to him, out of her own seat and across the middle until their hips touched.

"You're thinking too small," she told him. "Don't you have an imagination?"

"That's the way of people are here," he agreed. "They've got no drive."

"I'm going to be an airline pilot," she says. "I'm going to fly away and burn more fuel than anybody. I'll show you drive."

"Yeah? I'm going to Hollywood. Going to make more money than Decaprio."

He put his hand back on her leg and then moved it higher, underneath her skirt. He felt her shiver, and there was something immensely solid in the feeling. "I'm going to invent flying cars."

"I'm going back in time to see Buck Owens at the Crystal Palace."

"I'm never getting married."

"A-fucking-men," he said. "Never."

A bark split their solitary night, and then there is a soft huffing against the window Faye left open. "And who's this?" she asked.

"It's just Duke. Scram, boy. Go on."

"Hey now, not so fast." Faye pushed onto her knees in the passenger seat and leaned out the window. Half her body dangled outside the truck. "Come here, boy," she cooed. "You come right here."

Her skirt was folded up over her hips, and Jersey took advantage. He positioned himself against her, divesting Faye of her underwear in a quick but unpracticed motion. Then he lifted himself inside her. She grunted, but did not refuse.

Somewhere in those untimed minutes, Faye said, "I love you." The words were as otherworldly as the darkness around them, as empty as Faye sometimes seemed to be, when he desired her most. She meant the words for the dog, Jersey thought, the dog still panting under her petting fingers, but there was a dislocation to everything that left him wondering. He couldn't see her, and what he could see was fuzzy, so he ratcheted an image of Marilyn over the wavering body of the sister he had settled inside, and it was perfect.

#

And then, it's the middle of March, the fresh glow of a whirlwind romance gone under the weight of reality. They stand in front of his mother and grandmother, heads

hanging. They have news, the kind where they stand in the center of the room with all eyes glaring and wish they can be anywhere else. His cheeks flame red. Faye looks lost, bewildered, and empty.

Jersey's grandmother says, "When's she moving in?" and there's a way she says it, with a twist of her mouth, that shows a distinct pleasure. She's never liked Faye, never liked Marilyn or their father or old Grandpa Jones.

But his mother is the real surprise. She purses her lips and looked him up and down. The whole room could hear the slight knocking of his knees as they bounce against each other. She looks over at Faye, too, studies with a critical eye the girl's left hand cradling a still-tiny stomach, then slides her vision slowly over the entirety of them both. "What am I supposed to do with all this, now?" she said. His mother looks tired at forty-seven, tired like a grandma, tired like a waitress who's not saying no and slapping away hands anymore, as long as those are five-dollar bills getting dropped as tips.

Jersey thinks about his father, how the man fought so hard for so long and then folded, saw another option and reached out to take it. He's called a few times, general how-you-doing calls that make it pretty clear he's doing okay and they're doing okay, but nobody is doing well. But sometimes, he said the last time he called, from a payphone in a Sinclair gas station just outside of Caldwell, Idaho, sometimes halfway decent is all you can really hope for.

Jersey sees his mother making those calculations herself, while he and Faye stand and feel forcibly ashamed for something they wouldn't have do any differently, in

hindsight. “Well,” she says finally, “it’s not like you were going much of anywhere anyway.”

He wants to argue with her. He wants to tell her a little bit of faith could have gone a long way. What he really wishes is that her response hadn’t been the same as his own, a dull blankness. He wishes he had that tax prep test done, and maybe a few more to wave in her face, instead of pushed under his bed and proving her point.

“Might as well make another one,” she says. “Maybe we’ll do better this time.”

Jersey stands in the middle of the living room, making the fourth corner of a conversation square. He's blocking his grandmother’s view of the television: OLN, a fishing show. He thinks about flashing lights stopping deer in their tracks, of casting those same rays with a flashlight over the water. He thinks about his father switching course mid-stream, reinventing himself on the fly. And he opens his mouth.

“We’re not even talking about the other option?”

There is a moment of silence. Jersey reflects on the fact that maybe this topic should’ve been brought up to Faye alone before he threw it out for everyone to hear. The TV goes to commercial and blasted Tom Petty.

Then pandemonium takes over.

“You’re a Christian,” his mother yells, and Faye yelled something either at Jersey's mother or Jersey but probably Jersey, and then his grandmother jumps in and screams wordlessly, for the sound of her own voice or maybe just to shut up all other voices.

His mother tosses a shoe, a thick rubber mudboot with an insert that flops out as it hits the ground. There are seven, maybe nine more beside it on the rug beside the laundry room door, and she is bent over reaching for the next. She's screaming nonsense like, "Murderers have more class than your sorry behind," and Jersey retorted with nonsense in return like, "I told you I wasn't getting tied to this place forever," and his grandmother turns all the pictures of her husband facedown and says, "Sanford shouldn't have to see this."

The keys in his pocket are for his grandmother's truck, so he hits the door and lights out in that failing F-150. He drives the truck hard, faster than he ever has, up and over eighty and then ninety and tries for triple-digits. The warning lights go Star Trek, and something pulls sharply every time he takes a corner, and that insistent whine in the clutch that's been getting worse for weeks is loud and obnoxious. Jersey's father once said about old trucks, the kind that have never given any trouble, that when they go out, they go out everywhere. He'd said it standing beside a Datsun that was nothing but rust on the shoulder of Highway 80 waiting for Jersey's mother to come pick them up, so he knew what he was talking about.

Jersey drives that truck into the ground, until it locks up on him, coughing and spitting and rattling and shaking and then giving up entirely. It settles into the asphalt, sighs a great sigh and clanks to a hard stop in the middle of the road. He steps out and leaves it there, keys in the ignition for all the good it will do anyone. Then he walks.

He finds himself along the cliff at the edge of the Cosumnes, like always. He sits down on the bank, pulling at worms with his fingers and tossing them into the water,

watching the fish and their strange gobbling motion as they dart, never suspecting the hook however many times they're caught and released. But he was unarmed.

Jersey looks to his side and finds nothing where she had originally sat, just the sun bronzing the earth beside him. He's always liked the way Faye is pale as milk, just half a shade from translucent, even after they'd driven around all day with the sun smacking directly on them, and her rubbing aloe into the burns.

He can hear the greasy idling of his Toyota, but he doesn't look up. It's easier to pretend he's still looking straight through her, holding onto imagination for another minute or two. Eventually, he hears the crunching of twigs and knows that dream has to fall away.

She comes up to him at the river's edge. Jersey throws another worm at the water, watches another oversized mouth pop up and swallow. She grabs his shoulder with her hand, and he feels her heavy against him, substantial and entire. When he looks up at her, she appears as solid and immovable as everything else has always been. There is no other universe in her. There is nowhere else to go.

Faye stands behind him, hard and chipped like the rocks, all the tender moss ripped away. High above them, an airplane thunders past, and together they watch the white trail behind it until there is nothing left to see.

Squatters

Mitch Buchanan comes back from his job working the lunch-hour at the Flyers gas station with three twenty-dollar bills. His wife, Janice, is hunched over a pan at the stove when he walks in the door. She's stirring with a long wooden spoon. When she turns around to face him, setting the spoon on a slotted trivet emblazoned with cows that they've decided not to pack, her face is flushed from the steam. "How'd you do?" she asks.

Mitch shrugs. He pulls out two twenties and hands them to his wife. The third he keeps for himself. He's managed to squirrel away sixty dollars in exactly this way. He's thinking he'll use it on Christmas gifts. Janice wouldn't approve of the waste, but he'll win her over. He'll get her something she'd never see coming, something to make her smile. It's been a long year.

He squashes an ant as it marches across the countertop. She'd want him to throw that last twenty in the jelly jar on which they've written "New Home Fund," where the other two are going. They keep the tiny jar in her purse, pull it out each night he brings home another few bills to slide inside. Then they leave it out for the rest of the evening, and they allow themselves to dream. They talk plans, possibilities, certainties. The solutions flow easily, like water down the sink, easily the way they never seem to any other time. They're going to get back on their feet. They're going to find a decent apartment for a year or two, put a down payment on a house, a nice one over on Canal Street by the high school. Harper's twelve years old -- if they can put all this together quickly enough, it'll be perfect. He'll be two, maybe three streets from school, won't

even have to ride the bus. Out here on Deer Run Road, the bus takes an hour and a half when it's on time, and the bus stop is half a mile down the road. Harper has to be up at 5:30 to make sure he gets to school by 8:00.

Janice grabs the bills. "That's it?" she says. She's wearing an apron with holes in it. When he looks closely, Mitch can see the small imperfections in the holes, the tiny bites. Janice and Harper and Kenzie and the moths chewing Janice's apron and the ants that walk in straight lines across the countertop, they're all depending on him.

"That's it," he agrees. He takes off his gloves and drops them on the counter. He sees the look she gives him, but he doesn't pick them back up. Small pellets of dirt drip off the leather fingertips onto the white countertop. A few more ants have made their way onto the counter. One is picking at a speck of the newly-dropped dirt. Mitch stacks his phone and wallet beside the gloves. "Where are the kids?"

"Outside," she says. "What happened?"

"Nothing. That's just all I got." Mitch settles himself into one of the uncomfortable kitchen chairs. They were a cheap K-Mart purchase, and they've been nothing but problems since the first day out of the box. They're getting left behind, too, and the table. No place to store them, for one thing. Mitch pushed hard on that point.

Besides the chewed holes, there's a brown soup-stain on Janice's apron, just above the cut of her hip where she has a birthmark that looks like a dolphin. He used to trace that mark with his fingers, and she'd giggle and push him away and he'd slide around and catch her from the other side. They used to play like that. It's been a while.

"Dinner's about ready," she tells him. "Cut the bread?"

“Sure.” He stands up, walks to the sink. He pulls down a cutting board and settles it against the counter. More ants have arrived. Janice used to wage war against them, but she doesn’t even notice anymore. She opens the oven and pulls out a crisp brown loaf. The smell settles easily into the air.

Looking out the window, he can see the kids playing in the small swath of clearing that counts as their backyard before the pines take over. Kenzie’s just getting the hang of her motor functions. She’s running around in the grass and falling every few steps. Harper’s out in the tall bushes, sneaking around with a stick in his hands like a rifle, playing some singular form of army man. Inside, the house is warm, the smell divine. Mitch is slowly shaking the chill off his bones.

His phone vibrates against the counter. His hands are full with the bread and knife, and Janice has just poured her fettuccine from the pan into the colander and is waiting for the steam to dissipate, so she picks it up. She reads the text message. He watches her eyeballs make their slow rotation across the screen. She sets the phone back down, walks back to the stove. She picks up a second spoon and stirs the smaller pot of sauce twice, adds three hard wrist-flicks of oregano. “That was your whore,” she says.

Janice has a gorgeous snarl.

Mitch lets the knife settle onto the cutting board, grabs his phone and looks at it. The text is straightforward. “Meetup?” is all Naomi ever says. He texts a quick affirmation and puts the phone back on the counter. He can feel the sizzle of his wife’s glare, but he focuses on the bread. He cuts carefully, lining up the half-loaf with his left hand and letting the knife make its slow mark. The bottom is slightly burnt. He cuts four

long pieces, then settles them onto a plate Janice silently hands him from the cabinet.

They work so well together.

“Kids,” she calls. “Dinner.”

Mitch watches Harper slide out from behind a tree. He has a pine cone in his hand, and as he walks toward the house, he casually tosses it behind him like a grenade. Mitch sees the boy’s imaginary world exploding in streaks of fire and has a hard time arguing with the sight.

Around the table, the four bow their heads while Kenzie prays the simplest, quickest prayer she knows, only two lines, one quick rhyme. Afterward, Janice lifts her head and smiles tightly at the children, one and then the other. The look she gives Mitch is not exactly a smile. “Isn’t this nice?” she says.

#

Mitch and Naomi aren’t sleeping together anymore. Now, she’s just trying to help him save his house.

It’s 8:00 AM when Mitch parks at the Buttermilk. He sits in his truck and lets the heat blast against his knuckles for a moment while he trails his eyes across the parking lot. There are empty cars, and across the street is the man who carves wooden bears, but no one catches his eye. They were idiots to meet here, originally. Everyone comes here for breakfast. They talked about changing it up once or twice, but never did. And of course, it had done them in. A waitress at the Buttermilk, Marilyn Ruth, goes to Sunday Latin mass at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament with Janice. Mitch had come home one Sunday afternoon after meeting Naomi to his wife spearing a sausage with a fork, the juices

running out thick down her wrist, and her saying, “Remember when we used to tell each other everything? Let’s start that again. How about you go first?”

Naomi pulls up as Mitch is stepping out of his truck. She’s wearing a black skirt and holds a folder against her chest. Her blouse is white, the fine jacket over it black. She’s wearing heels. He’s been trying to be a good man, lately, but he’d have her again if she’d let him.

“Hi,” he says. It’s early, and it’s cold, but he’s sweating. Naomi does that to him. He still feels clandestine every time he meets her. He wipes his palms against his jeans.

“Your house just sold,” she tells him by way of greeting.

Naomi works at Golden State Credit Union. She used to be Mitch’s boss, when he worked there as well. She’s a high enough manager that she’s managed to lose the file for a few months, has stalled the foreclosure two separate times on paperwork technicalities, but Mitch knew this was coming. They haven’t owned the house for months. It’s been on the market since summer. Mitch and Janice and the kids have been squatting all this time, waiting for the worst.

“Damn.” Mitch opens the door for her. The restaurant is busy, but not full, so they seat themselves. Marilyn’s working a few tables over, smiling at a talking couple with her pencil and order pad in hand, but she keeps her distance, spares them only a quick grimace. When Rosalind comes over, Mitch orders water and half a Colorado omelet. Naomi asks for coffee and a short stack of pancakes, two eggs over easy. Rosalind doesn’t bother with an order pad, just nods and smiles and says, “All right, folks,” and

slides back to the kitchen. She's professional that way. Marilyn always needs the order pad.

He drinks his first glass quickly. The tablecloth is red, and it has little streamers down to the floor that he doesn't know the proper word for. Tassels, maybe. They tap softly against his leg every time he moves. He can't sit still. His house is gone. It has been for a while, but there's a permanence to this moment. There's no coming back from this.

"It's the couple from Alaska," she tells him. Mitch remembers them -- when Naomi had told him about them coming down to look at the house, she'd said they seemed serious. A serious offer, her exact words. This thing's headed for a conclusion, sooner rather than later.

Mitch gets a refill on his water, and he drinks that down just as fast.

"I don't guess you've managed to get together any--"

Cash? No. An apartment is out of the question. A house, even a rental, is laughable. Mitch needs more water. He needs his omelet. Something in his stomach, something to settle him down. He's jumpy. He's exhausted. He's got to go to work after this, what little of it there is, standing behind the register at the Flyers gas station watching the world drive by. Not even very much of that, really, on the old Prairie City Highway. The world feels tilted.

"How long do we have?"

"You need to get out," she tells him. "There'll be inspectors there tomorrow morning for the final walk-through. You know how this works."

Mitch was a teller for the credit union. He took cash and gave cash, he handed people slips of paper to fill out. He told people to take their hats off when they walked in the door, per company policy. He was never involved with the complicated stuff. He's completely out of his element, and has been for ages. He has no idea how any of this works.

The food arriving saves him from trying to craft a response. He drowns his omelet in ketchup and finishes another glass of water. The word homeless is rolling around his brain, but it doesn't feel any more correct now than it has any other time he's considered it.

"How's the job hunt?" she asks him. When they were sleeping together, sometimes she'd bring him classified ads, or print out job postings from the credit union website. Mitch has always felt that she didn't think he was putting enough effort in, that he could find something if he tried harder.

"If it ever snows, I'm a shoe-in up at Kirkwood." He worked at that snow lodge when he was a teen, and he's still got a few friends up there. He's been hanging his hopes on that since October. Other than that, he's got nothing going on. Just minding the store for Earvin. There's nothing else to say.

She reaches across the table and clasps his hand. Mitch sees Marilyn throw him a sidelong glance from three tables away, sees the upturned arch of her eyebrow while she freshens her customer's hot water, but he doesn't pull away.

"Hey," she tells him. "Hey. Chin up. It's going to get worse before it gets any better."

#

The affair started the same way, with Naomi grabbing his hand. It was the day he'd been given his two weeks' notice. It was a Saturday evening, and the credit union was closed. He was the last teller there, as he always was on Saturdays, and he'd been wondering for an hour why she hadn't left with everyone else.

She called him into her office. She was wearing a coat with two buttons undone, and he could see the smallest bit of her bra, a vibrant pink the color of donut frosting. The skin between the pink was rich like a maple bar, and Mitch could have fallen between those breasts and rested his head. She wasn't precisely beautiful, but her breasts were inarguably her best feature, and she dressed to accentuate them, in clean lines that drew the eyes. They pulled at Mitch's attention while she talked, and even as the termination handshake ended, as she stepped back and said, "I'm really sorry."

He nodded and said, "Me too."

For a moment, the two looked at each other uncomfortably. It was nearly 8:00 at night, and the day had been difficult even before learning he'd be let go -- a teller had called in sick five minutes before her shift, and there'd been no one to cover so Mitch had worked through two breaks. Probably wouldn't have, if they'd given him the two weeks' before his shift, but there was no getting that time back now.

So he stood in her office, his hands flat at his sides. Naomi was laying him off, and she was wearing a pink bra and had two buttons undone and her skin looked like the wood of an oak tree and it was one of those moments, those absolutely perfect moments

that never happen. It was a scripted moment, a television moment, a movie moment, a scene. It was ripe for an event, for something to happen.

He could have done anything, right then. He could have picked up his pride, taken a professional reference, and thanked her for the opportunity. He could have pitched a fit and chewed her out, told her how hard he'd worked -- completely untrue -- and how unfair this whole thing was -- probably true -- and gone on for five, maybe ten minutes about how the entire system was falling apart and he couldn't tell up from down or right from wrong anymore, about moral ambiguity and questionable faith.

Or, he could have done what he did.

He said her name. "Naomi." She was slightly off-balance, most of her weight on her left leg, stepping back toward her chair, and she turned into him when he spoke, a question on her face. He settled his right arm behind her, firm against her back, and pulled her into him. Then, he kissed her.

She tasted like apples, those precious Pink Lady varieties that Janice loved so much.

He'd always wanted to, but he wasn't thinking, wasn't expecting anything. He certainly wasn't expecting her to settle around him like hot apple cider against teeth. He took her there on the ground beside her executive chair, or she allowed herself to be taken, or she took him, right in the empty office, with only a few of the lights on and the building bathed in shadow, on the taupe rug just inside her office. She would correct anyone who called it brown. Taupe, she would insist. There was nothing brown about it.

Her skirt crumpled against her thighs. His pants caught against his ankles. His belt buckle bounced against his knees, hard. He would have bruises, and he'd explain them to Janice as tripping on the stairs going to the kitchen for orange juice.

She was gorgeous in that moment in a way that inspired him to the kind of forceful rutting that he'd imagined but never attempted with his wife. He wanted to believe that it wasn't the cheating that pulled that heavy need out of him, though introspection would leave him little choice but to believe it. His hips smashed against hers.

It's the only thing in his life that's ever happened exactly how he'd imagined.

Naomi touched him, her hand on his. Their stench filled the room, and he was sticky with himself and with her. He'd just been fired. The world was turning upside down, the economy in the first spasms of faltering.

"You can't have your job back," she told him when they were through. Her voice was thick with regret, with sugary despondence, with the despair that overtakes good people, the fortunate, as they stand aside and watch the unfortunate crumble and are unable to help. They were lying on the ground, Naomi against the crook of his shoulder. Her breasts, he noted, were just as impressive in that position.

"I don't want it," he'd said. He thought he'd find something else, would figure it out. He didn't know where he would go, and he still doesn't have an answer to the question of moral value, but feeling himself rise to hardness for the second time against the quick hands of a woman in a crumpled skirt who'd just given him a notice of termination and an orgasm, with his wife miles away and cooking what would turn out to

be Hamburger Helper for the second time that week, morality didn't seem to have much meaning.

#

Mitch Buchanan is trying to be a good man, but he works the lunch hour at the Flyers and takes three more twenties out of the till. He doesn't pocket any of them, brings all three back to Janice. Then he tells her the house has been sold. They've got to get out.

She looks at him steadily and says, "So, now what are you going to do?"

He says, "If you've got ideas, I'm pretty sure I've still got ears."

They pack what's left of the house, but there isn't much. Most of the pots and pans they leave, for want of space. The kitchen table, the damnable chairs, the couch and television and the bed set, that trivet on the counter covered in cows. There are more ants climbing the counters now, taking over before the Buchanans can even leave properly. The clothes are all packed, and the box of pictures they'd stored under the bed for years, the kids' toys and school supplies and the Hardy Boys books that Harper has recently gotten into -- it's all been in the car for weeks, waiting on this moment.

They spend one more night in the old place. Mitch sleeps on the couch, and tells the kids it's because he's going to miss that ratty old thing, but he can see they don't believe him.

In the morning, the kids disappear to school. Mitch pushes off the couch and makes coffee for himself and Janice. The process requires a trip to the truck for filters and the coffeepot and two cups, and one more to put them back.

Janice comes downstairs already dressed. She takes her cup and drinks it in a few long swallows, then dumps the grounds in the sink. “Well,” she says. “Let’s get on with this.”

#

“There’s only so far down you can go,” he tells Janice later that day. They’re sitting on the bank of the Cosumnes River in lawn chairs, watching with binoculars the flurry of action at their old house. The inspectors are rummaging around, and the new homeowners have come to watch the proceedings. It’s the first time Mitch has seen them. They’re Alaskan, and they look it. It’s barely fifty degrees, and they’re wearing shorts. They’re shielding their eyes from the half-sun that’s slipping out from behind the clouds. Maybe that’s unfair, to label that a result of their Alaska nature, but Mitch is not in a forgiving mood.

“Oh, yeah?” she says. “Show me one time in modern history where things stopped getting worse.” Janice sips at a Coors Light. There’s a cooler between them, filled with ice, with her Coors Light and his O’Doul’s. It tastes as ugly as it looks. “Show your facts,” she says. “Cite your sources.”

He used to love when she talked like that, over his head because she’d gone to the JC and pulled an AA in criminal justice before she got sucked into the complications of the world around her. Before he proposed, before he found the job at the bank that meant criminal justice degree or not, the best she could get would be local police. Before she got and then lost the dispatcher job in a swirl of accusations and schemes that Mitch had tried

his best to understand without success. Before she started using the words as a shield, guarding entrance to a part of her he wasn't allowed.

“There was still half a deer in the freezer,” Mitch tells her.

Janice doesn't respond immediately. She takes another sip and stares at the sun. “I forgot to empty the medicine cabinet,” she says.

The inspection doesn't take long. Outside, on the hood of a company truck, the Alaska couple sign papers and smile and shake hands. Mitch thinks about shaking Naomi's hand. He wonders what Janice is thinking about. It didn't used to be so difficult to figure out. He looks at her face and can't find anything. “So, what are we going to do?” he asks.

“I could always just leave,” Janice tells him. “I could get up and walk away.”

Mitch steals another glance at her. She's looking off toward the sun, toward the great phalanx of trees that separates their property from Perry's place. A person could get lost in there, easily. That's where they'll pitch their tent, later tonight, sleeping in the near-frozen air and thanking God for zero-degree sleeping bags and trying to figure out what exactly happens next, trying to figure out where they're going to go, and trying to get there before the real winter weather beats them to it.

#

After school, they tell the kids it's a vacation. “I guarantee it's going to be fun,” Mitch tells them. “Look at me. That's a personal guarantee.”

Harper and Kenzie look at him, but he can see they don't believe him. They're done with the vacation angle before the tent's set up, the spikes hammered into the

ground. When it gets dark, and cold, and there's nothing to do but curl up in sleeping bags and look up at the folds of the tent, they go to sleep to avoid talking. Nobody much seems to like anybody else, anymore.

Mitch falls asleep quickly, but that sleep is easily disturbed. He wakes up multiple times throughout the night. The winds pick up, and the tent sways. At one point, it calms down for a few minutes, so he pushes himself out of his sleeping bag and unzips the tent, steps outside and stares at the blackness of the forest. They've picked a spot deep under the pines, where there aren't even any porch lights twinkling in the distance. They're less than an acre from their old house, but it feels further. With the moon clouded over, it feels like a new start in an old world.

Mitch has sixty dollars in his pocket. He could always just leave. He could get up and walk away. In a few hours, he could walk to the road and catch a ride with Marshall, manager at the feed store, head into town and get a bus ticket. He could go down to Folsom, up to Roseville, over the state line to Reno, someplace nobody knows or cares about him, and disappear.

From the tent, softly, he hears his wife say, "Mitch?" He doesn't respond. The wind is picking up. He's wearing a light jacket and two layers, but he could use a coat. It feels like winter. All warmth is gone. "Where are you?" he hears.

He's walked perhaps five feet. The tent is the mottled color of the woods, invisible to his eye. He can't see anything but black, and the slightly darker black of tree trunks and their hardscrabble branches. He could be anywhere. He could just start walking, disappear completely, walk long enough and far enough that when the morning

sun finally begins its slow ascent over the Sierras, he'd have no idea where he was. He used to work construction, years ago. There's an axe in the car. Build a little cabin wherever he stops, hunt and fish and stay in the mountains for the rest of his life. All the rest of this, who needs it?

The possibility rests at the edges of his fingertips. A small light blinks to life, and the tent comes back into view, Janice's shadow inside. He watches her small figure as it clambers out of a sleeping bag, as the long tent clasp is unzipped, as her head appears. The light is from her cellphone, intoxicatingly bright. Her eyes glow against its shine. "I'm here," he says, when she finally catches sight of him. He tries to decipher the look in her eyes and fails, so he tries again. "Here I am."

After a Cliff, a Chasm

Faye stands at the edge of the cliff, looking into the fast-rushing current of the Cosumnes River. Water speeds past, rippling blue with occasional whitecaps. She contemplates jumping.

"Well," says the boy behind her, "do it or don't."

The boy is sandy-blond. He might be twelve. The kids that stand behind him, shuffling feet and crackling fallen leaves, are waiting for her to take flight so they can fill the space she currently occupies with their own concerns and then leap away. The boy's face has a circular construction that makes Faye think of whorls on the tip of a finger. He is thick-chested but slim, hips cocked in the way of boys who've never met opposition. There are eight kids in line, including him. It doesn't take any great leap to imagine that curling twist of a face will grow gorgeous by fifteen, smiling from some field playing quarterback or point guard, on the ski team or running track. He's shirtless, and the young muscles on his chest are already defined, rolling smoothly from shoulder to hip.

It is raining. It has been raining for a while, long enough to make this a viable swimming spot again as it hasn't been through most of the year and far into last winter, deep enough for diving even if the sign at the edge of the trail argues against it. Faye clears her throat. She marks the distance. It's doable. When she was the age of the children behind her, she made this leap often, cannonballing into the current with an abandon she can barely remember possessing.

"Come on, let's go," the boy tells her, and Faye looks at him sharply. He has a scar on his shoulder, the kind that works to his advantage -- the jagged thing might have

hurt badly when it happened, but it draws on the motherly senses. Faye wants to ask if he's okay, if he needs a cold compress or a warm shoulder. She even has the slight urge to ask if she needs to kiss it better. And deeper, another thought spasms inside that says in three or four years, that scar's going to be irresistible, and not in any kind of motherly way.

The boy sizes her up the same way she's done him, though clearly his consideration results in less flattering results. Then he pushes forward to take her place on the cliff edge. Faye steps aside without argument. He kneels low, explodes forward, takes four small steps and launches himself into the sky. For the tiniest of instants, he hangs in air, and Faye feels the urge to grab for him, catch his shirt, pull him back onto the solid ground where she exists. Then he's hidden by the cliff, and she cannot follow his swift descent into the water.

She hears the splash. It sounds so easy, then. The first time Faye took this dive, she was eleven and reckless, and the last time she closed her eyes and let herself go, she was twenty-one and empty. What is she now?

There are seven others waiting for their turn to dive into the Cosumnes River. Faye looks at each of them in turn, tries to find something distinctive in each face she'll remember after they fall away into the water. There isn't much: a small patch of beard beginning to grow on one, a uni-brow on another, and a third with a small slice of his left ear missing. They seem so similar, eager to dispose of themselves, to throw themselves down into the tide. One after another, they collect themselves at the edge and barrel

forward, pushing off the edge with complete abandon and leaping forward to meet the sky. She watches them all disappear, but she stays behind.

#

Faye and her father, Haunches, have moved several times this year. First, there was the house on Canal Street, which was repossessed after months of Haunches swearing to pay and fruitlessly searching for jobs that had all dried up. Then, they'd camped in a shack on the back forty of her grandfather's property, until Grandpa Jones had passed and left the acreage to a cousin up in North Dakota. Now, they live in the pay-by-week Old Dry Diggings Motel that rests in a business park just off the center of Hangtown. There's a Kmart and a Mexican restaurant in the park with the Motel. Lately, Haunches has started hallucinating, and he hasn't had a real job in almost three years and there are days it's hard to convince him even to put on pants before the day has given up on itself. This life is not sustainable.

She had planned to tell him this morning. It's time for her to move out. Her fiancée, Jersey, has found an efficiency apartment their meager budget can afford. She's been saving everything she can from her assistant manager position at KFC, and Jersey just picked up work at the newly-opened Safeway on Oklahoma Springs Boulevard, but he hasn't been there long enough to even request a vacation day for their wedding, yet. There will be a few tough months, but she's gone weeks straight eating nothing but chicken strips and cole slaw -- Faye can handle a rough stretch.

They signed the papers yesterday. Faye's been putting off telling her father, but today, she woke up with every intention of breaking the news. She meant to. But in the

morning, stepping out to grab orange juice from the Kmart just a hundred feet away in the plaza, Faye saw Mister Shuster. He was in the bread aisle, his hand bouncing between a roll of wheat bread and a roll of whole-grain wheat bread. His brow was furrowed, his lips puckered as though praying for celestial guidance. He was wearing flip-flops, black rubber with a pink thong surrounding heavily-tanned toes.

Faye was fresh out of bed, still wearing her Betty Boop pajama bottoms, a skinny gray halter, and no makeup. Not her best look, though it fit the Kmart feel. Mister Shuster must have been on his way to school, dressed in a shabby cream button-down and a geometric tie, his hair smoothed over, the same way she remembered him from junior year. But for the flip-flops.

Shuster had been everybody's favorite teacher that year, assigning projects that barely felt like school at all and barking out life lessons with a grumbling façade that demanded laughter. Except when he was mad, at which point he started telling truths nobody wanted to believe. "You can be anything you want to be," he sneered at Caroline Stendhal the day Caroline accidentally backed into his Camry -- the Camry he'd gotten from Folsom Lake Toyota just two years prior, that he was still paying monthly because for the first time in his life, he'd told his students, he was going to have a nice new car. Caroline hadn't quite totaled it, but the damage was clear and extensive. His bumper was on the ground, and the inner workings of his engine were lewdly open to all who cared to see where, exactly, horsepower came from. Mechanical sex ed, the joke had gone around. For all the Camry's pain, Caroline's bruising Jeep had only taken a few scratches, small

dents that could be buffed out during lunch. “But there’s a large difference between *can* and *will*. This is no grammar class, but trust me.”

Shuster taught history and civics, the way the laidback ones always seem to. But that day, he was fierce, and it was terrible.

He started with Caroline. “Look, this isn’t so complicated, folks. We’re spending all these millions educating you, telling you to reach for the skies. But I can tell you what you’re going to be right now. I’ve lived long enough to see the endgame for every one of you. Maybe one of you will surprise me. For instance, Caroline,” and he turned over her binder, stared at the hard red plastic set piece that glittered with dolphins, whales, marine animals of all kinds. She’d said something once about a marine biologist, maybe, or a pet doctor. Veterinarian, someone had suggested, and she’d nodded. Yeah, that. That’s exactly it. “You’ll be a perfectly serviceable Petsmart employee. Might even make it to the back office, customer service rep, if the tax rates ever flip and they bring those jobs back local.”

He went right down the list. Rico, Norman, five others. And then he came to Faye. He said, “Kentucky Fried, for you. Those glittering cheeks, no question. You’ll be a natural for the chicken grease.” Just that, and he was on to the next person, while Faye sat there caressing her cheeks the rest of class. She wore no more makeup than any other girl, less than some. Maybe it was the lighting, maybe a natural complexion issue, maybe something else. But, in the eyes of Mister Shuster, it defined her.

By the time she saw him again, this morning, in the bread aisle, she had mostly managed to forget about those five minutes of pure, righteous hellfire that Mister Shuster

had rained down from on high. Still, she did wish that she'd seen him sooner, before she'd turned down the bread aisle on her way to the refrigerated juices that held together the back of the store. Or at least that she'd bothered to throw on a decent pair of pants or a skirt, maybe put a little bounce in her hair before she left the motel room, done something to hide the chicken grease that floated out of her pores just like he'd prophesied. She couldn't wash it off in the weak stream of the motel shower.

But there was nothing for it. She walked right past him, quickly. He was looking at the bread, his attention wavering between one loaf and the next. Her tongue tasted thick in her mouth as she stepped close enough to see that he'd missed the top button on his shirt, that the entire collection of buttons was done incorrectly. He never so much as looked her way. Faye walked the entire aisle, then turned the corner and felt relief, simple and pure and powerful. She hated the burst of pleasure that squeezed through her at the reality of her escape, but she couldn't refuse it. As penitence, perhaps, or pure self-mutilation, she bought the chewy Extra Pulp orange juice, the kind she hated but her father loved, to go with the bagels she'd left on the counter in the room.

With all of that, she returned to the motel in no mood for another confrontation. She'd had all she could handle. So she let it drop, ate her bagel and then called Jersey for a ride. It was a nice day to go out along the Cosumnes, she told him, and he agreed. She left a note for her father, still snoring. He'd taught her that much, at least.

#

Her phone jingles, the old Bobby Fuller Four version of "I Fought the Law." Jersey downloaded it for her, put it on her phone as the ringtone that plays every time her

manager at KFC tries to get ahold of her. He calls her a stone-cold rebel every time it plays, and then he laughs and tells her to take the call. Take the call, rebel. Go ahead, sling that chicken, shuck that corn. But he doesn't complain about the money.

It's probably Abby, the daytime manager, asking if Faye can come in to help with the lunch crowd even though she's already scheduled for closing. Abby will say something like, there's no one else that can be trusted with this kind of responsibility, or, these are the moments that are looked favorably upon when looking for a new crop of managers. Faye's got an eye towards upward mobility.

All the kids are down in the water below splashing and playing. She is alone. Faye creeps to the edge of the cliff and peers over. Down there, she met Jersey for the first time, trawling for dinner with a fishing line she'd borrowed from her grandfather. She doesn't want to go down. It's the jump that intrigues her, the danger. And, the indelible link to childhood, to freedom, when she and her father would come visit Marilyn out here and Faye could disappear into the forest for hours and come out against the cliff and peer down into the depths below without a single note of fear souring the palette. She could jump, and exult in the soaring terror as she fell. But there are more people to think about, now, more than just one, just herself.

"There you are," she hears from behind her. It's Jersey. He sounds concerned. He's wearing a bulging backpack full of supplies and is holding a thick container of water, which he hands to her. "I've been looking for you."

She knows these woods better than he does. While he was parking the car, she disappeared, left him to bumble his way down to the river and then realize that she'd gone a different way. She's been standing here since, waiting and watching.

Faye takes a swig of the water. It is warm. He lays his hand on her shoulder, and she feels its solidity. She wraps her own arms, both of them, around her stomach and pulls back from the edge. "I figured you would be," she tells him. That's a good thing, she reminds herself. She lets him lead her away from the cliff, his hands hovering around her shoulders and midsection in a way that should be cute but instead feels exhaustingly overprotective. The ground beneath her is solid. She puts one foot in front of the other. The phone rings again, "I Fought the Law," and Jersey laughs.

She lets him laugh, but she answers. And when Abby says that two halfwits didn't bother to show, couldn't even be bothered to call with a half-decent excuse, Faye says, "I'll be there in thirty minutes." Someone has to hold things together.

The Swordsman

It happened on our road, two miles from the blacktop, where it trails down to one dirt lane and curves around the mountain like a question mark. It happened a quarter mile from our house, where the road gunks up into mud every time it rains. It happened two days ago, on Wednesday, rain coming down like pellets of deer shit. It happened right by the Christmas Tree Place, where we all buy our royal pines and cut them down with rusted-over saw blades and pick them up with four hands and toss the trees into the beds of trucks or tie them with old yellow rope onto the tops of cars and then drive home with ruddy cheeks and make cider for the kids and tipple whiskey for adults and circle around the tree and pretend everything's okay.

Everything is not okay.

That kid. Alejandro. He didn't do anything. They bundled him in a burlap bag, and they beat him. Three men, Deputy Ballmer said, at least three. They beat him, and then they took a baseball bat to him, hit him so hard his jaw disconnected, spun out and stuck in the sludge of the road. My father drove over it in his old Subaru, felt the crack against his tires, then reversed and cracked it one more time when he stopped to see what he'd hit. He stepped out and found the jaw, blackened by mud and some evidence of tooth decay. He saw teeth inside, quivering as if in fear, and then he saw the burlap sack. The entire scene, he told me, had the sense of something eminent. He called the police and disappeared, hustled home. And he took a souvenir, he said, unclenching his one good hand to show me a tooth he'd wrestled free.

A quarter-mile from our house. I went to high school with him.

This one hurts.

#

In the time of gold and silver, there was a swordsman.

The swordsman wore clothing the color of dirt. He wore a black hat, tight over his eyes, and a gun belt with two holsters slung across his waist. Two belts of ammunition were strapped to his chest in the Mexican style, and his moustache was black as oil. His hair hung thick and straight. He sat atop a dappled horse. Breath escaped the horse's nostrils in thick streams and frosted into clouds. He held a sword in his right hand, broad, with a heavy hilt and wide blade. It was morning.

Between the houses of Old Hangtown and the empty road where the swordsman sat his horse, a group of hardened men formed a line. At their head stood a man with a shining star stained in blood against his chest. "Move along," the sheriff said. He held a shotgun across his folded arms. There was mud on his boots.

"I'm here for justice," the swordsman said.

"I've got fifteen men, tough as tobacco."

"I can count."

"You have no chance."

"Her name was Jane Smith. Half-white, half-Miwok." The swordsman nudged his mount, one step and then another. The clop of those hooves settled over the men like certainty. "Twelve years of age." The face below that dark hat was the color of sun-dried tomatoes. "Forcibly taken by seven men." His sword was steady in his hand. "Thrown in a grave and left to die."

Sheriff Ben Bonner owned the Double-Bar B brand and several working mines, and he had seventy-two men under his employ sifting the various streams and rivers for gold. He'd never seen this Indian before, and he couldn't make hay of the sword the red man held. He'd never heard of Jane Smith, but there were Indians all around, all different brands and breeds. There were men in his employ who liked to take their pleasures, and plenty who did so in groups.

The swordsman halted at the edge of town, where hard-packed dirt gave way to vegetation. Behind the men, each white face whiskered, the shanty buildings of Old Hangtown searched for foundation. Short-guns in holsters swung free against the swordsman's hips, but he made no move. He kept his eyes on the man who was sheriff by right of gold, and he lowered his sword until the tip pointed squarely forward, lined against a red-gold star.

"I'm here for justice," the swordsman said, and the sheriff's shotgun thundered. The rolling blast was echoed by fifteen repetitious shots.

Gun smoke rose in the air. A screaming silence raced across the distance. Then the smoke dissipated, and the swordsman was calmly sitting atop his horse, bullet-holes nubbing circles within his clothing the color of dirt.

He nudged his horse forward one step, onto the well-kept road, into Old Hangtown proper. The sheriff raised a hand to calm his men, and the sixteen stood tall through fear, through certainty the devil himself had grown an Indian face and come to chew on their souls like long-lasting barley candy and suckle on the marrow in their

bones the way a thirsty man might greedily gum a bottle of sarsaparilla. Against this otherworld, they held their guns like Neanderthals discovering clubs.

The swordsman raised his blade high into the air. Then he killed them all, as simple a matter as receiving baptism.

#

I'm standing on the roof of the old soda factory, in the heart of Hangtown. It's getting cold. I can see all the way from the Buttermilk on one side to the Frosto on the other. On Main Street, there's a noose with a mannequin hanging from it. Alejandro was murdered. We don't need that noose to remind us we live beside death, but it's swung there as long as Hangtown has existed. The Sutter Highway snakes through the center of town and out in both directions. From this height, it looks like a dividing line between what we have been and what we could become.

Dani barks, "No jacket," when I reach for my windbreaker. I'm wearing buckskin and fringe, and Dani has me staring gravely into the sky. Alejandro worked at his parents' Mexican restaurant, and he could understand but not speak their Spanish. She has my chin jutting, and I'm turned a little to the left so my turgid cheekbones stand out, she says, like the face of a mountain. He was a third-generation American citizen. When I protest the extremity of this look, Dani tells me that for the minority to be recognized as themselves, physical differences from the dominant culture must be accentuated. Alejandro played the banjo and water polo. "Haven't you ever seen political cartoons?" she says by way of example.

Dani likes to hear herself talk. While I stand on the roof, contorting my face into her imagined emotions, she talks about literati, the intelligentsia. She mentions socioeconomic spheres of influence and speaks of the transformative power of art. She says a lot of words I don't understand, has a lot of thoughts I can't follow.

"More pensive," she tells me. "I need more pensive."

Sometimes before we get up to the roof, Dani will beg me for a cigarette, and we'll stand together on the street, under the soda factory's old wooden overhang. "Nobody appreciates culture anymore," she will say. She will blow the smoke between her lips, letting it dissipate before she un-pinches her mouth, entirely aware of her eroticism. "We're living in the end of days," she'll say, always the same phrase. She must have heard it somewhere. It rolls off her lips like a prayer. "It's the end of the world." I've never disagreed.

"Don't frown so much," Dani says. "I need stoic, not sad." She's behind her easel, holding a brush in her right hand, angled like she's about to throw it at a dart board. Her left hand holds a wooden tray covered in paint smears. She's painting me. "What kind of Indian can't do stoic?"

I'm Miwok, if it matters, which it doesn't to Dani. She's got me in a headdress she took from the county museum. It's from the Washoe tribe, neighbors back in the day, but Dani says no one will notice the minor inconsistencies. The pants and shirt aren't mine either, and the buckskin certainly isn't, but she swears they're from my tribe. That's how she said it, "your tribe." Some things I've just got to let go. The clothes stay in her locker when I'm not wearing them. She brings them out and hands them to me in the empty soda

factory hallway and waits for a long moment before she steps away to let me change in privacy.

"This is for a higher calling," she says when I ask about the clothes or the stance or the expressions that I'd never wear in real life. "Higher than the truth."

On a whim, the question comes. "What would you do if you weren't doing this?" I push the words out quickly, so she can't shush me for interrupting her painting hand with my voice.

It's something I wonder often, when I have these moments. The future sits in front of me, a looming chasm like the graves my grandfather used to dig. He died before I was born, but I've heard those stories of the bad old days when a Miwok was lucky not to be target practice. My father taught himself a trade, became a butcher, stayed indoors and useful, away from rednecks and hotheads. He grew up mean, and raised me the same way.

"This is all we're ever doing," Dani tells me. The words feel false from her lips, like the chatter of squirrels, but she has an answer. Normally, her voice soothes me, let me believe that there are answers in the clouds handed down to people smarter than me, and all I have to do is stay quiet to eventually hear their response. "There's nothing but this moment."

Dani wants me, I know that for a fact. After we're done here, she's going to ask me to Ranger's for a burger, or to the Frosto because she knows it's on my way home. She'd never go to Alejandro's place, where even the smell of Clorox tastes dirty. When

Dani says *ambiance*, the sound of French bouncing on her tongue, she does not mean Rafa's Burrito Café.

I will say no when she asks me, because I do not want her and because I do not feel comfortable in the world that appears in front of my eyes when she speaks. There are creatures moving below me. I could jump and survive, might not break any bones. The feeling takes me sometimes, a deep urge. I'd land in the dandelions beside the Argyle Coffeehouse that shares a corner of brick with this factory, push up and run. The trees are just a few quick steps. If I was much of a Miwok, I could live for years, go Ishi on the world and never see another face as long as I live. Those running dreams hold me still while Dani paints.

When the sun drops completely below the mountains, she collects her supplies and disappears for a moment. I change on the roof of the building, air curling chilly around the various naked segments of my body. As fast as I move, I'm barely slipping into my shirt when Dani returns, two bottles of Hangtown Soda in hand. I take the blackberry and knock necks with her. "A beautiful night," she tells me.

I sit against the rail, fold one leg over the other. The clothes are bunched on the ground, the breeches and headdress and buckskin shirt with all its fringe, and I'm a man again, no longer needed for my heritage. I can exist, can drink a blackberry soda and watch the final remnants of the sun freeze into memory. Dani rests on her stool, looking past me into the world that tumbles off this ledge.

My life is untenable. I don't have a skill, like my father. I don't have a job, like my grandfather. This painting gig will be done soon. I'm selling my father's swords on the

side of Deer Run Road, pushing them off for a hundred or two on anyone who grew up wanting to be a ninja. The old man watches me do it, can't stop me. He sits in the living room with his stub of an arm tight against his body and watches me wrap them in newspaper each morning. It's so easy to bring pain into the world. There are eleven swords left, and then that will be done too.

"Do you know who killed Alejandro?" I ask Dani. My father has already tired of the tooth he took from the dead man's jaw. He passed it to me this morning when I wrapped his swords. I tried to hide the way it made me feel, that he had given up on the memory so quickly, but as I left I could feel his smile in the crisp air.

"Who?"

"The guy who died on Wednesday."

"Oh," she says. "That Mexican kid. Tragedy." She takes a sip of her strawberry soda, and the way she tongues at the sweet on her lips makes me irate.

"Let me see the painting," I demand.

Dani turns the easel around. She whips back the coverlet with a snap of her wrist. This is the fourth painting we've done, and the first I've seen. She sells them at The Art Gallery on Pleasant Valley, where all the people like her sit on benches in the small stretch of grass they call The Park, settled around coffees from The Coffee House and chewing on croissants from The Bakery. These are inventive names, I'm told, subversive in their singularity of purpose and rebellious in their simplicity. Dani talks like that, and calls it sense.

In the painting, my cheekbones have been expanded, my jawline widened. I look like a caricature, but not of myself. I look like an Indian with all humanity removed. I could be anyone. That could be Sitting Bull or Chief Joseph, it could be Geronimo, but it couldn't be me. I suppose Dani would say that means she's done her job.

Above the nameless person in the painting, the sky is the color of metal. There are clouds liked a washed-out dustbowl, and the edge of each cloud looks like the slicing, dangerous curve of a blade. "Do you like it?" she asks me. She's chewing on her lip. I could ruin her.

"Who killed him?"

"Well," she says. She's looking at her canvas. "That's a complicated question. I suppose you could blame society, or the weight of expectations." I wonder if she listens to herself. I wonder if she remembers the conversation we were having, or if she exists completely within the realms of that painting, her fingers scratching against my exaggerated cheekbones and jaw.

"What was his name?"

"I'm thinking Buffalo Tom," she says, and smiles. This is inventive in its inversion of actual inventiveness, perhaps in the same way that The Art Gallery or The Bakery is inventive.

The darkness has compounded, overtaken the building and settled all the way to the ground. Hangtown is illuminated like the Old West town it used to be, back in the mining days when the rivers spat gold and the mountains shat silver, candelabras of light pooling from houselights. There's one big flash of advertising neon from Fantasia's,

though everyone who wants to be there already is. I've never seen the town from this perspective before. I've never stayed long enough to see it.

"How'd he die?" She must realize what I'm asking. I want acknowledgement. Just admit that he existed.

"I think," she tells me, "I think he died from sadness. A hole in his heart he could never fill." She's staring at the painting with a pang of the pain she's imagining into this character she's created. There's something in her green eyes that wants to be soulful but can't quite make it. She's trying to cry. I imagine looking at that after I've finished inside her, those wet eyes trying to pretend I'd filled her fantasy of stereotype. I am repulsed.

She's proud of herself. She thinks she's captured my essence. "It reminds me of Dances with Wolves," I tell her, and leave her to think it's a compliment.

#

The swordsman disappeared. A few survivors from the ranch organized a posse and rode out after him. He was an Indian, Archie the blacksmith had confirmed, which made the still-living members of the Double-Bar B much more confident. "I could've shot him," Archie had continued, forcing bravado, "but it wasn't my place. That's for you Double-Bar folk." Also, the Indian had killed sixteen men, each of whom had possessed shotguns. Archie had come to Old Hangtown for the same reason as everyone else. Gold -- lovely, perfect, elusive. He'd washed out almost immediately, lost his savings into the river, and had fallen back to town and set up a little shop with the only skill he possessed. The ranchers had taken to him quickly, and Ben Bonner had become his biggest customer. But that's not enough reason to risk a life.

"You're a coward," one of the cowboys told Archie, but they didn't second-guess his story. Perhaps they'd heard the same from others. They stayed only long enough to question everyone in town, or everyone they could find easily, and then only long enough to eat a midday dinner, then only long enough to resupply their saddlebags from the general store, and then by that point it was already working well towards the evening which was no time to get started on something of this magnitude so they settled in at the bar instead and ordered themselves a few rounds and a whole host of beds for the night. It was all on the Double-Bar B tab -- for the old man's memory.

In the morning, they started fresh, riding out from Old Hangtown into the mountains. They rode bunched together, not entirely willing to accept the stories they'd heard of a single man destroying an entire regiment, but neither capable of discounting the fear they'd seen in the eyes of the townspeople.

They caught a trail, and they followed it for two days, bunking at the first sight of darkness in the deep, pleasant skies. They had all heard stories of the fierceness of the local tribes, the Miwok and the Washoe and the Yokut, and they'd all made their way along the overland trails when the rumors of gold had started. They'd been lucky, each of them, not to encounter red man resistance on their original journeys, and of course holing up in town and organizing around the Double-Bar B had kept them impervious since, but the danger was always out there, waiting and watching. Omnipresent.

On the third night, they got a fire started as the weather turned doubly cold, a small flare of heat and light they kept hidden as best they could. Two men volunteered to take first watch while the rest settled into their bedrolls and swore across the fire that

tomorrow they'd finish this. There was nothing but confidence in each voice. The men standing watch held tightly to their rifles and peered blindly into the darkness.

The swordsman watched the white men with eyes he'd borrowed from an owl. The trail they were following was not his, and he had only a passing interest in these men. He listened to their banter bounce across the emptiness of night, and when each man had released his grip on sentience, the swordsman returned his eyes to the owl and faded into something akin to history.

#

Now I know who killed Alejandro.

The sheriff never comes out this way. He's afraid of my father, afraid of the dogs. My father keeps them mean and hungry, big Boxers that only respond to him. They snap and strain at the chains as soon as they sense Sheriff Greenblatt coming -- they can smell the fear, and they've been trained to hate that star he wears on his chest that catches the light and blinds them. The sheriff isn't stupid. He knows those dogs would kill him. He knows my father would too, if he could get away with it. And we're far enough from civilization, out here where Deer Run Road slowly spirals out of existence, that it's something to worry on.

I open the door before he's turned into our driveway. I clamber out onto the porch and watch his Charger piddle off the blacktop, bounce against the free-standing gravel. He disappears behind the mountain and reappears a moment later on the dirt. He's driving fast enough to push up a cloud that'll settle all over the grape vines. The locals slow down

to single digits when we wind past Gerald's vineyards, a small pocket of civility in all this barrenness.

When Deputy Ballmer stopped to talk to us right after the murder, he tried to say it was a drug thing. Beamer kid in the middle of nowhere, dark of night, beaten almost for sport. What else could it be? Buy gone wrong, a robbery, bad batch sold to the wrong men, could've been anything. Just an idiot kid in the wrong place doing the wrong thing with the wrong people at the wrong time. I heard the Sheriff didn't even get out of bed when he got the call. But here he is.

He parks behind the Subaru. He shuts off the engine, keeps the radio playing. It's loud enough to catch the lyrics. He has his shoulders reared back, one hand on the wheel. The visual is stolen from the song on the radio, "Some Folks Like to Steal," by the Kentucky Headhunters. I know he planned it that way, and he knows I know. The Sheriff loves his symbols. He likes to give messages, even when he's five feet away from telling me himself.

When the song is over, he steps out. He pockets the key, and he looks at me, standing on the porch with my glass of ice water. I don't offer, and he doesn't ask. The dogs are making their noise. He doesn't look at them. "Your dad's one stupid individual," he tells me.

"We haven't done nothing."

"If I had a vengeful bone," Greenblatt says, "your dad would already be in jail."

"We haven't done nothing."

"I could pinch him right now, for that Martin boy's murder."

That's a Goddamn lie. My father was the one who reported the murder, and he's the type that would know how to cover something like that up if he was going to do it. "We haven't done nothing."

The sheriff doesn't like my father, and he never has. They've got history, beyond and before me. That's all right with the old man, and it's all right with me. "We've got his fingerprints all up and down that jaw."

I do not blink. I take a sip of my water. "We haven't done nothing." That damn tooth, a memento he's already tired with and passed on. It's sitting in my breast pocket.

"If I was less conscientious," Greenblatt says, "I would've stopped my investigation there. Hauled him in and made life worlds easier. But I'm not that kind of policeman."

Sheriff Greenblatt is lazy. He's a horrible cop. He got himself elected by appealing to our county's love for self-reliance and nonintervention of law, which played perfectly within his chosen style of not-giving-a-shit and general-uselessness. Sure, I voted for him.

He's into his story now, unwinding it like a television crime drama. Riveting, a miracle of modern procedure. He interviewed a few people, found there was a minor altercation at Red Eagle Casino where Alejandro got thrown out for stealing -- hence the song in the car, I'm sure, plus aimed at my old man for grabbing the tooth -- and then he never was seen again. Not alive.

"So, lazy police," the Sheriff drawls, "might have thought, Indian plus fingerprint equals guilty. But me, I'm a real thinker. I know it couldn't be you lot."

Because we're not affiliated with the casino Miwoks, he's saying. Because we're not real Indians, that's what he's telling me.

I call myself an Indian because the white folks do, but I'm half-blood at best. My mother was a mixed-breed, Spanish and Pima, and my father was a quarter Miwok, a quarter Navajo, and half something else he never would reveal. I look the part, though, tall and broad and dark-haired, for all the good that did me. There was a while I had this fantasy of playing college ball, going to UOP on a basketball scholarship and pulling a Michael Olowokandi on the world, convince everybody I had talent for a month or three, long enough to grab a fat NBA contract and then fade into a punch line. I put together a decent highlight reel culled entirely from the one extramural game my high school team played against the low-risk inmates from the Ione Penitentiary, when we'd figured out in the middle of the first quarter that the small forward guarding me, 6'5 and wide as the west, had a balky knee that threatened to snap every time he tried to go left. I was a third option at best, but with that unmoving behemoth marked up on me, I'd gone off to the tune of 28 points in the first half, and even managed my first 270 windmill dunk. It would take another year to pull off the full circle. I could move back then. I could fly.

Now, I'm getting insulted by a county sheriff that drove an hour out of his way just to remind me I'm not full-blood anything. It burns. I want him to burn. "We haven't done nothing," I tell him. I hold my glass of ice water carefully. My lips are dry, but I do not drink.

"No," he agrees. His voice is jaunty. "You sure haven't. Say, is your dad home?"

He is, sitting just inside at the kitchen table, but I shake my head no.

"Well, you tell him for me, he owes me a great big old thank-you."

The Indians that killed Alejandro live on the Rancheria. Just from what the sheriff said, I know who they are, any or all of five Olano brothers that have drunk for free since the Red Eagle opened and have always been happy to do the dirtiest of dirty work. He probably knows it too, but he can't touch them. That's native jurisdiction. That's Indian land.

The five Olanos are each named from the old Miwok language, in all the grisliness that is our hallmark. (Elki, "bear hanging human intestines on top of rocks," and Yutne, "falcon dampening nest by defecating on it," and Hatawa, "bear breaking the bones of people/animals," and Luyunu, "bear taking off leg or arm of person while eating that person," and Teinwe, "squeezing the intestines out of minnows") And they're all big as me, and meaner.

When the sheriff is gone, my father comes outside. I ask him, one more time, "Why does Greenblatt hate you?"

My father says, "What you're missing is, some people don't need a reason." He's got a block of wood with him. He begins whittling with his one good hand, the wood held tight against the stump of his left forearm. The blade in his grip doesn't shake. His aim is true. The flecks curl and twist in the air. I can see the butcher that he used to be. The knife is an extension of himself in a way that nothing else manages to become. He's forty-seven years old, relying on federal aid for cash and my aid for survival. He hasn't raised a hand to me since he lost his own at the shop, hasn't threatened me in years. That blade moves like a snake. He terrifies me.

This old man knows about evil. When he was nine, he took a kitchen knife and ran down to the river to slice the throat of a dog that his neighbors had kept chained to a tree for three days and nights. They'd gone to Reno for the weekend, to gamble and partake of lobster specials, and there was a Kenny Rogers concert in there somewhere. They'd left food, but that fat Boxer had chomped through a weekend's worth of gruel in four hours and was begging for more by nightfall. She barked and carried on into the morning, then filled the day with more of the same.

It was not the worst thing he would ever do, but it's the story he returns to most often.

He hadn't slept in two days, and no one else seemed intent to do anything about the situation. He'd eaten his oatmeal from the flimsy top of a Tupperware container. He'd walked to the sink, tried to find a place to deposit the top, and finally just piled it on with everything else. It barely weighed anything, but was enough to upset the careful balancing act. There wasn't far to fall, but the pans overturned themselves anyway, and the resulting crash awoke his father and brought that sleeping hulk out of the bedroom. "You hurting for a whooping, boy?" Into all of that, the dog had barked again, and my father's father had stumbled back into his bedroom, cursing the day and the lack of sleep and the job that kept him exhausted and painted with the thick black grave dirt all his days.

He was angry, my father. Angry and ashamed and relieved that his father had turned away, and upset at being so relieved. And the dog was still barking, and there was a knife on the counter. It felt natural to pick it up. It felt natural to walk outside. He was

angry and ashamed, and he had a knife in his hands and a sense of destiny. He looked at the dog. The dog looked at him. They looked at each other, and he was feeling that destiny. The dog's eyes were brown, he told me. He could hear the clinking of the chain. He was angry and ashamed. The dog came up to him, expecting food, sniffed at his hand. There was the clinking of the chain, and the barking. He grabbed the animal along the muzzle of the nose and cuffed it. My father has never been one for hesitation, so he didn't hesitate. The soft tinkling sound as the blood seeped into the earth soothed him. The animal lay in his arms like a baby. And she was quiet. He unlatched the dog from the chain and picked it up. He threw it in the Cosumnes River, and he watched it float away. He told the neighbors that the animal had run away. "Maybe she'll come back," he told them. "You never know." And he smiled and nodded when they patted him on the head and said they appreciated his efforts. He was only an Indian boy, that smile said. What could he have done, anyway?

For his birthday, a short few months later, his father handed him a Bowie knife, sharp as lightning. The two never spoke about it.

He looks at me, blade in his hand. He can see where my thoughts have gone, back to Alejandro. I touch the tooth inside my pocket. What will I remember of Alejandro? I'll remember the dip in the road, the distance from my bed to the bloody spot in the road. I'll remember a baseball bat to the jaw. I'll remember the day I got food poisoning at Rafa's Burrito Café, how quickly he bussed my table. I wonder what he'd remember of me.

My father says, "Never underestimate the power of evil. And stupidity."

"You believe the sheriff? A Miwok killed him?"

"One thing about us," he tells me. "We can't help but get in our own way."

It's not a reason. It's not enough. And yet.

#

The next morning, the posse arose, buoyed by their own survival through the night. They caught the trail again, and they followed it. The rains were coming back after a few days' absence, heavy clouds, and there was talk of turning back. The ranch was done, after all. Sixteen men killed in the first attack, and all but a few of the rest off to revenge the deaths. And the owner dead. No one to watch the cattle but Charlene the owner's wife and her two kids that were just out of swaddling clothes and Cookie the ranch cook and John who'd come up sick with a deep chest cough a few weeks prior and had been so taken ill he could barely sit a horse.

They could turn back, and no one would blame them. The rains would wash out the tracks they were following, and they were well into territory they didn't know and just because they hadn't seen any Indian activity yet didn't change the fact that this deep into the mountains there could have been braves anywhere, whole raiding parties just waiting to cross paths and finish the group of them. They'd heard stories.

But they pushed forward, and the single set of tracks bled into another set, and soon another. The men slowed and kept watch on the skies, on the trees ahead, allowing their imagination to people every swatch of bark with a tomahawk, and when they found evidence of more, even a few horses and a travois, they stopped completely. They sent a scout ahead, who soon returned with news of a small settlement. Nothing the group couldn't handle.

The scout had a plan. They could attack as the clouds let out a torrent of rain, throw everything into confusion. The community was decent-sized, but not overwhelming. They could do it. For the sheriff. That one Indian, the swordsman, had caught them unawares, that's all that was. It was agreed. For honor, they said. For the honor of sheriff and rancher Ben Bonner, for the honor of sixteen men dead, and for days spent in the chase.

They lost two men, but got every one of those diggers. In the aftermath, gathering for the ride back to Old Hangtown, three different men were convinced they had downed the swordsman, and each of the others swore they had seen the moment. No sword was recovered.

#

My truck is old and loud, so I leave it at the edge of the Rancheria and cross on foot. I'm dressed in clothes the color of dirt, a black hat pulled tight over my eyes. I have one of my father's swords in its sheath around my shoulders.

I don't come to the Rancheria often, but I know my way around. A few times to visit relatives, once for my great-grandmother's funeral. I've driven past the Olanos' house each time, so I find it easily enough. I wonder about governance. I know there's a tribal police force, and I wonder if my father gets along better with those men than he does Sheriff Greenblatt. I doubt it.

Alejandro and I played on the same little league team. I watched him take a baseball to the mouth, chip a tooth and fall to the ground. I watched him fumble for the hard rock of it in the dirt off the third base line, listened to him ask the umpire if a dentist

could put it back together. I don't remember what happened, whether they put a fake one in or left the gaping hole or whether they could find some way to sew it all together and put it back. Now, my father could tell me.

At the Olano house, I slice through the window screen and slither inside. I step into the living room. It smells like chicken wings and beer and dried cum, and I find evidence of the first two on a table facing a tiny television. They are miserable people, if I needed more proof. There's a hallway to the left, and I follow it. Nothing in the house would look out of place in my own.

My father has another story about the reservation. He calls it the reservation because he says the Miwoks hate that word. They call it the Rancheria, on their website, all around town. Nobody calls it the reservation except my father, and he's the only one that can get away with it. Sometimes it pays to be meanest.

His other story is about his name. Everybody calls him Picket, but his given name is Robert. He didn't come to the Reservation often either, just to visit his grandmother in twice-a-month swipes of a weekend, but it was enough. The kids knew him, knew the cut of his best pair of Wranglers and knew his father's truck by the long, leaping belch it made when it tromped off the blacktop of the county-maintained road onto Flintrock Trail. Most of the time, they were waiting for him, bodies flitting between the sick-up-colored rocks. The joke they had was, Bobby was one-quarter Miwok, one-half Indian, and one-half dead. He would see them against the trunks of brown pine trees, and then he'd blink and look again and see nothing but shadows, the ghosts of his fears. "I don't want to stay here," he'd tell his father. "I want to go with you."

The old man would push him away with a thick forearm, whorled like twisted roots, heavy from lugging a shovel in the overnight hours. "Weekends are all me."

White-washed, the kids called Robert, words they'd heard strewn in the detritus of parents' conversations. When he visited in eighth grade, the year they read *Tom Sawyer* at the Indian school, they started calling him Picket. After the picket fence that Tom Sawyer paints white, they'd tried to explain, and he'd laughed in their faces and told them that in the white schools, they read *Tom Sawyer* in seventh grade. He was no ignorant. They'd trussed him up bad, and prideful knowledge or not, the name had stuck. I'm sure there were Olanos in that group.

The carpet doesn't creak. I step inside the first bedroom and see Elki. He faces the wall, sleeping on his left shoulder. I don't have the experience my father did, a single moment that branded him forever, but I've taken my share of white-washing jokes. Elki's lobbed plenty. Over farther, there's another bed, housing Teinwe, the youngest. I don't know him as well, don't have anything in particular against him.

I could kill them. I have the same hands as my father. When I was a kid and people asked what I wanted to do with my life, I said doctor. I understand my father's fascination with blades, because to a certain point, I share it. But I've never had the blood lust like he does.

I think of Alejandro. I think of the sword against my shoulder. I step closer to Elki. He's not the oldest, but he's the angriest, biggest, strongest, the toughest. He could wake up at any moment, and that knowledge quickens my pulse. Any of them could, and they'd probably kill me and maybe even have the right to it. I wonder if the Rancheria

police would bother calling Greenblatt or my father, let anyone know what happened. I wonder if my father would search, or if he'd just drive up the street a few hundred feet and ask Rico or Jersey if they'd seen me and then say thanks and drive back home and look at a can of beans and wait for me to get home to open it for him. It's not that he can't. That's the point.

I pull the sword out of its scabbard and stare at it. It's heavy, the largest piece in my father's collection. I don't know anything about blades, but it looks like something out of Braveheart.

I could kill him right now. Such a small, simple motion. Instead, I lay the weapon beside him on the bed, close like a lover, with the blade turned inwards, the teeth of it softly biting at the long hairs of his arm. Then I take out Alejandro's tooth.

I want to put it in his mouth, but I can't imagine a way to do it. I study the dents in the enamel, the curls and twists of the tooth's exterior. Up close, it has the same dips and dents as Deer Run Road. I place it on the wide edge of the sword and let it stare at the man's back.

I walk out of the room quickly. I've already stayed too long.

I don't know what Elki knows, what he might do. Perhaps he'll roll over in the morning and fillet himself into a corpse, perhaps he'll sense its presence and be comforted by the otherness filling his bed. Perhaps he knows a legend of a swordsman who strikes for the oppressed and abused, and he will be thankful he's been spared.

The Bar at the End of the World

Earvin and Karen have lunch at the Frosto. Arnie, the owner, brings out a bacon burger with fries for Earvin and a junior burger for Karen. He sets down the two burgers plus Cokes in Styrofoam to-go cups, then smiles and says, "Slow day."

"Tell me about it," Karen says. She flicks a fly pushing at a blob of ketchup left over from previous diners. The fly floats away, but a dollop of congealing red catches on her flannel shirt. Earvin opens a straw and pierces the lid of his drink, then does the same for hers.

Arnie takes that as an invitation that it wasn't. He turns a chair around, sits in it backward, then folds his arms and nestles his chin on his wrist. "We're the last of a breed," Arnie says. There is no hair on the top of his head. As he talks, Earvin watches the harsh overhead lights reflect against his empty skull. "Nobody wants what we've got anymore."

Earvin grabs a plastic ketchup bottle from the next table over and upends it on his fries. He squeezes three times, hard, before anything comes out, a single spurt that suggests nothing more remains. Next, he pulls the bacon from its position sandwiched between bun and cheese. He prefers it on the side, but there's something to be said for the essence of bacon on a burger, that smoky aftertaste and the soft imprint left in the melting cheese.

The Frosto is empty but for them. They sit beside the jukebox, at the old table with a dictionary underneath one leg. The tablecloth is thick butcher paper, a new sheet

torn for every meal. Even the jukebox doesn't work -- whatever song chosen, the thing shoots out Waylon Jennings' "Ain't Living Long Like This."

"I think every generation feels like that," Earvin suggests. Like the world is failing in some substantial but indiscernible way, like what they're leaving behind cannot compare to what they were given. They are aging. He sees it in Karen's slow-lifted morning wave, in the second cup of coffee he's been pulling out of the machine before he can find his keys most mornings. He sees it in Arnie's every motion, every sigh and complaint and the slow nod he gives to customers as they order. When they order. When there are customers.

"Not like this," Arnie tells them. "It's the end of the world."

Earvin excuses himself, makes his way to the bathroom. It's always the same thing with Arnie. Sometimes, Earvin tries to argue, but lately he hasn't had the energy. Earvin owns the Flyer's gas station down the street, and it's empty as the Frosto, empty as Karen's place too, probably. Everything this side of town is empty. Hangtown's all tourism, now, a long drag of curio shops and Thomas Kinkade galleries. The city council's unveiled a new motto: "Upscale, downhome." They've splashed it on city limit signs, every mile marker. There's no place in that for history, a gas station that's been around since the '50s or the oldest restaurant in town. Nobody wants to hear about the Donner Party while sipping Frappuccinos. Nobody wants to see the dirt and the rust and the broken axles of real frontier living.

Earvin can barely piss. It takes effort to push it out, and hurts when it comes. He's tired all the time, and he could swear there's gray in the hair on his forearms. He's getting close to a frame of mind where he can see Arnie's point.

All this, and Marilyn Ruth is dead. She used to come into the Flyer's early in the morning, his first customer, and rap against the glass like she was knocking on a door. She'd pour coffee, and she never managed to turn off the spout before it overflowed the lip of her travel mug, a few drops striking the linoleum. That early in the morning, and she already smelled like sliced-up apples and spices, like the sweetness of oven warmth. And now she's dead. That would be enough, but lately Earvin's been waking up in the middle of the night remembering dreams he's never captured, watching the early morning hours on his alarm clock while he thinks, for the first time in his life, why get up?

Earvin zips himself up and washes his hands. He does not look in the mirror, just lets the water catch one hand, then the other, and then he shakes them dry. Before he comes back to the table, he slides two quarters in the jukebox. Arnie's still talking. Earvin pulls his chair out and sits down. He takes a bite of his burger. Arnie stops his chatter to let Waylon Jennings sing the truth, dark and foreboding. The bite goes down slowly, thick and greasy with the slightest hint of smoke. Might as well enjoy himself. Nothing else to be done.

#

Outside the Frosto, Earvin says, same as every day, "That was good."

"Sure was," Karen agrees. She looks haggard, the skin under her eyes loose and blue.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she says. The lie bobs in her voice.

They walk in silence. At the Flyers, she stops and leans against a pump. Earvin stops with her. There’s a feeling in his stomach like a stone dropped in a well, that heavy plunk.

“Lance came by again,” she tells him. Lance owns the Chevron on Main Street and three more up toward Reno, several down by Sacramento as well. Karen runs the Texaco kitty-corner to the Flyers. Her dad built it, ran it until they put him in the ground. She and Earvin have been competitors for years, friends since high school.

The stone Earvin feels in his stomach plinks again, and echoes. He feels himself withering away inside where no one can see the hollowness. He knows what she’s going to say before she can pull the courage to speak. He’s considered it himself, every time Lance wanders past to buy a Snickers and throw out another lowball buyout offer, the store empty and every last gas pump lying dormant.

“I’m taking it,” she says. Inevitable as the moment may have been, Earvin feels himself ripped from his moorings. Arnie’s right, he thinks. The world is ending.

#

As owner, Earvin works the day shift at the Flyers. Mostly, he stands behind the counter and reads magazines off the rack. Sometimes, he’ll sell a Coke or a Coors to long faces covered in sweat, truckers or the camping-across America set. Sometimes the card readers go out, and he gets five or ten customers in an hour.

It used to be he'd take a twenty and give change, talk about the scenery or town history, whether cellphones work through these wide trees and if there's high-speed internet this far out from civilization, the way the weather's acting and how the flood season's looking this far up the foothills. Now, it's two twenties to fill up halfway, and the conversation circles around how it's getting harder to make the San-Fran to Reno round-trip every year. "This might be the last year I do this, old man," they say. "Not sure how much longer I can justify the expense."

Earvin doesn't exactly recognize these men who bask in the memory of a small town in which they have no history, but he nods agreeably and keeps the conversation flowing. They seem to believe, he notes, that driving through gives them the right to name this town their own, as if Hangtown exists within their memory more forcefully than it could upon a map or on the ground. Still, Earvin lets them talk. He has a minor gift for small conversation: weather, the Sacramento Kings, TV shows, movies, an hour-long discussion in which neither person says anything. He's always thought he would make an excellent bartender. There's a sign by the door that says, "No Alcoholic Beverages May Be Consumed on These Premises." This is an obstacle, and is not impossible to overcome.

Today, Earvin leaves the "Back Soon" sign against the glass doors when he returns from lunch. He stands behind the counter and listens to the world outside, the occasional engine coughing to a stop between gas pumps, the muttering of cars braking at the stop sign, then accelerating and sweeping into the distance. He stands in his empty store and lets his eyes roam from one aisle to another.

He opens the register and counts the cash inside. It's all there. Mitch Buchanan, who normally works the counter for an hour a day so Earvin can grab lunch, called in sick. In eight weeks, Mitch has stolen almost two hundred dollars from the register. Knowing the boy's living situation, Earvin's surprised it hasn't been more. It almost feels wrong, to find the receipts and bills matching.

Earvin's nephew, Jersey, is waiting on him to die so he can take over. Retire, the family calls it, and maybe they mean it. But Earvin can't imagine life without the Flyers. He owns it straight-up now, and spends more time here than he ever has his own home. Still, maybe it's time to start thinking about bringing the boy along, set it up so he's ready when Earvin's on his last legs. It wouldn't be a bad idea to get ahold of Jersey, see if he's ready to get serious. Start giving him Mitch's hours, stop running a charity and run it like a business for once. From all Earvin's heard, Jersey's got a baby on the way, a wedding coming. If that doesn't give a kid like him some maturity, then Earvin can just hand the store over to Gerald, who works the night shift, and be done with the whole damn thing. It's not impossible.

Just not to Lance.

At 5:00, he goes over to the Cheetos display by the window and looks into the dark. There are no headlights. Across the way, at the Texaco, there's one solitary truck sitting beside the building, Karen's old Datsun. Earvin shuffles a bag of Cheetos, picks it up and puts it back down. At the Texaco, the lights go off. Karen steps out of the store and walks to her truck. The taillights flicker. She pulls out of the space and settles into the turn lane, merges onto the empty two-lane highway. He watches her car disappear.

She will return to open the store at 8:00 AM -- otherwise, the pumps will take cards and print receipts, and the cash customers will come to the Flyers or prattle on a bit further towards the mountains or the Bay. The night settles around him.

Earvin steps outside and walks, away from the building and the pumps until his phone has service. He calls Gerald to wave off his overnight relief. "It's fine," Earvin says, watching the muted yellow light through the glass windows. The sun has gone down. It's cold. The rains are coming, maybe snow -- he can smell the fresh slant to the air. He feels anticipatory, a soft ache in his legs as if he's just finished running. "I could use the time."

"You're not the only one with bills," Gerald tells him, but doesn't argue very hard. The moon is rising, pale blue. It could be a painting. It's Saturday night, and Gerald likes to drink. He's got the body for it, thick in the belly but wide and strong, sturdy legs. He likes beer, old standbys and classics, none of that foreign import swill. In ten minutes, Gerald will be down at Fantasia's watching the girls swing, or set up at Downhome Brewery -- a bit woodsy for Earvin's taste, but they have Budweiser, Coors, and decent barstools, a place Gerald can tell himself he's stopping in for a taste and not leave until the bar is covered with bottles.

Earvin grabs a sandwich from the cooler in his truck. Egg salad. He swigs a bottle of Evian, unclasps the tailgate, and sits down. The moon climbs the banister of trees. He watches the glass in his store window, orange-painted letters advertising beef jerky sticks and one-liters of Coca-Cola products, for nearly an hour. In that time, two cars pull up to his pumps, both rust-addled, ugly and old and full of character. When the men slide their

plastic into the card readers, Earvin waves, and both wave back. This is how it all should be, he thinks. There's no better moment coming.

When it gets too cold, a deep snap to the air, Earvin goes inside. He turns off the electric light that advertises to drivers along the highway. Then he gets to work.

Behind the store, he's been stacking pallets for years. And there's wood in the dumpster, deep tufts of firewood in case the electricity shuts off in a snowstorm and he's stuck for a week or two, plus an assortment of other pieces that've piled up. The hammer, the nails, and the tape measure are supplies he keeps in the back room. It's all been waiting.

The building takes longer than he anticipated. He stops for cigarette breaks twice. He stops for the hell of it three more times, standing to feel silt shifting in his belly, to stretch his back and listen to the crackling of dry twigs. He stops once to use the restroom, the steam weak and amber-colored. There is a dab of blood, a bit more. At the toilet, he pushes the wall with one arm to himself steady, chest heaving. Sweat blinks into his eyes. He feels weakness in his limbs, and wonders if this is how the world ends.

Eventually, he's finished. It's perhaps one in the morning -- a quick look at his watch finds it even later, nearly two. He pulls his flannel shirt over his shoulders and steps outside, leans against the cool glass. The drunks will be along soon enough, pacing across the highway to the Hangtown Motel. There are always vacancies, rooms for the thin-livered to sleep it off.

Earvin has a plan. The bars are all about to shut their taps. This is a fact of California law. On a Saturday night, there will be men dissatisfied with the idea that drinking must end. If this was a puzzle, it would be for the four-and-under crowd.

He hears them coming before he sees them, the loud braying of two men in a pissing contest. It could be about anything, although he sees a moment later, as their silhouettes pop from the darkness, that they're in an actual pissing contest. He recognizes his nephew's friends Rico and Perry, two semi-regular customers. They're walking backwards, filling the night with the hard sound of urine on gravel. "Eat it, bitch," Rico says, his nasty exultant bored drawl, and Perry's drunken guffaw in return, "Homo."

When the sound like decomposing ice stops, Earvin steps out from the shadows of his building and draws in a breath. He speaks theatrically, script memorized. "Night over so soon, boys?" His chest hurts. He has no energy. "Can't handle your liquor?"

Perry turns first. Earvin knows him, a little -- knows his dad pretty well, and the son, in the right mood, is just as mean. Big boy, but little eyes, like a pig. "Bar's closed," he says. His words slur, and his penis is out, flopping like a shell of cooked pasta.

"Damn right," says Rico. He turns too, and he also hasn't bothered to zip himself into propriety. The two stand in the highway and let their dicks hang out. There's no concern in them. Earvin wonders how they'd respond if he pointed it out. Laugh, maybe. Call him a faggot, probably. They're that kind of drunk. "We drank it dry."

"Well, may I point out to you," -- Earvin goes off-script slightly here. He hadn't anticipated the drank-it-dry line -- "that I know of a place with nigh-unending supply of liquors, as much as a man could want."

Earvin's done it. He's gone and made himself a new man. He just used the word nigh in a sentence. That's life-redefining. He feels like he needs a cloak.

"Where?" Rico asks. He sounds suspicious, but doesn't look it. It's hard to look suspicious with a flopping penis shrunken by the cold. He is dripping dribbles of piss.

This is what Earvin's been waiting for. He's got the name picked out, and it's metaphorical and all of that. If Arnie's even half-right, it's also true. He's never felt quite so alive. "At the Bar at the End of the World."

The men are underwhelmed, but intrigued. Earvin gestures them inside the Flyers, and they follow, slithering in their drunkenness like worms, which reminds Earvin of what he's been trying to avoid. He looks down. They're even smaller now. He feels a touch of the same embarrassment he feels watching a poorly-edited movie.

"Gentlemen," he says. He feels himself born into the character he's playing, hyped-up carnival pitchman mixed with apron-wielding shopkeeper. It's not exactly bartender, but it's close, sympathetic ear and cold splash of sense like dousing water. And it works. He can grow to like this. "Gentlemen, I must insist that you holster your penises. This is a proper establishment."

Earvin leads the boys inside, past the chip aisle and the pastry aisle and the serve-yourself soda carousel to the refrigerated section. The boys sit down on the bench he's built while Earvin points out all the improvements he's made. Rico and Perry are not impressed, but they are thirsty. They're reasonably polite to his doting father routine for about two minutes. Then Rico says, "Booze."

“Lots of it,” Perry agrees. He looks terrible. Earvin doesn’t see him much, just the occasional quick stop-in for a Coke, for a tit mag -- Swank his weapon of choice -- or a beer and sandwich, something to finish off a too-late night in style. More often, he pumps his gas and leaves, no hello. Not like his old man. The mean old codger can talk, and will. It's always an effort to shut him up, move on to the next customer. Perry’s eyes are the soiled brown of molasses. He’s lost weight, and not in any positive direction. He looks shorter, almost Earvin’s eye-level, and Perry’s never been eye-level with anyone. His bones press against his skin.

“First drink’s on the house,” Earvin says. “For the purpose of establishing clientele.”

“This bench smells like crack,” Rico tells him.

“That’s the finest wood grain I could find on such short notice.” Some of the wood did come from the pile near the dumpster that’s been used as shelter by the vagrants for years, but the point stands. Best he could get with limited resources.

“Where’s the drink?” asks Perry.

Earvin opens a bottle of Bushmills. It’s a special occasion, but not that special. He grabs a plastic flagon of paper cups from aisle four and rips into them. The rending motion hurts his chest, and he grimaces, sucks in his breath. Rico looks up. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m dying,” Earvin says.

It’s the first time he’s said it. No one knows. Even his doctors disagree, or at least couch their possibilities in percentages -- nothing is for certain, they tell him. His words

don't have the weight he expected. They feel like a broken tooth his tongue can't stop bothering, like eating a potato chip with a cut on his lip. The words hurt, but not enough to stop him.

Perry says, "The end of the world's a good place for that."

Rico nods. "We'll let ourselves out when we're through with the liquor. Don't you worry about us."

"We'll be good."

"Perfect guests."

The doctors say there's no clear timeframe. They say if the disease is aggressive it could be eight months to a year, but if the drugs work like they're supposed to, and the chemo -- he shaved off what was left of his hair immediately, told everyone he was tired of going halfway bald -- then he could be home free and have a happy, healthy, productive life ahead of him. Years. Decades even. Earvin doesn't buy that crap. He had a wife before the Flyers, and breast cancer's a bitch and it took her away at thirty-four. She wasn't a smoker and only drank on Saturdays once or twice a month and she was fit, none of which Earvin can say for himself. It didn't help her. He watched her die like a rooted tree, rotting away from the inside and then standing blankly until someone noticed her existence was nearly over. Earvin doesn't have much in the way of hope.

Earvin is not exactly afraid. There's a special relationship with death in this place where it still exists in the natural order of things. A man can get lost in the snow, run a car off the road on a sharp turn and sail into the valley. It happens, and it burns, a shock to the system, but death's no all-consuming thing, some dramatic end-stop one never sees

coming. It pulses near the eardrum, just out of reach. Occasionally, it reaches deep inside the canal and slithers into the brain and jumps around, to remind of its presence. Marilyn Ruth is dead. Karen is leaving him behind. And he's so far gone he can barely piss. They'll all remember for a while.

“Hey,” Rico says. “Hey, alcohol?”

Earvin fills the plastic cups and walks them over. Rico grabs the first cup, then Perry takes the next. Earvin pours none for himself. His doctor was very specific on this point.

Outside, the wind picks up. Earvin hears it rattling against the bones of his old store, and he feels it respond with the same ache he feels within himself. He's become empathic, in his old age. Perhaps it's the beginning of his death knell.

“To drink,” Rico says, as a toast.

“Hear, hear,” Perry agrees.

The whiskey goes down quickly. He gave them liberal doses, but they're already primed from the night that's nearly gone. Rico holds out his plastic cup for another round.

Earvin pours and watches his hand shaking all the way to the elbows. It reminds him of Karen, of her arms, the way he always wondered how muscular she must be -- she never had any problem lugging bags of ice, cartons of sodas or beer. She nearly always wore a flannel shirt, blue-checkered, though she had red ones that he'd seen a couple times, and a few that weren't checked at all but covered in small designs, flowers or jaybirds. But mostly, she wore the blue, neck to wrist. He finally saw her arms, the silver-

white emptiness of her skin, at Marilyn Ruth's funeral. They'd sat together in one of the last rows. The church had been crowded, packed by an adoring public. The priest had cried, had talked for twelve minutes about the woman he'd known. Speakers had lined up ten-deep. And all that time, listening to the swell of emotion, Earvin had let the edges of his vision ride across Karen's bare arms. She'd worn a dress, gray and sedate, had curled a shawl around herself. It had been a revelation to Earvin -- she was a woman like any other, her skin smooth and muscles hard without popping. He had shaken her hand, after the service, felt the strength in her, and never seen her arms again. The moment had been exactly that.

Earvin doesn't remember his wife's arms. It's been twenty-four years, and he's never in his life been unfaithful, but the memories he's lost seem an equal betrayal. Her name was Lorraine. She had black hair, brown eyes, and she was five-foot-two. Strong forehead, and a severe smile. These are details, not memories.

As he fills Rico's cup, he says, "This one's not free."

Rico pulls out his wallet. He hands over his MasterCard, with which he's bought gas since he was seventeen. Perry follows the motion with the same, passing over a Visa with a close-up shot of the leather exterior of a basketball that Earvin's fed through the card reader for more than ten years. Earvin takes them both, slides them over the counter and forgets them. They'll settle at the end of the night, like a bar. If there is an end.

Rico and Perry are holding their cups high, waiting for the toast. "To those who almost made it," Earvin says, thinking of Karen, of himself. Lorraine filters in there somewhere.

“And to those who should have,” Perry adds. He means Marilyn. She was an institution, around this town. And Perry was half in love with her, or close to it as he could get, being ten years her junior and as invisible to her as he is to his own father. Earvin nods.

Perry and Rico are both young as his nephew. Can Jersey handle the shop? These kids are wastes of space -- no jobs, no prospects. Jersey's no stand-up citizen, and Mitch is nothing. Before tonight, Earvin's never had a meaningful conversation with either of the boys, and he never has with Jersey. There is a connection in their lack of connection, he feels, an ambiguity of intention and uncertainty of motive that lets him exist intuitively in the space of this moment.

There are more drinks had, more moments shared with only himself, a few shared with the young men. There is talk of substance, and talk forgotten as the words leave the mouth. Earvin allows himself a small nip after his fourth pour, and a few more later. He loses count.

The wind rises higher. Rain falls, fast and heavy. The gas pump cords look like coiling snakes. Everything seems alive. The mechanic shop that shares the plaza curves in Earvin's vision, takes the shape of something large and meaty, a bacon cheeseburger perhaps, but one that is pulsating, shivering. Earvin can't explain. He can't un-see the images his brain has recorded, the sights his mind has interpreted. He has no desire to do so.

Though neither of the young men commented on his effort, the bar looks great. He's got it cordoned off with rope, the way swanky clubs do it except that his is the

yellow twine that sits in every pickup on these roads. The bench is rotted in places and there's the constant threat of splinters, but Earvin lets pride bubble up. He'll send Gerald home again tomorrow night, or maybe he'll wait until next Saturday. There's something holy about the unlawfulness of the moment butting against the day of communion. Maybe he'll mention it to his regulars, leave the bench set up and show it to Sheriff Greenblatt. The old porker's a libertarian, elected four terms running on a platform of noninvolvement. He'd think drinking while staring at a "No Alcoholic Beverages" sign was absolutely cherry.

Rico takes a Coors can out of the frosted glass refrigerated section, pops the top, and downs it in two gulps. There was a time, star outfielder for Marshall High, that Rico owned this town. He stands up, empty beer can is in his hands. They've stopped toasting long ago, but the somber words still resonate. "I'm going to die here," Rico says. "Two miles from the place I was born. I'm going to die here."

He winds up like a southpaw, can in his left hand. Outside, the rain is blinding, waves curling on the wind. It sputters against the glass. It might get cold enough to snow tonight, black ice in the crannies of bridges. Perhaps it'll be unsafe to leave, maybe they'll be snowed in. The snow may rise high enough that they'll feel themselves alone in the world, like the Schulenburg cabin where a few last members of the Donner Party went insane, just miles away and nearly forgotten by history. Death haunts this land. It puts on a silver coat the color of rain and slides through the shadows.

Rico's almost through with his wind-up. He lets fly, and Earvin thinks of baseball games, five-dollar seats and the way every last person in town came to watch Rico play.

How sweet that white ball flew, so perfect it hurt the eyes, like another sun. Into that image flies a Coors can that misses the trashcan entirely. It clatters onto the floor, a harsh clank that could not have existed in any full stadium in the spring.

“The world I see is not the world I remember,” Earvin says. The words surprise him.

Perry frowns. “What’s that? Line from a song?”

“No, but it could be.”

“Has that feel,” Perry tells him.

“Like truth,” Earvin says, “but you can’t quite hold onto it.” He sees the words on the edges of his eyelids, behind the orange-brown shapes created by variations in light.

“There’s something to that,” Perry says. “I feel it tapping against my teeth.”

Earvin doesn’t feel it against his teeth, he hears it against the glass of the store. Opening his eyes, he sees Marilyn Ruth rapping on the window like knocking on a door. Beside her is Lorraine, chewing on the side of her cheek. And a little further back Tamsen Donner, cleaning her bones in the rain. They’re looking at him, peering through the glass and gesturing emphatically in his direction.

They’re not looking to come inside.

Haunches

When Haunches opens his motel room door, Daphne runs out. She slips between his legs and skitters across the cool granite, rushes down the hallway, then disappears into the stairwell.

Haunches watches her go. His arms are full. He's holding a deep cross-legged stance, his back knee two inches from the ground. He is carrying an imaginary oak barrel, full of sweet apple brandy. The last half-hour, he's been circling the Old Dry Diggings Motel, each step holding that low-set stance, utilizing the Tai Chi cloud hands technique to hold his barrel. His daily tradition is two full circuits around the motel, then he lugs the barrel inside his room and onto the bathroom counter. There, he'll set a tap and enjoy a glass, perhaps two or three. The process is one he made up, exercise and balance control while battling his constant desire for a tipple. Because the barrel isn't real.

By the time he's made his way into the room and dropped his barrel onto the counter beside his toothbrush and comb, slow-walking one leg over the other while locked deep enough to burn his muscles, Daphne could be anywhere. She's small enough to hide in the shadow of any door. "Why did she run?" Haunches asks Luke John, but gets no response. She could be under a car in the parking lot. Luke John turns a page of the Bible that sits in front of his nose. She could be in the maintenance room housekeeping never closes completely. Romans, by the look of it. She could have made it to the woods around the motel, lost in undergrowth.

Haunches spends half an hour searching for her. He twists trash cans out of their metal gratings, peers behind the stack of napkins in the bathroom. He pops his head into

the manager's office, checks the supply closet, then drops to his knees in the parking lot and crawls beneath each of the four engines that dot the asphalt, softly calling her name.

He finds nothing. Daphne is gone. This is disappointing to Haunches in a way that other recent misfortunes have not been. Piercing is not the right word. He fights off a craving for eggs. Perhaps it sounds strange, but he loves that chicken.

#

Daphne is fourteen years old. For a hen, that is ancient. Haunches' daughter Marilyn bought her twelve years ago from a farmer out on Deer Run Road, where she and her fiancée Charlie had just bought a house. Marilyn was twenty-four years old, hadn't yet discovered a gray hair or a problem she couldn't smile out of. Haunches was sixty and considering retirement.

Marilyn brought the chicken over to the old house on Canal and set her down in the backyard. She and her father stood, shoulders touching, and watched the hen inspect her new universe. The garden was struggling along, scraggly strawberry plants pushing for space and heirloom tomatoes reluctantly climbing beanpoles. "Someone has to look after you," she told Haunches. "And this way, you'll always have eggs." He did love eggs.

Haunches was moving. He was always in motion. Standing still, he kept his hands twisting, motions that were soft, sinuous, simple; he was breaking wrists, dislocating elbows.

"We bought a house, dad. I'm moving out."

"I have always found," he told her, "the beginning of a moment to exist within the resolution of the previous."

"It's a fifteen-minute drive. I can come back every weekend."

His attention was on the chicken, on the grasping strawberry plants, on a car driving past. His shoulders were beginning to follow the motions of his hands. His hips twitched in response. "What is the strongest part of the body?" he asked.

"The rhythm," she answered, and grinned. "Believe me, dad, Charlie can dance."

The hen scratched at the bulging root of a cherry tree, settled into a crook at the base where bark met dirt.

"Charlie and I couldn't be happier," Marilyn said. A bell rang from the high school, lunch time. The school let the kids walk to local restaurants during lunch, so they would all come strutting down Canal Street on the way to Taco Bell, KFC, and South Style BBQ. Marilyn could already see her father gearing up for the frustration of the kids, their chatter that disrupted his concentration, their teasing of his training sessions. "I hope that matters."

"Every thing matters," he said. The whole trunk of his body was moving, his thick toes grinding into the dirt, pantomiming twists and throws and steps. Marilyn had often heard him tell students, every motion can be interpreted a hundred ways. The simplest motion, he would say, is too complex to master in a lifetime. She'd heard it every week of her life.

"Dad," she said. "Dad, you'll be okay."

"I'll call her Daphne," Haunches told her. "For no reason whatsoever."

"Sure." Marilyn had to be on-shift in an hour. With a mortgage now, she'd found work at the Buttermilk Restaurant, though she didn't plan to be there for long. Big things were on the horizon. "Dad, I've got to go."

"It is the nature of things," Haunches told her.

"To become other things," she agreed.

The high schoolers came rushing past, then Marilyn had to head off to work, and then it was only Haunches and Daphne.

And now, there is nothing left.

#

The Old Dry Diggings Motel has one other tenant, in room 205, four doors down from Haunches. The room has been occupied three days, though Haunches hasn't yet seen his neighbor. He imagines some burly fellow with a rumbling belly, perhaps a weasely moustache. Daphne can't have just up and disappeared, and it takes a certain kind of person to grab another man's chicken. Haunches visualizes a palm-heel strike to the throat, a sidekick to the knee, sudden and debilitating. He knocks firmly.

The woman who answers the door is black. Dark black. The Toyota that's been parked in the lot these last three days is midnight colored. And her clothing, he notices, is dipped in fudge, shirt and skirt. He wonders about the material beneath.

She lets him look. This is a small town, but Haunches is the worldly type. He's been to Australia. He once spent a week in Orlando, Florida, where he headlined the World Athletic Martial Arts Symposium, though it's been years. He was even with a black woman once, in Omaha, Nebraska, of all places. It's a big country. He remembers

bony elbows, and the way that she bent. Flexible. That one would've been a good fighter, though he met her at Chili's.

Still it requires a slight reorientation of his concept of reality to see a black woman here, like the first time he tasted sweet and sour chicken; that was in Victorville, at the Southern California Karate Invitational, a tournament he'd won convincingly. But he won them all convincingly. The sweet and sour was at a restaurant called Chang's, and it had been, once he'd settled his taste buds to the sensation, an invigorating discovery. It's a horrible comparison, a terrible thought, but it does remind him of Daphne, which is something like justification.

When the woman starts to close the door on his silence, Haunches finds his tongue. "Have you seen my chicken?"

"Excuse me?" She talks with class, rolling every syllable around her mouth with more care than Haunches has ever done. In her voice, he hears the same care that he takes in sizing up an enemy. Her words have the clarity of purpose that he feels in the uncoiling of shoulders.

"My chicken is missing."

The woman is large, thick around the shoulders and the middle. She's taller than he is. Haunches is not intimidated, because size has no bearing on anything with all his years of training, but she cuts a large swath. And she does not look pleased. Perhaps, he begins to think, this was not the best idea.

"Are you joking?" she asks.

There are moments that Haunches wishes he could have back. Asking a black woman he's never previously met about chicken, he realizes, is one of those that may go down as not one of his brightest. He can see, upon further inspection, how that might look. There is probably an etiquette to these things, some unspoken agreement among gentlefolks to be careful in wording.

But the thing is, his chicken is missing. "Her name is Daphne," he says. "She disappeared ten minutes ago." When the woman's facial expression doesn't change, he says, "Give or take."

"A real chicken?"

"Of course she's real."

"So," the woman says. The sunlight allows Haunches to peer a few inches into her room. There is nothing interesting: an end table, the edge of a bed, a suitcase black as her clothing. "So, you're walking around knocking on people's doors looking for a real, live chicken?"

"Just yours."

"Ah," she says.

At the moment, there is no one else at the Old Dry Diggings Motel. There's a Doubletree a mile down the interstate, and the Red Eagle Casino has four-star rooms cheap. Old Dry Diggings has history, and mold, and drooping stairs, and five dollars less per night than the Doubletree, that's what it's got going for it. If there are other suspects, he can't think of them.

"No," he tells her. "I'm asking everybody."

She closes the door.

#

The woman's name is Andre, Rosalind tells him at the front desk. She is reading *Elle*, and does not look at him.

"And that doesn't strike you as suspicious? A man's name?"

"Some people are just more tolerant," she tells him. "It's a gift."

As to what she's doing in town, Rosalind has no idea and no interest. "You've got to look into this," Haunches says. "It's clearly a fake name."

"Why?"

Because it is, that's why. To which Rosalind could say, unless it isn't. "She stole my chicken," he says.

Rosalind puts down the magazine. She finally looks at him. "No pets," she tells him. "You signed papers to that effect."

"It's Daphne."

"We've all got problems." Rosalind isn't wearing her wedding ring. She's covering a few hours at the motel as a second job. Her husband Buddy works for the city, running the trash trucks and picking up general handyman jobs on the side, but a government job isn't what it used to be. Last Haunches heard, they were talking about cutting 401(k)s entirely. It's a big issue coming up on election time, but doesn't interest him. He hasn't voted in years.

"Please," he says. "This is important."

Rosalind knows him well. She was his daughter Marilyn's best friend, used to come over to the house on Canal when Haunches still owned it, back when his youngest daughter, Faye, was barely in preschool. Rosalind has seen his whole life upended: she's seen his dojos sold or repossessed, all his demonstrations and conferences disappear, the house gone along with his credit. She was even around for the year he spent living with Faye in a tent on his father's property until the old man died and left them nothing. Rosalind's had a front-row seat to the gory years, which have not yet concluded and may never. She looks at him. She sees his desperation, perhaps something more than that. And then she says, "How's Faye?"

Faye is fine. She's gone, actually, living with a man named Jersey who works the coffee counter at Safeway and asks Haunches all kinds of questions about proper takedown techniques. The boy thinks he's going to get into MMA, says if he can win a few bouts the family will be set. He doesn't know anything, won't listen to a washed-up warrior telling him different. Faye's about to get married -- Haunches still doesn't have a suit -- and the baby is due in a month. Rosalind knows all of this.

Back in his room, Haunches pours himself another glass of fake apple brandy and lies down. He visualizes possibilities. Daphne could have made it to the K-Mart on the other side of this small stretch of blacktop. There, someone could have grabbed her for dinner, or she could be wandering aisles trying to twist off Gatorade caps like she does when Haunches leaves a bottle on the nightstand. She might have circled over towards Rafa's Burrito Café, and could already be in a tostada. And the main road, Green Valley, leads to Hangtown proper in one direction and into the woods for miles the other way,

out where all the rich second-housers live, folks who work from vacation homes during the winter and complain the satellite internet goes out during snowstorms. Daphne's almost safe if she went that way, but for the coyotes. And roaming those woods, there's a flock of wild chickens. Haunches hears them in the mornings, and sometimes they parade across the small manicured lawn that fronts the motel. Daphne has never shown the least interest in them, but he can't discount the possibility.

When he gets up to pour himself another glass, Haunches notices a bright red button on his desk, beside Luke John and the Bible. Since Faye moved out, Haunches has begun to hallucinate. This is not a problem, he has convinced himself, because he can differentiate between reality and his hallucinations. The marbles that roll across his floor in the middle of the night as he's trying to sleep, those are hallucinatory, wisps of Faye's favorite childhood toys and Marilyn's before. Daphne picking at leftover KFC -- she never eats the meat, no cannibal, but loves the breading -- that he sprinkles like feed onto the floor by the refrigerator, that's real. The women who appear and argue with him are old memories, and he knows they do not exist. Old Luke John, that preacher bullfrog that fills his hours pushing at the pages of the Bible with his thick, corroded face, he's too strange to be imagined.

But Haunches looks at the button and can't easily dismiss it. The button is roughly the size of a push-lamp. There are no wires dangling. Beneath it, there is a single layer of clear tape on which are written the words, "Reset Button." The concept is intoxicating.

In his years of martial arts, Haunches has learned to dismiss nothing. He's seen Bruce Lee's one-inch punch, and he's witnessed warriors fake limps for the right to carry

their weapons of choice, a cane, onboard flights after 9/11. There are ways to manipulate the body without touching it, and the mind is even easier. Anything is possible.

Maybe he's lost control over the hallucinations. Maybe the button was put there by the same rotten jokester that's hiding Daphne, if she's not in the woods with the other chickens, if she's not half-cooked into an enchilada. Or maybe he can push the button, start everything over again. Marilyn gave him that hen. Daphne is not the only thing she ever gave him, but the only thing that survives. It's all about the chicken.

It was never about the chicken.

He could push the button, just for kicks and just in case, but instead he goes out. Under the overhang of the Kmart, he looks up to the motel's second floor and sees the shadow of a woman behind the curtains of room 205. But he has no proof.

#

It takes half an hour to get to town, walking slow. By the Flyers gas station, he passes Rico the pot dealer trying to look inconspicuous. "Hey Haunches," Rico says, "Want to play a game? I'm flush."

Rico's game doesn't take long. It's a minor challenge they play every time Rico has cash. Rico's always up for a bet, and he's no good at holding money. The game involves Haunches closing his eyes and letting Rico take a swing. If he connects, he got a free punch in on a grandmaster, no repercussions. A miss, and Haunches gets twenty bucks. Haunches never loses. It's about sensitivity, and just a little bit of knowing the enemy. Rico often throws haymakers, but if he's going to go for the jab he fakes a deep breath as if he needs all his energy.

Rico throws a right haymaker that Haunches bobs, then a somewhat tighter left hook that Haunches slips. They play five times before Rico stumbles away with a lighter pocket. Haunches slides into Flyers and grabs a bologna sandwich with a red Gatorade. Daphne's favorite flavor. He leaves the change, pockets ninety-four bucks. It's a small sandwich, he's done before he leaves the lot. Besides the brandy, it's all he's had to eat today.

At 1:00, he leads a self-defense seminar in Marshall Park. "Consider the straight punch," he tells the crowd. "Consider that nothing about it is straight, except for the final product."

His first words, and he's over their heads. They're all gray-haired yoga practitioners drawn in by flyers advertising "Free Self-Defense." Haunches gets fifty dollars from Parks and Rec for the half-hour session, though the idea of teaching anyone to defend themselves in thirty minutes is fool's gold.

"To throw a good straight punch," he says, "every part of the body moves. The shoulders curl, the hips, the knees, even the ankles and feet. The striker pulls in to collect their power, and then explodes out via torque. The power comes from rotation. Are you with me so far?"

There are a few nods, a few head-scratches. Mostly, there is a blank stare. Haunches used to own studios. He used to have students from Australia to Orlando. This is humiliating.

"Look," he says, "let me show you." He has his assistant throw a punch, slow motion. Jersey is only too happy for the opportunity -- "lunch break never tasted so

good," he said when Haunches suggested the kid tag along. The young man pulls in his arm and then recoils back to an extended position. Haunches watches the rotation of shoulders and shifts his weight slightly to the left, outside the strike zone. The punch passes harmlessly from that simple motion, and Haunches returns the weight forward to control the shoulder that has now passed. "All you have to do is let the rotation work for you." He pushes the shoulder to continue the rotation. Barely any pressure, and Jersey twists himself into a knot.

"Okay," says one woman. "Okay, but what if the bad guy punches again?"

Bad guy. Haunches considers asking her to define the term. Instead, he shows her the weight he's placing on Jersey's shoulder that prevents the reverse rotation required for another punch. Basic-level stuff. A second-week white belt could handle this class.

Of course, there are none of those left. His studios are long gone, students moved on to BJJ or MMA or Krav Maga or capoeira or some new fad. There's no room for forty years of dedication in this world. He's lucky to be teaching at all. When the beer-belly from the Rec Department interviewed him, Haunches was asked if he knew aikido. He said he had trained in the throwing arts under multiple instructors, and that he could teach practical applications of groundwork fighting that would work both for those overpowered in a fight by size as well as for the physically superior fighter. That was great, the interviewer had said, pen scratching against clipboard. That was a great answer, truly, but what about aikido? "Our students," Recreation Commissioner Trowell had said, looking down at the clipboard, "are asking specifically for aikido classes. I'm sure you understand."

"The bad guy can't punch again," Haunches explains to the woman. She's wearing a floppy sunhat and yoga pants. She is not old, but will be soon. "He can't move, because your weight is pushing down on him." This is not complicated, but it is different. The idea of going with a motion and bending it to one's own ends, rather than meeting it with force, is not one that comes naturally.

At the conclusion of the session, his students can theoretically redirect a punch. They can step away from a strike and bring their foot down in proper position to then drop their weight against an ankle or knee and enact a quick, simple takedown. They know to rake with knuckles towards the eyes, and the major folds of the body -- hips, knees, shoulders, neck -- that can be exploited. Whether any of them will be able to use this knowledge is open for debate.

After, Haunches and Jersey go for suits. The wedding is in three days. Haunches buys the first piece he finds in his price range, a \$100 suit that comes out to \$136 with accessories and tax. He tries it on in the bathroom, because Jersey is hogging the single changing room. The jacket is blue, the shirt underneath an offbeat eggshell color that used to be white. It's loose on him and threadbare, but the salesman tightens the tie against Haunches' neck and dusts lint off the shoulders, then steps back from the spectacle and says, "There," in a voice that suggests there's something to be proud of. Haunches allows himself to believe. The bathroom smells of excrement and failed washings. He's buying the suit, because there will be other times when he will need a suit, he believes. He ignores the walls and their crude messages, focuses on the mirror and on

himself entirely. The future, he reminds himself. There are still moments following this one.

On his personal scale, he looks passable. He smooths the jacket one more time and steps out of the bathroom. Jersey is waiting, all smiles and pecs. His arms pop out of his new suit. Jersey is not good enough for Faye, but Haunches doesn't say that. It's too easy, and he's made a career on the simplicity that is the opposite of simplicity.

In the silence of dual appraisal, Haunches feels how poorly he measures. "I want you to know," Jersey says, "she makes me feel like the luckiest man in the world."

That's because you are, Haunches doesn't say. As a father, he may not have been particularly serviceable, but he is finding in this moment that there is nothing but cliché available to him. So he lets silence speak.

"She'll be taken care of," Jersey tells him. "She's everything. I'll treat her like a goddess."

Haunches watches Jersey's hand shake. Jersey is a decent man, of that much Haunches is sure. There is a flower pinned to the young man's chest, and the father of the bride cannot name it. Jersey didn't have a job when he knocked Faye up, and he's working ten-hour days slinging coffee at Safeway; it's not much, but it's a start. The flower is red, with five petals.

"I hope I have your blessing," Jersey says.

Haunches smiles at the young man in the black tuxedo, the red flower with five petals. "Of course you do," he says. There is no way to avoid the expected. "Now how about a whiskey for the road?" He's been lugging that barrel of fake brandy for almost a

year, not a single taste of the real stuff since his daughter died. His older daughter, Marilyn. And the youngest is moving on, in an entirely different direction. He deserves a drink.

Jersey obliges. They crawl to Earvin's Bar and have a whiskey, then a second. "I'm supposed to get back," Jersey says somewhere in the middle of the action, but Haunches reels him in for another round with a story of Guru Dan Inosanto, and Jersey can't pull away. Three more stories, and Jersey's slack-jawed on a stool, staring at Haunches with a look the old man remembers from some of his better demonstrations. Awe is not too great a word for it. Haunches has expanded minds. He once stood in front of a standing-room-only crowd in the Hangtown Lyon's Club and announced, "Anything you can do with your hands, you can do with your feet," then proven himself right by having his hands tied behind his back for a fifteen-minute sparring session against a sixth-degree black belt from Stockton who'd been brought in exactly to prove him wrong. Back when he still fought competitively, he built a perfect four-year tournament streak before deciding that point sparring wasn't enough of a challenge, and his unique abilities once led Chuck Norris to call him, at an awards banquet honoring the legendary Ed Parker, "The Bill 'Superfoot' Wallace of the takedown."

Into the silence between Haunches' words, Jersey says, "Your stories are like corn off the cob. Just when you think it's done, there's always another kernel." That reminds Haunches of a story about a man who'd been bludgeoned to death with a corncob pipe, and there's no stopping the tide. The stories continue well into the evening, until Earvin's

place fills with customers and there's a crowd around to keep Haunches' mouth moving and his mind switched off. Exactly the way he prefers it.

#

Most nights around dinnertime, Haunches goes to KFC and talks with Faye. She works closing, and when she sits across from him in the booth she'll slide him her shift meal, three chicken strips and green beans, mashed potatoes, biscuit. Then she'll sit there while he eats, and she'll fill the empty table with conversations from work. She's so thin, like a fine *jo*, and he always feels guilty, but without the food he's trying to scrounge meals off old bouncer friends that pretend they don't remember the years he taught them wrist and finger locks. When he finishes eating, she'll ask him about the motel, about Daphne, as if there's anything to say. He can't handle that tonight. So when the conversation curls to a close at Earvin's, he goes home.

Luke John looks at him reproachfully when Haunches opens the door. "Shut up," he tells the bullfrog, and the animal goes back to his Bible. He's almost through the book -- tomorrow, at the latest, Haunches will have to flip it back to the beginning for him.

In the dark, the red button glows. Haunches doesn't like Jersey. He still can't decide if the button is anything more than a figment of imagination. He allows himself a fantasy of pushing it, reversing everything to the moment just before Faye met that boy, months before the Old Dry Diggings' scratchy sheets had rubbed his body raw. Things were not at their absolute worst, then. Jersey didn't bring it all crashing down, but he does make an easy target.

Haunches strips and turns on water for a shower. In the bathroom, he finds a comforting hallucination: his favorite ex-lover, a former student named Cherise who possessed the best calves he's ever seen. He knows it is a hallucination because she's wearing a *gi* -- her martial uniform -- and a beginner's white belt around her waist although she's been a certified instructor for nearly ten years. He met her for the first time at a tournament in Boise, Idaho, where he'd taken her to a Perkins café just outside of town and had one of the best conversations of his life. She'd been a philosophy major at UConn, and she'd taken him through a basic primer of concepts he'd heard but never understood: Plato's cave, Descartes' demon, Schrödinger's cat. She now owns two schools in Rogersville, Alabama, and she has taken to teaching a style that Haunches despises for its lack of fluidity, for its simplistic and unnecessarily harsh response to every attack, and for its easy advancement in ranks that allowed students to gain black belts in two years. Haunches doesn't talk to her anymore. But when she appears, she is twenty-three again, hair auburn and eyes flecking cobalt, and he's somewhere around the same, except his is a shock of oil-black hair and eyes firm like a fighter pilot's. She stands in *zenkutsu-dachi* stance, front leg bent and fists to her breasts, and he thinks that if she were to try to kill him, he might be convinced to let her.

Haunches steps into the shower and allows the water to work on his shoulders. It feels like shiatsu, Cherise's fingers after she came back from seminars studying with Guru Bernie. Luke John, attracted by the newly-subterranean climate, attaches to the lip of the tub and watches the proceedings like any official magistrate or preacher. Under the torrent, beneath the scent of Tropical Papaya body wash the motel freshens every third

day, Haunches considers the idea, spurred by Jersey's corn on the cob comment, that he is a single kernel of corn, one among many other kernels, each held distinct in their pod and covered by a simple, elegant filament of silk. It's a beautiful idea, and he decides on a new title for his memoir -- *Kernels of Silk: A Workman's Guide to a Life in the Martial Arts*. The subtitle has never changed, but he's circled around the rest of it many times. He thinks it over from many angles, and once out of the water, he crosses out his former title and writes the new one in careful script. The ringed notebook has not yet been opened beyond the first page. There is a single line of text beneath the title which is now undergoing its third transmutation. "Falling is the only way to rise." He's been working on that for years, but he's no closer to a second line.

Marilyn is dead. He's lost Daphne. Faye is on a clear trajectory anywhere else. Haunches lies on the bed and allows the hallucinatory Cherise to writhe above him. She doesn't say, It's not your fault. Even imaginary creatures know better. The steam from the shower dissipated, he hears Luke John back at the Bible, scratching from one page to the next. Haunches reminds himself to pick up Chapstick -- after a run through the Bible, the old bullfrog's face will be delicate. He closes his eyes and enters a world peeled back in time, a universe where everything is right. There must be one out there -- when a man steps forward to strike, Haunches has felt his perceptions slow, all the possibilities lining up in his mind. There is no perfect choice, but ten or twenty acceptable ones. Is it so much to assume a reality for each possibility?

The red button gleams.

#

In the middle of the night, his head aglow with pain like the beatings he used to stand still and take to test his mettle as a young martial artist, he hears Daphne clucking. The voice is clearly hers, crabbing for him.

By the time he makes it out the door, staring eagerly over the railing, the voice is gone. There are no chickens, not a single of the brood in sight. He curses, loudly, and sees the light go on in room 205. The blinds draw back, and he sees kinked hair framing a wary face. Built into the shadows that cover that face, he can see Faye. And before her, Marilyn. It all comes back to Marilyn. It always comes back to Marilyn.

While he's standing in the corridor watching for Daphne, his door creaks closed. He doesn't have his keys with him, his wallet, his phone. This late, there's nothing for him to do -- there won't be anyone at the front desk until 6:00 AM, and the night manager is a phone number to an owner who lives way outside of town. He's not getting back inside.

So, he walks. The night has cooled nearly to freezing, and it wears the air like bristles. He follows Green Valley Road in the direction of town, because there's nowhere else to go. Everything looks different at night, and without the kaleidoscope of whiskey and old stories. Shadows hang off tree limbs like squirrels. The world is not silent, but the heavy traffic of midday has been replaced by occasional gastronomical murmurings from the deep woods. Without the buzz of gasoline and rumbling engines, Haunches notices the scent of earthworms and oncoming rain.

Green Valley Road bends a bit, then leads right into town. The first thing Haunches sees are streetlamps, quivering light at the pure foothill darkness. Then Earvin's comes into focus, that highway cross-street and the gas pumps, the A-frame

convenience store that Earvin turned into a bar. A drink sounds heavenly, but the lights are still on, and that's one of Jersey's hangouts. The night is cold, but not that cold.

Green Valley Road hits Main Street. Haunches turns left and keeps walking, past the candy store and the coffee shop, the bookstore, three separate consignment stores, the old soda factory, and the hangman's noose. There are few cars, no people, just the streetlights pooling and the far-off hum of the freeway heading up to Tahoe. Further down Main Street, the courthouse looms, and the police station kitty-corner, beside Madame Tomato's Fine Bagels. He keeps walking until he finds himself all the way out near the Buttermilk.

The restaurant is closed. It will reopen at 4:00 AM for the passing truckers to order their coffee and eggs. Haunches' older daughter, Marilyn, worked that early shift, used to step out of the house at 3:00 AM to scrape her iced windshield and leave by 3:15 to make sure she had plenty of time to drive slow on the one-lane bridges where black ice collected in pre-dawn hours. She'd work straight on through the morning rush, then leave at 10:00 for her second job. If nothing else, she'd gotten her father's work ethic.

Haunches finds Charlie Scott huddled in a sleeping bag, shivering, pressed tight against the closed doors of the Buttermilk. They don't see much of each other, since Marilyn and Charlie divorced, and not at all since the funeral, but he always liked Charlie. Haunches sits beside the tightly-wound figure and shakes him awake. "Hi," he says.

Charlie doesn't say a word. He doesn't speak much, anymore.

"I couldn't sleep," Haunches tells him. "I lost Daphne."

Ten years ago, Charlie sawed through a live wire and electrified himself into a vegetable. Right after the accident, everyone thought he'd snap out of it. Most of his humanity was gone, but the shell of him could pass for a person. He just didn't talk much. He kept his hands close to his hips where no one could get a look at the lightning scars the electricity had left on him, and Marilyn clothed him in long sleeves and pants to hide the rest of the damage. Marilyn stuck with him for seven years, until she couldn't hope any longer. There are days when Haunches feels responsible for the divorce, for Marilyn finally giving up on Charlie. Haunches' business was failing -- he'd lost half his students, closed three of his four studios, and the big Taekwondo place, Lewis Martial Arts Center, had just rented out a location in the center of town, a huge factory that could train quadruple the students Haunches had ever taught. This was in 2009, flush in the middle of the recession, and almost before he knew it, Haunches was underwater, watching his business and his students and his house float away. And Marilyn, wonder that she was, even she couldn't help everyone at once. Yeah, Haunches feels a little guilt.

"Faye is getting married," Haunches says.

Charlie's pants bunch up, revealing an ankle and a swatch of his calf. The scars have not faded. There won't be any recovery. The moments he can make himself speak, Charlie gets a word stuck in his head, and he wears that word like underwear, so close to his body as to be almost indistinguishable from self. For a while, it was Mahogany, and then Byzantium. They're always beautiful words, and Haunches believes them to be ripe with meaning that crackles just below the surface, lightning about to strike. In his own way, Charlie is working at something.

"And then there's Marilyn." Haunches lets the name lie between them like an old hound, sleeping but ever-present. He tries not to think about his daughter, about the bathtub where her body was found. Sheriff Greenblatt calls it a suicide, but Haunches doesn't let that word linger long in his consciousness; that's not what happened, official report or no.

"They're gone," he tells Charlie. "They're all gone."

Charlie's never been anywhere. He just went to school then went to work, met Marilyn freshman year of high school and fell in love. He got a job, they bought a house, and then they worked and they lived in it. This is a simplicity that Haunches can admire. He's always liked Charlie, liked him for his work ethic and for his willingness to be what he is. Jersey will never understand the joy of working hard. And Jersey wasn't around for the worst times, either. It's a small strike against, but it's one that Haunches holds onto.

"Charlie," he says. "What am I going to do?"

Beside Charlie's head, Haunches sees the button. It is a vibrant red like the flavor of Gatorade that Daphne prefers. A strand of Charlie's hair brushes against the button with each gust of wind, and Haunches wonders how much pressure it would take to push. Charlie's hair is black, and it is impossibly straight, with one arcing wing that sweeps across his forehead. It's perfect, his one truly distinguishable feature, and all the slick, oily filth that's accumulated on his body in the weeks since his last shower somehow has managed only to add luster. From the eyes up, Charlie could be a model in a magazine, gaunt and a deep-eyed gaze that could be soulful or soulless.

The button is within reach. The night remakes this town into a place he barely recognizes. This isn't the town he grew up in, when even in the '60s horses were the fastest way to get from the Frosty to the Buttermilk. Gerald, the man behind the counter at the Frosty from 6:00-10:00 PM on Wednesdays and Thursdays who sometimes gives Haunches cheeseburgers when the crowds are light, likes to say that the world is ending. Haunches might not go that far, but it's certainly changing. And when he looks into the future, he can't see much of himself anywhere.

It's easy to believe the button is a hallucination, and for that reason Haunches resists the urge to believe it. There is a certain mystical quality to the shimmering night, and the mythical has haunted him all his life. He's 74 years old, and that doesn't mean death is staring him in the face any more than it ever has done.

If the button is a hallucination, if he has lost the ability to determine reality and illusion, then anything could be false. In a Perkins in Caldwell, Idaho, he had once discussed with Cherise the principal fear of the philosopher Descartes, who had wondered how exactly he could prove that anything, himself included, was real. At the time, Haunches had taken it as a logic game, had toyed with the idea in the same way he had wrestled koans with grandmasters. Now, it feels a bit more urgent to find a suitable answer. *Cogito ergo sum* is nice enough as a thought, but it doesn't satisfy down deep, at the gut-level.

Haunches punches the granite wall of the Buttermilk. Hard. Pain flashes like a photograph, traverses his body faster than thought. Hard to question that reality, his blood dotting the pale gray wall. Marilyn had met him once, after her Buttermilk shift, her

pinky finger wrapped tight in a brown bandage. "Pies," she told him, "are dangerous." It feels admirable, somehow, to spill blood where his daughter has.

Charlie pushes his head further out of the sleeping bag. His breath fogs as he pants. He says only one word, a new fascination. "Entelechy."

The Buttermilk has lights everywhere. It twinkles even when closed. Entelechy is a word that Haunches uses in his teachings, a word he introduced into Charlie's vocabulary. It suggests the full potentiality that exists within a thing, as in: it is the entelechy of an acorn to become a tree. Marilyn and Faye have both moved on, in their different ways. Daphne, too. Haunches leans his head against glass and allows himself to consider the possibility that everything is moving slowly, inexorably, toward its ultimate perfection. It is a complete recasting of his views, in much the same way that a martial artist must accept the force coming at him in order to redirect. In both, there is the concept of misdirection and timing, capitulation and re.

Or, the button. It sits inches from him. Its greatest potential is very great indeed. He has broken at least one finger. Charlie is silent, retreated back inside his sleeping bag. Haunches watches the gray gauze of his frosting breath. In the distance, he thinks he hears a chicken squawk. It might be Daphne. It might be, but he can't be sure.

Marilyn's Story

Marilyn's shift at the Buttermilk is almost over when the man comes in and sits down at table fourteen. She watches him out of the corner of her eye while she works table twelve. He's very watchable: he has a hardscrabble face and a confident stride, hips that sort of circle as he walks and a pair of Tony Lama boots that can't be anything but expensive. He wears black racing gloves cut off at the first joint, lived-in pinto-colored jeans, and a fine shirt, maybe silk. His moustache is black as oil. His hair hangs thick and straight. His skin is a soft brown that could come from any multiple nationalities. He's not a trucker, and he's not a regular. He's too well-put together for Sacramento and not manicured enough for San Francisco. Maybe Reno has people like this. Wherever he comes from, she wouldn't mind a road trip.

As soon as she's free, she beelines for him. "What can I get you?" she asks.

He smiles at her, something like a Philips screwdriver slotting perfectly into the groove. It's been a long time since a smile could turn Marilyn's head around, but his makes a good attempt. "A woman like you," he tells her, "knows better than to ask a loaded question like that."

He's got an accent full of Oklahoma, dust and whirlwinds and an idle comfort in his own skin. The whole world, he seems to proclaim with his voice and his jaw and the way that he sits back in his chair with one leg kicked out to the side, the whole world knows better than to challenge him. Cocksure, Rosalind would call it, and wouldn't be wrong.

"To drink," she clarifies.

"Coffee," he says.

"And to eat?"

"Just that. I'm watching my figure," he tells her, and pats his stomach. This is a normal gesture, a joke Marilyn hears perhaps twice a week, and one that allows her to regain her distance. Until she looks down, until she notices his shirt riding up. Pressed against his tan skin, and lower against the Irish green of his underwear, is the heavy blackness of a pistol.

He's looking at her. For perhaps three seconds, she feels closer to death than she has ever been. Then he smiles again, and she feels that same feeling of a screw turning. There is a sense of the earth spinning out of its orbit. One thing she is not, she notes, is afraid.

"What are you going to do with that?" she asks.

"How about this," the man says. He tucks in his shirt, using both hands. She can see the indent beneath his tight shirt. The shirt is maroon. "How about you walk over to the register, and you get me a hundred dollars with my cup of coffee."

This is not the way that Marilyn has imagined a robbery would take place. There are no masks, no machine guns, no loud shouts to get on the floor. These are horrible clichés, she knows, but the scene makes so much sense. What does not make sense is a confident man in boots with fine stitchery lacing the toes, a man with a shirt so tightly-fitted that she can see the vague outline of his nipples, strolling in with his face clearly visible and demanding cash. That defies convention, defies sense.

Marilyn lets her pencil stub fall into her apron pouch. She settles into a more comfortable position, most of her weight on her left leg. She considers him. "Unless you're going to kill everyone," she says, "you're not going to kill me."

"I'm not going to kill you. This here, just think of it as motivation." That gun, he's saying, allows her to make a choice.

And if I say no?" she asks.

"You'd be surprised how many people do." He lets the words sit there for a minute, and then he smiles again. Marilyn feels it in her joints, in the sore elbow that she nurses with a heating pad during every break. She's made thirty-three dollars today, and it's nearing 10:00 AM, the morning rush disappearing into just another workday.

The important thing to consider here, she tells herself, is that this is a robbery. He is big, stronger than her, and he has a weapon. He's more than just a smile. It may not exactly be a stick-up, but he's not sitting here asking for a side of pancakes.

"You have," he tells her, "options."

"Do I?"

"I'd like you to get me the money," he says, "but if that doesn't happen, maybe I'll have better luck up in Sparks."

"I could tell," Marilyn says. She doesn't mean it to sound so juvenile, so second-grade.

"You could." He does not threaten, does not cajole. He doesn't even smile again. "You could also take forty, and keep it for yourself." He spreads his hands wide against the table. They are as well-groomed as the rest of him.

"It's not like they won't notice a hundred bucks is missing."

"Or a hundred and forty," he says. "But come now, that's what the gun is for.

Who's going to blame a pretty girl like you when faced with all that? I know you can play the Legally Blonde angle, am I right?"

Marilyn taps her toe against the hard Buttermilk floor. She wants to move her head, but holds still instead. She doesn't want him thinking she's letting her hair spill over her shoulder in a dash of grinning blond. And she doesn't want him judging her performance.

"What happens now is all you," he says. Perhaps that is what wins her over. A single moment, of all her moments, that rests entirely in her hands.

Marilyn puts her order pad away and walks toward the kitchen. "A little cream and sugar, if you don't mind," he adds. Marilyn does not turn around.

#

Back when he was still an actual human being, Charlie used to tell her that fear was the price of existing in the modern age. He was a smart man. He would tell her that everyone was afraid, that anyone who pretended otherwise was the worst kind of coward. "Look at the world," he'd say. "Fire and famine, tornado and flood. Even if you don't believe the science, you have to see the End of Days coming." This was just after the Martis Fire, when the mountain looked charred and empty. There is no blackness as deep as that of smoky desolation, plants and trees and the ground itself reduced to a strip of empty.

Marilyn is terrified. There are forty dollars in her apron, which is folded over the edge of the door. The storeroom is empty but for Rosalind. It is 10:00 AM, and they are on their federally-mandated half-hour lunch break.

"If you had to choose, what's the one thing in the world you couldn't live without?" Rosalind asks. They're eating boysenberry pie. Marilyn can feel the tiny seeds sticking against her teeth. Her plastic fork has lost a tine somewhere, and she is watching every bite as it rises to her mouth, afraid she'll accidentally swallow the miniature spear.

Marilyn throws her eyes around the storeroom and finds a box of glass shakers. "Pepper," she says. "What would life be without flavor?"

"Wow," Rosalind says. "I was thinking, like, love."

"Oh honey," Marilyn tells her. "I haven't thought like that in years."

Rosalind is fiddling with her wedding ring. She twists it off her finger and then slides it back on again. She wants Marilyn to ask, but either way she'll tell the story. There is a splotch of dark boysenberry on Rosalind's cheek. Marilyn reaches over and flicks it off.

Things are strained, Rosalind says. It's not a big deal, really it's not, she just needs someone to talk to. Buddy's thinking about going back to school. He got the idea from Marilyn, actually, from one morning in the Buttermilk when he ordered his normal seafood omelet with no onions and heard Marilyn talking about only needing twelve more credits to get an English degree. Isn't that a hoot, a joke of absurd proportions, an absolute kick in the pants, that he's taking life direction from overheard snippets of other people's plans? They've been talking it through for a couple of weeks now -- does

Marilyn remember that day, about a month ago, when she and Rosalind were talking over her schedule, rearranging shifts so Marilyn could get into a Wednesday lit class that started at 8:00 AM? That's when Buddy overheard, that's when he started thinking about doing the same thing, he says. So they've had some conversations about it, what he'd study and what he'd do with it. He told her last night, he's thinking about political office.

Marilyn knows this relationship intimately. She's heard every story, every complaint. Rosalind comes to work and does her job quietly. Doesn't talk to anyone, until lunch. Then she sits in the storeroom, and Marilyn unfolds two slices of pie. And Rosalind talks.

Marilyn leans forward. "Remember the man at table fourteen?"

"The one that looked like Palo Alto money?"

"He had a gun. He robbed us."

Rosalind looks at the wedding ring in her hand. "What? How did I miss this?"

"It was a subtle robbery. He just showed me the gun."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Sure." Marilyn feels jumpy, a sort of giddy euphoria rolling around behind her eyelids. It pushes at her scalp like a headache. She's already finished her pie. She never did find the extra tine. "I told Evan, and he called it in. Sheriff's going to question me when he comes in for lunch."

"What do you think about me, Mrs. Comptroller 2016?"

Marilyn rolls her plastic fork around her knuckles the way her father taught her, though he used knives. "And you know what? He left a tip. Nothing un-American about that."

Rosalind pushes her plate toward Marilyn and stands. "I just wanted a little compassion."

Marilyn watches her walk away. She bites her tongue to stop herself from saying the same thing.

#

About six-foot-one, Marilyn tells the Sheriff. Light skin, perhaps of the Hispanic persuasion. Black hair, brown eyes. She doesn't say, eyes like warm whiskey, but she wants to. The description feels like Hemingway, or more correctly feels like Hemingway makes her feel. She's been reading a lot of Hemingway lately, in her new English class. It's an interesting thing -- she doesn't like the writing so much as she does the way the writing makes her feel. Full, like chewing on the last bite of a large steak.

He was wearing dark clothing, she says, and shrugs. That's all she knows. He had a gun, and he didn't point it at her but he made it clear that it meant business. Green underwear, if that helps. There's no way that could matter, she says, but what she's trying to do is be helpful.

"You saw his underwear?" Sheriff Greenblatt asks. "Now how did that come up?"

"He raised his shirt to show me the gun. I'm trying to help."

"Well, now," the Sheriff says. "Did he say anything? Have an accent? Do anything? You've got to give me something to work with here, darling."

Greenblatt comes in just before the lunch rush, right before Marilyn is scheduled off. He grabs a turkey sandwich and an extra-large Coke, then settles down in the booth in the corner. He calls Marilyn over, and she sits opposite him. She can see table fourteen from her seat. The open slats of the blinds let sun sprinkle into her eyes. From the way the Sheriff's looking at her, she knows that her eyes are sparkling against the light. People have told her it's her best look. The sheriff wears suspenders, and he has to hitch his uniform khakis up every time he slides out of a booth. He's got a gap tooth from a fight he started with the wrong man, and since then he's been running scared of any and all confrontation. His basic philosophy is, Let God sort them out, and that's what keeps him in office. Although from what she's overheard handing him poached eggs and double-burnt wheat toast, he doesn't believe in God.

And she knows he thinks someday, things are going to slide into the right position, and he's going to go home with her.

"I know," he says, "that this is difficult."

"Yes it is," Marilyn says. "I just wish I could help."

"Look here, little darling, it can be something small, but it might be just the break I need. I can't very well go hauling in everyone in black clothes, now, can I?"

Marilyn shakes her head.

"Of course not." Greenblatt leans back in the booth, takes a slurp at his Coke.

"Just you remember, we're all in this together. Isn't that right?"

There are two twenties in the pocket of Marilyn's apron. The Sheriff comes in for a meal three, perhaps four times a week, usually lunch, usually one of Marilyn's last

customers. Over by the bar, she catches Rosalind's eye, and her friend turns back to a customer as though shutting Marilyn out. Greenblatt has never left a tip. "Right," she says. "That's exactly right."

#

"What are you doing with the gun?" Marilyn asks.

He found her standing behind the counter of the fruit stand she runs at Galileo Corner. He drove past purely by luck, he swears. His truck gleamed brightly in the heavy sun, a shine that forced her to cover her eyes with an arm. The distinction had been so sharp, him in perfect focus against the aging mountains behind him, that she'd packed what was left of her stand and hopped in his truck as soon as he'd asked if she might fancy a drive.

They're sitting in the bed of his Dodge Ram, in the Kmart parking lot, across from the Old Dry Diggings Motel. She has two hours before class. It is the cheapest, emptiest place in town. The Kmart is rarely used, and the motel survives, best it can, on bottom-of-the-barrel tenants stretching paycheck or government assistance as far as possible. There's a burrito restaurant, too, the kind of place Marilyn goes when she wants a meal she'll be feeling for days.

There is no one in the world but them. They're drinking from a bottle of five-dollar Kmart Moscato. The trees are hunched over as if trying to eavesdrop on the conversation. Everything feels as though it is circling around this moment.

"Well, tell me," he says, "have you noticed anybody disappearing lately?"

He's teasing her. She's pretty sure he's teasing her. "No."

He hasn't shown her the gun again. She's waiting for it, always on the tips of her toes, and she knows he knows it. Electricity, fascination, surprise -- these are still feelings that exist. She hadn't realized.

Across the lot, in the motel, there's a single room lit up with light. That's his room. He'll be gone tomorrow, he told her when he picked her up. Just one day seeing the sights, he said. This town offers that much, at least, doesn't it?

"Well, is there anyone you'd like to see gone?"

She could answer, but she doesn't.

He kicks his feet at a mosquito climbing up his pant leg, but his eyes hold fast to her. He never looks away. The sun is on its way down, barely visible over the tree line. She's heard people call it a banister, those tops of trees that the sun slowly descends each night, and the word feels right, romantic in a larger sense.

"Sometimes I feel," she tells him, "like I'm a bit player in someone else's story."

"Now that cannot be allowed." He takes the bottle from her, sips at it. Too sweet, he told her in the aisle when they were perusing, but he didn't argue when she grabbed it.

She kicks at the dust on the ground, watches it float and then settle. "It's all been done before."

Every small-town nothing wants to get out. Every mountain beauty wants to raise the money for a bus fare to LA, dreams of the silver screen and adoring fans. She was named after Marilyn Monroe. There's no mystery here.

In her English class, her professor tells her to avoid cliché, to find the truth of a person in the places where no storyteller has yet looked. But Marilyn's story has none of

the romance of unfulfilled dreams. She's thirty-seven years old, beautiful as celluloid, and that's all she is.

In class, her instructor says that today's stories exist in conversations with those of the past. As a result, her instructor says, there are only two ways to tell a story in this modern world: either tell an old story in a new way, or find an entirely new story to tell.

"Well," he says. "If it's been done before, there must be a reason. Let's do something that other people have proven is fun. Let's do something wild."

"Tell me you have something in mind."

"Me? Never." He kills the bottle and tosses it deep into the truck bed. It rattles around for a second before finding a home with the other bottles and a few tools that are already settled in place. "That's what makes it so much fun."

Marilyn considers that for a moment. "Okay," she says.

#

Marilyn drives to College of the Foothills. She parks beneath a sycamore tree, against the edge of the soccer field, at the back of the lot directly beneath a streetlight. The light spills out orange tinged with green. There are young men kicking soccer balls on the field, dressed in blue-and-yellow school colors. The College of the Foothills Sycamores, they are practicing touch passes, quick- controlled blasts with the in or outstep of the foot. The boys do not look her way as she slides out of her car.

She walks to Elisha Stevens Hall. It is late afternoon, and the sycamores lining the pathways produce long shadows. There are no pines, no forest, no rivers. The buildings are all made of brick, a faux old-time look that has nothing in common with the actual

aged storefronts of Hangtown. Ten short miles away, and it's a different world completely.

Her class is in room 203. The woman who teaches American History: 1840-Present, is named Travis. That's her first name, which she insists on being called, and she wears a half-wrapped tie and a thin white button-down to class every day. Her breasts look like hard apples inside the blouse, and her nipples are often visible. This never seems calculated, but rather a necessary kowtowing to other, more important concerns. A student, on the first day, tried to tell her that she looked like Patti Smith on the cover of *Horses*, and she'd nearly dropped her book bag. "I did not expect," she'd said, "that reference when I swung out of bed this morning." She always appears flustered.

Today, Travis comes into class five minutes late, out of breath. "You don't understand," she says, "what it's like to work two jobs."

Half the class laughs at her. The other half doesn't work. Marilyn chuckles.

Travis lives in Elk Grove, commutes the hour to Hangtown once a week. The rest of her life she spends down in the suburbs. She teaches Wednesdays and Thursdays at Sac City, that second job mentions. She has Tuesdays and Fridays off, she's said before. It sounds, to Marilyn, like good work, for those who can get it.

Most class periods, Travis perches on a desk and talks at the students. It's not entirely lecture, and it's only sometimes history, but there's an awkward authenticity to her stumbling commentary on the world past and present that is markedly different from the only slightly similar instructor Marilyn's had, a high school civics instructor who pounded on his lectern and rambled about life lessons while counting down the hours

until football practice. Travis' speeches are less adversarial and more rambling experience. Marilyn sops them up like gravy.

Today, however, there's none of that. Travis deposits her accordion-folder briefcase on her desk and pulls out thirty-five single sheets of paper. She hands them out, row by row, then returns to her desk. "Remember," she says. "No talking." And then the midterm begins.

There is only one question. Last week, when asked how to study, Travis had said only that it would be a nontraditional test and then gotten sidetracked by a critique of the modern school testing climate. Indeed, the question lines up a scenario -- roughly speaking, the earthquake that all of California is waiting on, the big one that will leave the state a floating island somewhere in the vast Pacific Ocean -- and then asks the test-taker to respond to that scenario following tactics set up by some historical precedent studied during the quarter. Six weeks of study come to this.

Marilyn uses the Donner Party as her analogue. Margret Reed, specifically, whose husband James Reed had led the Party once George Donner had proven himself especially ineffective as a steward. But James was hot-tempered, and was excised from the wagon party somewhere in Nevada after a quarrel turned deadly and he stabbed a man. James agreed to go ahead of the party, and he reached Sutter's Fort before the Donners, before his wife and children. But the early winter began before he could return for them, and Margret was forced to take shelter with her children in a makeshift cabin.

As the winter wore on, Margret made tough choices. Desperate for food for her family, Margret killed the family dog, her kids' best and only friend. She devastated her

children to save their lives. Marilyn can visualize that cabin, small tufts of snow dribbling through the cracks in the shoddy construction. She can see the looks on the children's faces, so similar to the look her ex-husband Charlie shot her when she finally rolled over in bed and told him that she wanted a divorce. The same look he gave her three weeks later, when she had to explain to him what divorce meant, that he had to get out of the house, that she couldn't do this anymore, that it wasn't fair to her to spend the rest of her natural life babysitting a man who'd only a short few years before held her in his arms and promised to care and protect *her*. Charlie had dropped his head hangdog-style, had nodded and said, "Okay," and Marilyn had known in that instant that if he ever came to her door and asked her for anything, she wouldn't be able to say no. Like slaying that dog and destroying whatever shreds of innocence Margret's children might have had left, Marilyn is tied to that face Charlie made when he turned and looked over his shoulder, walking through the forest in no particular direction, that boy's smile that he'd never outgrown -- there'd been no regret in that look. Of course, he'd been too far gone for such emotions, had lost too much of those human essentials, but that had been what had broken her hard, what had bound her to him tighter than anything else he could have done. He hadn't hated her.

Within all of that, the essay flies onto the page.

#

When Marilyn gets out of class, there is a text from her father. It says, simply: KFC? He wants to bring KFC out to Marilyn's, something like a peace offering, or as close to one as he is capable of delivering. This means he wants to meet, which means he

wants money, which means he's drinking again, which means that her younger sister Faye can't handle him on her own, which means more work for Marilyn.

She replies: Homework. This means that she cannot meet, that she has to go straight home and get working on assignments. Or, sleep. Or, start baking pies for tomorrow at the fruit stand. Or, take care of Charlie, which always seems to come up on the days she can least afford the time commitment. Poor Charlie. She's got a tasteless take-home box from the Buttermilk sitting on the passenger seat of her truck, on the off chance she sees him, just in case he swings by the house tonight. It's pancakes and eggs and bacon, just a Buttermilk Special, but it's enough. If she remembers, she'll put it on the porch tonight, and maybe Charlie will come by or maybe the coyotes will. It's all she can allow herself to do, but maybe it's enough.

Her father replies: Okay. This means absolutely nothing.

So Marilyn goes home. It's a forty-minute drive from College of the Foothills, and she spends the entire time thinking of Margret Reed and her dog, and of guns. The robber who would not tell her his name -- his name was Adam, like the first man, he told her, and then laughed and said, "That's not my name, but you already knew that," and then refused to say anything more about himself -- he also did not give her a phone number, and she has a suspicion that the hotel room he showed her will not be the place he sleeps tonight. She will never see him again. That's what he told her, "You'll never see me again."

In her driveway, she sees her father's car. It has a brand-new 'Sold' sticker in the bottom left corner of the back window. Her father, Haunches, is standing a few feet

behind it. He is in a deep-set *kiba-dachi* stance, fists tight to his side. His eyes are closed, no doubt exploring some alternate use of a bodily motion. *Kiba-dachi* translates to horse stance. Marilyn responds to that name on a visceral level, at the moment.

"So, you're here," she says, when she gets out of her car.

"Everything is starting to fall apart," Haunches tells her.

"It never stopped," she replies.

He follows her to her door and says that her sister Faye has finally given up on him, the same way Marilyn did a few years ago. He breaks down on her porch. He says, "I know I haven't been the best father," and he cries gargantuan tears onto the redwood she hasn't weather-stained.

"I don't have any money," she tells him.

"I don't want your money."

"What do you want?" she asks. It's late, and it's cold. There's no yellow light yet slinking over the mountains. She wants, more than anything, to end this day.

"I could use a drink," he says.

"No, you couldn't."

He stands behind her on her porch and regards her. "At this rate," he says, "I'll be joining Charlie on the streets."

"At this rate," she tells him, "you'll deserve it."

She opens the door and finds Faye in the kitchen, grabbing for plates. "I'm sorry," Faye says immediately. "I told him not to come."

"What's he out there rambling about?"

Faye explains, quickly. They got the letter last week, that the house on Canal Street is being repossessed. Haunches is on a bender the size of Minneapolis and has been gone six days. He just reappeared this morning, showing up as Faye was on her way to work. He's going to ask, Faye warns, if the two of them can stay at Marilyn's for a while. "Not while he's drinking, I know," Faye says. "But hey, we brought chicken strips."

They sit in the living room. Haunches takes the high-backed chair against the wall where he can see both doors. He calls this the Wild Bill Hickok seat, a joke that neither Marilyn nor Faye has ever graced with a laugh. The sisters take the gray-and-green loveseat.

Most of the meal is spent in silence, the chomp of chicken and the slurp of Sprite. Haunches looks nervous, Faye looks angry. Marilyn just feels exhausted. The house rumbles.

The earthquake is a small one. It barely rattles the chairs. Silverware trembles for a second, but doesn't move. Marilyn thinks of her midterm, and of an earthquake so strong that California splits off from the mainland and floats away. It is not an unpleasant thought.

"I was thinking," Haunches says, "about a trip out to Coloma. It's been too long since we've looked into our history."

This is his way of bringing up the topic of the night. Like the true grandmaster that he is, he speaks the way he moves, with circular motions and near-unrelated twists. Sometimes he tries to dazzle with lyrical pyrotechnics, and at other moments he uses the poetry of clarity, but always he comes from an angle designed to surprise.

Marilyn gets straight to the point. "As long as you're drinking, you can't stay here."

Haunches swallows a bite before he speaks. "I've run weeklong seminars with more alcohol in me than I've had all this month."

"Good for you." The mashed potatoes are nearly gone. Marilyn scoops the last bit onto her plate before Haunches can get to it. "The point stands."

"It is the nature of a thing," he tells her, but Marilyn does not finish the statement as she has so many other times. So he finishes it himself. "To become another thing."

Before she went to class, Marilyn stole a horse. She and Adam finished the bottle of Moscato, and then she led him beyond the Kmart and past Rafa's Burrito Café, down Green Mountain Road toward the farms. They walked for a bit, and she opened the first gate she found, then raced across a field of shrub grass to a large silver barn. Inside, there were horses, at least a dozen. They regarded her incuriously. She chose one at random, a short steed that looked like mustard and possessed a fiery disposition. It snorted at her as she tried to remember how to saddle the animal, and it refused to sit still even as she lifted one foot into the stirrup and swung her other over on top of him.

Her father stares at her beseechingly, but Marilyn is not swayed. "How's work?" Marilyn asks her sister.

"It's Kentucky Fried. Sucks."

There is no follow-up. There's nothing else to say. Adam waited for her outside the barn. He sat atop a dappled horse. In the muddy afternoon light, his fine clothes were the color of dirt. His hair hung thick and straight. His smile broke something off in her,

and she kicked her heels into the flanks of Mustard, hard. The horse lit out like buckshot, and Marilyn felt a laugh bubble up in her. She aimed Mustard toward the gate, which still swung wide and inviting. They reached the road, and Mustard slowed as if uncertain. Perhaps he'd never before felt the clump of asphalt on his feet. Marilyn dug in her heels one more time, and then she was flying across the blacktop. There were no cars passing, no city lights, nothing but the self-created wind that tore at her cheeks and the great gasps of the animal beneath her.

Marilyn chews. Faye reaches for the green beans. The potatoes are gone, the biscuits too. There is one chicken strip left. Marilyn's plate is empty. So is her father's. He's eyeing the strip closely, and Marilyn's full enough. But she considers grabbing it anyway, because he wants it. Before she can, Faye darts forward and spears it. She leans forward to do it, settling herself evenly between Marilyn and Haunches. This is not accidental.

Faye eats the final strip quickly, to a soundtrack of silence, and then dinner is over. There is nothing to discuss. Marilyn grabs the plates and takes them to the sink. Faye picks up the containers and deposits them in the garbage. Faye helps Marilyn scrub the dishes.

She ran Mustard hard until he got into the rhythm of running for its own sake, and then she let him have his head. The world sped past her, and she let it go. For a moment, she was flying, and she was free. It felt right, it felt good.

Outside, her father stands beside his car. He stares at the dark sky, at the clouds that swirl above him. They are thunder clouds. Marilyn stays on the porch. "There will

never be another day like this one," Haunches says. This is his final attempt at engendering what he would call compassion.

This is true, Marilyn agrees, but does not tell him so. She says, "There never is," and Haunches nods. His hand shakes as he tries to fit the key into the lock on his door, and Faye eventually leans over from the passenger seat to open it for him. Marilyn doesn't know where they're going to go, but she's given Faye the option before, to come stay out here. It's too far from work, Faye has said, and what would he do without one of us there? It is not your responsibility, Marilyn has tried to tell her, but Faye is a Ruth like Marilyn is a Ruth. Responsibility is what they do.

When Mustard stumbled, Marilyn went rolling over his back and found herself on the ground. Her elbow throbbed, the same one she had to ice some days after work, the one she warmed with a heating pad during breaks at the Buttermilk. Adam finally caught up on his own mount. Even jumping off, he looked graceful as anything Marilyn had ever seen. He offered her a hand, and she took it happily, pulled herself up. He smelled like wine and springtime grass, and he was sweating just slightly. She would have gone anywhere with him, if he asked. Mustard, it was clear with a look, was not going to be going anywhere again.

Before he can climb into the car, she asks, "Do you remember Margret Reed?"

"Sure," he says. "But I always preferred Keseberg."

The divide is stark. At the same time that Margret Reed was a martyr and a near-saint, Keseberg was another member of the Donner Party who hunkered down in a cabin to survive the harsh winter of 1846. Her father considers the whole episode a cosmic

joke, the grisliness setup for a punch line: when the snow had melted and the freeze had thawed, men from a search party reached the cabin expecting to find George and Tamsen Donner as well as a German man whom none of the Sacramento survivors had known well. Instead, knocking fiercely on the door, they had found simply the German, Keseberg. He has been, reported the search party, "particularly well-fed and well-nourished." These are the things that fascinate her father.

"Margret was a hero," she says.

Her father nods. "But Keseberg was an individual."

This is the principle demarcation that has always existed between Marilyn and her father. She lives in constancy, and he exists in the space between moments. This is one reason she was never much of a martial artist -- she has such a low tolerance for play, and possesses precious little imagination.

Adam watched the horse for a few seconds. The leg was broken, even Marilyn could tell that much. He pointed to the road, to a small pothole. "That's all it takes," he said. Then he reached behind him, to the waistband of his jeans. Again, Marilyn saw the Irish green of his underwear. There were stars on his boxers, and a leprechaun. He pulled the gun out -- a revolver, Marilyn noticed this time -- and held it casually in his left hand. Before he could square up and draw a bead, she took it from him and held it herself. She thought of Margret Reed, of the dog those children had loved. The wind brought the taste of apples to her tongue. She aimed the revolver at Mustard. Margret hadn't hesitated. In her ears, her heartbeat thumped loud.

She walks to the car. She leans in and tells her father, "I'm sorry I can't help."

He says, "I understand. We all do what we can."

What would he say if she told him about Mustard? About standing her with her feet shoulder-width apart, holding the heavy slab of metal with both hands? Would he understand that as well? Adam had told her to aim for the head, that anything else might require a second shot. Would he absolve her of her sin? She squeezed the trigger, and the gun bucked in her hand; she felt raw all along the meat of her hand, but Mustard was dead. All Marilyn does is go to work and go to school and come home and stare at her empty house. She should have left it at that.

She reaches into the left pocket of her jeans and pulls out two twenty dollar bills. They are not new, they are not crisp. Her father's eyes widen with something that is not exactly lust, not entirely greed. "Do not," she says, "spend this on bourbon."

He nods. "Not a chance."

"This is a moment of trust," she tells him. "I can't do anything more for you."

Haunches nods. He points up at the sky and says, "It's going to rain."

"About time," she agrees. She hands him the two bills, steps away from the car, heads back inside. Behind her, the engine rattles to life.

As she closes the front door, she hears the soft patter of rain against the roof. So deep into the winter, and this is the first rain of the season. She makes herself a cup of tea and listens as the rain begins to pour in earnest. A roll of thunder begins.

The day ends. There will never be another like it. Lightning slashes through the darkness, and Marilyn thinks of Charlie. She thinks of the day he came back from work, with wounds forked like lightning that traced the whorls of his body. He seemed so

normal at first, his quiet mistaken for introspection, and it took her years to accept that the man he slowly devolved into was the man he would remain.

The day she discovered she did not love him anymore, she was working on a crossword puzzle, pillows propped against the small of her back. Wheel of Fortune was on. She held a stub of a pencil the size of her pinky finger, a large purple eraser in the shape of a dinosaur on the nightstand. Also, a TV dinner: steak tips and mashed potatoes, peas, applesauce, a bite taken from each, fork piercing the mountain of potatoes.

"What's a five-letter word for, tired of the same-old?" she asked. Charlie sat at the pine desk with his hands folded inside each other, wearing no second layer though the house couldn't be warmer than forty. On Wheel of Fortune, they were trying to solve a puzzle concerning Travel And Leisure. The board read C _ _ N _ _ _ L C _ U _ _ E. The answer was Carnival Cruise. Marilyn had it before the U. A Carnival Cruise was the grand prize for solving the puzzle. If one knew how to play the game, it was easy. "Bored," she said. "I'm just bored."

Charlie didn't answer. Charlie never answered. He sat at the pine desk and stared out the small window. Snow spiraled through the air. The branches outside were thick with it, white and heavy, but the porch was clear. Down in the valley, off toward Deer Run Road, the ground was coated white, but as their small territory loped delicately downward, the snow disappeared in a jagged line. He unfolded his hands and studied lightning in his palms, the clear moment when his life stopped being what it was and became what it is, a change so drastic as to be written on the nearest parchment of veins, like the Mason-Dixon Line or the equator, mapped and drowning out his life line. The

pads of his fingers were gone, all sensitivity, even his fingerprints, that mark upon the world. What's left was a husk, shucked like corn, interior nibbled to a nub.

Marilyn worked at her crossword. She turned off the television when Wheel of Fortune finished, told herself she should try out for the program. She shut off the nightstand light and readjusted her pillows, rolled onto her side, face toward Charlie. She watched the rise and fall of his shoulders where he sat, the slight indentations of his breathing. Softly, she breathed his name, "Charlie," and he did not respond. She fell asleep secure, for the first time, that Charlie was gone.

Above the house, lightning splinters the night again. She sips at her tea. Faye and her father will be getting home soon, and they'll be wondering what to do next. Charlie will or won't be coming by, and he'll be needing all the help he does. Rosalind's going to be wanting her attention in the morning. Marilyn is tired, so tired of all of them.

Her father would have forgiven her, Marilyn knows. She finishes her tea and pushes out of her chair, heads to the bathroom and starts water running for a bath. Thunder rumbles heavy in the night. It sounds almost directly on top of her. She drops her clothes into the hamper. A hairbrush and tube of lipstick, both used this morning, have fallen into the sink. She steps into the water. Her hair dryer sits on the counter.

There's another story of the Donner Party that Marilyn remembers. Charles F. Stanton was a member of the so-called "Forlorn Hope," a small group that tasked themselves with crossing the snowy mountain once it became clear that the whole party would not make it. While the others bunked themselves down for the winter, Mister Stanton and others set out once more for Sacramento. They traveled for five full days,

and on the sixth morning, Charles Stanton woke up and knew he could go no farther. He lit himself a pipe and sat by the fire, smoking, while the others prepared themselves to trek. Finally, they left him staring into the fire, the smoke from his pipe lifting into the air, and he faded from his brief moment of history.

Marilyn sinks deeper into the water.

Of An Acorn to Become a Tree

From Main Street in Hangtown, where the noose and the galley stand, turn on Sierra Highway. They call it Washo Street in town, but that name drops off about a mile into the pines. Pass the old quarry, the split turnoff for Coloma, and keep driving straight. Five miles in comes the first stop sign. Turn left at the stop, on a road called Pleasant Hill, and roll beyond the fire station, the butcher, that gold mine with the weekend tours and the Chateaux de Hillbilly wine tasting shack. Keep going. Another two miles, past Pleasant Hill School and the old pasta restaurant -- the sign just says "Pasta," and it's open seven days a week from noon-8:00 no matter how dilapidated the sign or how bad the weather -- and past the empty video-rental store and the coffee shop that bought a Starbucks cappuccino machine so it can sell mixed coffee drinks, all the way to the stop sign at. Turn right, and follow Tuck's Tar Road all the way up the hill and then back down, then finally up that twisting steep grade they call the Hangman's Noose, where the road blasts sharply up and then curls around like the edge of a shepherd's crook. Then, it's over the one-car bridge with the yield sign that no one pays attention to, sliding down the other side of Hangman's Noose, where cars can hit eighty miles an hour and there's almost no visibility. Survive that, and then it's another right at the first stop sign you see, onto Deer Run Road. There, it's a straight shot to the end of the asphalt, then to the end of the rocks, until finally even the dirt road trails out of existence and returns to the original, an aging deer trail barely wide as a snake that tapers finely, until it becomes imagination.

It's twenty miles from the galley on Main Street to the end of Deer Run Road. From death to the end, in thirty-five minutes. Twenty miles and three stop signs -- left,

right, right. It's a hard road, that last stretch. Three miles of dirt, and near the end comes the split-off with Cabernet Circle and the always-open Christmas Tree Place. Then the "Warning: Not a Through Street" sign appears, and Deer Run Road becomes, essentially, a driveway. The driveway leads to Marilyn Ruth.

Gerald crests the hill and slows to a crawl as the asphalt devolves into rock, mindful of his grapes. It's 7:00 in the morning, and he is bleary-eyed from another twelve-hour overnight shift at the Flyers. The rain started early last night, just before his shift began, and it's still coming down hard. He turns into his driveway and stops, lets the car idle for a moment. In the tape deck, George Jones is talking over a softly-wailing woman, the saddest song ever written. Gerald lets it float into the chorus before he speaks. "You're welcome," he tells Charlie. "Hey, no problem. Happy to help. Anytime you need, just ask."

Charlie says nothing.

"All right, then," Gerald says. "Good talk. Get out."

Charlie does. He pushes out of the passenger seat, sets one foot on the ground and then the other. He closes the door and stands beside it. The rain drops onto him.

"Yeah," says Gerald. "Yeah, all right then." The saddest song ever written fades away, and with it goes Gerald. He throws the car back into first gear and disappears.

Charlie starts walking. It doesn't take long. Gerald's house is kitty-corner to Marilyn's, to the house he used to share with her.

He knocks on the door twice. He is wearing the same clothes he wore the day before and the day before that. Marilyn doesn't answer, so he tries the door. It opens

easily. He stumbles over the doorjamb trying to step inside, but catches himself. He kicked his shoes off, then made his way into the kitchen.

On the table sits a plastic bag from the Buttermilk. Charlie pulls the Styrofoam box out of the Buttermilk bag and opens it. Moisture drips onto his fingers.

Palming the plastic fork and napkin combination, he steps into the living room. The television is on, an early-morning infomercial for the Ab Lounge. Marilyn always said she was going to get one of those. The only thing that stopped her, she claimed, was deciding which one. The Rocket, the Circle, the Lounge, the Glider -- when you commit, you've got to be certain everything's perfect. Then she'd look at him, her eyebrows corkscrewed, and he'd look down at his food, the half-warmed microwave dinner: fried chicken and mashed potatoes, carrots, chocolate pudding. This was in the days just after his accident, when they still ate together, when he could barely speak but Marilyn had hope, and they'd watch infomercials and she'd comment on how much better their life would be if they just had this knick-knack or that knick-knack, and he'd stare blindly at the world around him and try to put it all together like a puzzle with a center piece missing and no picture on the box to work from, and occasionally he'd close his eyes and watch the lightning slice across his clouded vision.

Beyond the living room, the bathroom light is on, flickering brown and harsh. He eats two pancakes and all the bacon, but Marilyn doesn't appear, so he plods down the hallway.

The bathroom door is tilted open, and there is a smell in the air that makes him look down at the Styrofoam box to make sure there's no bacon left. He pushes the door open further and looks inside.

Marilyn is lying in the bathtub, water sloshing over the top of the tub and splashing on the tile. Steam rises from the water, warm and thick. Charlie almost shuts the door, looking at the ground to avoid her nudity, but sparks braising the surface of the water catch his eye. He sees her hair dryer floating, bumping her knuckle and then the side of the tub and then back against her knuckle. In front of his eyes, the lightning splices. He feels it rumbling in the back of his head, splitting and cracking, and he closes his eyes.

When he looks again, lightning still tainting his vision, he finds himself drawn to her eyes. They are open, irises the color of dried earth, the crinkled lids pale as a peeled potato. Marilyn made the best potatoes. They hit the stomach with one bite and filled him to his toes. Her eyes look up, locked onto the ceiling, hands curled as if reaching for something. He follows her gaze and finds nothing.

Charlie has never seen a dead body. He is a lumbering thing holding together small fragments of selfhood, a brain that fires slowly, that considers and considers again and still makes wrong decisions as often as not. He steps toward the tub, then away. He casts his eyes around the bathroom. Within him, there is the sudden, swift urge to cry, something he hasn't remembered to do for eleven years. The last time Charlie cried, it hurt so badly the tears felt squeezed out of his body in the same way that all his sense and personhood disappeared.

He stumbles out of the bathroom, out of the living room, out of the house. The rain has slowed slightly, now mists over the land. He walks into the forest, and keeps walking, into trees that have never looked upon a road. He walks steadily, and does not stop. After a while train tracks appear, both directions leading further into greenery. When Charlie loses himself, this is where he comes. Sometimes he turns in the direction that leads him to Hangtown, to people who will care for him, who will give him food or a comfortable bit of space beneath a store's overhang when it rains.

And there are times he turns the other way. He leaves it behind him, the accumulation of history and misery and pain that circles this place. The boys with no hope, watching jobs flutter in some other direction no matter which way the wind blows. The women in cabins with snow piling around, choices that either way feel evil. The men with their necks in nooses. And all the years in between then and now, generations passing time until they pass away, filling emptiness with stories that never change no matter who does the telling, a slow or not-so-slow devolution from youth and joy to age and grief.

Charlie bites his lip. Marilyn Ruth is dead. He kneels in the dirt that pushes at the black metal of the railroad tracks, and he begins to dig. The dirt is soft from the rain, and it squishes against the pads of his knees. It does not take long. The ground is pliant, and Charlie is determined. He scoops at the dirt with his hands, and he deposits his offering in an ever-growing hill off to the side.

There is a story that Marilyn's father, Haunches, tells to young students when they grow frustrated with their inability to execute a perfect roundhouse kick, when their

attempts at an *age uke* block fail to stop some meager punch. He tells them that the mastery they seek is already inside them, that the seeds for their personal perfection have only to be planted. Entelechy, that is the word that Haunches circles on the whiteboard with a dry-erase pen. Plant yourself, he says. Invest in yourself. Like the acorn, it is your entelechy to become a better self, the best possible self. Plant your potential, water it and let it grow. See what blooms.

The hole is three feet deep and long as his body when the train tracks begin to vibrate. Charlie can hear the rumble of an oncoming train. He stops digging and stands, watching the horizon. When the dark belly of the train comes into view, lumbering and thick, Charlie plants himself in the ground. He climbs inside the hole he's dug and begins to pull the dirt he's unearthed back atop him.

Charlie covers his entire body, his face and his toes and his arms. There is nothing of him left above-ground as the train rushes past, its shrill whistle piercing the air. The ground shakes, and Charlie vibrates like a burgeoning seed in his fresh-made pod. When he pushes out of the ground, he will not be what he was. Marilyn will be placed in a hole similar to the one Charlie has dug, but she will not come up again. Her potentiality has left her behind.

But there is possibility in the world beyond this moment. The train sluices past and then disappears. The ground calms. Charlie lies in his new-made bed and wonders, vibrantly, what he is going to become.