

## **The Invisible Hand**

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## **Part One**

## A Random Walk

She watched as the jury came in, watched with that dream detachment that sometimes comes to people in the midst of life-changing moments whether they know it or not. She watched the jurors take their seats, and in what seemed a rehearsed way, they all wore the same bland emotionless expression, if anything a bit drained was all, and sat motionless for the judge to call for their verdict. The Bailiff moved slowly, again like a figure in a dream, and made the transfer of the verdict note. Then the judge took the paper and opened it, slowly, so that it made an audible rasping sound, and that was just what it was, too, a slip of paper with a word written on it, probably in pencil, either one or two words, that was the balance, the only possible difference for the fate of the man who sat before her.

And she watched her father as he half rose and was half lifted from his chair. He stood there, his hands at his sides and attached to a binding that circled his waist, wearing the orange coveralls of the convict already. The fiery door showed up behind him, elusive to a direct gaze. When the judge spoke, his mouth seemed to speak in slow motion, and the only thing in the string of his phrases which she heard was the word, Guilty. Her father turned then, and again, as though he too had been rehearsed, his face showed no expression, nothing to reveal what he might feel, and she remembered that this was indeed a moment rehearsed for he had said to her, and more than once, never show your true emotions because that would give someone power over you. So she naturally wondered, as he began to move forward and turned just slightly her

way, enough to allow his eyes to meet hers in a lingering moment during which if anything she may have detected a smile, just what expression did her own face reveal?

Riding home on the bus she was aware of time speeding up. Moments, even the brief span of time from when she left the courthouse to when she got on the bus, were shooting by her and through her, rich, complicated symphonies of individual faces and wind and changes in the horsetail clouds in the sky, conversations, radio voices and music coming from cars, engine drones and laughter, winding up, speeding up. And there was no getting them back and no way of knowing just what had been lost.

The bus was a swelter of heat, stench of exhaust and foul odor. There were many people on the bus, everyone seated. One man lay reeking and stretched out on an entire seat. A few gray outlines of shadow keepers and other hungers hovered nearby too, but she knew by now how to adjust to their presence when they were on the scene. The bus rumbled through the city streets and the dust plumed behind it. The sun was low, orange and burning fierce and veiled in heat waves and smoky air, descending over the low hills and the black-etched cutout of homes, through palm trees that glowed like fabulous aliens. Gradually people got off as she road on, and she watched passively as the homes became smaller and the yards wilder and the streets filthier and more scarred with neglect. The man asleep then rose up, and his face was a quick-shifting mask of anger and bewilderment, hair like black-matted and grease-clumped feathers. She did not engage his glances as the bus came to her stop, but she felt him watching her as she descended the steps to the street, and his was the only form left on the bus, looking down at her through the window as the bus pulled away.

She walked the short distance to her home, and large trucks swept past her sending up their rooster tails of dirt. She lived on a road that had once been the main road but which now

paralleled the city and never entered it, a grimy ring around the daylight business district with dollar motels and boarding houses, dying but never dying off, yet it was still a heavily used thoroughfare because it had no stoplights or stop signs for thirty three miles and so people who knew used it to avoid the traffic of the main road and because the police never patrolled it. She passed the dirt yards where dogs slept on porches in front of screen doors behind which televisions glowed and sent up their phantom auroras. She passed the old man watering his patio who stood shirtless and bloat-bellied and leering with a cigar stub ground into his countenance. She passed through the little chain link gate and up onto the porch of her own home, unlocked the door and went in.

Inside, the air was hot and still and silent. They owned very little and little was left. Her father had pawned whatever he could to buy the lawyer he had, who was expensive but in the end little better than the court appointed one who eventually took over. There were no photographs, no mementos of any kind, nothing certainly of her mother. They had owned the house, but now the state would confiscate it, as they do in all cases like this. The lightning flash crackle of a door appeared on her left but was elusive to a direct look and vanished when she turned her head. She could still smell her father's smoke and his alcohol and the aftershave he used, and it nearly made her pass out.

She went to her room and sat on the edge of the bed for a long while. She sat there as the light faded, sat there unmoving, and in brief spasms of self-consciousness realized that she was thinking nothing at all. The light drained out of the room and she sat there in darkness, not so much because she was depressed but because she did not know what to do, now. There was nothing to tell her where to go, and so she sat. She was not particularly hungry. Then a thought came to her. It was like someone spoke into her head. And the thought made her stand and look

around her room and see and find her backpack. And with a little grin she could not have explained to anyone, she packed a few clothes and a book of Russian poetry and a notebook and the family gun which her father had said she would one day use, would have to use because it was a part of their lives so long to lose it was to let a fire die and might offend the ancestors, the otherwise dead, causing them to stir and become involved again against their wishes. Then she put the pack on her back and went into the kitchen where she found the last bottles of her father's liquor and took them into the living room which was empty with a bare wooden floor and poured out that alcohol and then lit a match and dropped the match in the pool of liquid and watched as a lovely blue flame whipped out like an electric wire and rose up in a glorious flame.

She walked out the door and did not close it behind her and did not look back. In the windshields of the cars on the street she saw the fire grow and shake and flick little fins as if waving goodbye to her as she walked away.

When she boarded the greyhound bus, yet another bus in an uncountable line of buses she had boarded in her lifetime, only a handful of people were evenly dispersed throughout the seats, so she was able to take a seat of her own. She put her backpack onto the rack overhead and sat down and waited. They were a silent collection on that bus. The cabin lights lit the windows into dark mirrors so that she could not see outside except for the people bent at the counter in the terminal café that was well-lit from within, while her own face and the faces of the rest of the passengers were framed and still and trapped in the darkness that roared outside. Then the driver boarded the bus and punched on the engine and rolled the destination sign through a succession of names until it stopped with the words San Diego. Another man outside slammed down the

cargo covers, and the driver pulled the doors shut, and they were almost ready to pull out of the station when a man came running and shouted at the driver, Stop!

The bus was just beginning to roll, and the driver grunted once and jerked to a stop and the man outside smiled and lifted a hand as if both thanking the driver and hailing to a crowd. The driver opened the doors and the man climbed aboard, carrying a small brown travel case of soft, spotted leather. He grinned and said, I thank you, bowing to the driver who only nodded and twisted his upper lip. Then he put the bus in gear and pulled forward before the man had a chance to take a seat. The man lurched to one side but caught himself quickly and with a kind of dancer's grace started down the aisle, taking the shifts and changes in motion somewhere in the center of his body and moving with his legs just a little apart, as easily as an experienced sailor walks the deck of a ship. There were any number of seats he could have chosen and have a seat to himself, but he stared straight forward and smiled and threw his satchel up on the rack right beside her backpack and sat in the seat next to her so close his leg rested against hers.

Howdy, he said. Jack. He extended a hand.

She felt herself pull away and inside herself but shook his hand anyway. She was thinking to say something like, please take another seat, or, I'd rather be alone, thank you, but instead all that she said was, Hi, turning her head quickly in his direction but not looking at his eyes so that all she really saw was the blurred shape of his face and the knife point of a sideburn.

What's your name?

My name.... she hesitated, then she said, Sara.

Very nice to meet you, Sara. Whew! I very nearly missed this one, didn't I? I'm just coming back from Mexico, he said, and she felt him staring straight at her so frankly and unflinchingly that she felt the heat of his eyes. It sure is a beautiful country, Mexico. Beautiful

place, although you have to be careful, for sure, if you're an outsider. It's better if you speak the language. Me gusta la lengua mucho, entonces fue facile por mi. Comprende? I was down on the west coast just South of Mazatlan in a little town called San Blas. Have you heard of it?

For a moment she was not sure if he was really speaking to her. His Spanish was poor and when she realized she had better say something just to keep him at bay or else allow him to burrow in with more questions about why she was so silent or why she was so unfriendly, she said, No, I haven't.

Oh, pristine, untouched. It's just a fishing village, really. Nothing there to attract your typical tourist. No Senor Frogs or jai alai or string of discos. Just a few restaurants and a whorehouse, but the beaches have the widest, flattest plane, you know, so that the waves break forever. They rise up a mile or so offshore and just fall and keep falling all the way in. It's truly a paradise.

Then why did you leave? She didn't want to encourage any conversation with him. The words had come of their own accord.

Why, he said, a grin rising, surprised, perhaps taken off guard. It's a strange story, really. Kind of a mistaken identity thing.

In a fishing village?

He leaned back a little as if to take a more careful look at her. Well listen to you, he said, and here I thought I was going to do all the talking till we reached Balboa Park and you're giving me the third degree. Well, I'll tell you, I'll tell you, and I can see that you're someone I can't lie to, it was me who did the mistaking. I mistook a man, you see, to be another man, and I'm not saying I'm the kind of man who can't make subtle distinctions. I'm a very cautious person by nature... But the man I mean was the kind of man that anyone would mistake for the kind of man

I was in fact looking for. You see, the man I was looking for was a stranger anyway, and I was trying to locate him based solely on a verbal description. I was told to meet this man at a particular place and at a particular time, and that he would be expecting me as well. So I went to this place at the appointed time and it just so happened that this place was a private residence and so not the kind of place you would expect there to be much confusion about, or at least you'd expect that if you went to a place at a particular time and were supposed to be meeting someone there, it would be highly unlikely that anyone else who was not supposed to be there would be there. And so I went out to this place, outside the village on a private road, out there with the macaws cackling down at me like they were warning me, I think that now, and it's coming up on evening with the sun already gone. But light enough. And when I approach the house, I see the front door is open, which I think of as odd even when I see it, but I keep on going and just before I can go through the door a man comes out and he's got a gun in his hand and he's looking like he's been roughed up a little himself, some blood coming from his mouth, and he points the gun at me, so I just stop. I don't say anything. I just stand there and look at him. And he says, Mas despacio. And I say, como? And he says, Mas despacio. And he waves his gun I think for me to come closer, but I do nothing. Then he points that gun at me more business-like, so I move forward. Then he sits down on the steps, and I can see blood, a lot of blood, spreading out on his belly and I think maybe he is going to die soon. That was one thing that hit me as certain, that I thought I knew for sure, and I looked at him, and I watched as he breathed very slowly, like he had to think about every breath to make it happen. And he would close his eyes for a long time and then open them again. And then he just leaned down onto his side like he was trying to go to sleep, and as he did that I saw through the doorway another man who was standing back in the shadows of the living room. I tell you, that's when I was shock-edged heart-stopped terrified. I

just turned and ran back down the road the way I came. So then I go back to the person who had sent me to this place, thinking somehow that I had been set up, but it turns out that neither of the men I had seen was the man I was supposed to see. It turns out that the house was not even the place where I was supposed to meet him. And it turns out that the house that I did go to was a place I should never have gone. And I think maybe it was a trick. But I couldn't be sure. But since I had gone there, everything changed, see? The whole case was altered. So now what was I going to do? I was left holding two bags, so to speak, and nobody there was a friend of mine. I left immediately. I left that very night. And what happened there, the truth of it and the people and the eventual outcome will always remain a mystery to me, but one which only makes me more glad than I have ever been to be alive and sitting here next to you. Because it's all blurring as it forms, you know? Like a tornado behind me—and here you are.

He stopped talking and looked at her, and she found herself looking at him; then he leaned forward slowly, more slowly, and kissed her, and she let him.

My Mother got real sick, she said. The land was a flat dry desert of nothing. A world dissolving in distance. Dust devils leaped up near the side of the road, and a dust trail billowed up behind the bus as though the bus moved inside a cloud generated by its own wheels. She got the flu at first and then she couldn't stand up anymore, said she was dizzy. We had family over and they knew she was sick, but when she started vomiting and couldn't stand for falling over, they just left. It was Christmas time and they were her people, but when she started to get worse they just left. My father didn't do anything. He told her to stop whining, that it couldn't be so bad. He just drank and said she was being a baby. Then she called me in. She made me come to her, and her room smelled of the sick. She wanted to make sure he couldn't hear what she was telling

me. And she said to me, she said, you go and get my diary out of my dresser, and she told me which drawer it was in and I got it. And she said, now you take that to the living room—don't read it, now—and you put it on the fire, you understand? I didn't want to do it, and I told her I didn't want to do it. I told her it wasn't necessary to do it, that she was going to be just fine and then she wouldn't want me to have burned it. I wasn't afraid for myself. I was afraid for her. I mean, I was a little afraid for myself because I didn't want to be alone, not with him. She wasn't able to help anyway, even when she was well. She was afraid of him, too. But I wanted her to be all right because I loved her and I knew that if I did what she told me it would just give her more reason not to fight to stay alive. She was losing, it looked like. She was wasting away. I didn't know everything that was wrong with her. I was twelve. But I knew I didn't want to burn her diary. I took it though, but I didn't burn it. I thought if I didn't actually burn it she would somehow know, even if she believed I had burned it, that her spirit would know and that would give her spirit reason to fight. I didn't want to be alone without her. But she was never like that before. I made her cans of soup and put them by the bed, but she never drank them and they just went cold and I poured them out. I slept next to her and felt her shivering. Sometimes she would say something and I would say, What? What is it? But she wasn't talking to me. She was more in her dreams. I prayed for her to get better. I prayed non-stop for six days. I said God could have some of my time, to just give over some of my time to her. But she didn't get better. She got weaker and smaller, and one morning she wouldn't wake up, but she wasn't dead. That's when my father called the ambulance and they took her to the hospital, but by then she was too weak. She was too far away.

He looked at her, his face close and his expression tight, an odd expression she couldn't read, a reaction maybe to either the heat in the bus or the contents of her tale. But she did not

entirely trust faces. She did die, though, in the hospital. But I never burned her diary. I kept it. I suppose that was wrong, but now it's the only thing left of her.

Land. Land and hours passed. Darkness in which not even their faces were visible, their hands interlaced, their mouths close as they talked through the blur of the night. I've had fifty kinds of jobs, he said.

Not fifty.

Maybe. I've done work most people would never do.

Like what?

I've dug graves.

You haven't.

I have. I worked in a cemetery in Louisiana.

Did you ever see a ghost?

Heard them.

What did they say?

This place is spooky...

She laughed and in her laughter her breath caught in a snort and she buried her face in his shoulder.

There were some gravestones that had worn down, he said. You couldn't read a name on them. Some that broke and sank into the earth. If no one came by or tended them, we just used the spot for another. The dead stacked on top of each other. I know it's a morbid thought.

What else have you done?

Janitor in a school. Nightwatchman. I worked for a catering service that did big, elaborate barbeques. That was in Texas. We did barbeques with these six-foot moveable grills full of mesquite. We roasted whole pigs in a pit in the ground. We did barbeques in the desert in the middle of summer with wet rags on our heads and fire singeing our arms. That was the hardest job I ever did. We'd be at it for twelve, fifteen hours for these parties of up to two thousand people. Companies mostly, mobs, weddings sometimes. I saw people pass out in the heat. I'd be alone at that grill for hours sometimes turning chicken parts as flames spat up into my face. Hell can't be much hotter than that job. Hotter than the smelting mill I worked in. At least there we had masks. I worked in a hospital in Arizona. I was worked in the cancer ward. Every day, they came in, those poor sick people. Wasted. Wracked by it on the inside. Old folks, young folks, children, even. It didn't seem to matter. At first it was hard to take. One little girl came in and got chemotherapy and radiation treatments, bald as a newborn baby. She was maybe eight. I went to the bathroom and I just cried like a... It was a hard job to do, at first. I would go home every night and drink a six-pack just to lighten up. The doctors were like robots. I guess you'd have to be. I couldn't do it after about six months. That was the last real job I ever had.

What do you mean?

I mean, at first, I thought maybe I'd like to do it is a career, you know. Work in a hospital, take care of people. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't take the suffering. I felt really ashamed of that for a while, but I saw what it took to do it, and I couldn't harden myself that way.

The bus pulled into a small town where lights slid by in lonely cones of illumination along empty streets. The driver pulled into a gas station with a little cafe and stopped. He didn't even announce the name of the town. It didn't seem like a regular stop. The lights of the cabin came on and some of the people lifted their heads and stretched and squinted into the night.

Some slept on. The driver pushed the door open and dropped down to the ground and went into the cafe.

You want something to eat? he asked her.

Sure.

They both got up and went down the aisle along with a few of the other passengers. You know, travelin's a lot easier when you have someone to talk to, and he put his arm around her. She let him, and perhaps it was that she hadn't slept yet, even though she didn't feel the need for sleep, or perhaps it was the unreality of the journey, or being on the road with no home now behind her drawing her back and nothing really before her making her careful to reach some destination, but it was all right, being with him like this, feeling like this. Her father had been a prison keeper. She never dared to have a friend, let alone a boyfriend. Now, though, she would do this, now, as if this were somehow an act of defiance, something so simple and really so normal. She let him put his arm around her, and she enjoyed the feeling of the weight of it across her shoulder, even the light way his hand brushed across her collarbone, this new feeling, this new way of being in the world. No wonder she couldn't sleep. Not now, not now that she was finally alive. It was intoxicating.

They slipped into a booth and a waitress floated over in that slow dreamy way people move who work through the night and sleep through the day. Anything to drink? she asked as she laid two slick, plastic-coated menus onto the table.

You folks serve any beer, here? he asked.

Bud. Bud Light.

Bud.

I'll have a cup of coffee.

Coffee girl? You sure you don't want something a little more adventurous? Have a beer with me.

All right. I will.

Bud, too? the waitress said.

That's fine, she said.

And why don't you go ahead and bring me some steak and eggs, he said.

I'll just have some toast and jelly.

Toast and Jelly? That's not enough food, he said. Eat up. You gotta eat.

No. Toast and jelly's all I want.

Expressionless, drained of anything resembling human emotion, the waitress wrote their order down on a green pad of paper and drifted away.

We should be in San Diego by morning, he said. You meeting any people?

I have a friend, she said. I knew her in school. She moved out there. We moved south, but last I heard she lives in San Diego. I was hoping to meet up with her.

And are you just visiting or what?

I don't know yet.

That sounds like or what to me. How long were you living in Houston?

About two years. We moved a lot.

Why's that? Your daddy in the military.

She smiled. No. He's not in the military. He changed his name a lot, too.

Changed his name?

Yeah.

What, then, he laughed, were you in a witness protection plan? Why did you move?

Well, I can't say for sure. I do think he was doing something illegal, though. That would explain why we had to move. We were always moving. Then she saw something change in his face. His smile faded for a moment, involuntarily, as if he had lost his ability to smile for that moment, and in its place arose a darker light, some dim and hidden thing perhaps or room of his personality coming to glow. Then he shook his head and smiled again.

Don't that beat the shit out of it, he said.

What?

And here I thought...and he laughed so loud that people in the cafe turned around and looked at him.

What?

Nothing. He said. I just had a different impression of you is all.

What?

I don't know. That you grew up in a proper home. You seem to be...well...you carry yourself...

He sent me to good schools, she said. I always went to very good schools.

Catholic?

Yes.

What a world. And you were on the run?

We spent most of our time in the South. Sometimes we were in Mexico. You know, he taught me how to shoot a gun. He said I would need to someday.

I'll bet he was right.

The waitress brought their food. He ate voraciously, looking up at her and shaking his head and smiling, cramming his mouth with food. He drank his beer and she drank hers. She ate

her toast and a few bites of his food that he offered to her. The beer made her head warm and light, and after she finished it he ordered her another and she drank that too and felt a pleasant confusion.

The bus driver rose and paid and went back to the bus. The rest of the passengers followed him. She walked out of the café with him and he held his arm around her shoulder tighter now and slapped his stomach and said, damn that feel's good, and leaned down and kissed her cheek and squeezed her stomach with his other hand and moved it lower and kissed her harder on the neck and said, Honey, I think we may have been made for each other. And for the first time she pulled back slightly as they separated to board the bus and take their seats.

They traveled through night, and the road was invisible. She sat with her head leaned against the cool window, feeling only the motion, the rock and occasional jolt as she drifted beside this man, this other person there in the darkness. He had now fallen asleep and she was on the verge, though her eyes would not release her, seemed of themselves to seek some vision, resisted the falling away which she felt every time she forced her eyes to close, closing them against a dry ache, closing them finally for what felt could have been a lifetime or more as she fell into a warm deep amniotic and depthless sea, phantoms and her own past around her like schools of blind fish nerving their way through dark levels, darting in and taking her with them so that she saw herself when she was a little girl in the field behind the house where she lived, and she was alone in the light in a field where rain had recently soaked the high grass. She crossed slowly, wading through the wet swales to a little shed at the edge of the field beyond which was a grove of maple trees in lush fullness swaying in a breeze that swept through them with animating force, and she went to the shed which was like some weathered outhouse with

bare wood grooved and warped and gray and with streaks of black descending from the bare nail heads. She opened the door. The smell hit first, a damp smell of earth and rot, and the darkness was at first a barrier against which she halted and waited for her eyes to adapt. And slowly she saw the dim outline of shelves and a narrow floor of dirt and a low ceiling beneath which she stooped as she went inside, cobwebs threaded in the rafters and flumed like thick-silked deep-white mouths along the rotting sill beneath a single window that glowed opaque from years of dust and heat and mold-growth. Along the shelves were hundreds of bottles. All of different shapes and sizes and colors. Then she reached out and touched them, not even picking them up at first but simply touching them, and when her hand came away the place where her fingers had made contact glowed with a strange luster. She picked one up. In her hand she felt the shift of the liquid contents, shook it and heard the liquid splash internally, and with her thumb rubbed the dirt and cleaned it so that when she lifted it into the light she could see inside a swirling shape of unmixed ingredients swirling like a tornado. In the top of the bottle was a cork, and with her other hand she twisted it and pulled it out and the smell hit her like a blow, wretched, putrefied, causing her throat to clench. Her eyes opened and it was like a film swipe, a dissolve, putting her back in the bus again, riding through the boundless night with the sea of black imagining on the periphery, and with a quick dip back into the borderland of consciousness she saw the house where she had last lived with her father and saw it as though she had turned and waited after the last departure, saw it swallowed in a rich and heaving fire, becoming a multileveled and rounded furnace which sent up emissary arms and long thin fingers that opened out into brief eyeless heads that leaped and held for a moment before they burst and extinguished in the air. Disembodied, she rode through other nights in the back of her father's car, and her mother was there and they were flying through the darkness away from another home, away from a whole

series of homes. Arrivals became a new routine. At first she would wait, would not even unpack but would sit with her things inside boxes, sitting on the bed in a room that was furnished since they always rented furnished places, sitting among a host of smells, the smells of others, the smells of all the lives that had tramped through and sat and slept and fretted and dreamed and moved on as she would too, and she knew there would come a time when the smell would no longer affect her, would diminish into what she thought was her own smell, her own life, and that was usually the moment at which her father would call them out in haste to pack once again and hurry and go. And gradually she had less and less to pack, leaving bits and pieces, books and hairbrushes and chewed-on pencils and photographs and even once a diary into whose hands she could not imagine it falling, yet feeling acutely the exposure and the loss, the violation even as someone who would crawl through that same room and smell those same alien and oppressive smells would find it and open it and at last read it. Then even that ceased to touch her, though all of it, in distinct and oddly pristine definition, remained catalogued in her memory. She could wander through each of those anonymous rooms in succession with her mind in this state, could see herself brooding before a portable television set as she watched the ghosts of the past prance around in reruns of old shows made in a time long before she was born but which through the repeated watching became so familiar she could at times believe those images were from her own memory, as though some parallel or past life transpired in the infinite realms of the possible that existed outside her boundary, that moved and pulled at her and even captured her for how long she couldn't say except that wherever she was or would go she would always return to the world of her father. Nightmare. Ancient shapes. A figure draped in robes, hooded, who lifts his cloaked arm at her and silent stands and by his presence locks her into place, holds her down without even touching her so that no breath comes, no sound emerges though she tries with all

her will to make some sound, tries and would even scream, knowing in some way that the scream would release her but feeling come out nothing but a hoarse tight hiss. She opened her eyes again back in the bus. Now she resisted slipping back in, but the reach and power of sleep is strong, her body still, her mind fighting against the nightmare which seems to be around her still, as though she has pulled it into this world with her, so that open or closed her eyes will see the contours of the dream, and so she does, seeing it in odd floating black spheres that dart and drift and hold and seem to breathe and watch in the air around her. She thinks if she does not look directly at them they will lose interest in her and move on. Others are here. Others move uninvited nearby and would take a peek through her mind if she allowed it, which she does not. She feels her own breath. She feels the mouth of a wolf behind her head. The wolves are circling her, just beyond her vision though she sees them anyway, predatory, moving peripherally though somehow unable to get at her, unable to fully locate her. She holds so still they cannot touch her. Instead, she darts through them, darts down, then up, away, away, away. Does she fully wake? She doesn't know. It is darker than ever dark. She is somewhere, but she doesn't know where. She must pass through it. She thinks this though she feels unsure how or where she thinks it. She has no body by which to orient her thought, her sense of what she is, that she is at all, and yet she is. That is certainty. She is. She knows this, even though all around her is indistinguishable. Extinguished. Blown out. She is. She knows this. She is.

## Asymmetric Shock

Gabriel High Bear stood in the line of choir children as the minister went from child to child, asking, are you a good Christian? And each child answered, uniformly, in almost the same tone.

Yes, I am.

Child to child, the minister went, asking, Are you a good Christian. He asked it with a smile, a proud cant to his back, turning slightly just as each child answered as if to reveal to the congregation the wonder of each face, each soul.

Yes, I am.

When he came to Gabriel, he asked again, in the same tone, with the same slight turn of his body, Are you a good Christian? Gabriel rose in his chest and answered, but he did not say, Yes, I am.

No, he said, I'm a Sagittarius. And the congregation, hearing this, laughed. Gabriel felt pleased by this and rose even higher in his chest and smiled back at the people. The minister smiled, too, but stood his ground and asked the question again.

But are you a good Christian?

This time, Gabriel looked into the eyes of the minister and saw something there which would not relent, something that spoke, telling him he had better say the same words that the other children had said, and he bowed a little, just slightly, and said, Yes, I am. He kept his eyes

to the eyes of the minister, and he kept his smile as he faced the man, but he knew in his heart that he was not a good Christian.

After the minister had asked each child the question and received the answers, the children filed past him, and he gave them each a Bible with a red leather cover and a clear plastic box which contained a black string necklace and a black wooden cross. They then took their seats and waited for the sermon to commence. Gabriel held the Bible and the cross in his hands in his lap and could not take his eyes off of them. The red leather cover was smooth and thick with gold letters on the front that said, Holy Bible. He parted the pages and looked inside and saw the colored drawing of Moses lifting his staff to part the Red Sea. He opened further on and saw Joseph being sold into slavery. He went even further and saw a picture of Jesus standing in a group of children with his arms outstretched. He wanted to put on the cross, but none of the other children had, so he waited. He looked out into the congregation and saw his mother's face. She was smiling at him, but he suppressed a smile of his own.

After the service was over, they went out, and Gabriel joined his mother and his sister, Jenny. He showed the cross and the book to his mother. They're just beautiful, she said. But what was that about being a Sagittarius? He shrugged. She was not mad, though; in fact, she seemed a little proud and said, You little kidder.

Let me see your pin, he said to his sister. She had been in the older group, and they had each received a gold pin with a little blue cross on it.

No, Jenny said.

Why not?

She just raised her head in the haughty way that she did and said, Because. He knew it was no use asking again.

Do you want to see my cross?

No, she said. I've already got one.

And so they went into the lounge and waited while their mother drank coffee and talked.

Jenny waited silently by the door. She would not speak to anyone, and Gabriel knew that to others she looked snobbish but that really she was shy. He waited with her, even though she sneered down at him as though embarrassed to be seen with him. Finally, she said, Go tell Mom it's time to go.

You go tell her.

It's your turn.

No, it isn't.

I went last, really. It's your turn.

He went over to their mother and took hold of her hand. She continued to talk and he gradually exerted more force on her arm, pulling her away. In just a minute, she said, and she went back to talking. He went and stood by his sister.

You didn't do it right, Jenny said.

You go.

When they got home that afternoon, Gabriel went down into the basement where his father was working. The basement was filled with easels and mounds of sawdust on the floor and sawdust drifting through the air. His father was at the table saw, cutting a board down that would fit into the forms he had designed and patented and was in the process of selling to the university, an order of over two hundred which he had to make himself by the end of the month. Gabriel stood by until the cut was finished, and when his father turned off the saw, he said, Look,

Dad, I got a wooden cross at church today. He held it out from his chest for his father to see. His father pulled back his goggles and looked down at the cross and then picked it up in his dust covered and heavily calloused hand, squinting at it.

Uh huh, he said.

I got it for being in choir, Gabriel said.

I know you did. That's nice. I've got to get back to this, so you go on upstairs, now.

Gabriel turned and went up the stairs and sat down on the landing and watched his father work. His father snapped on the saw again and picked up another board from the stack that lay beside him. He slid the board through, precise, clean, the blade loud shrieking as it cut the wood then just the humming of the motor. Gabriel watched, holding his cross in his hand. He was not a good Christian, he knew this. It was something he knew in his heart, but he wanted to be a good Christian. He wanted to feel only love for people, wanted to keep his mind pure and high and turned towards God. He wanted to do the things that God wanted him to do, wanted to keep his heart open to know what those things were. His father did not go to church with them. In fact, Gabriel knew that his father did not believe in God. He had asked him once, and only once, Dad, what do you think happens when we die? Nothing, his father said. Nothing happens, and he smiled strangely, laughing a little. So don't worry about it. There's a bullet with your name on it out there, but you don't know when it's coming, so there's no point worrying about it. Gabriel watched his father work, and he wondered how his father could believe in nothing. Nothing. What was nothing? His mind tried to see it. He closed his eyes. Darkness. That was nothing. But he could still hear. He tried to imagine not hearing. Silence. That was nothing. Darkness and silence, that must be nothing. Yet, that was something, darkness and silence, and he realized that he did not understand. He did not understand what his father believed, but he was afraid to ask

him because his father, like his sister, had a way of laughing, of shaking the head as though the question were too stupid to think about. Don't worry about it. That was all he could understand, but how could he not worry about it? He held his cross, thinking over and over, nothing, nothing, nothing.

Gabriel drifted through the schoolyard during the chaos of recess, the tag games, kickball, clusters of kids and others running, the seagulls overhead, smoke from the incinerator, and Mark Tunney by the brick wall, an outcast in filthy clothes with dirty hair and dirt ground always under his long, split fingernails. He was a violent boy, prone to outbursts. He was frequently disciplined. They called him the Detention King. Most children were afraid of him, and he had no real friends as far as Gabriel knew. He was intently running a toy tank along the wall, making shooting sounds and playing out a private little war, and in a moment of calm observation, Gabriel thought he saw the boy's life extending forward like a newsreel unveiling itself in a flash of sad apartments, lost jobs and eventually a tent alone in the woods. He went over to the boy and said, What kind of tank is that?

Panzer, Eddie said, and he kept on playing, making the sounds of war.

Can I see it?

Eddie stopped and handed it to him and stood there facing him. Gabriel looked at the tank. It was metal and had been hand painted with a light brown and green paint. He gave it back and said, Nice.

You can have it, Eddie said, and he handed it back to Gabriel. Gabriel held it in his hand again.

Really?

Sure.

Gabriel thought about it for a moment, and then said, No, that's all right.

Really. I don't want it anymore.

Are you sure?

Yeah.

Okay. Gabriel pushed it along the wall and began to make the same kind of war sounds.

Say, Eddie said, you want to come by my house after school? I've got a bike ramp. We can jump our bikes. Gabriel felt a tingling unease, as though he were being pulled into something, a friendship he was not sure he wanted. But he was holding the tank. He said, I'll have to ask my mom if I can.

Okay.

They played more or less together, but they said nothing, and the noon whistle sounded with its piercing lament and unheeded warning of bombs and death, and all the children on the playground flapped their hands against their ears or ran or raised their voices to match that wail. Then recess was over, and they went back into class.

On the cover of his Scholastic Book Club book two people in white fur were wrestling a mastodon down with rope. The land was blue-white snow. Gabriel went down the list of spelling, words, some simple, some a mystery. Magic words, things unknown. The rain slid down the windows and the clock seemed to stop for a moment, second hand jumping backwards it looked like, then starting again. Was that a mechanical glitch or time cracking its knuckles? His stomach boiled with a sense of dread. Why did he approach the Tunney boy? He was not at all sure now that he wanted to go over to his house, but the tank in his pocket had the weight of an obligation in it. It was a transaction, now, a promise only partially completed.

When school ended he lingered in the classroom and allowed Mark to go ahead. He was afraid the boy might wait for him, but he waited until he saw the other through the tall, warped classroom windows crossing the playground. Gabriel went out and kept himself hidden within the ranks of other children filing out of the school. He took the next street over for his path home so that he would not accidentally catch up to the other or be seen by him.

When he got home, he went in quickly and closed the door behind him. He was going to wait out the afternoon but realized that the next day would mean facing the other and then having to lie, because his mother was not even home and would not mind if he went out for a bike ride or to play at a friend's house as long as he left a note. And he did not want to lie. Nor did he want to have to make up further lies to avoid the other.

He took his bike from under the porch and rode down the driveway and out onto the sidewalk. He rode around the corner and east on 47th street past the Ford house and the other homes that all knew descent lives within. He road around to the other side of the block, a short distance all in all, and then he was coasting up in front of Mark's house, where Mark was already carrying bricks out to the sidewalk. Gabriel stopped and stood straddling his bike.

Come on, Mark said. Are you going to help or what?

The Tunney house was distinct on the block, front lawn a grassless plot worn flat and hard-pack smooth, the dirt a fine dust that floated up in the occasional breeze. The paint on the house had faded away entirely, leaving the siding gray and weathered, blasted by wind and sun to a warp of wood grain. The front yard and the driveway along the side were a dumping ground of old appliances and loose wood stacks and car parts and car carcasses and downspouts fallen from the eaves and lying where they landed. Quince trees grew in wild profusion, and willows and maples wove into each other with limbs that snagged whatever blew into their webbing. It

was a place of long, slow and perpetual ruin, and the family moved through the neighborhood with the glaring shame and viciousness of untouchables.

Sure, Gabriel said, and he laid down his bike and followed Mark around the side of the house to the back. An enormous mound of bricks stood beside the garage. The garage itself could no longer house a car, overflowing as it was with old boxes and planter pots and clothes and broken toys and bikes and tires. Gabriel stood for a moment in amazement, looking at the mountain of debris.

Here, you can carry them in your shirt, Mark said. You can get more that way. He pulled his shirt out and held the bottom edge as he lay bricks into its loom. Gabriel went over and pulled his shirt out and began to do the same thing. They carried the bricks to the front and put them down in a row along the sidewalk. They made two more trips and then had enough for a knee-high rise.

Come on, let's get the ramp, Mark said. He ran and Gabriel followed. They carried the plywood ramp out and lay it on the bricks and stood back. Mark stepped onto it and rocked back and forth to see if it would hold and it did, then he laughed and jumped on his bike. I'll go first, he shouted, and he rode his bike back down the street and turned around and stood there for a moment twisting his hands on the handlebars and making engine revving sounds. Then he rode fast up the sidewalk, his head bobbing up and down as he peddled. He hit the ramp, rose and shrieked and flew a bike-length before he came back down and skidded sideways to a halt. Yeeoww! he cried, and he turned to Gabriel and said, Now you try!

Gabriel climbed on his bike and followed the same path down the block. He turned and rode back, accelerating, heading straight for the ramp. And then he hit the ramp and rose. He held there aloft for a moment flying forward and neither breathed nor thought, then came down

hard on the front wheel and wobbled but maintained control. All right, Mark shouted. Gabriel smiled and turned his bike around.

They made several more jumps, and now Gabriel was getting a feel for it. Then Mark said, Let's make it higher.

All right, Gabriel said. He would admit no fear.

Hey, Mark said, follow me.

Gabriel followed him across the dirt yard and into the house. A television was on in the living room. The windows were covered with sheets, the couch and chairs covered with dirty sheets, the walls black to the height of the dogs that lay on the floor at the feet of a girl who sat on the couch watching TV. She neither spoke nor looked at them as they passed through the room. The kitchen was another matter, with dirty dishes on the counter, garbage bags overflowing on the floor. It didn't feel like the kind of space where food belonged. Mark opened the refrigerator and took out a package of bologna and yanked out a round and then offered one to Gabriel.

I'm not really hungry, Gabriel said.

They went out through the kitchen door into the backyard, and Gabriel went to the pile of bricks and began to collect another load. Mark stood in the driveway, dangling the bologna round over his mouth. Gabriel turned and saw an older boy standing in the back doorway. He leaned in the doorjamb and watched Mark, watched Gabriel. Gabriel felt the cool electric danger and averted his eyes and continued to gather bricks. When he had filled his shirt, he stood up and saw the older boy step out and lift his arm and throw something that flashed quickly then struck Mark in the hand. Mark's hand jerked up and the metal wrench the older boy had thrown clattered on the ground followed almost instantly by the slap of the bologna on the cement. Mark

dropped to his knees and began to scream. The older boy stood on the back porch laughing. Gabriel did not move.

That was a kind of laughter Gabriel had never heard before, and as he watched the older boy his head began to buzz and just like before he saw a wave of movie-like images of the older boy's life rushing by, a flash of forced march, a camp by a river, confinement in a small room, and then a huge woman in a billowing yellow dress appeared. She must have been their mother, Gabriel thought, as she grabbed the older boy and pulled him back inside the house. Mark was still on his knees, cradling his hand and sobbing. Gabriel dropped the bricks and went over to him and said, Are you all right? Mark's face was streaked with his tears, and he rocked back and forth but did not answer.

Gabriel stood there frozen himself, not knowing what to do. Then a strange sound came out of the house, a slow, rhythmic thumping, like a washing machine off balance. Mark rose and went up to the back door and peered in. He was still clutching his hand against his chest. Then he began to laugh, and it was the same as the older boy's laugh. He looked over at Gabriel and said, Come see this.

Gabriel approached, slowly, as if in a dream. The sound of the thumping and Mark's strange laughter mixed with the adrenaline of the violence that had only just passed and the bicycle jumps before that all worked up into nausea that boiled in Gabriel's stomach. The now fading light rolled into a sepia wave of unreality as Gabriel stepped onto the porch beside Mark. Mark backed away slightly, allowing Gabriel to move in front of him and peer into the house. One of the big black dogs lay panting on the kitchen floor. On the other side of the room, the mother held the older boy by the hair and was slamming his head repeatedly into the wall.

Gabriel pulled away. Mark moved back into the doorway, watching and laughing. Somehow, he had retrieved his piece of bologna and was now eating it.

I should get going, Gabriel said, and he went around to the front of the house and picked up his bike and climbed on and rode away fast for home.

Summer stretches out hours with cobalt light burning late into the night sky through the trees. Even the avenues seem to telescope so there is no end. Gabriel rode his bike alone through the illuminated and mostly empty streets, far from the Tunney's, past other mystery homes with their doors still wide open because no one used their locks, the smell of the blackberries richly fused into the honeysuckle and the warm currents of air as he rode, awake and alive to the ends of his hair, coasting through the paths of Pinehurst park, crunching over horse chestnut shells, cruising around the baseball diamond and kicking up dust with his bike tires, back down the overpass to the school and through the empty playground with chains tinging against the iron poles with the tether balls removed, and then back along the street to his home, the old farmhouse in the trees, the land a botanist's creation of Indian spruce and yew trees, camellias and rhododendrons and the intertwining snake-limbs of the wisteria.

He dropped his bike by the side of the house and went in and up the split stairs, one set heading down to the basement, the other up to the door into the hallway between the kitchen and the living room. Sound of a television, his father watching a baseball game. His mother talking on the phone. His sister alone upstairs in her room reading. This is everyday of their lives. This is how he remembers it forever. He moves through the hall and his mother smiles and reaches out and touches his arm. He falls into her for a moment, feeling the warmth of her body, feeling the vibration of her voice as she talks. She likes to sit in a little nook in the hallway between the

kitchen and the living room under a square-framed spot in the wall where an old telephone still hung, the kind with an earphone and a mouthpiece and the crank you turned to dial up the operator. Sometimes, he could pick up the receiver and hear a thousand voices. Sometimes it just listened. He knew the number by heart, there on a yellowed slip of paper under the handset, and would know it the rest of his life, LA2-6217. What did the letters mean?

He went past the living room and smelled the cigarette smoke. He looked in and saw his father in the chair in front of the television set. The lights were out. His father was smoking and drinking a beer. The sound was down on the television and the radio was on, playing a popular Mexican song. He watched his father for a moment, then moved in and stood beside him in the glow of the television screen. His father saw him and grinned and said, Hey, buddy. Then he nodded his head to the music and squinted. I love this song, his father said, don't you love this song?

Yeah.

His father was funny, happier than he usually was, and his eyes burned with a dark joy. He reached over and patted Gabriel on the chest and said, Ah, my son, my son, as if this were a powerful thought to him. And then he felt the cross that Gabriel wore and picked it up in his hand and looked closely at it and said, why are you wearing this?

I got it for being in the choir.

I know, but what does it mean to you?

I don't know. God. Jesus. Love.

Love? And he started to laugh, then stopped as if to check that he had heard right, Love? Gabriel said nothing. Have they been teaching you the Bible at church?

Yes, some.

And what have they told you about God?

That God loves us all. That God is love.

Oh son, his father said, and he laughed again. You've got a lot to learn.

Like what?

About love.

What do you mean?

Nothing. You'll see. And that was all he said, and all he would say. It's getting past your bedtime, now get along. He leaned in and gave Gabriel a rough hug, and Gabriel knew it was time to leave him, knew that if he tried for more his father would snap.

Good night, dad.

Good night, son.

Gabriel went up the stairs, stepping between the loose molding strips with nails sticking out of them, a project that had been half-finished for quite some time. The house was a series of unfinished projects. He climbed to the top floor and could see his sister, lying on her bed, reading. He went into his room and turned on the light. He walked the spiral path on the circular stitch rug, heel to toe, towards the center. From there, he leaped out onto the wood floor. He went to the open window and put his face close to the screen. Mosquitoes smelled him out and zoomed in. The stars blazed through the trees. The still air was full of crickets making their sounds. Others had lived in this house and in this room, and he felt the glow of their lives as he stood at the window, felt that he could if he tried remember those lives in detail, felt that those lives were calling upon him to remember, as though he were even now sorting through their requests. The farmer didn't trust the banks, and he hid his money somewhere in the walls. When Gabriel's family first moved in, he and his sister went around tapping on the walls, listening for a

hollow spot. Hidden treasure. This was now his family's house, home, all he had ever known, and though he could remember every summer, every Christmas, almost every person he had ever met, he felt the things that were beyond his knowing, felt them in a way that was nearly more real than the cool screen under his fingers or the mosquitos trying to push through. He felt things moving around him that he could not actually see, and all of it, what he knew and what he was aware of outside his knowing annealed in his mind in a vague blueprint he could identify but not look at directly, his gaze instead going out through the humming into the kingdom of night.

The games always arise in the gorge along the railroad tracks. It's a kind of borderland, a periphery. War was the most popular game. There was an overpass beneath which they gathered in the rain. They threw rocks into the creek below and threw rocks at the broken seats, lying in the gravel and blackberries along the side of the tracks, seats from a train wreck. They searched for bloodstains and thought they found some on the blue vinyl. They threw rocks at the passing freight trains. They divided up with one group going over to the other side and threw rocks at each other. Peter Ansel always wanted to be a German soldier. He was an expert on the World War Two German military: the Stucker, the Panzer, the blitzkrieg. He read *Weird War Tales* and obsessed on the various battles, and whenever a war film came on television, he watched with the rapt amazement of the last man on earth watching home movies. He watched like he was remembering. Then there was Dougie McFalls, who was the opposite. He was more interested in setting up the camp, pretending to sit through a lull in the battle. He was an intermittent member of the crew, and sometimes he preferred to play house games with his younger sister's friends. Stuart lived next door to Gabriel. He was a timid kid with a wolfishly protective mother, who, every time he left to play said, Don't eat dirt, you'll get worms. He was a small boy who had been

born premature and was thin-boned and a little wide-eyed and tentative. He preferred his own games but came out because he was coaxed by Gabriel. Georgi was Greek, and he had an accent when he spoke and always wore the same green jeans. He had a powerful sense of fair play and already said with certainty that he was going to be a lawyer. Those were the friends. They were in the same class and they all lived a few blocks from each other. During the darkest days of winter they often met in Georgi's garage and played games and watched old shows on a television set that had a coat hangar for an antenna. They went sledding at Pinehurst park and jumped the moguls and one time Gabriel split his lip and was walking home bloody when another, older kid saw him and laughed. But across all seasons, they played war in the gorge by the railroad tracks. Then they discovered the new game.

Chicken was not really a game so much as a trial. The name itself was the content of the rules, the goals, and the nature of its origin. It began on a hot Saturday. School was about to let out. They all met in the gorge, and Georgi brought a rope. They sat in the shade beneath the underpass, and he pretended to lasso with it, throwing a loop out over branches and saplings, catching nothing.

What are we going to do with it? Peter asked.

We could jump rope, Dougie said. Peter sneered.

Come on, Dougie, think.

Well, what do you think?

Let's tie it to two trees on either side of the tracks and when the train comes we'll see what happens.

Nah, said Georgi, that would just break it.

I've got an idea, Gabriel said, Let's tie it to one of these trees. We can make a swing.

That's a good one, Georgi said.

Should we tie a branch to the end to sit on? Dougie said. Or maybe just a knot.

A board would be better, said Georgi.

They scrounged around and came up with a board and laid it against the tracks and kicked it down until it was a good length then tied one end of the rope around it tight. Come on, said Peter, let's find a good tree.

Hey, said Georgi, over here. He climbed up the embankment and onto the overpass and went out about halfway and then leaned over and called down to them. Couple of you guys come give me a hand. Gabriel and Peter went up. Stuart and Dougie watched from below. Hold onto my belt, said Georgi, and he leaned out from the overpass and tied the rope onto the lower edge of the railing while Peter and Gabriel held onto his belt to keep him from falling. Go grab the end, Dougie.

All right. Dougie climbed halfway up the embankment as Georgi moved the rope back and forth, making it swing until Dougie was able to reach out and grab it. Got it! he shouted, holding it with one hand as he leaned back into the side of the gorge. They had a swing.

All right! Peter said, and they all scrambled to where Dougie stood holding the rope. Who goes first?

Georgi, definitely, Dougie said. It's his rope.

Definitely Georgi. The others agreed.

Georgi took the rope and backed up the embankment as far as he could while still keeping a hold on the rope. The others moved to the side. Georgi climbed onto the seat, pushed back with his legs, and swept forward past them and out over the gorge, and he made it to the other side, pushed off and came back and landed perfectly on his feet. He did not make a sound,

but he was breathing hard as he took another step back and launched out again and this time cried out, Whoaaaaah! as he swung out over the gorge and the railroad tracks and to the other side and back again.

They each went in turn and the rope held up and the board held up and it was the greatest of all games, the most fun, the most exciting. Time dissolved the afternoon. The sunlight began to shift away and pull out of the gorge until it came only in dusty rays through the lower branches and created a triangle of illuminated space beneath the overpass. And then they heard the train coming. Peter was the last to swing and come back up onto the bank and jump down and hold, and they waited as the train came through. And as it passed, they stood still on the embankment and watched with wide eyes and laughter and terror, looking at each other and the passing cars and the obvious intersection of the rope swing's trajectory and the path of the train. And so the real game was born.

How high was it? Georgi leaned out, with Gabriel and Peter holding onto his belt, while Stuart and Dougie stood on the embankment and eyeballed the level of the seat.

A little higher, Dougie said.

Not too high, Peter shouted down. Don't be a chicken shit. He was the only one of them who really swore.

That looks right to me.

Me too, Stuart said.

And so the new level was set. It was harder to get on, but the trajectory was now just above the top of the train, at least that was how they planned it, but someone would have to test it.

I think Georgi should go first again, Peter said.

Sure, now, Gabriel said.

Yeah, Peter, you wanted to go first before, Dougie said.

All right, I'll go first.

Then you're first, Georgi said.

Peter climbed on and swung out. The arc was short and fast, but he was unable to get his footing again after he pushed off from the other side and came back. But upon returning he failed to get a foothold. Ahh! he said, dangling. I'm stuck.

You're going to have to jump, Georgi shouted.

Peter leaned into the rope and back again and forced it into swaying in a small arc and then jumped off and fell onto his side on the embankment.

You all right?

Yeah. He stood up and grabbed his shoulder and sat down on the dirt and winced, but he was all right. The rope swing settled straight and pointing down into the middle of the gorge and hung there out of reach.

Now how are we going to get the rope? Dougie asked.

Go up onto the overpass and push it.

Look around for a long stick, Georgi said. And they scavenged around again until Stuart found a long, dead branch. Georgi used it to guide the rope back into the hillside where Gabriel took hold of it.

I'm going to give it a try, Gabriel said, and he pulled the rope back and prepared to climb on.

You gotta push off hard, Peter said.

Gabriel held the rope with both hands and jumped onto the seat and swung out fast through the strobes of light in the trees. He was back on the other side again in a quick return of the arc, but he was not able to get his footing. Before he settled to a stop, he put the rope into a harder swing, leaning back and forth, pushing for extension, but all he could do was get the tips of his shoes to scrape the dirt, nothing that would make for a solid landing, and he realized that he was going to have to jump, too. He tried to get his body turned around so that he was facing the opposite embankment, that way he could drop off and turn and possibly land on his feet. When he got the best height he was going to get, he dropped off and fell onto his back with a thud that knocked the wind out of him. He lay frozen, unable to take a breath. The others quickly encircled him, laughing and grimacing and shouting down into his face, Are you okay?

He was finally able to gasp and breathe and rise to a sitting position.

Who's next? Peter said.

Georgi went next, and he swung to the other side and pushed off again and was agile enough to jump in such a way that he landed on his feet and only had to drop to his knees and brace himself with his hands. Dougie went next, and he too fell. Then it was Stuart's turn. He did not want to go.

Come on, Peter said, we all went.

He doesn't have to, Georgi said.

Yeah, Gabriel added, he doesn't have to go.

Then he's a chicken.

That's so stupid, Dougie said.

I'll go, Stuart said, and he climbed up the embankment.

Right on, Stuart! And Peter grinned with mean victory.

Stuart took the rope from Georgi and climbed to a spot higher on the hillside. Then he leaned back and jumped out, but when he brought his legs up to throw them over the board, he knocked the board sideways. He slid down as the rope went forward, and the force of his weight made his grip slip so that he was barely hanging on by the board. He struggled to pull himself up but could not get back onto the board. Ahh, he shouted, help me! The rest of them scattered on the bank beneath him, calling out directions.

Pull yourself up, Georgi said.

Yeah, get up on the board, Peter shouted.

I can't, Stuart said, and gradually the movement of the rope narrowed, arc by diminishing arc, until he hung straight down over the tracks. The drop was a long way, enough that all of them knew it would probably mean a broken ankle.

Help, get help, he cried.

You gotta swing yourself over to the side, Georgi said.

Can you get it swinging again? Gabriel said. Use your body.

Then you can jump onto the slope!

I can't. Get help, Stuart said.

You've just gotta swing a little way, Georgi said, and then you can drop off and be safe.

Then Stuart let out a piercing scream in which was mixed the word, I caaaan't. And then he started crying.

We've got to get help, Dougie said. Get the fire department.

Come on, Georgi said, maybe we can swing him from above. Georgi went up the hill first, followed by Dougie and Gabriel and then Peter. When they got out onto the overpass,

Georgi leaned out while the others held his belt, and he began to push the rope back towards the embankment. But below, Stuart screamed, Stop! I'm going to fall. That's making me fall. Stop!

Try to hold on, Georgi said. We'll get you over to the side and you can drop off. It'll be easy, you'll see.

Nooooo! And Stuart let out another scream followed by more sobs, so Georgi let go of the rope. It gradually settled back, straight and still. And then they heard the train.

Stuart, the train is coming, Georgi said. Let me swing you to the side. Stuart did not answer. Georgi called down, Stuart, the train is coming. You've got to let go. Gabriel and Dougie and Peter looked at each other, then they all began calling down to Stuart.

The train is coming!

Let go.

Drop down.

The train is coming!

Stuart!

Let go.

Come on, drop down.

But Stuart did not say a word. He clung to the rope, frozen, not even sobbing now but whimpering slightly with his face pressed between his arms.

Stuart!

The sound of the train was growing, coming from the other side of the overpass and the banded rays of sunlight shooting through the trees.

Stuart!

Let go!

Stuart!

And then the train was visible. It appeared out of the trees, out of the sunlight. Perhaps the driver saw Stuart but did not believe it. Perhaps Stuart's form was buried in the shadows, invisible. Stuart! When the train swept under the overpass they all leaped to the edge and looked down. Stuart never moved. And then he was just gone. They watched in mute horror. It was too unreal. And they said nothing the entire time the train went beneath them, the ground trembling with its passing, while the wooden board tied to the end of the rope bounced along the top of the boxcars.

### **A Bounded Rationality**

When he enters in, the bar is comfortable darkness. The street outside is still a boiling mass of construction, torn holes, piping, the new lines they will lay for the transit system, but all of it retreats in a world snuffed out as the doors swing closed behind him and he makes his way to the end of the bar where he usually sits and sits now again and nods to Hal who smiles and says, Hey, Jones, how ya doin'?

Alive and kicking, mostly kicking, Jones says.

The usual?

Certainly.

And it appears before him from Hal's hand, a perfect glass of liquid oxygen from which he drinks and becomes once again a whole civilized human creature. He nods to Hal for another, and Hal already has it made.

Then he has another. And he doesn't speak to anyone, though the bar is a brew of noisy drunk conversations going on around him in a conflagration of tongues, the babble of the Byzantines. They are flowing in from after work. Like him they are sliding in and out of their lives. After the first two drinks, he no longer thinks about the job. The drinks have freed him from that and he hovers now in the hazy chamber of laughter. The job has lost its grip, and the job hates to lose its grip, keeps a finger hooked around the rope at the base of the brain. The job reveals the designer at one remove that keeps a hold, and only through great theatrical measures

and the gentlest social libation can one escape the grip. It's all temporary. Now, in his breath, in his heart, in his free flying mind, he achieves liberty.

She is slender and her hair is black shines luminous negative space, a piece of the obsidian all. He thinks this, thinking on as he enters another round, that her beauty is a kind of force burning through the material of her dress, her skin. Energy is rising up from its mysterious source, depths we will never behold entirely in this lifetime, halve it down as you may, and it is coiling and curling up inside this shape of beauty. She is with another woman who has her back to him. He tries not to stare. It's not her in particular but the enigma she reveals. He has just enough ground to realize he is two drinks or so beyond the ability to engage in a light yet meaningful way, that if he were to speak now his voice would come out through partially disconnected and excessively loud circuitry. Thought is moving faster than words, there under the peeled-back casing. From this velocity he has the ability he would not otherwise have to perceive this terrible beauty that springs up blob-black as if whole chunks of the setting were removed or heady heads were pushing through, even if he cannot touch it or communicate in some groping, elemental way with it.

He has another. His fingertips are cold with it. And the dark enigma resists a direct approach. Now he is on the rise. The ground is shifting. There is an electric field everywhere he lookss that he hears crackling. Sometimes the crackling comes from his skin. No, the crackling comes from under the skin. When he moves his head quickly, everything dissolves into particles. You could put your hand between the spaces between the orbits if you only had a hand. Imagine pulling back the skin of time. Everything reassembles when he stops. Stillness is a stance. The stopped moment is where the seams show up.

Someone appears, a young man laughing. He is warped youth and veiled menace and dives into Jones's vicinity with a slur of editorials which come out like garbled incantation, bizarre and meaningless, something like Halomonom, lokiter ronmonolam. Roat? Roat? Then he splits wide with laughter, and Jones realizes that in the reality he has dislodged himself from, the black-haired woman has shed some essence revealing this strange reptilian rider with scaled cheeks and blue shimmering eyes and mouth puckering and sucking and smacking wet sphincter. Who? Who? Oh. She is the octopus inking the waves.

Jones turns away and turns back again and the creature is only woman. He rises from his place and signals in that simple way that looks like a blessing and pays for his drinks. Haven't I been here before? He lunges half a league onward. The crowd folds in behind him, opens before him. Strangers lean in teeth gleaming and eyes blinking and laughter and voices mingling, and he smiles, he thinks, as he moves through these funhouse mirror scenes.

Through the door opening the world howls. Cranes. Jackhammers. The cardiac beeping of trucks in reverse. Steam. A demon from above dropping a wobbling egg from its dripping mucoidal pouch. The moon with its own distractions.

He staggers on and lets his body to drive. He seeks the bus numbers on the bus stop post. People are waiting around him with their blank regard and homefire stares. Others are standing in groups by the soup kitchen under the overpass across the street. Others are emerging from the ground with wet limbs and tendril hair, their broken shells still clinging to the skin. Someone takes him by the arm, a woman, her face burning through the halo of her hair. Do you want to go to the party?

He is standing in a doorway. The automatic doors open and close and open and close. Move on, buddy, someone shouts from a bright white distance, a row of cashiers, row of shelves stocked with things things things.

He careens off of something. Watch it! he hears.

The streetlights burn and waver and circle each other in blurring veronicas with flames inside of flames that sputter and flare. Olé! Rain is falling, and he feels it soaking through the shoulders of his coat. The neon of the Market shines and bleeds across the bricks and the black asphalt and the dark crowds coming from everywhere.

The bus arrives and he climbs on board. He pulls his wallet out and shows his pass, and as he does, the bus moves and he quick-steps down the aisle and no one is looking at him, then a voice loud saying, Congregation of The Dead, as face after face turns away and he fleeting realizes he is the only one speaking. What else has he said? He collapses in an open seat. The bus is hot. He is soaked and steams. I am made of steam he hisses. He laughs and melts against the window. The sky is a shimmer of jewels, glowing primary colors. Red. Green. Yellow. Blue. He shuts his eyes and spins and spirals into white falling into black and out.

Jones knew money. That was his gift. He made his clients money. That was his curse, too. He never invested based on a hunch, at least that's what he told the clients. He wasn't pouring over numbers, either. That's not what money was about. Any fool could read the trend in prices, read the news, anticipate the acquisitions and the mergers. Any fool could buy low, sell high. That wasn't the game, either. That was a Mickey Mouse version of the long game and a chore for numbers people, and he had never met a numbers person who knew how to find the living wire, who had any grace or charisma, who could lead anyone into the zone. Money, and he

never told the client this, money could never beat grace and charisma, yet grace and charisma were the only things that got you into the zone. It was important that the client believe first and foremost in charm, and so he put them on the track, cultivated their portfolios, taught them how to live with money but even more so, and this was his secret pedagogy, how to live. Once locked into that trajectory, all the gears would mesh.

When Mrs. Breen's husband died, she was living like a maid. Mr. Breen was a tightwad penny licker who lived embedded in the hum of machines, an expanding chain of laundry shops which brought in more money than he knew what to do with. Actually, he did know what to do with it, being a growth: he built more shops. That was the only way he could think, a feeding organism. He was more like a machine himself, and yet he was rich, yes richer than a king. But Mrs. Breen never knew this, or if she did she didn't realize it, because they lived in a simple house under the water tower and a transformer with a watershed for a backyard and convinced themselves that they were simple country folk. When he died, quick and sudden as a rush job, his heart stopping on its last key-code digit, she had no idea how much the business was worth, how much someone would be willing to pay for it, since she had no knowledge or ability or desire to run it herself. But when she found out, the pain of her loss shifted quickly, and a kind of quizzical resentment rose in its place. That was the moment he knew she was someone who could learn to actualize her full potential as a being of grace, and he would show her the way.

After that she went to Europe—twice. And she now hosted the largest collection of glass art in the Northwest, housed in a cliff-top home with high ceilings and thick blond pine beams, overlooking the Sound and the Olympics and the City itself. He didn't really agree with her taste in art, but it wasn't for him to judge her way of living only push her through the door of living it. She was an art lover, now, and that was the point, that was all that mattered. And she trusted him

entirely with the estate of her financial affairs. He made money for her, and by this she in turn made money for him, and they were both happy and they never spoke of the courser matters of means and numbers, nor where her streams of income went on some occasions and how those little journeys didn't have to show up on official records but could blossom in ways that made both lives blush. In fact, if she ever did try to bring up the issue of actual amounts and where they were and how they were invested and how they were doing, he was always careful to guide her back, like a lighthouse beacon, from the dangerous rocks of financial scrutiny, and he did this most often by raising the image of her dead husband like a skull pulled from the grave and hung before her as a warning, as if to say, see, this could be you too if you become too curious about, toto distracted by, the matter of numbers.

Yes, Mrs. Breen had blossomed. He considered her a friend, even a kind of protégé. And there was Mrs. Ansel and Mrs. Kline and Mrs. Woodruff. Most of his clients were women, it was true, but not only because he primarily sought them out as a protector in a time of extreme vulnerability during which a more unscrupulous person might try for advantage, but also because he found in women the aesthetic he enjoyed so much in himself, a sense of taste, a feeling for refinement, and an ability to learn. It was true that most men simply had to be involved in the intimate details of their money. They couldn't help themselves. This was the frontier, after all. And there were women who were just the same, it was true. But with these, he simply could not work. An artist, after all, cannot work hobbled by the scrutiny and questions and certainly well-meaning input of the audience. It had to be a harmonious relationship, a trusting relationship, a relationship which found its shape and motivation in a feeling for life.

The truth was, he rarely attended to the details himself. He had to be acutely cautious not to become sacrifice to the same hazards he warned his clients away from. That was the job of the

accountant and the broker. They were inclined to this kind of work and performed their functions well. His job was to cultivate relationships, to be in the right place at the right time, to troll the culture for its active energy spots and then to siphon off the overlooked abscess here and there and charge them with his own kind of magic. In order to do this, he had developed his ears. He carefully culled information such as who was replacing who as a marketing manager, what ideas were they onto, who had capital backing up and underappreciated, who was starting up a new adventure, and always who was coming and going from this world, and this information he fed into the system of his brokers and investors. That was the legitimate part. It was that simple, really. He absorbed information, trolled and siphoned it through the baleen of his creativity, and moved it into the right place and let the numbers incept the way they naturally would. Not that everything hit. There were losses, too. There were always losses. But even losses had value accountants and tax lawyers could leverage. Losses were part of the general and obvious game, and unless they completely decimated the principal, those losses were not matters for concern or conversation and could rightly be viewed as the inevitable systolic signature of an investment in life. The key to winning was to simply keep on playing. Play the strength when you found it, stay close to the hot spots. When a person or a company went cold, move on. And that was just what he did. Sometimes he lost relationships this way, even ones that seemed based on the most deeply rooted common values. Nothing remains static. Yet, if these friendships did not last, then they simply weren't meant to be. Letting go is the traveler's secret weapon.

Yet within this perfectly artful system, there were times when it became simply a job. How did this happen? It had little to do with the numbers or the success or failure of investments. That was the smallest actual concern and focus of his job. It came with the contact, with the people. As beautiful as any of these relationships were, they were still, as much as he tried to

deny it, based on business. And because of this, there was an act he must always maintain, and moments when he had to bite his tongue, as they say, keep silence or even speak when all he wanted to do was be silent. He had to give so much of himself in the cultivation of these relationships that when the chance to actually be alone arose, he often faced a wall of exhaustion and lay stone still on the floor of his office or home, unable to move, plastered to the bottom of the sea as the black clouds coiled above him. These were dark, black ass times. These were the sink holes, the despair spots, the wasted drained-out husk depressions that were sometimes almost insurmountable. They were moments when his job displayed itself as what it was: a job. And that could be unbearable. A drink or two would sometimes help. Three or four were often necessary to regain a necessary balance.

In fact, he did some of his best work drunk, particularly if the client was drinking with him. Those could be true moments of inspiration and even friendship, as he liked to believe it, the spirit punching through. Mrs. Ansel had a wonderful sense of humor and drama, even if she was sometimes sexually demanding. She once told him the most harrowing story. Apparently, her son witnessed the death of another boy. It seems they had been playing near some train tracks and her son's friend had somehow gotten himself onto a rope swing hanging over the tracks and been struck by a passing train. The boy was killed instantly. My god, Jones said when she told him this, that's absolutely tragic! We must have another drink.

His own finances were, alas, a shambles. He had personally invested money his wife had inherited into an upstart venture, but a digital coup annihilated that investment. Some disasters can't be anticipated. It had its eroding effect on the relationship, and then she targeted what she thought were his obvious weaknesses. The war of attrition raging on and on. She could not accept his drinking or the demands of his work, and so finally divorced him. It was inevitable, he

now thought. The dividends were diminishing. Her first husband had drowned, leaving her with two children alone. Yet that first husband still haunted the house. His picture hung in the hallway and she refused to take it down. The children never warmed to him. In fact, they were downright hostile. The boy, who was older, would only call him by his first name and regarded him with the glare of a rival gorilla. The girl was simple and cowed and sweet in her way. But he watched as her mother whittled down her personality by passing on in some blind and aggressive way the shame of their father's death, saying things like, Well, if you act like that, you know, people will only say it is because you don't have a father.

Relationships. He was not born to succeed in them, himself, not romantic ones at least. He had the talent to create and initiate them, with the arc always tending towards his own detriment and eventual sorrow. He was born alone and lived alone and, well, his death was a daily meditation. How would it come? In a long slow sickness wasting away, deterioration and quiet, painful annihilation? Or in a sudden accident? Or by his own hand? Or the quick and forgiving death of the worker whose heart one day explodes like a glorious nova? Each morning when he rose, like this one, and pulled himself from the catafalque of his own excesses, he wondered how death would visit him and what sort of warning, encouragement or insight it would give.

And so he climbed back into his skin, wretched, nauseous, sneezing, blear-eyed and dark in his mind, showered slowly and without resurrection, dressed in clothes that felt like sand paper on his inflamed flesh, and drank coffee as he gazed eastward through his living room window, the sun burning dull in a bank of grim gray clouds and the people of the neighborhood creeping germ-like from their homes. Good morning Mr. Jones.

A drink by mid-day, that's what he thought. I'll have a drink by mid-day. Just one. I'll go over to McCormick's and have one glass of wine and a little bite to eat. It will be refreshing. Constitutional. Invigorating and inspiring. It won't be like a drink at all. It will be with a meal, so it's not really like drinking at all.

Russell, the hungry little toad and a new man at the firm, a new member of his division, was breathing down his neck. But Russell was a numbers man only, no panache, no flair, and Jones knew this. No class, all clothes and that nasty way of finishing people's sentences for them. Here he comes, all gloat and aftershave.

Hey, Jonesy, how are the little old ladies treating you? His teeth were large and white.

I suppose you've been trying to cover all the losses from that dip on Friday, haven't you, Jones said.

I'm saying buy, buy, buy. Its bargain basement Monday right now, buddy. Even the small fry can take a bite. Put the geris on it.

Jones thought: Russell never actually looks at you. He's always looking around for another place to be, another soul to suck. One drink by mid-day, Jones thought. One drink. He said, Ride out the wave, is that it, Russell? All illusions? Smoke and mirrors? Reality lies in the imagination and we're in it for the long haul? A snake biting its own tail? He lifted a collegial fist and noticed that it was shaking. Did Russell catch that?

Yeah, Russell snorted, right. And he was already moving away before the last word fell from his mouth.

One drink.

The office was like a slow-motion reel of grainy paper figures curling up under a heat lamp. The nausea crested and fell. Jones kept his office door open, but just barely, so he wouldn't appear to be hiding, which he was. Business, business, business. He read his messages. A meeting was scheduled for 2:30. Who meets at 2:30? People like Russell. One drink. And it will have to be just one.

He checked the updates on the trends, but nothing caught his imagination. His office overlooked the sloping parking lot of Pioneer Square, the sinking ship as they call it. It glared in the light. Everything glares. A large dump truck lumbered up the street and his office windows rattled from its passing. The light itself cut his eyes, and now this sound assaulting his ears. The window glass was warped, liquid and rippled with age. Breathe on it and all the faces of the room's occupants will appear. A brief wave of vertigo hit him, slight throbbing in the arms, tingling in the hands, a copper taste on the tongue and that black spiral closing in around his head, but he kept to his feet. To pass out was not without its allure.

His account was heavy with old messages, the glowing anxiety of clients who listen to the news and panic. He was waiting for another few hours for the numbers to change. They always rise soon after a dip as the bottom feeders come in and the middle cruisers get lured back. After six percent, he'd make the calls, which would just be hand-holding and reassurances. This has happened before, in various forms, from priest to legislator, keeping the calm was the art of leadership. The system always recovers.

## **Part Two**

## The Paris Club

She awoke in a grainy dawn, the bus rattling around her like a covered wagon, and for a moment she had a vision of herself in a time long ago crossing the country and not for the first time in a wagon on a rutted road over this same land she was now traveling over, and she was convinced by the impression that this borderland to sleep gave her that she had in fact lived that life and that it was only now surfacing in her memory because of the gentle break in the scene as she drew herself from sleep. He was awakening beside her, his eyes opening to hers. He smiled and said, Morning sunshine. He slid over and kissed her vigorously, then pulled himself up and stretched and squinted at the gray land outside. here do you suppose we are now? he said.

New Mexico? she said. Maybe Arizona?

Nah, not Arizona yet. He yawned, nodding his head. Then again, maybe so, he said. He leaned across her and shoved the window open and stuck out a hand and felt the air outside. Dry, he said, and pulled his hand back in, letting it rest around her shoulder. So what do you say, when we get into town, you let me show you around? I've got some friends. You'll like them. They're real characters.

I'll bet.

Really. They're good people, trivia-night crowd. A little strange, maybe, but good-hearted. Old Francis, now he was once married, has a kid. About as normal a guy as you'd ever meet.

Was married?

He got divorced a few years back, but he's better for it. Last I heard he had a little business of his own.

Doing what?

Oh, selling things people need to get rid of in a hurry.

Great, she said.

He smiled. I'm only kidding, he said, pulling his arm a little tighter around her shoulder. These are the things some people do, you know, when things fall off the back of the truck. It's a bit overcoat but harmless. I've known him since the cradle. And then there's T-Bear. Sweet fella, Canadian, I think. And Piston. He's a real character, too, full of piss and vinegar.

His name is Piston?

That's just what people call him.

Why?

He's a fireball, that's why. Always going. He's from Kansas, but he ran out there on energy you can't keep up with. You'll love him. You'll love all of them. There like my family, which is better than family.

Where is your family? Your real family?

Well, now, that's a long story.

We don't seem to have any place special to go.

All right, then. Let's see now...well, to start, I come from Utah. Yes, Utah and all that means. My father was...something about that part of the world...you might want to say he's insane. Not the kind of insane that would drive him to an asylum but the slow creeping slithery snake kind of insane, the kind of insane of a revivalist preacher, which is what he was, the kind

of insane of a man who fights with his god, can you believe that? Fighting with your god? Devoting yourself to this god and in a way hating that god and fighting against that god with your acts as if to say, all right, I'll do it, but just to spite you, to make you save my soul, and things like that he used to say late into the night, crazy nights so we thought he was drinking, my two brothers and my sister and I, but he never drank. He was not a drinking man. No. But he was a man drunk on his religion, addicted to his faith. And I don't know, he wasn't always so somber, he just burned. He scared people but not with the fear of hell. He didn't think anyone was going to hell. He didn't think hell was any place other than this, and he said it was within a man's power to live in hell or heaven right now, that the kingdom of god was upon us, meaning within us as well, and so he carried on conversations with the dead, with angels, demons, demigods.... People came to see him and he would pray with them and summon up their dead relations and speak in their voices. People would come with their ailments and the ailments of their brothers and mothers and children, and he'd go into this kind of trance, sometimes lasting for hours in which he would not say anything at all, then come out and say something like, you need to put the boy on a diet of vegetables only, eliminate all meat, for now. His blood will respond. Or you need to move north. Or you need to shed all your leather. Or you need to stay out of sunlight for the season. Things like that. And daily he prayed, but it was not the kind of prayer you might hear in a regular church. When he prayed he would rant, he would call his god to task for the things he considered unjust in this world, saying all right now, Lord, there's this problem of sickness, a bad sickness in the people, and I'm doing what I can, but you've got to move in their hearts, you've got to move them, move their heard hearts, these people are sick, Lord, lost in money, lost in gluttony, lost in the bloat of their knowledge, lost in fear, lost in lust, lost in want. And we don't need another divine prophet. We've got divine prophets. We need you, Lord, to rise up in us, to

burn brightly in our hearts. Now do it! This is no time to sit back and observe, no time to lay dormant, no time to be abstract and eastern. I'll do my part, Lord, but you've got to come to us, give us your fury, give us your love, give us your strength and your beauty before we falter and it becomes too late. And if it is too late, then give us the vision to see clear into the next world, Lord, and don't let me live out my days in the realm of the dying and the suffering alone, come, come with your burning music. Or if I must, then give me the sign and I'll do my ministering in your grace, but tell me, Lord, tell me now, now, do you hear? Now! Do it! And he would go into a fit of talking, words pouring out of him like nothing you've ever heard before, but sounds like words nevertheless, like something that should make sense but doesn't. He burned on the edges of his mind, on the edge of this world, and though he was never cruel or mean-spirited or unfair or unkind, we were afraid of him. Who wouldn't be with that kind of craziness? We weren't the kind of family that went on trips to the Grand Canyon or to the beach. He was too on fire for anything that conventional. And anytime we were out with him, people would approach him, they would come up to him like they knew, they just knew, like some network informed them or else they just saw it in his eyes or burning in his face, these filthy, homeless, sick, decrepit bastards, stinking foul and penniless creatures that could barely talk, and they would zero in on him and take his arm or his hand, and he'd get into a clutch with them and nod with great earnestness and intensity like they were old friends, and he'd whisper in their ears, tell them secrets, things that made them jolt back and either smile or weep or sometimes just go into a daze but go away as if something had been sprung inside their brains. And when we asked him what he said, he would never tell us, or he'd just say, I told them god's words, which we knew meant the words of his prayers, those weird, gobbledy sounding and a little scary words which

made your skin crawl to hear them. In any other age he would have been burned as a heretic, I suppose. In any other age they would have killed him.

Did you go to church?

We lived in his church. No other church would have him. He stormed out of churches in a fury, if we went at all, which after I was maybe eight we never did. He called them charlatans and papist fools and ignorant literalists. He said, You've got to see, you've got to see the beauty of the metaphor. If you can't see the beauty of the symbol, then you see nothing at all.

The beauty of the symbol, like the cross?

The cross, the church itself, the Passion, the whole thing. He said it was like a map, and you had to read it like one if you were to find your way anywhere in this life. That's what all religions are, he said, and he could as easily find god through Buddhism or Islam or Zen or Shinto or Tao or anything. It just so happened that he was raised with the stories of the Bible, all the way up to his own day of working, as if he walked right out of those pages, and so it was just the language he had learned to use to speak of the divine.

That makes sense to me, she said.

But not to Utah. They ran us out of that state. Death threats. Hate mail. But that wouldn't have done it, I suppose, until they set fire to our house.

My God!

Ha! Maybe so! At that point we were desperate to go. That was when we came out to California. And as each of us got old enough, we just split. We had to. Who could stay around something like that? It's like living near a volcano.

How old were you when you left?

Seventeen.

Where did you go?

I joined the Navy. Went all over the world. I never looked back. Discharged in San Francisco, but by then, well, by then...there was no going back. He continued his ministry, if you could call it that. Healing. Praying. Maybe it was all just a sham. He seemed to believe it, though, and I guess that's all you need.

They both looked out through the window into the land which had not yet fully materialized. It seemed unformed at the borders with a gray haze of obscurity over all, and the bus rolled and rumbled, the engine loud howling around them, a deafening sound with a silence of its own as they hurled down a road that had no visible beginning or end.

And what did she know of him, the thought occurred and not without a little fear, as they rode through desert land in a haze of dust that itself was now slouching into its next incarnation. Wasn't this her life also? She made a mental catalogue of the things in her bag, the clothes, the book which she had not read, the notebooks in which she had not yet written but which now awaited the next versions of herself, and the gun which she had not yet had cause to use, though in her mind it remained a fate that couldn't be avoided. What could she expect from this stranger or anyone? Trust? Trust in her, maybe? This she could tell, for she was fully aware of the effect she had on people, how they saw in her the follower, the meek one who will obey if pressed hard enough, and with this she would play along, but only for as long as it would advantage her. A new freedom was hers, and it was not to be taken even by this man, though everything in his manner seemed to suggest that he expected nothing less of her than a total devotion which he himself could not offer in return. She was no fool. And this was the thought that steeled itself in her mind, though she whispered to herself, hide me in your wing from the evil that surrounds me,

said it like a prayer, a familiar set of words perhaps she learned from her mother, she now thought, since they were the kind of words her mother would have said to her, taught her to use as an instruction for how to face times when she felt herself vulnerable and alone. Hide me in your wing from the evil that surrounds me, she whispered again, and over again, and it was as if she sent the words to her mother and it was as if her mother in fact heard her and was even now responding in ways she could not yet detect.

So the land wove itself around her and unwound itself in distance, as the man kept his arm around her and pulled her close and kissed her cheek and then her mouth. And the words kept coming like a voice inside her head as she felt his hand on the back of her neck, felt herself lowering, the words continuing even as he arched and groaned and the bus drove on and on.

It was the kind of place you would never look at twice. Glance and counter glance of the crew that lingers around the white stone steps out front under the belaurelled cornice faces and you would pass on by, head forward to avoid those threatening eyes and the feral intentions behind them. The architecture is from no time in particular, except that most likely some sacrifices occurred during its construction, tales a janitor might tell on a cigarette break of bodies buried in the concrete foundation, moans in late night rooms no one will ever inhabit again. Each identical window of soot-begrimed glass encloses a darkness beyond reach of any penetrating light, an array of Anasazi holes cut into a cliff face. And yet the sunlight rides through surface-changing the angles during the day to redesign the shadows in their geometry of woe. Yet, the uniformity of design breaks in the variations of voices, music, arguments, laughter and screams that coalesce into a single thing called sound or babble or howl emerging from that same dark center. And you might have the same kind of thought she had as she passed through that throng

of loitering ghosts out front, any wrong move, gesture or word could start the engine of your demise machinery, that thing dormant in everyone's fate-line that might be stirred to waking depending on the individual soul and the whims of Fortuna, because anyone's life was metrically arranged with details malleable as a cloud.

Pass on through. The doors give a kind of welcome like a ticket-taker's smile in a funhouse, something final. But nothing is final. That's just how it appears. Pass on through into the hubbub, into that boiling darkness, the underworld you thought you would never plunge into that has always existed at the border of your dreaming, your darling. There is a familiar smell of institutions, of grade schools in winter, of laboratories and toilet cakes, of wet coats hanging on hooks, old shoes, food in paper bags, and that faint and pervasive human smell of sweat and worry lingering beneath the sharp smell of ammonia cleanser, all too human, a kind of smell which sparks the memory even in the very young or very old, the smell of beginnings, first smells, birth and of course its brother, decay. The floor is green linoleum, faded out down the center from centuries of walking, permeated by a pattern of black protozoan shapes which seem, from the condition you take on when entering, to writhe.

Doorways, men in filthy tee shirts peeling back from swollen bellies like burned skin, lurid smiles, missing teeth, little dogs, birds in cages. Pass on through. The eyes narrow to sleep but no one is unable to sleep. Sleep will come no more. Not here. Here, vigilance is the new bloodstream. Music. Television sets on tabletops. Stains on the walls. Carpets with tasseled corners. A coverless book. Doorway after doorway of little worlds she peers into but not for very long because each world has its demigod awaiting some sign of contrition, if nothing more than eye contact, to rise, rise from fetid abandonment and blaze.

She climbed the stairs with him. And along the way she caught hints of the secret doorways, the kind she'd noticed in all the various places she had ever lived in that untethered flowing of the family's journey, fuzzy openings that looked like dandelions pressed between the pages of a book or an Xray of the heart, doors that boiled and wobbled with electric fringes and a filmy green curtain of liquid air like the mist that rises from dry ice in a spook house, but neither cold nor warm, the kind of thing she had as a child on occasion, maybe twice, reached out to touch with curiosity and put her hand forward and saw it change as it passed through into a kind of glowing goblin hand with bones showing through like dark emeralds. And just like a child learns not to touch a stove after one bad burn, she never reached through again, nor mentioned seeing them to anyone thinking that somehow saying what she saw would get her into trouble, following an instinct that the best thing to do in most situations was to be invisible.

They went to the room he had purchased and inside, the smell hit her, and it was like every move she had ever made, the inherited smell of the countless preceding occupants layered in the fabric of the chairs and the wood of the floor. She sat on the bed. He must have smelled it too because he said, "Whooweee," and went to the window to open it, wedging his hands up under the middle of the frame and pushing hard. It wouldn't budge. He banged at the casement and the glass rattled in its warped and puttied frame. "Damn thing." He pushed at it again and it slid up and halted. He banged on it again and knocked it three quarters of the way open, which allowed some air to flow in along with the horns and engines and sirens and smoke and heat from the street below. Welcome.

He went around the room, turning on the lights, but when he came to one lamp, he twisted the switch and nothing happened. He tapped the lamp and tried the switch again and still nothing happened. He reached in and twisted the bulb and as it came out on its threads it

flickered once, so he screwed it back in again, apparently thinking all it needed was to be better seated in its socket. But the light didn't come. So he took it out and stood there holding the dead bulb. But he didn't seem satisfied with this. He went to one of the other lamps and turned it off and reached in to unscrew the bulb, but it had already gotten hot and he jerked back his hand and said, "Mother fu—" and bent down and looked at it as if looking at it would inspire coolness and waited and then licked his fingers and tried again and quick unscrewed it and pulled it out and tossed it on the bed and tried the bulb that was apparently dead in that lamp and once again it gave a tantalizing flicker of light but still would not burn, so he took it out again and shook it by his ear and said, "Filament must be broken." It was almost like a silent comedy routine, watching him, and she felt a wave of warmth and affection for his bumbling domestic efforts as he put the working bulb back into the lamp he'd taken it from and stood there with the half-dead bulb in his hand unsure just what to do with it, as if he were thinking out loud that it obviously wasn't going to work but had enough life in it that it just didn't make sense to throw it away, such was the depth of philosophy exhibited by her newfound companion.

He put the bulb on a dresser and looked at it a moment and smiled and shook his head.

She was surprised he had so many friends. They all descended, filling up the room the next day en masse smoking and drinking and talking so fast and over each other she couldn't believe that anyone was following a single conversation. Rather, she witnessed an amalgamation of conversations, braided and interconnecting, as she was occasionally introduced to people like Quince, a heavy bearded man in a ripped white dress shirt with rich dark stains oozing from the arm pits. He kept an eye on her and winked often with a stale lasciviousness, showing occasionally a yellow canine tooth. And there was T-Bear whose eyes were nearly shut with one

open slightly more than the other and in constant wander. He sat beside a large gelatinous woman named Balel who smoked and laughed beneath a platinum wig. And there was Piston, a rapid talking little bolt of a man whose knee was in constant jitter like his name indicated and who smoked cigarettes with such rapidity they seemed to shrivel at his mouth and who poked his finger at people when he spoke to them as if shooting them with an electric prod. Others came and went in the barrage and clatter and smoke clouds, because everyone was smoking, smoking so much there was a perpetual blue landscape at eye level undulating and shifting with occasional heads coming through, talking and talking, all a rush and a jumble with a bottle going around and a stinky joint and people shouting and laughing, rising to their feet to make a point like a parliament of madness, more and more coming and going so she was never sure who was really there at all, just the rush of the talk and the ferocity of the words and the conviction behind them, like:

It's all economics, primarily, Piston was saying. A numbers game for the numbers people who get it. They get it and so they make shit happen.

Economic? T-Bear said, and from his tone he seemed skeptical. Maybe not about the concept, which wasn't yet clear, but Piston's ability to formulate it.

Think about it, Piston said. It's no great mystery, we all know it, money establishes the power, first and foremost, and the power lies in the hands of those who are in control of the money. Right? No argument there. This is lesson A-1 since time began, since someone put a stamp of a face on a piece of metal and said, there, that'll count for your day of work. If you move the money around more freely, if you are the mover, then you are the one with the power.

Oh, that's just jack shit, Quince said. No one has power over me. Look! And he stuck a finger into his nose, grinding out a nugget. He held it out for a moment, taunting, then popped it

in his mouth and held it there and said through tight lips, Just try and stop me. He got a good laugh over that one.

No, it isn't, you ignorant ass puss! Piston said, waving a hand, offended, back arched. You're not even listening.

Tell us why it isn't jack shit, smart guy, and watch the name-calling.

It isn't jack shit, I'm telling you. And he tapped his temple with a finger. Powers of observation! That's what you're missing. The people with the power are the people with the money are the people who own everything and deal it out in little tiny piecemeal bits just to keep us from raiding the big table, just to hold us off, you know, that's all minimum wage is, that's all welfare is, just a tossed down, gnawed on bone left-over to say back off you niggers, injuns, spicks, you poor white shitheads and all you other scraggly little immigrant motherfuckers, just back off. Here's your scrap. And he threw down an invisible bone to the floor and said, See, as the shadows of his argument lunged after it.

And you think if you move the money you have the power?

Absolutely. Piston nodded and clamped his teeth on his cigarette. A child could see it.

And the people with the power have the money.

Dat's right. That's always been right. Well not right, but true. Just look where you are.

Well, if you're going to get some of that power, then, how do you propose to move the money around? Seems like that's a freight train bigger than your muscles! More laughter rippled through the smoke.

That's what laws are supposed to change. That's what we elect these liberal motherfuckers for.

And do you see anything changing? T-Bear asked.

Nope. Because those liberal motherfuckers are just doing what everyone's doing, trying to survive. They're just throwing down a bigger bone is all. But you look behind their backs and you'll see they got a heap of gold in the cave they're holding onto, too. No secret. You can't scream justice cause nature ain't about justice. It's about survival. Dog eats dog. That's no secret.

Doesn't that tell you something?

It tells me those liberal motherfuckers want to keep a little too much for themselves!

Don't you see, T-Bear said, waving an arm as if to pull back the veil from around them. It isn't the money. If it were the money alone, then you'd see them shifting away from it in a hurry, because that's too vulnerable. Thieves eventually find their way into the vault. Money's never been more than a symbol for the real thing, and the real power is more than the movement of money. It's something much deeper than that!

Which is?

Ownership.

Right, ownership.

That's part of it, ownership and greed.

So what are you saying?

I'm saying you can't move any money around because that won't change anything. I'm saying it's a shell game. You're looking at the shells. The shells are always empty. T-Bear swept his hand forward and across in a cutting motion, deal done.

What the hell you mean? It would change everything. Why do you think they hold onto it so tightly?

The money is nothing. It's the perception that matters. You're like the guy in the audience watching the magician thinking it's all real. But it's all a trick. It's always been a trick. Making you believe it's real is the trick. Let me ask you something, T-Bear said. Let's just say you win the lottery. Now Piston grinned. He had ahold of something, and it lit up his eyes. All right, smart guy, T-Bear continued. Let's say you win the lottery, say it's a big one, millions, billions...whatever ions. What are you going to do?

Me? Piston laughed and stood up and gyrated and said, You know I'm going to party party party.

There you go. T-Bear swept his hand out flat again, deal done.

What? I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I'm going to blow it all, that I'm going to be like those stupid bastards you see on television who get all this money and blow it all and even make it worse and go into debt and can't pay their taxes and wind up in jail, blah blah blah.

Well...

Well, what? I'm not an idiot. I already see that. No one is tricking me! I already have a plan. I'd put some of it into savings. Just flat clean and simple stick a big chunk of it into savings. Don't even touch it. Pretend it's not even there. Even at....what, the little interest it makes, it makes something. And the more you put in the more it makes. I know that. It's economics, and I'm not moving the money around. I've got the big heap behind my back. And like they say, money makes money. So, I get money and I make sure it gets to work making more money. And I'll tell you what, after I take care of a few of my friends...that's right, I'll still honor my friendships, I won't step over all of you to go hang out with the other rich people with money. I know where I come from, see? And that's the mistake those other fools make. I'll take my friends

on a cruise to the Bahamas or the Virgin Islands or...wherever ain't destroyed yet, someplace clean, yeah, and we'll hang out on a little island for a year or two, just to enjoy it because you should get to enjoy it, too, right? You should get to party, swim, party. Come on! But then! 'Cause I'm no fool, I put some into savings, just to rest safely. And I hire one of those tough motherfucker investors, you know, the ones with the connections, like what's that bull one, you know, with the ring in its nose? Get someone who really knows that machinery of the system to do the work. Why do the work yourself if you can hire someone else to do it? Isn't that the whole reason for having money? A banker don't farm and grow his own food! A brain surgeon don't operate on his own head! So, yeah, I get the bull guy. What's he called?

Bullshit! Quince said, and the room erupted into laughter.

Very funny, very funny. No, but come on now, you know the one I mean. What's it called? He shook his hand like it hurt. Lynch something.

Yeah, they're going to lynch your savings. Laughter.

Lynch you for your money!

Yeah, Lynch, whatever, you know? Piston said. He obviously wanted to make this point clear. This was very real to him, now, as if he already had the money in his hand. Whoever the powerhouse guys are on the inside, that's what I'm talking about. I'll find them. The money opens the doors. I get those guys and they just take my money. And because they get a...a...percentage, they *want* to make money. That's how it works. They make me money, but they make money at the same time too. They love it. Like a hunting dog. They love doing it cause it's the way they're wired. They're naturals. Ducks in water. They are made to make money. Maybe they don't have it to begin with, but they figure it out and work for the ones who have the money. And that's what I am now. So they make money for me and get some for

themselves, and make more money with it so I don't never have to work again, and I just take my friends on more cruises to the Bahamas and we party, party, party. He gyrated and pressed his fists together.

You don't even work now!

I wanna go on that cruise! Take me along.

I'll take all ya'll along.

Piston probably end up seasick.

Get malaria.

Berry Berry.

Do they still have that?

Don't forget your shots, Piston.

Ah, he'll just drink enough to kill off any bug gets into his body.

Start a new strain.

Stronger, drunker mosquitoes.

Killer mosquitoes.

Coming up the coast of California!

You're all just jealous, Piston said, 'cause I got the money. Better be nice to me now, you know. That's how it works.

But look what you just did, T-Bear said. Smart man says move the money and you move the power. The money moves. The money moves right into your lap, and you just turn it right back over to the ones who had it in the first place.

A money lap dance! Someone shouted.

Make it rain!

Give old Grant a kiss.

Hey, Piston, can I get a loan?

You can see him, but you can't touch him.

You can only look.

Smart man has the money move right into his home, T-Bear says, bringing both hands down in a funnel motion to his chest. All that money moving his way, and what does he do?

He buys a house!

We're going on a cruise!

A pack of cigarettes.

He dies of a heart attack!

Piston stops and points a finger at the man. Don't you talk about me dying, now.

What does the smart man do? T-Bear asks, and now everyone wants to hear it, like they know he's about to put the last cut into Piston's already crumbling logic, because they all know it just can't be, even if the fantasy is fun and making fun of Piston is fun. But Piston is never going to be rich. The eyes in the room are as focused now as a wolf-pack circling a limping fox. They just want to hear T-Bear explain it. They want him to finish it off. Smart man turns right around and gives it back! To the bank? To the ones on the inside? Smart man gets the money, moves that money by buying that little ticket, and when the money comes to him he just moves it right back to where it belongs, to where it always has been. Because look at it, just look: he only thought he had it. Best shell and pea game ever, my man, and you're falling for it every day.

Ah, so what. They're used to money. They know how to handle it, so what? I'm still living large.

You're just the court jester.

Yeah, well, better the jester than the slave!

I don't see much difference, T-Bear said. The levity had deflated and now Piston was over getting into T-Bear's face, finger only inches from the other man's eyes.

Look, Indian. I don't see much call for you putting me down like that.

Hey, Piston, someone said, cool down!

T-Bear said nothing.

Piston stayed fixed in place. So what if I want to enjoy my life. So what if I want to share it with my friends? What's wrong with that? And so what if I flip the switch and make the ones who made me nothing work for me? Why do you have to cheapen it?

I'm not trying to cheapen it, T-Bear said. I'm just trying to tell you it's an illusion. Money won't buy you respect from the people who have lived with it their entire lives. It won't buy you a world you can't already touch. It won't give you anything that won't exact something from you in return.

Are you saying it's better to be poor? Are you saying it's better to eat shitty food and sleep in shitty rat hole hotels like this one? Piston was so close to T-Bear's face that he looked like he might bite the other man.

I'm saying you'll just be in another kind of shitty hotel even with your money. Money is the trick. If money were the solution, don't you think smart and good and compassionate people would have devised a way to, as you say, move it around by now? Even if you move it, what it represents will still be hidden from you. And what is hidden will still be just another trick to keep people believing they are over you by making you believe you are under them. That's the illusion that keeps the rich rich and the poor poor.

Now you're talking nonsense. Piston turned away and someone handed him the jug and he drank a deep drink and held the bottle against his chest, but he continued to point his finger, saying, You mean for me to believe money doesn't matter. Well, you're the one living in an illusion, buddy, because I'll tell you something: money does matter. Money is the only thing that matters. Look at your people. They aren't where they are because money doesn't matter. And they sure as hell aren't building casinos because money doesn't matter. You try and eat. You try and find a place to sleep without money and see how far you go.

You talk as though I haven't lived in this world, T-Bear said. But all you're telling me is how many people are tricked by the same illusion. You aren't telling me the illusion is real.

Ah! You just twist it around, don't you, play philosophical, but you're right here with us. Ain't that right? He shook his head and turned his finger on himself. That's right. Right here with us.

Then T-Bear smiled.

Hey piston, someone shouted, keep that bottle moving.

After the party was over and everyone gone and the smoke cleared and they were alone in their own room, he pulled off his shirt and turned and moved toward her. He sat down beside her on the bed and put his arm around her. They said nothing because there was nothing to say. He kissed her. She kissed him. For a moment she caught site of a hummingbird at the window, or just outside and moving along a palm leaf with its long beak and blur of wings. It almost seemed to be looking at her. She felt a hand sliding over her belly. She closed her eyes and dissolved. They twisted through a flowing array of poses, infinitely divisible and collateral and just as slow in motion as her mind falling back into the bed that seemed to open to their forms as though

molded for their shapes in particular with a hatch underneath laced with a kind of furry webbing that kept them poised above a cauldron of rooms below and something sulfurous bubbling even further down than that. And they made love in the heat of the evening, in the sounds of the city which became a kind of soundtrack, an abstract howl like ocean waves or crowd cheers in a stadium, rising and falling against the walls which themselves trembled with a vicious living sheen. And in the act of their love she was taking it all in, abstract or not, all the rooms and all the occupants in their shadow motion through that endless succession of walls and corridors, faces and voices, days and nights flickering like that broken bulb in a strobe of perpetual and layered off and on moments. And when at last they fell away from each other, she felt him lie back beside her, his breathing soon measured and slow with a hint of phlegm gurgle, and even though it went against her own on guard nature to remain alert no matter where she was, she felt the lacy tendrils of an entity with such luring resonance wrapping around her that she too let herself drift and was soon sliding down into a state of sleep as deep as she had ever known.

And she had this dream:

She is walking down a city street at dawn. Alone. A mist rides the air like a world becoming. She feels eyes, feels watched, looks up and sees that hummingbird riding shotgun over her shoulder as if assigned to surveillance, and gradually she sees others around her walking, some purposeful as though they know where they were going, others like her moving more tentatively as though trying to read street signs, although there are none, and others seeming not to know what they are doing, stepping around in circles or up against walls from which they bounced back only to go forward and hit again. One person, only a vague outline, indecipherable as either man or woman, stands nearby bent down and looking at the ground, tapping with foot as if to determine if the ground would could hold human weight. But she is

trained not to look like a victim, which means maintaining a look of confidence (even if her own face, like that stranger distrustful of the ground, has no countenance), so she assumes the appearance of someone who knows where she is going, even though she is careful and acutely aware of everything around her, watchful, keeping track of the number of streets she walks and in what direction. She goes past motels with rows of empty parking stalls, used car lots full of old cars no one would ever want to own, liquor stores, grocery stores, convenience stores, billboards with layers of advertising showing through, a face beneath a plane and a skyscraper overlapping a line-drawing of a globe. She passes an empty schoolyard, and it occurs to her that it is very early in the morning, or a holiday. She is moving in the direction of the West. Isn't she? There is no sun visible through the mist, nothing by which to gauge her direction. She feels enormously weary and longs to sit down somewhere, but she is afraid to sit down, to cease moving, as though to cease moving would call attention to her, and the otherwise unconscious people around her would suddenly descend upon her like flies.

She is aware of her dreaming, in touch with her body outside the dream, of her own consciousness like an audience watching this consciousness trying to figure out the mystery of its own theater. She is not fully a part of this world. At least this is how she has usually dreamed, with a tether to the waking world. But now she is sensing something else happening. When she draws back to feel herself, she is not sure anymore if the space she is rising back into is the real location of herself. She can't seem to detect it. It's as if something were sitting on her chest, inhaling her breath as she exhales. It seems that perhaps, this time, she has gone a few layers deeper than before. But that could just be part of the dream's thinking. The ground seems solid enough, but everything else around her, the gray trees like hooded figures, the demolished cars, the building fronts with vague, blue outlines behind them, everything shimmers with that gauzy

thinness of the unreal. And then she sees a woman standing on the steps of an old house in the middle of the block, what looks like a left-over from another age, a holdout to the wave of progress, a developer's thorn, both woman and home, there between a condemned theater and a massage parlor. It is a dark, gothic gabled house with a bower of Bougainvillea vines draped over the porch so thick they have constructed what looks like a tunnel, and the woman there is like some strange earth gnome from prairie haze with arms like wisteria vines, holding a candle on a little green platter with a curved handle, the hand shaking with palsied rhythm so that the candle dances and the flame wavers. And with the other hand the old woman is vigorously waving her over, fingers curling like feelers, come, come! She approaches, but the old woman does not stop motioning to her until she has ascended the steps and halted a moment, standing one step below the old woman so that she and the woman are eye to eye, the old woman's hand still drawing her in, the eyes deep embedded in the rippled putty of her face. She is an ancient relief of fleshy jowls, heavy lobed ears, white-gray hair like a cloud on her head, and she is quite stooped although she is not very tall to begin with. She is a force of will that burns, the hand waving the young girl in closer, close enough in fact for the old woman to reach out and touch her arm, which she does. The old woman wears brown gardener's pants splattered with paint and a white blouse covered by a brown wool sweater in which thorns and thistles and pieces of moss cling as though the woman had crawled out of the earth itself. How old do you think I am? She asks.

Not a day over thirty nine.

The old woman smiles and for a moment it seems her eyes disappear.

I'm one hundred and three, says the old woman, and she pats her chest with her hand as if to show the heart is still there. Yes I am. According to the records. I lived here long before they

even had paved streets. I saw them lay the brick for the first road. Yes I did. I saw all these buildings go up, and she sticks out the candle flame to point at the ghostly neighborhood that surrounds her. More than one man come around with offers to buy my place, my land. I knew they wanted to tear it down, drive me away, but they never drove me out. They never bought me out. They never had enough money.

Why did you stay?

Where would I go anyway? I've got work to do here, and this is where it has to be done. This was the first place I came to when I came into my power. I was seventeen. I'd been all over the country before that. We came over from England. I've lived in every state, north and south, east and west. My father was a teacher, a composer, a mathematician, a traveling musician. Oh, we had parties. Every night a party. Paderewski gave me my first dollar. Yes she did. I babysat for Alma Gluck. Always music, every night. And people, people with talent and energy and charisma. Always a party. And the music. I loved the music most of all. Learned to play the piano myself. My father caught me with a sheet of ragtime, and when he saw that he tore it to pieces in front of my face. He said no respectable girl plays that kind of music. That and other rules. And always moving from place to place. Never one place long enough that I could make a friend. I've never had a friend in this life. I got tired of it. I was tired of moving around, always moving. We got here and I just said, I'm not moving anymore. I'm not going to budge. My father said, fine. He gave me fifty cents, and that was the last time I saw him.

He never came to see you?

I never went to see him. Why should I? He left me. I was on my own after that. It was a terrible thing to do to a girl, leave her alone. But I was coming into my power then. I could feel it. But he was a good man. He really was. He died acting a gentleman. He was about to get on a

streetcar but stepped down to allow two ladies to board before him and was struck by a car. That's what killed him. Not right away, though. He lingered for a few days, I'm told. And I'm told he was waiting for me to come to him. But I never did. Her face shows nothing, no more emotion that a cliff rock blasted by wind. He passed on. His whole life was passing on. And he suffered more than most. His wife, my mother, was killed by a misfiled prescription, you know. They read it wrong, poisoned her dead. And then her best friend came out from England to help with us, you know. It seemed like she was waiting to do that. I'm not a suspicious person, but the whole matter didn't sit right with me. Not that I think my father capable of a thing like that. But all I know is a story about it. I was young. Then this friend comes out from England, and she and my father marry her right away. Like I said, something didn't sit right with me about that. I never took to her, but she got sick with the goiter. Sticking out of her neck. Awful thing. And it gave her the poppy eyes. She hanged herself. I found her when I came home one day after school, hanging there in the foyer. That was it for my father, too. Something went out of him. Restless spirits, all of them.

How sad. That must have been hard on you, too.

Oh, yes, but you know I had to work, right away. A woman alone in those days had to work hard. I went to school, got a real estate license and then a medical degree. I worked in a hospital. I delivered thirteen babies. Got to deliver one more, now, to end on a good number. And I got married too, had three children. My husband died, though, too soon. He drowned on vacation to the coast, Indian land. He was a strong swimmer, which is the strangest thing. He went out for a swim one evening and didn't come back. We searched. I was frantic. I remember an Indian boy was riding on horseback back and forth along the crest of the shore to try and see him. He was the one who spotted him because he was up high like that. They pulled him in, but

he had drowned. After that I had to work even harder, you know? I worked the night shift at the hospital and got home in time to get my children off to school. Then I'd sleep. Then I'd be up when they got home from school. That was the way it had to be. I should never have gotten married again after that, though. I married a man because I thought my children needed a father. I didn't want them going through life with others saying they had no father. But he turned out to be a bad drinker. I didn't know that at first. He came from a good family. They had a house out on the island and a boat. We went there in summer. But then he started to drink like he didn't want to be alive anymore himself. He used all my savings, the money from the insurance when my first husband died, to open up a produce warehouse, but he couldn't run it in his condition. And then there was that other matter, but I'm not going to talk about that. He just drank up all my money. I divorced him. Nobody divorced in those days. But living with him was worse than getting divorced. He was not good with my children, either. So I raised my kids on my own, and I told them, because you don't have a father you have to be even better than other kids because that's what everyone will say of you if you aren't better: ah well, they'll say, it's to be expected, of course they're no good, they don't have a father. But they turned out all right.

That's really sad.

Now don't you go feeling sorry for me. I didn't tell you all that to get your pity. I'm long past that, now anyway. I see you scurrying around now all full of intent and I'm just warning you, you see? That's the point after all. I'm giving you a warning, plain and simple. This story is yours now, part of you, now, and you can't forget it even if you try. I'm giving you a piece of my power, although I can see you have plenty of your own anyways. But sure enough, I'm warning you.

About what?

About where you're going. About what it takes to get where you need to be. You're flipping coins, girl. I see where you're headed, and I'm just trying to help you stay clear of trouble.

What kind of trouble?

The same trouble I've seen. The same trouble I've had, some of which can't be helped of course, but if you think hard, look at things as they really are, there's a way you don't have to suffer so much. Your life is bound to come on it, of course, every life does. But you have to know what to do when it happens. It's a way of your mind more than anything. Doesn't matter so much where you are or what you're doing, although those things are important, too. And your story is going to fit into others, you know, so it's not just about you. But what matters most is how you think.

How am I supposed to think?

Simple and clear, like I'm telling you. No fooling around with what you want to be but what is. Most people can't do that. They look at things as how they want them to be instead of how they are, then they get all fussed up when things end up in ways they don't want. It's like people expect miracles when they should just step aside from trouble plain in front of their faces. That's where your strength lies. You see it clear and don't fool yourself. Others don't matter, not when it comes to how you see things. You have a good detector, use it. That's what I'm trying to tell you. You take it with you. It's what you already have, but I'm also giving you something because you'll remember this. That's the way a story works. You understand what I'm saying? And you'll have to tell your own, too. But right now, I'm giving you mine. It's got fire in it. You need some fire. You got plenty of the other, but you need more fire. You will need it someday, that's plain to see. It's not so strange. Don't think too much about it. A woman gave it to me just

like I'm giving it to you. It's something you should have been taught long ago and weren't. You should have had training, but you didn't get it. It's not your fault. Changes haven't just been these roads and buildings. There's other things, things that people think are lost, but they are never lost. They just come to us in different ways. It will come to you as well to pass this on to another one day. You will know when that time comes. It won't be anything you plan. It will be something you carry with you always, and you have always had it although you didn't know you had it. I am just here to show it to you and give you a piece of mine. Now you can go. You can tell people about the strange old woman you met and her sad story, but that won't be it. And the story is not so sad as you think, if you think about it. You can laugh about me or disbelieve me, but that won't be it, either. Now you go on. You've got to look like you're going somewhere. I've done my job now. Now I'm at fourteen, and that's all I needed. I can end on a good number, like I said. So, you go on, now. Don't let those shadows catch you with your mouth open.

And the woman waves her back down the steps with a reversal of the motion she utilized to summon her onto the porch, and just as the young girl had been unable to resist the will that brought her up to the strange old woman, she is now unable to resist the will that sends her away, glancing back once to see the old woman waving at her insistently, ripples in the air visibly riding out from her and until she finally turns and ducks back into her bower of blood red vines like a living mouth to a tunnel that leads for all she knows to the core of the earth.

She awoke to the sound of rain. It came in through the window, cool and wet, like a blessing, like forgiveness, and she reached out her hand through the window and felt it on her palm and tasted it and lay there listening to it long into the night, the sound of it like waves rolling across the rooftop and over the bland face of the building and over the window ledge, like

the waves of cars passing in the street below, their tires hissing, the sound of it hypnotic, rhythmic, full of melody and little voices, like all the languages of the world in a chorus of pure breathing with occasional distant thunder like the sheering of rock, like the edge of the world in crumble, like a great river coming down and swallowing up the streets and buildings and the sad wandering people hitting up against lampposts and walls, a wave full of it all and rolling on forever.

## **Animal Spirits**

Stuart's mother did not believe him. She came over to their house after she had finally been convinced by the police that her son was actually dead, and she wanted to know exactly what happened. Gabriel told her. She narrowed her eyes and pointed a finger at him and said, You knew he was a frail boy. You knew what could happen to him. You let this happen. You let things go too far. You should have been watching out for him. You're to blame!

No, Gabriel said, I told him not to go.

It was a horrible accident, Gabriel's mother said. She stood by him, but she did not touch him, and he realized that on some level she was allowing the woman to blame him, even though she was now defending him. The woman was shaking with rage. Without another word, she went past him, through the door, and left. But her eyes still burned him where he stood.

I didn't want... he began, but a host of confused thought choked in his mind.

I know.

He woke up early, before light. School was out. Gabriel dressed in the dark and carried his pack down to the kitchen. His father was already there and had made bacon and eggs and toast and coffee. No one else was up yet. Gabriel sat down and rubbed his eyes and waited. His father put a plate before him and he ate, but he was still groggy and not very hungry.

Better than going to school, don't you think? His father said.

Definitely.

Let's hope we get a good haul this year.

After his father finished eating and put his plate in the sink he said, Well, you about ready to go?

Sure.

They went down to the truck, and Gabriel pushed his pack into the space behind the seat and climbed up into the cab and waited. His father slid in and closed the door and started the engine and turned on the lights. Gabriel looked up from the cab at the house in darkness. Ahead, the trees were a tunnel of dark boughs illuminated by the headlights. They moved down the gravel driveway and out onto the road.

They did not speak. They drove. Gabriel was used to it, knew this was how his father was in his most unguarded times, silent. They drove out onto the highway and headed north, driving in the dark. Then they pulled off onto the access road and went down into the town. The streetlights were fixed in a blinking pattern, yellow all around. They did not see another car. Then they drove up to the ferry terminal, paid a cashier in the booth and went onto the ferry. Neither of them said a word.

They stayed in the truck for the crossing. It smelled of leather and mink oiled boots and rifle iron and cigarettes. Gabriel's father opened a window and smoked and blew the smoke out the window and leaned back in the seat and turned on the radio. He fiddled with the dial and came onto a Hank Williams song and let it sit. The ferry horn sounded three time and the boat pulled out into the sound and rocked softly while they listened to the music. This was the same way they'd go to see his cousins, Gabriel thought, but the thought was meaningless because they were not going to see his cousins. The path was familiar, that was all. He looked out at the

blackness of the water, the far faint lights of homes on the islands. What was it like to live on an island? It seemed like a dream, desirable and at the same time unreal. He did not want his life the way it was, now that he was a bad kid. On an island he would be alone.

Daylight was beginning to form, glowing up along the eastern mountain range across the sound as they drove off the ferry and onto the two-lane highway. Then they were back driving through the darkness of trees, alone except for the eyes in the forest. His cousins were out here. They were probably asleep right now.

They went on through the mill town with its sandstone buildings blasted by salt waves, and then back into forest, the endless corridor with the boles fluttering past in the gray illumination of the car lights, and Gabriel thought of sasquatch, the creature of the woods, looking out from the deep of the forest. The road was becoming as they drove on it, because they drove on it and believed a road must be there for them to drive on. Really, they were still asleep in their beds. Really, they were asleep in another life and would wake up curious about these scenes that would quickly fade as they went into the rush of their other worlds. And the people in those worlds were only asleep in other worlds, and this went on for a long time, maybe forever. This is what he kept thinking as they drove in the dark, away from the sunrise that would soon overtake them, that was overtaking them even now but only in the stream of sky above, changing from darker gray to lighter gray to light, while the trees retained their impenetrable darkness.

Emerging, they entered a clearing, and his father drove off onto a gravel road and out into a field of clearcut where the stumps of trees stood flat-topped and other trees lay fallen dead soldiers. The truck came to a stop, and his father stubbed out his cigarette in the crammed-full ash tray, opened the door and stepped out and stretched and scanned the field. Gabriel got down and

walked a few feet out in front of the truck and gazed out over the wasted forest. Every tree was cut down all the way up to the ridgeline. Most were gone. A few lay on the ground, and some saplings still twigged their way up through the ground cover. Robins jumped and darted and flew stump to stump, and they seemed weirdly exposed. Mist rose from the ground in tendrils sweeps and strands. The air had a strange raw feeling to it, like a wound in the flesh of the world, and as Gabriel stood before the ticking engine of the truck he had the dizzy feeling he had seen this before, as if it were a battleground after a long war in which he had fought and died, and as if he would, if he wandered and searched and opened himself up to it, find the place where his body had fallen.

Well, his father finally said, better get started. He took the chainsaw out of the back of the truck and started hiking out over the rumpled terrain. Gabriel followed, climbing over the dead trees. The ground was a loamy tangle and he had to choose his footing carefully. His father took long strides, lifting his feet high, and would occasionally stop and inspect a tree, pull at it, move on until he finally found the one he wanted or that had the kind of properties he was seeking either in weight or length or circumference. He punched the choke on the chainsaw and was just about to pull the cord when he turned and said, Now I want you to stand back while I'm cutting. When I'm done you can help me load up the truck. Then he yanked the cord and the chainsaw screamed and he started carving into the fallen tree.

Gabriel climbed up onto a stump and watched as his father cut the tree, slice by slice, bucking it and lifting it onto the fallen debris to prop it up and so get the cut all the way through, tugging it back length by length, as saw dust spilled out around his feet. And it occurred to Gabriel that his father was a woodman. The basement of their home was full of saw dust and the smell of wood and wood oils and stains and varnishes and machines for cutting wood and for

shaping wood, and here he was now with his arms deep into wood, bent into the work of it, natural as he ever seemed joining himself to the work of wood.

It did not take long for his father to cut the trunk down into moveable sections. All right, he said, turning to Gabriel, smiling and brushing the sawdust from his chest. Give me a hand here. And so Gabriel jumped down and began to help his father carry the sections back to the truck. He could only take a few, while his father's armloads seemed heaped high. But he worked on steadily and did not complain. His arms soon felt hot and tired and ached and his back felt tightly strained, but he kept on working and said nothing as his father worked on and said nothing.

After they finished loading the wood, his father lit another cigarette and stomped out in search of another abandoned tree. When he found one to his liking, he yanked at it, getting it into a position ready for cutting and pulled the cord and set the blade in while the cigarette bobbed between his lips and his eyes squinted and sawdust boiled up over his hands. They loaded the sections onto the truck, and his father sought another tree. After he had sliced up two more trees they had a full load. We're done, his father said.

He stood smoking another cigarette, looking out over the clearcut. Sweat was flowing down his face, and he wiped it with his sleeve. Gabriel stood beside him, leaning back against the hood of the truck. The sun was now breaking through the clouds and warming the ground. The stumps steamed like hot bodies. Chipmunks appeared from the tangle and jumped across the fallen logs and stumps, their heads rising up and looking around with their little forepaws hanging against their bellies. Then they jumped back down and tittered on in their own journeys. Well, his father said, is that enough work for ya?

Yeah, Gabriel said, and he blew a long breath.

What do you say we go get a hamburger?

Sounds good to me.

Let's go.

They climbed back into the truck and backed up on the road. The truck moved heavy with its load, straining in a new way through washouts and the potholes and the uneven ground. And as they passed from the field steaming in the rising heat, Gabriel took it all in with a gaze, the forest gone, the layers and density of it gone but the sadly exposed though unvanishing heart still beating in darkness and partial light.

They ate lunch in a roadside diner with trucks and semis pulled up in front of it among men with plaid shirts and John Deere caps who smoked and drank endless cups of coffee. And then they were back on the road, driving through the corridor of trees again. The clouds had burned off and sunlight came piercing through the trees in fierce light. The radio jumped between stations in static blur, so his father switched it off. They opened the windows and the cabin was filled with air, the sweet pine smell of the forest, the heat of it rising rich and sweet.

And slowly, through glades and turns and far from any town now, the road began to descend, the light coming down from straight above, and the trees began to change with different kinds of fir and oak giving way to cedar, thinning out as they dropped and rose and dropped again winding out towards the coast. Smell it? his father said.

What?

The sea.

It came through like a living thing. And Gabriel was awake and attentive to it like a vision coming towards him. He gazed hard through the trees, and they seemed to part and close

in a frustrating and magical weave which seemed to reveal it, seemed to suggest and infer and show forth in tantalizing glimpses which may have been, which probably were, yet were still uncertain. Was it the silver flash of a wave? Was it the glittering of light bouncing along the surface? Was it the blue gleam coming through from its distance? Still he was unsure, even as they came to a turnoff down which his father drove, bumping and jolting to the road's end. His father switched off the engine and said, Here we are.

They climbed out and unloaded their gear. His father helped Gabriel put on his pack, pulled down the straps so that it was cinched tightly around his shoulders and waist and pressed close against his back. Then his father put on his own pack and tugged the straps down tight and stuck his arms out and lifted them and worked his shoulders and then said, Let's go.

His father led them up the trailhead and into the woods. Gabriel followed, leaning forward and back, striking for that balance of position which would put the weight of the pack right in the middle. Sometimes he felt it pulling him back, and so he leaned forward. Then he felt it pushing him forward so that his steps were a kind of catch-up to keep the weight from pushing him over, and so he leaned back. Like a drunken sailor he weaved and stumbled along the trail, toe-stumping into roots and rocks when he did not pay attention to his footing. Gradually, he found the right stride, hooking his thumbs under the shoulder straps and keeping his eyes on the path before him. His father strode far ahead and out of sight. Occasionally Gabriel would catch a glimpse of him through the trees or when the trail curved back on itself, and from time to time his father would call out, You all right back there?

Gabriel would summon the breath to answer in a steady, tough voice, I'm all right. Are you all right? And he would hear his father laugh. And that became the call and response of their

hiking, his father calling back, Are you all right back there? And Gabriel answering, I'm all right, you all right?

The straps of the pack began to cut into Gabriel's shoulders after a while, and his arms began to tingle. It was a pain that went to the bone, and he felt himself grimacing. But he said nothing and kept up the call and response with his father. He was hot, and wished he could take off his coat, but he did not trust himself to get the pack back on, and he did not want to lose track of his father or make his father have to stop. He was thirsty, now, too, his mouth blown dry by fierce breathing. But he pushed himself, pushed to follow his father along the path through the woods, pushed to keep up and not appear weak.

The trail was perpetual descent, treacherous at times as it switched back and forth. Sunlight came through in dusty rays, and a few feet off the path, the forest floor was thick with moss-covered fallen logs and thistles and nettles and rich banks of ferns. Fat banana slugs stretched their way over the ground and sometimes onto the path, and sometimes Gabriel came across one that had been crushed by his father hiking ahead. Gabriel tried to avoid stepping on them while keeping his stride even. He had found a working rhythm, a kind of groove that was less awkward and that allowed him to move forward with some surety and grace. And he was careful to keep his concentration on the path, on his footing, even as he sought in quick glances for a glimpse of the sea.

And at last he saw it, he thought. Then it was gone. He listened and heard a whispering from the distance. He watched his footing. Then he looked again, but it was not there. Then he saw it again, a glitter. He was certain of it now. And the whispering of it was coming to him now, constant. His father called back, You all right back there?

And Gabriel answered, I'm all right, you all right?

Then he saw it, full flooding through the trees, rich, cobalt, dark glittering through the trees.

He came down to where the path leveled out and saw his father standing there, hands on his hips, smiling, not even breathing hard. How you holding up? his father asked.

Good.

Thirsty?

Yeah.

His father stepped over to him and tugged on his pack and pulled out a water bottle and handed it to him. Gabriel drank deeply, keeping his eyes to that strange and gleaming spirit through the trees. His father reached back to a side pouch on his own pack and pulled out a water bottle and drank and then poured some of the water over his face and shook his head and said, Ahhhh. Not much farther, now.

Really?

You done with that? his father said, pointing at Gabriel's bottle with the tip of his own.

Yeah.

His father took the bottle and slipped it back into Gabriel's pack, then put his own water bottle back into the side pouch and said, Last leg. Let's go.

They followed the trail now as it wove through the scattered stands of trees. They were descending very gradually, now, and the sea was coming to them, giving itself to the land as the trees seemed to stand back for it. Gabriel heard seagulls crying. Then the trail dipped down and the sea was gone, although he could still hear it voicing to him with its whisper of a thousand tongues. The trail rose again and the sea was before them fully, open, and Gabriel felt the full rush of it, the surge of the wind with its salt smell and taste, the water rolling in, huge breakers

coiling high and cobra-bent, suspended only briefly then crashing and tumbling and roiling in a fierce churning of white foam that stretched itself out at last thin and green and glassy as seagulls with their wings in perfect hard arcs rode the wind currents over the breaking waves. Gabriel stood rapt, transfixed before the enormity of it, his first vision of the ocean.

They set up camp in the grass behind a tangle of driftwood where the last few firs and pine trees blocked some of the wind and where a little creek flowed gurgling down and fanned out shimmering onto the beach. His father pitched the tent and built a fire ring while Gabriel gathered firewood. They shook out the sleeping bags and tucked the packs into the foot of the tent, and his father hung a bag from a tree limb to keep their food. Then he spread a blanket out before the opening of the tent and the campsite was set. His father started a fire and blew on it and fanned it into a steady self-sustaining burn.

Gabriel drank some water and walked out along the driftwood, stepping along the logs and into the sand. He looked out at the ocean and its vastness, the far curve of its horizon. No ships were visible, only the sea. He went down to where the water came in sliding fast over the flat stretch of shore and the wet sand shining like polished stone. The sun was past its high arc and now in descent, warm, the wind wild off the sea and full of intensity and force. Gabriel could lean into it and feel his body suspended by it, as if a hand were pushing him back. A sun line shone down on the water so bright he could not look directly into it.

He sailed sand dollars and they came alive. hawks scanned overhead. He knelt down near a tide pool and overturned a rock and saw the scattering of black shelled crabs. He picked one up and it dug its stony tined legs into his fingers. He looked into the orbit of its white-tipped, milky eye. What do you see, my little friend? He put it back in its home and replaced the rock and

continued down the shore. Then he came upon a group of towering rocks that seemed as though they had bitterly broken away from the mainland and were marching out to sea, a few scraggly pines still embedded in their isolated plots of earth, and he wandered among them, feeling himself now like a crab among giants.

He picked up a heavy stick and dragged it through the wet sand, leaving a long, unbroken scroll of meaningless script; then, he wrote out his name in cursive lettering, and then shapes of obscure meaning, and at last a giant cross. Then he threw the stick into the waves and watched it plunge and rise drifting in the water, seeming to try for return.

He turned and headed back towards camp. He was now facing into the wind and the sand came at him stinging with speed and serpentine low along the beach. He turned his face and looked up to where the land rose again in a cliff face of sandstone, serrated rock grooved by wind into profiles which grinned and frowned and laughed and shifted and gazed back at him. The forest was thick, and he could not see into its depths, back going back into a land woven around the penetrating waters of the Sound, as if land and sea were in endless face-off, circling each other like fighters. And then he saw it rise, too big to be a gull or even a hawk, moving slowly in powerful soar on the currents of the wind, using that wind with a kind of liberty, feathers glinting as it moved in a circular path skyward and on. The eagle rose with the light of late afternoon and cruised along the treeline and higher. And as Gabriel followed it, running along the shoreline with it, he stepped off the end of a stripped-clean and white-bleached log and leaped with it. He flew in that moment and knew in that moment a truth of air as he took it deep in his chest and with its buoyancy floated and climbed higher. He made his body hold to sky with his will alone and the air held deep in his lungs, and he held to that trajectory with his mind as he followed the path of the eagle.

When he returned to the camp, the sun was already flattening out, shifting shape, blood burning as it plunged itself wavering and searing into the body of the ocean.

He dropped down onto the blanket. His father had a campfire going hot with one side pushed back with a large flat rock he used as a cooking surface. He had a blackened camp pot on it with beans bubbling away inside. He tossed in a couple of hotdogs and they sank in and burbled and it all smelled good. He cut up some bread and cheese and apples and laid out a fine little meal on some paper plates and handed one to Gabriel. The food was steaming hot, and Gabriel blew on each forkful as he ate. This is good, he said.

Not bad for a camp cook. My grandfather used to cook bacon on a piece of wood. Smokey, that tasted good.

What was his name?

My grandfather? Your great grandfather? His name was Thomas High Bear, too, just like me, just like you. He was the first High Bear I know of.

What do you mean the first?

He got the name, acquired it you might say, hunting up in the mountains. He was with the Crow. That's what my father told me, anyway, before he died. I don't know if we have relations there or not, but that's how he got the name.

What do you mean Crow?

You never heard about that?

No.

The Crow...they're people, Indians

Indians? No way.

Yeah.

And how did die?

Great grandfather or father?

Your father.

He drowned, in the ocean, just a little north of here, actually. It was a freak accident, my mother says. He was always a strong swimmer, a powerful man. They were out here on a holiday, and he went in for one last swim that evening and drowned. He got caught in a rip tide, she says. Some of the folks from the tribe up there searched for his body using their fishing boats. It was a boy riding a horse along the top of the shoreline who spotted him.

And how did great grandfather die.

He died an old man. He moved out to Lake Chelan when he was a young man and ran a hotel there. We visited a few times. He never talked about his past to me, but then I was just a kid when he died. I didn't get to ask him anything about it, and my grandmother moved back out in Montana and I never saw her, so... I asked my mother about him some, but she just said he was a hardworking man, a good man, the best man she ever knew.

How did they meet?

My parents?

Yeah.

In school. They were sweethearts in school. Ask her about it sometime. She likes to tell that story.

So you never learned about the people that were Crows.

His father laughed a little. Nope.

So how come you and mom call me Gabriel?

That's your middle name.

Yeah, but how come I don't go by my first name?

So we won't get confused when she calls us to dinner. Finish up there.

And his father tossed his own empty plate into the fire where it sputtered and steamed and then burst into flame, burning from the center out. Gabriel ate the rest of his food and tossed his plate into the burning flame of his father's plate, and there it caught quickly.

His father lit a cigarette and leaned back against a log and smoked with one hand behind his head. Gabriel lay flat on his back looking up at the stars as if he had never seen them before. He said, Wow, the stars are really bright out here, and so many.

Yeah, the city lights don't obscure the view here. See that white streak there? His father pointed with his cigarette.

Yeah.

That's the Milky Way.

Yeah? What's that?

That's our galaxy. It's like our galaxy is a spinning octopus and what you're seeing is an arm of that octopus. Our planet is on another arm of that octopus. And see that big collection of stars there, with the square and the part curving back?

I think so.

That's the Big Dipper.

Gabriel looked into the mystery of the stars and saw something flare-out in a quick and silent streak. What was that? he said.

A shooting star. Actually, they're not stars. They're bits of matter hitting the earth's atmosphere.

Wow.

We'll probably see some more before the night's through.

Tell me some more stars.

That's Orion there, his father said, running his hand back and forth over a constellation.

You can tell by the three stars of his belt. And that's the little dipper and the little bear.

That sure is a high bear, Gabriel said. His father laughed. And that's great grandfather riding on his back.

Looks like he's smiling, his father said, clamping the cigarette between his teeth and putting both hands behind his head.

He's laughing.

At what.

You and me.

Why?

Cause we're looking at him.

All right.

Gabriel could not remember ever having a conversation with his father. It seemed to him that in some way, out here, disconnected from the shop and his woodworking and his job worries, his father was a different, open, lighter, happier man. Before they had left, Gabriel thought that the purpose of this trip had something to do with Stuart's death and his responsibility in it, that somewhere along the way he was going to be lectured and questioned and brow-beaten for his sins, and he believed sincerely that they were sins, but so far his father had said nothing about it. Strangely, he felt guilty that he was enjoying himself so much, and he wanted to tell his father about this, but he did not want to spoil the feeling they had now. And he knew what his father's response would be regarding the idea of sin.

They lay there a long time with the stars all around them. Sometimes they saw the quick outline of a shooting star, or something falling, and Gabriel thought this might be how writers of the bible imagined falling angels. His mind was crowded with them, and crowded with all the new impressions he had gathered this day, and he felt alive and strong in a new way he could not explain but which he knew he would have forever, as though he had found some secret energy source to which he could connect whenever he had to and that was more pure because for whatever reasons and whether conscious of it or not, his father had shown him. And again, he wanted to ask his father if this was why he had brought him out here and if this was what he felt himself. But he said nothing. He knew if he asked his father would either say nothing or laugh. He knew his father's spoken beliefs, but he believed that in some way his father had other beliefs that he wouldn't or couldn't speak, and that coming here was the way he spoke them without knowing from some place deep in his heart.

After a while his father rose and went out beyond the fire light, and Gabriel waited and listened and wondered. Then his father came back and tossed his cigarette butt into the fire and said, Well, I'm turning in. And he yawned and stretched and climbed into the tent. Gabriel listened to the rustling as his father slipped into his sleeping bag. Then Gabriel rose and went out to the creek and dipped his hands in and brought the cold water to his face and listened to the snapping of the fire and to the waves coming in on the beach below. He looked up through the fierce burning stars. Did he hear something else? Did he see something else as another white flare burst into a line in the sky above? Then he went back and climbed into the tent and lay down there in his sleeping bag beside his father, hearing the sounds of fire and sea and his father there beside him breathing in the dark.

He stood before it, naked but for the cross on the little black cord around his neck, facing into it, into wind and wave upon wave. The sun was behind him, coming up over the trees and casting his shadow forward on the slick black water. He stepped forward and felt the first touch of it on his feet, the cold bite of the water and then the inrush of the wave flattening out smooth and green and clear. He went forward until he stood with the water up to his knees, felt it surging forward then surging back, felt the seemingly solid ground beneath him shifting and dropping away in circles where his feet were planted as though it were trying to suck him down into it. He went forward, and the incoming water hit against his chest with its cold body-wracking force. Then he dove in.

Now he was swimming out from the edge of the land into a boundless body of water. The waves came in and as they came he dove down under them and felt them break across his back, felt the fast sweep and lunge of them and then the brief suspension in which the water seemed not to move at all. And he rose and broke the surface and breathed and saw the sky above and the line of the horizon and turning back saw the diminishing curve of the shore. He swam beyond the breaking waves into the outer swells and felt his body rise and fall with their force, but he didn't have to dive down to avoid the crash of the waves. And he swam parallel to the shore, and outward too, feeling a new kind of fear and freedom as he pushed his body forward and at the same time was propelled in thousands of ways he could not control or even tell.

The waves came in at an angle and he swam in the same direction as the flow, which pushed him fast along the shoreline. He felt good and strong and dove down and swam underwater in that green-hued and spiraling world. Then he rose and curved out and caught an incoming wave and rode it as it rose and surged and gathered like a fist and then broke forward.

He turned back and lunged out to catch another wave and rode it for a short while before it left him. What a beautiful game he had found, and he went out to wave after wave and had a string of good rides, hitting just as the waves were giving their full force, riding them towards shore and gliding into the rippling shallows. It was a good game to play with the ocean.

Then there was a lull during which he floated and waited and watched as the swells came in, and he tried to gauge which ones would rise and carry him. He caught a few too early as they were gathering themselves so that by the time they rushed forward he was too far back and they passed him by. He tried to find a better spot from which to enter the waves, and as they came he turned and swam with them hard to try and catch just as they broke. He caught a few more, finding that place where he was not too high up and behind the force of the wave nor too far forward and hammered by the break. Then he found himself trying for one too late. It was already breaking, and he was caught up in its explosion which was violent and punching downward. He could not control himself and was thrown down and dashed in the shallow back-draw then overswept by the churning and choking water. He rose to his feet in the foaming, broken wave and coughed and shook his head and leaned onto his knees. Then he dove back in and swam under the next three waves and sought a deeper place to tread water and choose the next perfect wave.

He rode the waves, catching some, losing some, diving under some that seemed huge and frightening. In the lulls he swam back and forth or dropped down to a pinging depth by letting the air out of his lungs, and when his feet struck bottom he bent his knees and lunged back surfaceward to break gasping into the air. It was another game of the sea, and the deeper he went the sharper he felt the pressure in his ears, the darker the water became, the closer he came to a feeling of danger. And when he rose, he re-entered the world with a kind of relief and renewed

force. Then he came up into another wave that was starting to break. He surfaced and saw it only for a moment and barely had time to take a breath. It pounded down on him and sent him swirling under. When he rose, he was facing another wave and could only gasp once before he was thrown back under in its the swirling force. Then the wave gathered back, and it was as if the wave had him in some terrible grip. He came to the surface only to see another towering wave in full crest about to fall upon him, but it did not carry him in. Instead, it seemed to be drawing back, as if gathering from its own collapse the force and energy for its next rise and fall. And Gabriel was inside it. He felt himself swept forward and he carried with it, rolling inside of it and completely lost. By luck alone he rose and caught a breath but was hit again by another wave. And again, he broke the surface and gasped for air, and another wave came down on him. And when it hit him and threw him under he lost his direction, and for long, heart-throbbing and chest aching moments he could not tell how to get back to the surface. There was no surface and there were no rays of light to guide him to the surface in the dark and inward coiling chaos of the wave. Then he was back at the surface and taking a quick breath only to be subsumed again. He lost count of the number of times he had been thrown under, but he knew that he was weakening, and he knew he had to get to shore.

Then there was a moment, a strange suspended moment after a wave had just hit and drawn him under and was about to draw itself up again, when Gabriel, with no idea of surface or depth, only the dark drift between wave-breaks, felt something near, felt as though something were near him though he could see nothing. His mind became still, and the thought struck him that he was drowning, that this was how his grandfather had drowned, in this way, in this very sea and nearly in this very place in these same waters surging against the shore—and it was as if the thought brought his grandfather near, as though his grandfather were there, inside his mind,

seeing this over again, witnessing his own death by drowning again in the body of his grandson and saying in a silent way, No, not you. Gabriel swam as hard as he could in the only direction he could, wave after wave breaking upon him, taking him under, erasing the world. But he kept on swimming, his thought going forward in one direction, taking with him whatever breath he could steal back in the brief intervals of wave-crash and slamming violent momentum, until he reached the shore and crawled out of the grip of the sea.

He collapsed beyond the reach of the incoming waves, and it was as if he sank down into the sand, dissolving into the sand, breathing hard but his mind deep down and dreamless and completely at ease. He felt nothing. And he passed out.

When he awoke, he sat up. His limbs were shaking, tingling, weak. He did not know if he could stand. He looked around. The beach was empty. Where was his father? The sun was high. The warm air flowed over him. The salt had crystallized on his skin. He rose to his feet and stood on trembling legs. He looked down at his body and saw no injuries. He was fine. He was amazed. He wanted to call out to someone and say, Did you see that? But there was no one to call to. He laughed aloud and shook his head and looked out at the sea which now glittered calm and beautiful. He lifted his hands and looked at them, he lifted his feet. I'm all right, he said. He placed his hands on his chest and took a deep loving breath. The he felt with his hands and realized that his cross was gone.

He put on his clothes and hiked back up the empty beach. The eagle swept along the upper edge of the treeline, and Gabriel raised his head and let out a sharp and piercing sound unlike anything he had ever heard come from his throat before. He leaped over the fallen driftwood and called every branch and every stone and every swirl of sand and swale of grass

brother. He followed the creek with its glittering alluvium back into camp where his father was packing up the tent, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He said nothing to his father about his experience in the waves.

He helped collect up the last of their things and set his own pack against a log and slipped it onto his back by himself. He stood up, pulled the straps tight and said, I'm ready.

Well just give me a minute, there, cowboy. His father smiled, took a few last drags on his cigarette, then tossed it into the fire pit and kicked some dirt over it. He scanned the site and the sea one more time, then lifted his pack onto his back and cinched it and said, All right. Lead the way.

Gabriel leaned forward into the slope of the hill and used the weight of the pack to propel him. He kept up a pace as fast as he could. He had to concentrate on each heavy step, but he felt clear and crisp and strong. When he reached the first sharp switch-back he turned and took one last look at the sea. It was glittering hard and blue through the trees, and the waves were singing up to him with their infinite voices overlapping and faint. He turned and hiked on, and gradually he could not distinguish the sound of sea waves from the sound of the wind coming through the trees. Eventually both sounds funneled down as he went deeper into the forest until the only sound he heard was the sound of his own breathing.

Gabriel kept the lead the entire way and pulled his water bottle from the side pocket to drink, which was only once, at the same spot where they had stopped to drink on their hike in. And he called back from time to time, saying, You all right back there?

I'm all right, his father would call, You all right? And they would both laugh.

When they reached the car, Gabriel unhooked his pack and dropped it and stood breathing hard as his father came up. Then they loaded the packs into the truck and climbed in.

Well, said his father. Let's go home. And he started the truck and pulled around and headed out, the sun shining through the branches in rhythmic, hypnotic fluttering light.

### **A Mean Reversion**

By eleven Jones was out the door. He went out to the fire-exit stairs and lit a cigarette. The steps were littered with old cigarette butts, most of them his. The smoke went in and down and gave its mild narcotic nudge. The stairs were covered with pigeon shit, and the pigeons huddled on the ledges just inside the window casings with their disintegrated meshing. He opened the door and looked back down the hallway. No one was there. He went down the stairs.

He moved through the bright glittering spring light air. The people were on the move, and the sidewalks were crowded with their energy. He put on a pair of dark glasses and felt comfortably invisible.

One drink.

He slid into McCormick's and took his place at the bar. The smooth dark wood of the bar counter caught the light and gleamed like a holy altar. A few others were drinking at the other end. A few more sat in the booths. One couple had the look of an illicit rendezvous. The young woman bartender, familiar but nameless, came down to greet him. Her light brown hair was pulled back so tight her skin seemed smoothed to a high-tension sheen, her nose a precise little avian blade, her eyes like two black stones in an otherwise bright, white eggshell face. What can I get for you, she asked. Even her speech was a quick, sharp snap.

Johnny Walker Black on the rocks, he said. And she was already turning, already in the process of making it before he realized what he had said, that he had responded automatically,

that he had not even ordered food and would not order food and would order another drink as soon as the first one was done and would force himself not to finish it too quickly, although he was already regretting that he had not ordered a double.

She is like a bird, a blue jay, he thought, as she placed the drink before him. Her fingers are talons. The ice settled. The liquid went through its dance, swirling as the ice began dissolving into waves radiating between his fingers as he put it to his lips. It was the purest libation, the touch of the glass to his lips, so cold and quiet, the scent of the alcohol rising to his nose before he even tasted it, tasting it in fact before he tasted it, then actually tasting it, cool, smoky, radiant and warm, and at last the burn of it to the core of his being. Ah, to be human again. Though not just human. Better than human. Superhuman. Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene.

By the second drink he had reclaimed his soul with interest and clarity, and it struck him that even his body had begun to find its edges, its line, yes that's it, the form has been obscured by too much tension or a lack of the correct tension, and this, this is the defining fire, all energies properly distributed throughout the limbs, the blood moving at its proper pace, chambers of the heart diastolically filling, systolically contracting and sending the blood on its way. He could feel it happening, and it pleased him. If only he could sell this smile. And he said, aloud, Ah, the machine is at its work again! although no one was near or paying any attention to him. The few at the end of the bar did look over, and so he continued, lifting his glass: To the heart, of course.

Can I get you something else? the bar tender asked.

Yes, please. Another. And he held up and rattled the ice in the otherwise empty glass. While she fixed it, he followed the idea further. The heart expands to take in blood, and this action is called diastole. This is also, in linguistics, or poetics rather, the lengthening of a syllable for poetic effect, as in I suppose a line like: And there the king is but as a beggar, although I

think the elimination of the word 'as' would be much more concise. I suppose it is added to make the line align to the correct number of syllables, but there you are again, back in the numbers. Line align, ha, I suppose therein is an internal example, a hidden gem as it were. There must be a name for that specifically and not just under the umbrella of the broader poetics. And no neologism, although I'm not opposed to those. Where would we be without invention? But back to the original line: isn't it much more interesting to say, And there the king is but a beggar! Yes, now that has power! Concision at its work. Systole, too, has both the meaning of the heart's contraction and a shortening of a word, not unlike elision or the slurring together of words or the syncope of eliminating vowel sounds as in, In the beginning how the heav'ns and the earth rose out of chaos. See, do you hear that? Heav'ns. Heav'ns. He laughed. It sounds like a stifled slur, doesn't it? And he exaggerated, Innn the beginnnning how the heav'nnnnns...

She placed the drink before him. He still had the other glass in his hand. You're kind of happy, aren't you? she said.

What are we without joy? God gave us drink to show that He loves us! He put the glass down and swept up the other in one smooth motion, lifting it in pontific decussation. Blessings, he said, blessings to us all.

Through the tilt-a-whirl streets, the cartoon people, the long shadows of the buildings climbing up among the lengths of their brothers like a creeping death or an incipient shame, through tourists with heads bent back to view the facades and the second story entrances into mid-air's nothing but what was once imagined with grandeur but was then abandoned, where a street would have been but then never was because the regrade never reached its promised level, such are the products of proposals and city planning and investments, through beer garden

chatter and waves of perfume, through arguments and harangues and honking horn traffic where he was the only vital creature in the congregation, Get the hell out of the street you idiot!, he kept his hand aloft to them all, the patron saint of cyclones, and to all in his stumbling humble awkward blind benediction, blessings...until he stopped at a pair of legs stretched out on the sidewalk before him.

With exaggerated bow from the waist and squint and blink he finally saw the sign that read:

Homeless

Anything will help

Even a Smile

God Bless

My God, he said, looking down at the man with his legs outstretched, a pair of legs in filthy green pants, with nobody inside them, a man wearing several layers of shirts and an olive drab coat open at the neck, the neck and the face burned deep, almost black, hair like a matted bird's nest with a tinge of gray not from fading color but from the dust of the world, a cup at his side held in a hand that did not even seem to grip so much as lay next to it, claiming by proximity alone, though the cup, Jones saw, was empty. The eyes were closed.

Jones looked with a raptor's intensity, closed his eyes, looked again. The man did not move, did not even seem to breathe, and for a long moment Jones stared at him as people passed around them, people in fast motion as if in a near yet other universe but far away nevertheless, far away enough not to see him and this man on the ground beneath him, as if the two of them

were invisible or only faintly visible in the periphery of the world alongside thieves who run through alleyways or public workers cleaning streets or the dead come back to peer in on the living from their borderlands of gray. And was he alive this man before him? Jones tried to steady himself to see if he could detect any motion at all, any sign of life.

Here, Jones said. Are you all right? His voice seemed to travel from somewhere deep inside his belly and came out almost like a whisper through the pipeline. He cleared his throat and began again. Here, hey there, you, are you all right?

No reaction.

Hey! He leaned down closer, putting out a hand to nudge or maybe try for an artery. Hey. Are you...

The eyes opened, barely.

Jones squinted. All right? Okay. Hello, there. You seem to be... Here, something for your cup...

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small wad of crumpled bills, and a few additional coins tumbled out. He looked down into the confusion of the rippling ground, the warp and weave of the sidewalk like plates of serpent skin rolling and overlapping, swelling and deflating with some regularity, but the coins were lost in that maze of shifting earthskin. He caught himself and looked into his hand, into the crunch of money. He pulled one bill free and two more fell, and he put the one bill into the cup with some difficulty, tilting himself with his legs set apart and straight, his hand wavering towards that narrowing point of the cup below, that shrinking target as if it were quickly retreating from his approach so that he almost lost his balance again and said, Now wait! Then dip and cantilever once again, this time fingers plunging into the cup and stuck there, then releasing his grip on the money. He lifted his hand and the cup

came with it. He lowered the cup and shook the hand, and cup and bills came free, landing where they were, bills inside the cup, coins scattered round on the ground. A mid-air transfer between fast flying planes could not have been accomplished with more precision. He put the remaining money in his hand held back into his pocket, in spirit now departing and oblivious of any other money that had fallen.

There. What's your name? His voice came through the tunnel. Your name?

Nothing.

Hmmm. Hey, my friend. Can you tell me, what's your name?

One eye opened, then the other. The man's mouth moved, but no sound came.

Jones leaned in closer. What? I can't quite hear.

The mouth moved again, and this time a whisper came through from some far universe,  
Arl.

Arl? Is that it? Did I hear that right? Arl? Is that a name?

The eyes closed again, and the head faintly nodded.

Are you sleeping outside, my friend?

The head nodded again.

It's cold for that, I believe.

Nothing.

Jones kept looking at the man. Was he drunk? Was he starving? Probably both. So little life seemed to emanate from the form below him. Jones said, There's a shelter down the street here. I've seen it. He pointed in the direction. You probably know about it, though.

The man had drifted off.

Watch out someone doesn't steal that money. Huh?

Nothing.

Jones backed away. He turned, momentarily lost, his direction confused, trajectory broken, his destination unclear. The buildings seemed to blend their shadows into a fluttering pleorama in which black figures erupted from the cornices or dove from rooftops only to evaporate before striking the ground. He heard laughter. He heard great turbines working down below the street. He felt alternate waves of heat and cold coming in cross currents from the four directions. A face appeared and resolved itself before him with lascivious grin, ghoulish and sneering, a gorgon of snake-hair and mouth wide opening as if unhinged to devour. Then it was gone. Distorted voices came out of passing cars, upper windows, long echoing calls, and he realized from some place deep in his mind that he had gone over a border and was treading vulnerable in a terrifying current in which everything he perceived was permeated with subtle tributary illusions and projections from his own sprung subconscious or that everything around him was appearing now with the filters stripped away that normally preserved a stable and coherent condition. Everything was possible. Everything was real. Cars swept by him, and their long metal bodies flowed and stretched like rubbery cartoon forms with shuddering orbs within. Robed missionaries or mendicants bowed and searched through the rubble for stones that they tossed into a heap in the street where others of their kind converged and struck at the rocks with long metal pikes and each strike sent out a brief and flaring spark. Jones marveled at the absurdity of it all, at the artistry and poetry as well as horror and confusion, then leaped from an oncoming trolley that swept by silent on a pair of gleaming rails. Electricity jumped through the air. Everything was happening at the same time. Everything was happening in the same place. He stood in the midst of it. He looked up into the converging cords of sky and saw the shadow forms falling again, black leaves that broke like breath across his face, and there in the middle of it all

came swooping the form of Gropius of Arcadia with his flea circus mind channeling the waves of the Pleroma. Hello, Mr. Jones.

He walked on tiptoes balancing on the thin wire of the sidewalk. He chose a direction, in this case any direction would do, and he walked. He kept on walking, and the motion was in its own way a sobering act of repetitive choices, footfalls through a throng of blurs that became more and more distant as his own breath increased and the sound of his own breathing rose up in his ears until he passed from that whirlwind whiptailing behind him and was finally able to focus solely on his footsteps and his breathing as behind him he heard the sound of a ferry horn and one lone seagull's diminishing cry.

As Jones steered his way through the palm fronds of a few ideas that wanted to surface but kept diving back down into the undertow of his brain, appearing just for a flicker of a moment like seal heads poking their eyes through the surface of the water and looking directly at you, really seeing you in that way that makes you think they are in fact thinking about you and considering your position there and your proximity and possible threat or ineptitude in the smooth deep waters with your little spider legs, he came upon an opening. It was that time of day that could be any time of day. Why, what have we here? he said. A carved aperture in the ground had opened up before him, cut like an incision in a cadaver, bloodless and clean, and while he had the feeling he had seen this before, had he seen this before? He had seen it before, there below him like something worker men were at, say, laying subway track or sewer lines, but there was nothing of the sort going on here, now. No, this was of an entirely different nature, something out of the science fiction books, a gateway, yes, that's just what it was, just that, down into...he leaned out over the hole, weight balancing precarious, rocking back and forth with a delicious thrill of catching the fall, because down below there were hints of acetylene and smoke

and hook lights and miner's caps, but not the kind of apparatus that was up to regular street work, or maybe he saw a glorious obsidian river, a sip of which brought the perfect blend of light and oblivion, the blissful hippocrene once again if only he could reach it and take that luscious sip, and yet again it was changing, a thing of change both peristaltic and reptilian, ouroboros with scales of mythic wonder, upon which scale panel are you, dear shadow? More indeed riverlike and flowing and bobbing to the surface with emergent horses heads, whole horse carcasses it appeared in fact boiling in with lamppost and pick axe and bricks and tents and timber crunched and splintered and poking up like cactus spines, why yes in fact he had stumbled onto the very portal that stands between the unfettered spirit and the pineal entrance to the skull's cathedral, the foyer of limbo full of the discarded thought and memory and life detritus jettisoned when the soul makes its perennial leap from one narrative branch to another and comes up shaking mitred locks and gawping with primordial bewilderment traveling through the arctic mind-bath of death's cotilion. Ah what a marvel! What a blessing! What a beast to behold! The kind of thing that inspires the shakers and the riders and the babbling seers of the tribes and the scribes in caves scribbling their visions for the holy cantors to sing out to hungry congregations. And why shouldn't he be given this gift that it was, the revealing, the Sator Square, the palm at the end of the mind? Come at last! Hadn't he made his sacrifice? Been making it daily in the construction of sandwiches and the lave routine of hand and face, the examination of metric tables, the bustle and beehive tremble, the spin and clatter of the laundromat in apocalyptic white blear afternoon spin cycles, the barroom susitations and prescriptions and confidentials of yes yes, and oh, yes, listening like a priest, singing like a goat, holding court, holding secret, holding infirmary's head like an apple to the mouth of sad Adam stuck at the threshold of dull Eden and wanting to cricket-leap out of the thicket of monotone...?

A flesh. Ah, hidden desire. The cauldron of the human mind. Yes? And here before him now it was all opened up. And not in desert but in city center he stood, yes, verily at the navel itself. The very oracle, the well of conclusions and visions down which one was cast to scream the mollusk mutton of the clutterbrain, dragged like a sponge through the human day and decay and the mind at large with its static groaning of all the minds' prayerful and baleful complaining and begging and here so too Jones knew he was called upon to add his barbaric yawp into the rich earth ear and add to all the bilious conversation chatter and empty rattling on and on and so he opened his mouth and unleashed....Hallafactiouslatoranimockery I've been for you and you you see and me inside your blind bedroom feeling for a light feeling for a day feeling for a way back to the child in the all body cast and casket tree high above among the wisteria limbs and mystery winds and swaying haven't I? The game afoot with rules cooked up by a zookeeper or a circus clown, the ground of acid bath to touch, each grass blade sharp as glass and cured with curare...oh, no...swinging down so close those blades brush like tongues against my hair, like an acrobat, like a hero...yes, a hero, that's the very thing, pursued by the animus antihero so loveless in his game and quest but oh so ingenious! Hidden in rags and stupefaction. Outguessing and outflanking at every turn. How does he do it? It's maddening. It's unfair! He must have a map ve van't see, after all, a mirror behind my head so he can see every card I hold, every diagram. Why did you do that? Rig the game like that? Give that creature access to every thread of thought and jurisprudence over every impulse. Dangling oh why yes like a marionet like a toy like a doll strung up over a campfire with sad plastic features melting into hideous globular and oh so gloriously beautiful and revealing truth to behold! Why make him in my image like that so I have to shatter the mirror to get out of the mess, the scene already changing as I fly right through the snapping jaws and the closing doors, your mad laughter following everywhere I go,

nibbling at the nerves, biting at the toes, headlock in my dreams so I must gnaw through my own arms to get away! Madness! Who conceived this sort of thing? Why? Why that kind of charade is this? Pain like a payment, like a passport into a country of dream makers who can only repeat the sorrows and sufferings they've been through life after life so that we spiral and fly on the tornado's wings with farm house clap clattering and shutters flying off like burnt skin, good mother brisket knitting her charm into a pair of guillotine eyes and sending us off on a forced march through jungle path classroom corridor and feudal trench row, through blow torch fields littered with the dead and small town swept with sickness and company debt and anonymous foundry lives, through screaming, atomizing, disintegration knowing...knowing it's happening while it's happening? Patient on the table without an anesthetic? And then the outer drifting observer disembodied and looking in all directions and especially down at versions of myself so that I am not myself and think why, I never was, never could have been after all, and after all it was all an illusion? Really? That's the great awaking? Just to dive back in and do it all again in another warped personality because I have to stand on the deck of the sinking ship and throw life preservers overboard to all of the bluing sinkers with their shock faces and hands of ice so frozen they can't even take a hold of the rope, is that it? Sing your praises well and true and all the way, merrily merrily and say why yes man is born of woman's womb and lo and so and here we go and knife blade to the neck, pistol to the forehead, it doesn't matter who has a hold of it, the reign of terror is the reign of terror is resin bubbling in amber with a fly wide-eyed trapped and mouthing, Pleeeeeease heeeelp meeee, it almost makes you laugh, shrinking down to the head of a pin with all the rest of the bumbling angels, the house cat swiping at your head like the great reliever come to liberate you from all that dread you carried around like draft papers, like homework, a kid in school sitting down to a test and looking around and knowing, knowing sure

as judgment that the scrambled questions shifting on the page are moving targets, and I have no answers! I have no answers! It's radicals! It's reciprocals! It's a beast in a cage! It's the hypotenuse leg! When in doubt, sit and stare moodily across the room or out the window. Heh heh. He laughed a bit, expunged, expelled, outcast and free. And what did the oracle say? What answer returned from the whirlwind?

He looked up. A small crowd had gathered around him. Tourists. Children. People with backpacks and shopping bags were looking at him. A few were smiling. A few looked like they were getting ready to call the police. A few were pointing and talking to each other. Did someone take a picture? What was he saying? Yes what was he saying? Had they heard all that? Ooh, he felt his face on fire, and looking up he saw the wolves and the rattle snakes and the vipers all bending down from the tops of the buildings. The sky was an open mouth. A storm was brewing. Had he started that? The thoughts in his head were turning in the same direction as the spiral of clouds above. Surely, this could be no coincidence. He must have stirred up the heavenly gamelans and tapped into the engine of the great Macroprosopus. There would be consequences, without a doubt. He had better prepare himself. What are you looking at? he said, and he spat and snarled at them. Animal noises came from his mouth, it seemed, not the words he thought he said. Grunts and squeaks. He had brought that up from the depths. He had not fully re-arrived, recombined, reconstituted and amalgamated back into his human form. The fur on his hands stood up and he swiped at the air. The people backed away. What do you want from me?

We're here for the tour, someone said.

What?

We were told to meet here for the tour.

What tour?

The underground tour.

We're supposed to meet in front of Doc's and the guide would start the tour. This is Doc's.

Jones looked up. The bulb lights were on, spelling out the name: Doc's. Why, it's broad daylight, he said. Someone laughed.

Are you here for the tour?

No! Jones said, then he took a deep breath. What tour is this?

The underground tour. The underground city.

Oh! Jones shot right through the fuzzy screen and shook his head and cleared the clouds. It all came back in bites. And it was all beginning to blur as it formed. But he knew, he remembered. The underground city! Yes! No, I'm not here for that.

We thought this was part of the tour.

Me?

Yeah.

Funny, what you were saying, someone said. It was funny.

This was not what Jones expected. With both hands, he pressed against the top of his chest and pushed downward, smoothing the material of his coat. Then he cupped his hands over his mouth and with his fingertips rubbed his closed eyes, then pushed his hands back across the top of his head, smoothing out the hair and resting his hands at last at the back of his neck, turning his head from side to side. Well, he said. No, indeed, I'm not here for the tour, and I'm afraid the show is over for now. This was after all simply a preamble to your journey. Caron shall be here shortly, and your tour will be a most fantastical, historical lesson! Invigorating. Stimulating. Truly, an eye-opener. Chuckles and laughter rippled through the little crowd.

But I'm afraid, Jones said, that I must now take my leave of you, and he conjured up a smile. He looked down and tapped the ground a few times with his toe. This seems to be holding, he said. A few more people laughed, and he bowed slightly, took a deep breath and went about his day.

Jones made his way up the back stairs and into the hallway and at last to his office where he collapsed in his high-backed leather chair and spun it around, throwing his feet up onto the window ledge. The sun was descending, and long shadows stretched across the street. Traffic was already increasing, and the cars had flipped on their headlights. He reached back and turned on the radio. A little jazz music would be just about right. Thelonious Monk emerged. Blue Monk, and it became a kind of soundtrack to the moment as he drifted, his breathing coming slower and slower until his eyes closed. The last thing he heard was an advertisement on the radio: that's right! We're giving it away. Once a year we do it, no strings attached! Just come on down to the showroom, this Saturday, and everyone will have a chance to win a brand-new car! What's the catch? There is no catch! All you have to do it show up, put your hand on the contest car, and the person who lasts the longest wins the car! So come on down! We'll be open as long as the party lasts! Don't be late! Only those who arrive between ten and noon will be eligible! So see ya down here!

A search for the grail, and everywhere he turned, the image of a hat flying off a head appeared to him: an acting company production billboard with the back of a man's head, his hat tumbling off (it happened to be a bowler) while one hand reached out for it; then a book cover of a faceless man, a hat rising from the top of his head (once again, a bowler) as if from some form

of magic levitation. Someone holding a newspaper, the headline reading: New Mexico Hat, seriously, and so forth, in fairly quick succession, as though a beam were shining the idea into his world, transforming into different versions of the image, showing up in various designs, meant to attract his attention, a cosmic advertisement, and being a man who opened himself to the symbols and suggestive images mind-at-large offered up, he noticed this, noted it, and lodged it in his mind for future consideration. There were, of course, several possibilities: the images could be coming out of the universal whirlpool to tell him something; he could just be aware of a coincidental image which because of his attention to it invested it with significance; or his mind was on high alert and fixating on this recurring image and so seeking some code to resolve a vague equation in the psyche by engaging consciousness in the process. Or he was just a strong receiver. Big Mystery!

But it would have to wait. He was tired beyond comprehension, moving through a throng of foes that seemed to leer at him with their own collective and secret knowledge, as though they were aware of some significant information which was meant for him but was untransmittable at this time. He stood at the bus stop, his bus stop. Everything moved in slow motion. Cars flowed, dragging their after-images behind them. The people sitting in the restaurant on the second floor of the building across the street seemed to move with mechanical stops and starts, repeating their motions as if on a recorded automaton loop. In the construction site, now quiet, canvas tarps rippled like galleon sails and stopped, catching momentarily like gray film, like a movie image rolling to a point then stopping, only to rerun again exactly as before, over and over.

The bus arrived. He climbed on board. He slipped into the doldrum of its warm interior and pale lights. It leaped and rattled into the flow of traffic, and he leaned his head into a bank of stars and drifted free from his mind.

It was no surprise that when Jones appeared at work the next day he had no memory of missing the meeting, no memory in fact that there had been any meeting at all. The previous day retracted into the blur and baleen and inky bloom of dark undersea no thought could penetrate, and so as he ambled into the office it was again no surprise that because he had missed the meeting, he was called into George's office.

George was a thin, dark-haired patrician with the cartilaginous features of one who had always stuck to business, who knew how to keep a business functioning with precision and profit. His skin was pinkish and his eyes the palest of gray, but there was an intensity and acuteness about him which revealed that nothing passed his scrutiny, no fraction miscalculated, no pin out of place, no hair untouched. And his office was a chamber of perfection with dustless and uncluttered desk, new black leather chairs, and a ceiling fan regulating the temperature to the perfect degree for signing anything. Jones, he said, for he always called Jones Jones, even though they were the same age and the same relative rank in the company. We need to talk,

And Jones knew exactly what was coming. As if a plug were pulled from his navel, he let go a long stream of breath and dropped into one of the leather chairs facing George's desk and offered himself up for reprobation or worse. I know, he said.

Jones, George said, sitting down on the front corner of his desk and crossing his hands on his lap. I'm not going to play some kind of heavy role with you, here, but I'm going to tell you the truth.

Just as well. Jones felt his hangover was now a dull blessing. He moved somewhere inside himself like a boxfish. But he was insulated.

We're losing money, Jones. You know that, don't you?

In the market?

No, he said, turning his head slightly, squinting just perceptibly as if that were going to give a clue. How many clients do you have, Jones?

Jones pushed himself up in the chair. Mine are some of our biggest accounts.

How many?

A dozen or so, last time I counted.

George leveled his gaze at him. None, Jones. You have no accounts. All your clients have left the firm.

There was no retreat. Jones said, That's ridiculous. Why, I was just talking to one of my clients the other day, Mrs...

Gone. Whoever you're talking about. Gone. They've all pulled out. They all did. And they didn't go with other representatives, here, either. I suppose they felt that would have been some kind of insult to you, which shows that they respected you that much. And for good reason, Jones. You're a good man. None of them named you, specifically, as the reason for their leaving, either, but come on, Jones, let's be honest; your drinking has gotten out of hand.

My drinking? Well, sure, I drink. So do a lot of the fellows in the firm. It's part of the culture, part of the process, part of the dance with the client...

Well, it looks like you've been left on the floor by yourself. He raised his eyebrows as a coup de tat, the final stab, then slid down to a lower depth of sincerity, opening his hands as though offering some kind of embrace. Now I don't mean to sound...judgmental or disrespectful, Jones. I like you. We've been friends for years. Your father gave me my first job. But I'm telling you, we're losing money.

That's preposterous! With all of the other agents?

We have to restructure. At this rate, we will be seriously in trouble and very soon. We aren't even making our overhead for office space and salaries right now. Do you know that?

But what about...? He didn't even want to say his name. Or...

Yes?

Jones rubbed his neck, looking down. Sunlight, miraculous sunlight, was coming through the window, inserting a square of light on the floor like an escape hatch he could simply step forward and drop through, and the temptation was very great at this moment, with George's eyes drilling him with a white-hot intensity that was almost mind-numbing. Why, why...all of them? All of my clients? How can that be? Not all of them, surely.

All of them Jones. Where have you been? You haven't been to any of the meetings in weeks. When was the last time you actually met with a client? Really?

I thought...I thought, but wait!

Jones, you've got to get it together. Do you understand? We can't keep working together, this firm can't stay like it is if you don't get some help, really, and soon. And not just for your job. Do you understand?

What do you mean?

I mean your health.

I'm perfectly fine! Strong as a bull.

Jones, I'm speaking to you as a friend.

Now wait a minute you little piranha...Jones rose from his chair, but he could not sustain the advance, saw no point in it as he looked down at the little mechanical man, sitting there in his girlish pose, his mouth like a little salt sucker with just the slightest touch of a grin. This was all theater. There was no question about it. Theater of the absurd! But he also knew that this was not

George's way. George was not a bad man and had no real incentive to shame or even condemn Jones. In one province of his mind he knew what this was about, the real truth of the matter, that the firm had to make money, and as long as the money was coming in, they were all friends and happy colleagues. Full steam ahead! Beyond that, there was nothing else that connected them, really, no other basis for their relationship other than a nostalgic connection to Jones' father, a connection which by now was not much more than semblance, eroded as it was by time.

Jones, George said, what can I say? I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm just telling you what I see, and I see the best broker I ever knew destroying himself. We've been together for a lot of years, and in all that time I've been mostly in awe of you. Did you know that? No one hooks the clients like you do. No one keeps clients longer than you do. No one has ever had more clients than you. You're the Don Juan of brokers. But something happened. Somewhere along the way...what? Tell me, Jones, what? Because all I can see is the drinking. You're slipping, Jones, and, frankly, I'm scared for you.

Pinned and wriggling on the wall, Jones held his hands before him, two shaking tendrils not quite part of him, not fully under his command. He thrust them into his pockets. I...he began, but what was there to say...I...I'm sorry. He turned.

Now, Jones. Don't just...

No, no. You're right, Jones said, retreating from the blaze of light on the floor, the smooth carpet, the angular windows, the high ceiling with its fan spinning like an executioner blade.

A drink. Another drink. What lovely wood. Mahogany. Molten grain and depths like rivers going down, the wood is like a map of time and rivers, down, down past the black burn of railroads, down past the first townships and the treaties, past the huts on the shore and the

smoking fish, past Shem and Shaun, Adam and Eve and swerve of shore and time and river, river  
running down and round...

**Part Three**

### The Safe Harbor

Descending into the lobby of the building with her backpack on her shoulders, Sara passed through the fetid smells and crossed over the black and white tiles that were worn away in spots by the tread of uncountable feet and passed through the ghost traces of those left in the rolling motes of dust that swirled, light slanting in through the large front windows. She stopped and looked around. Through those windows she saw the people in perpetual milling, stamping, smoking, laughing and taunting cars and strangers on foot who passed them by. Against one wall and beneath a television set which gave a picture but no sound, she saw a rack of dust-covered and sun-faded brochures and free news broadsides and city maps. She pulled them back and looked through the less faded ones and there came upon an advertisement for the city college. She took this brochure and looked through its folded over pictures of students in classrooms and a courtyard where young happy smiling people gathered beneath blooming jacaranda trees and bowed reverently over microscopes and heavy serious textbooks. She took one of the maps and set her course through the doors and the hiss of the vipers outside.

She walked vaguely through the unfamiliar streets, but city streets with a precut stamp pattern of faces and facades. A huge trailer truck passed by loaded down with stacked cars that had been crushed down into perfect blocks of geometric destruction and waste that now resembled a tightly bound bundle of anonymous flapping rags. But this came and went and then she was simply moving along with the bright liquid shine of newer cars and their smugly self-

contained drivers. No one looks around, she whispered. They drive like they walk, in uniformity, gridlines, carefully controlled and asleep.

She bought a coffee at a corner stand and sugared it and stood scanning the flow around her. The beautiful people swept by on roller blades and bicycles or running on spongy new tech shoes. They were bronzed and muscled and slightly clad in glowing shorts and tank tops, and they were like little nations flying their strangely undefining flags, visored in mirror sunglasses, waves wired directly into their ears as they moved to private concerts, all attuned to their own sounds, yet moving like a synchronized show. Among them were the workers, the waiters in black and white, the hipster coffee baristas in berets or slouch hats, jeans and tie-dye, the office clerks in slick suits and ties, silk blouses and rigid hair, workers on the rafters of a building under construction, bus drivers, cops with bullet proof chests and eagle glares with a mix of threat and terror, doctors, palm readers and beggars all, all in flux and flow, all together in the same dream and dreaming independently. What is the clerk to the doctor? What is the doctor to the homeless woman in her rags, carrying her bedding towards the next sheltered space? What mysterious relationship binds them all together and blinds them to that connection? This is what she thought, at a more rapid speed as the coffee hit her system, as the impression of a paper bag caught in a little whirlwind hit her with acute clarity.

God dammit, the man was shouting. God...dammit. And he jerked and threw violent punches into the space in front of him. He looked into a car that had stopped at the light in front of him, looked directly at the driver and shouted, What the fuck are you looking at?

Street torn open, workers in orange vests stood around and within a barrier of yellow ribbon with the word, Caution, repeated on it. Workers hacked away at the old piping in an open mouth of dirt and shards of concrete within a hole that in places descended even further than the

network of pipes, a bottomless pit near which they stood on a precipice of dirt and stone, a darkness below and eyes down there staring up, she imagined, like the very eyes of Adam. Smoke billowed up and drifted over the street, and as it rolled over the heads of the people and the passing busses it took on the shape of a wan hand gently blessing.

She turned onto another street flooded with bright grainy sunlight. Shadows stretched down from window ledges like Nostradamus beards, doorways opened into deep inner darkneses out of which eyes again peered with the vague unease of captured souls, and old men sat half in light and half in shadow along an open bar, their backs curved, feet in the light, heads buried in the darkness as in a Manuel Bravo come to life.

The school appeared like an Aztec temple with brick flow and wide outer courtyards converging in a rhomboid set of buildings. She wandered in along the slope that seemed to tilt towards a warm and radiant center, and she looked into the open doorways through which she saw classrooms, some empty, some filled with students. She walked in among the buildings, reading the signs that pointed in confusing split-numbered directions, and at last came upon a building labeled, Administration. She went in. The hallway was lit by flickering fluorescent lights, and she continued on until she came to an office with a sign over the door that read, Admissions and Records. She entered, and there found a room with three walk-up counters with signs hanging over them, each reading, Registration A-H, Registration I-R, Registration Q-Z. There were no lines, no other people waiting to register, and she knew from this that it must be midway through on of the terms. She went to the first counter and the young woman there looked up and smiled and said, Yes, can I help you?

I was wondering when the next quarter or semester starts.

We're on quarters, here.

The woman, a bright-energy young woman with short hair and keen clear eyes and skin like a polished sunset, checked the schedule, found what she wanted quickly, and said, Spring quarter begins on April first. Then she smiled a broad electric smile, April Fool's Day! What do you know?!

April what?

You know, April Fool's Day?

What's that?

You mean you've never heard of April Fool's Day?

I don't know what that is.

Where are you from?

South.

And you've never...well, it's a joke day. The day is just a joke, or a day for playing jokes, you know? You play a joke on someone and you say to them, April Fools, and it's just sort of understood, like the person you play the joke on is the April Fool. It's the first day of April. You never had that? Never did anything like that?

No. Not on one day in particular, she said, and she smiled.

Well, school begins that day. It really does, I'm not fooling. Are you interested in signing up for classes?

Sure. What do I have to do?

Well, the woman said, first you need to fill out the admissions form. Then, you need to have your high school transcripts sent to us, pay the tuition and sign up for classes. And if you want to apply for financial aid, just fill out that form along with your application.

Wow, that's a lot!

I know.

I went to a lot of different high schools, do I—

Just have the school from which you graduated send transcripts. You really only need to show you're eligible.

Okay. How soon do I have to get this all in?

You can sign up for classes up until the end of the first week of the quarter. Transcripts have to be in by then, too. Financial aid has to be in at least three weeks prior to the start of the quarter, although sometimes they make exceptions. Check in at the financial aid office on that.

Okay. Thanks.

Anything else I can help you with?

No. That makes sense. Thank you very much.

Thanks for coming in. If you have any questions about the forms, come back in and I'll help you.

Thanks, that's great.

She went back out into the light of the afternoon and wandered again through the buildings, absorbing the feel of them, the energy of the surroundings, and it felt good. It felt right and balanced, and she went out to the courtyard and sat in the shade of a pyramid sculpture, poised with its point to the earth and its base to the sky, its shadow fanning out on the bricks before her. And she took out her notebook and drew a sketch of the scene before her, the angles and shapes rendered down to a simple almost abstract collage, filtered and charged through her perception and imagination into an arena, an Olympus of grace and light and beauty. She titled it: Geometry of Hope, writing that at the bottom of the page.

They appeared like a ragtag assembly of mystery players out of the heatwaves. How many were there? If she counted them one by one she'd say three, but then she would correct herself and say five. Definitely five. Maybe seven? Who could tell on a bright day like this? Even or odd, they were bright, too, light as angels coming right out of the sun and crossing the quad while she sat among the inverted pyramids and their blocky shadows, planning her life or trying to, calculating costs of books and classes and how much financial aid she could hope for and how much more she would have to pay and where she would find the money. And they zeroed in on her. That's what she would have said. Made a beeline in their dancing, prancing, miracle-wonder way of moving, linking hands, spinning, singing, One and one is two...Two and two are four...laughing all the way.

Their shadows reached her first, followed by the circle they set up around her like a wobbly amoeba. What a thought! She felt like a nucleus. For the first time, in fact, she felt like the center of something. Maybe she would major in biology. Thoughts are things and this felt just like a sign. Biology was something she could understand, certainly. It made sense and it was real and touchable like this body she reached her hand out to and felt its stinging surface. She got good grades in her high school, so why not follow your strengths?

You a student here? She was a blond wisp of mist with a sun corona behind her head. Maybe she was their leader. Maybe they were sending her ahead as the meeter and greeter.

Not yet, Sara said to the shadow of the other's face. Because that's what it was, a shadow, a black hole where features should be. It was far too bright to look up and directly at them all individually. So she looked with a squint from the side. And they were moving and shifting and humming like high-charged electrons. That was another thing, and it made sense.

And it was almost predatory how they had positioned themselves around her, as if light and shadow could be a weapon. She was surrounded.

You look like a student.

You look like a wayfarer.

You look like a child of God.

You look like a damsel in distress.

No, she doesn't.

She looks like a warrior.

A fierce warrior.

A warrior princess.

Sara lifted a hand to her brow. Who was talking? They were all talking in unison. Some mind must be joining them. They were only appendages. She shook her head and smiled. They were a funny group, though.

What do you want to study? This time it was definitely the blond mist talking, singularly it seemed, for sure.

I don't know. Science appeals to me, I suppose.

Science is dead!

Science is a lie!

Science is a trap!

Science is a slippery slope.

Science got us into this mess in the first place.

There's no hope in science.

What about your heart?

Yes, what about your soul?

What? They had a collective laughter like flock of starlings. Science is beautiful, she said, but then it struck her: it's not something you have to defend.

This is beautiful! And their arms started swaying up and down and around. It was like an octopus floating undersea. And who could say it wasn't beautiful?

Come on!

Come with us!

Come this way!

Why did she follow? Why not follow? They were calling. They were young and free and strange and completely unexpected. They were having fun, and they had invited her, and she wanted to feel what they were feeling. Whatever it was. This was new. It was a new sort of thing, and it was electric and fascinating and energizing. She could feel her hands tingling. Why not? One and one is two... Two and two are four... She even felt herself singing along in her head, maybe even out loud. And off they went in a morphy group that she was now peripherally joined to, off and into the street and into the world at large.

They crossed the street and then crossed a parking lot. No plan was set or said, no huddle or conversation, they simply divided, as if it were naturally time, with sparkling trails of light strung between them like stands of spiderweb as two went off by the dumpster and the rest headed toward a little food store. Sara followed the ones who went to the store and through the ring-a-ding of the door and into its cool, air-conditioned interior. And then the show began. And again, without discussion or even looks of knowing they subdivided once again, now going like allele pairs in several different directions. Two went up and down the aisles. Two went up to the counter, laughing and singing. And two went back to the refrigerated glass doors. Sara stood

there. What was she to choose? She was an audience along with the proprietor who stood bunkered behind his glass-partitioned counter with a bank of security camera screens behind him and a look like this was going to cost him no matter what. And yet, whatever they were doing seemed to put a spell on him, too, as they sang and danced and laughed and all swirled back to the refrigerated glass doors and plucked up each of them a block of ice and lifted them like babies and carried them up through the aisle, again in pairs. Someone put a block of ice into Sara's hands. What a cold, heavy weight, and yet it felt good. What was next? She followed, but instead of going to the counter to pay for them, they all just walked out of the store. And once outside, the other two who had gone over to the dumpster joined them, and they both had their arms full of cardboard boxes.

Aren't we going to pay for these? Sara said.

With what, dear Liza? With what?

They laughed and laughed.

We pay with our goodness and light.

We pay with our presence.

Money is a lie.

Money is the root of decay.

But won't we get in trouble?

It's only water.

Trouble all the way!

Laughter, and once again the group gathered into itself like a thing of one mind that knew what it wanted without having to say it. Sara followed, holding her block of ice. How could they get away with this? This must be a joke. Someone must have paid or else the proprietor would

have tried to stop them. Wouldn't he? But she hadn't seen anyone pay. She looked back at the store, but no proprietor appeared to be coming out, no shouting of hey, what are you doing, bring that stuff back here! It was, after all, only water.

They went back the way they came, back to the school and back through the courtyard of pyramids and to the back of the school and a hillside there that they climbed in single file. At the top of the hill was a mission church with stucco arches and belfry and shadowed garden overhung with bright red bougainvillea. Morning doves cooed in the eucalyptus trees, a coded cry over and over with a sharp uptick like a question followed by three short answers. What were they saying? Yes, what were they saying? Everything was up on its hind legs. On the grassy hilltop the players all set down their blocks of ice and tore down the cardboard boxes and passed around broad sheets of cardboard. Sara received hers and watched as they each took their piece of cardboard and laid it on top of their block of ice. What was this all about? They sure seemed to know what they were doing, like they had done this before. It seemed pretty simple, so Sara did the same thing, and with them she climbed onto her block of ice, kicked off with her feet as all together in a line they went sliding fast down the hillside, riding their blocks of ice.

At the bottom of the hill they slid to a stop or tumbled off laughing and chasing down their ice. Oh, this was fun, and together with this weird group of mystery people, Sara hiked back to the top of the hill with her ice and rode it down again. And how many rounds they got in, she couldn't be sure, but she was covered in grass and laughing and wet and feeling a part of something at least for the moment that was lovely and free and fun and like nothing she had ever experienced before. Was this what the world was like? They rode and rode until their blocks of ice had melted and worn down to lumps they could no longer ride.

When they were done and the hillside was flattened, slicked-down grass, they left their melting blobs of ice and sheets of wet cardboard there at the bottom of the hill and wandered off and away, singing, dancing, an amorphous thing Sara followed for a while, not quite in or part of their group, though she felt an open valent invitation to join. The players were twirling ahead of her, but something clicked, something snapped, something went off in her head and she stopped. What was it? What was stopping her? This she couldn't explain. She watched them, but she did not follow, as their group moved on becoming one large shadow that wobbled and wavered like a jellyfish disappearing into the sea. And so the afternoon swallowed them up. And she went back down the street to the school and through the long shadows of the inverted pyramids in the courtyard. What was that? Had that all really happened? How did they get away with it? It felt like a dream, and she didn't know if she wanted to wake up.

Students were now coming and going to classes. Sara stood in the courtyard watching, wondering. Which room would she be in at some point? What a place. It felt like a home, sort of. At least, it felt like a place she could belong. Maybe. But it was all still out of reach. And again she heard the morning doves cooing. It sounded like each one was making the exact same sound. Could that be? Why all the unison? If they were each making the same sound, what was the point? No warning. No courting. No appreciation of light. That couldn't be called communication at all. Not a chance. So then what was the point? It made about as much sense as these upside-down pyramids. And what were they supposed to mean, with their shadows like opposite selves spread out right side up on the ground? Still, it was fun. It was all fun and mysterious, this place she had arrived and the people in it. Like a dream. And so she looked down, tapped her foot several times on the ground to make sure it could support her weight, then she took one hesitating step and then another and headed back to the street.

Upon re-entering the hotel, she crossed paths with T-Bear. He stopped her with a warning palm raised and almost but not quite touching her shoulder. And he said this to her, what are you doing here?

She smiled, bemused. Was it a joke? I just got back from the community college, she said. I was thinking of taking a few classes next quarter.

That sounds like a great idea, he said, and then he asked again, But why are you here?

What do you mean?

In this place, here? He swept his arm as if to indicate the world, but she knew he meant only the hotel, which was nevertheless still a question she couldn't answer. And so he took her arm, lightly, and pulled her deeper into the lobby and out of the warn path that lead down the hallway and eventually to the room where she was staying. He was smiling, but his eyes were narrow, severe, one seeming to turn back towards some inner darkness. His voice was soft, however, almost a whisper so that she had to consciously listen to hear him. I've lived in a lot of places, too, he said. I'm originally...well, I had a sister a lot like you. She was smart and read books. She wasn't always so nice when we were young. She was mad about something. I think she was mad about things I couldn't see. But she was smart, and she went to school and got degrees and could have done anything. She was good at math and languages. But then she started to party. She dropped all that school stuff and moved in with me for a while. She said she wanted to live in the real world. She wanted to work like real people and got jobs as a waitress and a secretary and temp work. And it was okay for a while, you know, because we were young and it didn't matter. And we partied a lot, you know, like anyone. But after a while, after a while it

seemed like we were doing nothing but partying because all that mattered was partying. And my sister, she was worse than me. She could do just about everything, and she seemed to be able to take it. She seemed to. But I saw it change her. I saw it physically. I saw it in her spirit, like a flame dying down, and I told her, but it was like she was getting farther and farther away and couldn't hear me.

I don't really do drugs, Sara said, and maybe the pride in her voice was not quite what she meant because she only wanted to tell him the truth.

It's not just drugs. You tell me you're going to go to college, that's good. And I'm nobody to tell you what to do. It's just, well, the people here, the people you're with...

You mean Jack? He's no saint. I know that. Look, you don't know me. You don't know where I'm coming from. I mean, I appreciate that you're concerned about me and everything, really, I do, but I can take care of myself. I have for most of my life. My eyes are wide open.

Good. Good. I'm not trying to disrespect you. But I know some things you don't know.

About Jack?

Yes.

So?

He's more dangerous than you think.

That's it?

Trust me.

Well tell me something I don't know. What has he done? What am I supposed to watch out for?

Him. You just watch out for him. And if you're smart, you'll go away from here and from him and you won't look back.

Or what, I'll turn into a pillar of salt?

That's right, and the city will go up in flames.

She smiled at this and reached out and touched his arm and said, Okay.

In the room that night, Jack had placed and lit many candles. The room seemed to waver and flicker as the light of the candles fluttered over the walls. The sounds of the street wove into the sounds of music in a warp of worlds overlapping. T- Bear's warning was in her mind, and perhaps in some ways it even sharpened the intensity of her desire.

You look beautiful, Jack said to her, pulling her towards the bed. And he whispered it to her again as he kissed her and drew his fingers along her throat.

They lived in a dream, making love, watching the light of the day roll through the room like a slow lonely apparition. In the evening, the streetlight illuminated their twin forms beneath the window, and she watched as a jewel moon cut scythewise through the narrow space between the buildings. Then they rose and walked along the streets and avenues and dipped into the bars, but they were never far from the room, as if the room itself were following them, as if all its previous occupants and indeed every occupant of every room she had ever inhabited were being exorcised by the energy of their lovemaking. She felt herself slowly and consciously remolding herself through these energies, claiming her world in a way she had never been able to claim it before, and the sexual performance was a part of this in some methodical yet mysterious way she could not articulate yet which became more and more certain as it was urgent and plaintive and bold. And he became something both more and less as she embraced him, his face constrained in a violent and painful battle, it seemed, as if in a way he battled with her. The methods of his love

were sometimes torturous, sometimes perverted, sometimes malevolent, as though in the act she were able to catch a glimpse of something beneath the skin, the mask removed, the self, the true self poised there for only the briefest of moments in which he lost control and appeared to her as near demonic.

In the calm, in a break during which they lay beside each other, naked in the pale light of the streetlamp coming through the window, he said to her, Do you ever wonder why we met each other?

Why?

That's what I'm asking you. Do you ever wonder? Do you ever think, maybe that bus driver would not have stopped and let me on the bus, and maybe you would have rode on and we never would have met?

It's hard to imagine, now.

I think that's because it could never have happened any other way.

You believe it was fate?

I believe that things happen in a way that...things happen and there is no other way that they could have happened, ever. If that's fate, I don't know. I think our minds are way over-developed. We have these imaginations that dream up all kinds of possibilities, but the truth of the matter is that things just happen in a way we can't explain, and never will explain. But because of that we have to accept them as the only way it could be. Maybe that's fate. I don't know.

Well, you're the one asking what if the bus hadn't stopped.

I know. I can't help it. It's like an addiction in the brain, wondering, but what good does it do?

Well, she said, and she let her arm rise in the light above her, turning her hand so that the bones of her wrist twisted slightly. I think the imagination is our highest achievement, or our greatest ability. Look at what's around us. Nothing would be here if someone hadn't imagined it. Someone imagined a home here, then built it. Someone else imagined a road, and then there was a road. Another person imagined a building; now we lie inside that building. Every moment, we're imagining the next moment and what we will do, what we will be. We imagine ourselves into the future and that's where we arrive and what we create.

That's beautiful, he said.

I know.

But there's only one problem.

What's that?

Death. If we're imagining ourselves, why are we imagining getting older, getting sick, dying? Why aren't we imagining paradise? Why aren't we imagining ourselves beautiful and happy and peaceful? It seems a lot of people are imagining a whole lot of horror.

That's just right. People are imagining horror. They're imagining war and disease and sadness. We don't completely control our imagination. And who knows, she said, gazing up at sister moon in her three-quarter burn between the blades of the high-rise buildings, who knows what imagination makes the stars or the wind or the waves or our very own hearts?

She met Annie Dupree when she went to pay for classes. They stood in line together, and Annie struck up the conversation first, saying she wanted to take Modern World Literature, Creative Writing, and British History; saying she had taken Philosophy with an absolutely brilliant professor who was young and good looking, but unreachable it seemed, by some strange

purity of ethics or some existential vow; saying she herself would take nothing that did not excite her soul, that did not fit into the trajectory of her dream to write and act and sing; saying that the only way to live was to seek your bliss and follow your instincts and to never compromise, much; saying that in fact she had become a Buddhist after taking a religious studies class in which she learned the four noble truths: that all existence is suffering (or dukhka), that suffering is caused by clinging to life and the things of life, that all suffering can be ended, and that the way to end suffering and attachment and clinging to life was to follow the eightfold path. And the eightfold path meant holding in your mind the right view in life, and with that spark aspiring to the highest nobility of spirit, speaking only rightly according to that aspiration, and of course acting according to that aspiration, working only to end suffering while causing no suffering by your actions, and keeping on with that effort, trying for what you know to be true and beautiful, thinking this way with all your heart and mind, which is a battle itself. By this path you will reach bliss, Nirvana, an idea she was still not certain of, wondering if it meant simply the end to one's karmic debt, that cause and effect path, a cessation, or a unification with the divine vow which itself, according to some traditions, was either total unification with the godhead or an apotheosis which resulted in the sensation of sameness while the individual spirit still retains its separateness (a kind of Atma and Brahman relationship), or as St. John of the cross said, a feeling as though one gazed upon god through a glass so clear you cannot see it. The existential qualities were only superficial, although the more she studied the existentialists the less she was convinced that they had come up with anything new, other than a tendency to be both more complicated and at times utterly simplistic, but what philosophy or religion did not have contradictions? In fact, Annie said, she was wondering now whether or not a philosophy of contradiction could not bridge all the metaphysical worlds, for what is sameness without

difference, difference without sameness; or better yet, that contradictions and paradox are the problems all religions strain to reconcile: life and death, good and evil, spirit and body...ahh, so much to know, and what does it really get you? And then there was Kant's categorical imperative, with its principle that all human beings have something like a conscience, although she had doubts about that sometimes, especially when she watched the news. As a great writer once said, know all philosophies but keep them out of your writing. And that was exactly what she was going to do, learn as much as she could, but keep it out of her poetry and her music and her painting, since she loved all the arts.

They went to a coffee shop and talked and the more coffee Annie drank the faster she talked, and it seemed that she already had so much knowledge, so many ideas and had read so many books, Sara couldn't understand why she needed to go to school.

Did you learn all this in one class?

No, Annie said, and she lit up a cigarette and pressed her lips together and blew smoke through her nose and tilted her head to one side. I've always been interested in this stuff: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christian mysticism, The Kabala, Native Ceremony, Taoism, Zen, Tantra and Yoga, all the western philosophers from Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas and Meister Eckhart to the three stooges of empiricism: Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and even occultism and Tarot. I've got a deck; do you want me to read your cards?

I suppose, but Sara didn't say that growing up Catholic had predisposed her to think of things such as Tarot cards as dabbling in evil. She couldn't be sure when, but she had let go of this fear somewhere among the anonymous rooms they inhabited fleeing from her father's enemies.

Annie took out the cards and handed them to her and said, Shuffle them, and while you're shuffling them concentrate on what it is you'd like to know, or on some good memory, or a problem you'd like to solve or someone you love or anything at all, or else just clear your mind and be as blank as you can be and when you're done set them on the table.

She shuffled the cards. They were oddly sized, larger than playing cards, and awkward in her hands as she tried to smoothly blend them in the arched, double-handed shuffle she had learned to do. The cascade of cards that was supposed to result from this action came out as a quick, flat collapsing of the stiff cards falling together. She did this several times, smiling, embarrassed by what she felt must have looked like gracelessness, and handed the cards back to Annie.

Annie picked up the cards and placed them down in a pattern with several in the center and some in a row to the side and began to read. Mmmm. Mmmm, she said, looking them over and taking a few drags on her cigarette. Wow, she said, you have some powerful forces operating in your life.

Sara looked at the mysterious cards Annie had laid out. She didn't know much but recognized the death card because what else could a card be for with a skeleton on it swinging a scythe, and she felt her gaze fix upon on it.

Now the position of this card is pretty important, but don't let it frighten you. This Queen of Wands is at your center. That's a powerful image, fire, attraction. I think with the Moon over it like this, though, you seem to be battling through something, some fear that overlays you, in this landscape, right, that looks pretty sinister, some darkness, the night, the midnight, the dark night of the soul in a way, something you might even be generating yourself, some illusion you are clinging to, I'm not sure, or the illusions that others have of you. That's possible. I think it really

means that you are coming through some conflict, a struggle. A man is involved, here, in the fourth position, represented by this Knight of Swords. He is opposed, here, in the sixth position by, well, the lovers. That's interesting, and it seems good, especially with the Strength card in the seventh position. See here, this line that ascends? Look, you've got The World, sometimes called the universe card, in your tenth position. That's very good, very positive. Big changes coming, or you're right on the verge, but good. Your divine is manifesting and this is what that looks like. I think you've got some...well, here, the fifth position, this is your conscious state and you've got the Nine of Pentacles, see, the woman here with the falcon, that's your goal, a spiritual power, sort of setting up the future against the sixth, here, which is the lovers, right, which would seem like a change in a relationship and it very well might be, but by the greater arrangement I think it has more to do with an internal relationship shifting, but the Nine, that really seems to mean you've got to rely on yourself pretty heavily, although it does lead into this ascent, and yes, this card here, The World, yes, that is the outcome no doubt about it, right here in the tenth position, which is a culmination, a kind of ending before beginning again, and the fool right before it, well, that makes sense because you have to step off, you know? Any good journey begins with a single step, but don't misunderstand, the fool doesn't mean you're foolish. It makes sense that that would be your last obstacle because it's really what you think yourself. The Fool is the beggar, the vagabond, but that's freedom. The fool is free, a free state of mind you need to start an adventure! But sister, I think you have some...well, some miles to go before you sleep.

A rebirth, huh?

Sure, in many ways. The choices you make along the way are important of course. Are you planning to move?

I just moved out here.

And now you're starting college. That's a move, right? I would read it that way. Is there a man with whom you've had any kind of conflict?

You could say that. But who hasn't?

I think this shows you coming out of that. Definitely. Rebirth makes a lot of sense.

Rebirth. Yes.

When she returned to the apartment, she went quickly down the hall and was on her way to their room when she passed an open door and someone inside called out, saying, Hey, come look at this.

She looked in, a little apprehensive. It was Quince and his lover Eddie. Quince was sitting on the bed with his legs crossed and Eddie was playing a guitar while a young man stood by who himself looked somewhat apprehensive. She stepped just inside the door but didn't fully enter the room. The room, this room in particular, was full of human reek, and the sink on the right was stopped up with water dripping into a pool of reddish-brown rusty water which itself gave off a fetid and poisonous odor. Quince had his bare feet up in his lap, and he was picking under the yellowed toenails with a paper clip, the smell of his dirty flesh adding a fume of putridity. Eddie, who himself was a matted and clotted mess of tangled black hair and gray teeth and patchy cheek stubble, plucked at the strings of the guitar and said, What do you think? This guy wants two hundred for it. Do you think it's worth it?

She glanced at the young man who stood with his hands behind his back, almost but not quite touching the wall, not touching anything at all in fact, looking edgy, jittery, like a speeded-up version of a visitor, out of his element, ready to bolt, but in need of the cash. It looks like a nice guitar, she said, but I don't know anything about guitars.

It's not what it looks like that's important, said Quince. It's how it sounds. And Eddie plucked a few more strings, but it was obvious he didn't know how to play it.

I don't think Eddie's playing it to its full value, then, she said. Quince burst into a good laugh which sounded more like someone had performed a heimlich maneuver on him. Eddie sneered. Do you play? he asked her.

I told you, I don't know much about guitars.

Then how would you know what it's supposed to sound like or what its value is?

She shrugged and said, You asked me, and was about to turn to go. Let's hear him play it, then, Eddie said, and he pushed the guitar towards the young man who had not said a word and still didn't speak as he took the guitar and held it up on his knee with his foot propped on a chair. He began to play, strumming a few cords, plucking out a song that was both simple and beautiful.

It sounds nice, she said. The young man played a few more cords, brought the picking up to the higher frets in a kind of finale, then stopped and held the guitar up gently, turning it slightly and sliding his hand down the strings.

I'll buy it, then, Eddie said. And he got the money from his dresser and gave it to the young man who then, and perhaps a bit reluctantly, gave the guitar to Eddie. She again turned to go when she heard Eddie say, You ever get it on with a man? And at first she thought Eddie was talking to her, but looking back she saw that he was addressing the young man. Quince sat there grinning on the bed behind him, and then Eddie laughed and pointed at her and said, Or are you in line for the little girl?

She didn't say anything but continued on to her room, their voices diminishing as she strode away, or rather Eddie's voice diminishing since she still hadn't hear the young man speak.

And she went back to her room and sat on the bed. She was shaking but not from fear. The slick walls oozed around her. She waited as the light faded, and she left the room light off and let the darkness seep through the windows along with the pale glow of the streetlamp which had a romantic and erotic energy to it at one point but which now felt tawdry and drained. She waited, thinking the door was going to open at any moment and Jack come smiling in. But he didn't come in, and she waited, feeling herself draining, drifting, though she resisted it, into a deathlike sleep.

And that was how it began. He didn't come back. It could have been days she waited, and when he did return and she tried to ask where he had been he just grunted in a kind of horse snort and said, With some friends. When she got angry, and said he was a liar, he rose to twice the height of her anger and pounded the walls and kicked the bed apart and stormed out, leaving the room in a shambles. Thus he became a new monster, gone for days at a time, coming back sometimes drunk, sometimes penitent. He never struck her, but she began to fear that that time might be drawing near, and the memory of Annie Dupree's Tarot reading superimposed itself on her vision of the daily unraveling of this new version of her world, so that she made sure, now, every night, that her things were packed in her bag: the few clothes she owned, the notebooks, and the gun her father had given her and instructed her how to use, predicting that one day she would need it and would use it.

And so she waited, until one night another man with another name entered the room. She was alone and writing in her journal and he came in through the door and closed the door behind him and stood there smiling or more rightly grimacing and looking her up and down as he reached down and began to undo his pants.

What the hell are you doing? she said, closing the book. She remained where she was.

He said I would find you here, the man said, and that was all he said. She could smell him now, the stench of sweat and alcohol. She stood up, her heart pounding with new fear.

Well, he was wrong, she said.

No, you look just right to me. I gave him fifty, so you come on now. His pants were down and he was holding himself with one hand while the other tried to pull a pant leg off of one foot. She stepped forward and pushed him, and drunk as he was he fell over heavily as she stepped once around him and out the door.

She went down the hallway and down the stairs and through the lobby of clowns and freaks all leering and twisting before her like creatures in a funhouse. And she walked out onto the street where other men called out to her, nasty vicious tongues and lurid requests, offers, prices, saying what they wanted, saying what they would do. She pressed through, even as she felt them reach for her, felt them grab her arms, felt them pulling at the fabric of her shirt, pulling so that she had to yank herself free as though from gorillas. But she pressed on, her gaze straight forward, until she had pulled herself free and walked on down the dark street.

She went to the coffee shop and sat in a booth alone. The few diners at the counter looked over and watched her as she slipped down and covered her face with her hands; then they turned back to their cups and conversations and food. The waitress came over, a heavy middle-aged woman with a black wig and black eyeliner and a look of vast indifference in her eyes. Do you want a menu? she asked.

Just some coffee.

Coffee, the waitress repeated and shook her head and punched her green order pad back into her pocket and turned and went. A few moments later she brought the coffee over, and now

she was not even looking down but placed the cup on the table with her head turned away and then turned away herself and was gone. Sara settled into the obscurity of the booth and breathed more slowly and felt her heart beating more slowly as she sat with her hands around the coffee cup, staring at the reflection of the light overhead as it wavered and shuddered and then locked into stillness in the round black pool of liquid.

And there she sat, motionless, for over an hour, thinking, where will I go, now? I don't have the money for a place of my own. Where will I go? How much money do I have? She counted it mentally but couldn't be sure and couldn't muster the energy to actually look. The bus fare, the college tuition. Can I get that back? I can, I think. I need to have money or...but where? And her mind swirled around the void of possibilities and came settling back like the light in her cup to one center, one solution, one place, which was nothing more than the spot she occupied right now. But how long would this last, and when the moment ended, then what? She still had to return to the room. She knew that. The man was most likely gone by now. The image of the fool emerged in her mind, open, face tilted back as the feet stepped toward the precipice. Zero.

She didn't drink the coffee, didn't even taste it. She left the money on the countertop and rose slowly, her mind in a far removed space of awareness, watching as she rose, watching herself move past the other tables and the old waitress who didn't even look over, didn't even notice her as she went out the door, and it felt, to her mind in its distance, almost as if she were invisible.

She walked back along the same street, but it was as though she had been transformed, minutely, sub atomically, or something in her gaze was transformed, the way she presented herself, shielded, tough, for no one said a word to her now as she passed through the pantheon of woes, and the thought came to her again, I am invisible. She passed knots of clustered people

smoking and drinking and talking, and they neither stopped nor turned nor looked at her. She went back in through those high double doors and into the warped lobby. She heard a loud hissing sound, as though an air duct had been blocked by paper. She moved in dreamy slow surety, fearless, calm and distant, back to the room. The door was open, and Jack was there.

The moment he saw her, his face came alive in a thousand ways, and he stood almost on his toes and shouted into her face, You little bitch! What the fuck do you think you're doing? Huh? What are you doing? You tell me because I don't see it? Are you bringing money in? Are you? Are you even trying to help out here? Or is it all supposed to be on me, in your mind? I want to know. Huh? Is that the way you saw it? Well, fuck that! That's right. I said, fuck that. And he shook his head and grabbed both of her arms and held her rigid and said, if you don't bring in money, and I don't care how you get it, but if you don't, then you are my bitch, do you get that? If you are too fucking stupid to get your shit together, then I have no choice but to do it for you, do I? Do I? And he let go with one hand, pulled it back, fisted, and slammed it into her neck. She fell back, at first unable to feel anything, except that she was unable to breathe. He reached down, striking her again as she lifted her arms to block the blows. Then he began kicking her, and she doubled over and rolled back and found herself pinned against the side of the bed. Then he kicked at the bed and at the bureau, knocking it over, and in that moment she reached under the bed and got a hold of her bag. You think you're getting out of here, now, you little whore? he said. Is that what you think? Ha! That is not going to happen. You have a debt. Do you understand that? Can your mind comprehend that? What a debt is? How it is incurred by taking, that's right, taking and therefore disturbing the balance so that you have to make it right. Do you understand? Your side of the balance is deficient! You owe! It's your responsibility to set the balance right, and if you don't, then this is what happens. Do you understand?

From her distant vantage point above the room and looking down through the walls as if they were the transparent flesh of a deep sea creature, she commanded her hand to go into the bag, commanded it to find the gun, commanded it to bring out the gun and point it at him. She did not tremble, but when he saw it he began to laugh. Are you serious? That's your next move? That's what you came up with? You think that changes the balance? Huh? You think that scares me? And he lifted his hand and spread his fingers like claws and bared his teeth and hissed. And she pointed the gun at his chest and commanded it to fire.

He smiled, looking not at her but at the gun, a strange expression of knowing and wonder, drawing his hands in towards the black hole in the middle of his shirt but careful not to touch it, looking down at it and the little bit of smoke that coiled up as though his soul were already leaving. Then he fell back and sat on the bed. His mouth opened, but he wasn't speaking now. If his eyes could speak, she thought, they would have said, good. He looked like he wanted to sleep. He lay down on his side, his head on the pillow. He looked at the floor. He seemed to be holding his breath. Certainly he was dead. His chest was still and black-red with blood. His eyes were open but blank. He did not move at all.

She rose and collected the last few things left in the room that were hers and placed them in the bag. Then she went to the sink, ran cold water and dipped her hands into it and cupped it to her face. She did this several times, then simply held the water in her palms until it stilled and there held the reflection of the overhead light. She let it go then through her fingers, turned, and cultivating her force, walked through the door and through the hallway which like a gallery held in every door a head that leaned out but didn't see her.

She walked through that field of night terrors, devils, twisting neon and cars all passing and flowing about her in confusion. She had no idea at all where she was walking. Isn't this how the fool starts off? She was utterly lost. But she kept to one direction, west, like a homing pigeon, her eyes wide with feverish and rapt attention. So much sound around her, with the cars, it was like a roaring out of the void, and when at last she came to the place where the road ascended and then curved into a cloverleaf of exiting and entering the rush and howl of the freeway, she stopped and turned and lifted her hand, thumb outstretched, toward the oncoming cars.

A green pick-up truck eventually pulled over and stopped, and she went up to the door and looked in and registered the face inside of a man who looked back at her with an apprehension that nearly matched her own. He waved for her to come on in, and she opened the door and climbed aboard. She had just barely closed the door before the truck was in motion, throwing her back against the seat. Sorry about that, he said. Someone was coming up on us from behind there pretty fast. I had to get moving.

That's all right, she said, and she put her pack on the floor between her feet and buckled herself in.

My name's Arl, he said. Where you headed? I'm heading north. Where you headed?

That's fine, she said, as they entered the fast flow, and she felt a kind of comfort in that uniform motion as she saw the lights of the city reflected in the side view mirror.

What's your name? he asked.

My name is...and she hesitated; then she said, My name is Michelle. And she looked forward through the windshield as the truck went on in the rush of the freeway traffic.

## Hawala

The summer was endless time, a blur of days. Sometimes hot into the evening hours, the warm wind moving through the open windows and through the rooms, building up and sweltering at night so it was hard to sleep. Mosquitoes buzzed in, and Gabriel played a losing game of lying still in wait for them to land on the only bit of skin exposed on his cheek by wrapping himself in his sheet, so that when the horrible buzzing stopped and he was sure the little blood suckers had settled in, he would slap his own face to kill them. Rarely, he got one. Usually, they flew away only to return with that buzz just as he was about to fall asleep.

It was the summer of outer space. It was the summer of movies. One afternoon in the basement den of Peter Ansel's house, they all watched an old-time movie called *When World's Collide*, watched with a believing terror the moment of the cataclysm as the last few people chosen were boarding the ship beneath signs that said Waste Anything but Time. Would the ship lift off? Nothing like it had ever been built. They were over the weight limit. Not everyone would escape. And the crippled benefactor trying for the metal door rose from his wheelchair on his atrophied legs, as Gabriel's thought: he wants to live so desperately he has willed himself to walk. The earth destroyed. The people destroyed. The new home? A frozen planet. Survivors climbing into the cold. Gabriel walked home in the bright afternoon with a hollow end of the world feeling. Would it happen in his lifetime? The seas boil? The rivers die? People crawling

after escaping ships, refugees headed into the dead of space? What a feeling after sitting in the darkness watching a movie on a summer day.

Another day, his sister said, You want to see a real movie? They watched *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The apes. The monolith. The crying voices! The slow beautiful ship, drifting in orbit, turning. The moon and the station. The monolith. The Voices! The Jupiter mission. The computer, Hal, always winning at chess. The breakdown and Pool cast out into space, struggling for one horrible moment with his dislodged air hose, then still and floating. Bowman in the pod, going out to retrieve the body, cradling it in mechanical arms, gentle, heartbreaking. The slow dismantling of Hal and the sad singing, Daisy, Daisy, and the journey inward to the monolith over the rushing landscape, the eye, the purple eye, the vision of the aging self in a cold white room. What was happening? The strange reaching and then the unborn infant out of nowhere filling up the screen. He understood very little of it, and yet all of it made sense, so that he could remember it nearly scene for scene afterwards.

It's all happening out there. We are going into space, building ships and going out into space. The sky seemed crowded with ships. Earth was just another port. Ships were going deep into space, and he would be on one someday, someday stepping out onto a strange planet, breathing miraculous air, striding through low gravity, each step taking him leaps ahead. Aliens everywhere. You could smell them, their alien skin, the emanation of their food. Not all of them were friendly. Not all of them were monsters. But it all felt far away, as if he were stuck in the wrong century. Their house was in the middle of nowhere.

Summer has a way of jumping out of time. There was no beginning now, and the end was too far away to consider. Each day was long, the light lingering late, and was it ever truly dark? On bright clear days the horizon burned dark blue and remained aglow deep into night. Gabriel

rode through the neighborhoods, far beyond the park, alone, through streets with big trees and pitch roof houses with dark porches, lit from within with doors wide open. Other streets with ranch all-window A-Frames with light collecting cell panels and cars on the front lawn. The night was a gentle embrace, warm air, empty fields, smell of blackberry, pine sap, cool water creeks, and he'd glide up into the driveway that was so dry the dirt puffed up from his tires as he skidded to a stop. And the night flowed through the doors and windows and throughout the house, sweet and warm, no days no hours to know in this mobius strip of being.

In the high hot dry days, the church had its retreat. He and his sister went with their mother. Their father would never go. They rode out with others on the ferry, driving the old Volkswagen bug with the missing front passenger seat someone had stolen, and sang along with the songs on the radio. The campground was a series of dormitory rooms in the style of old settler cabins, with names like Cedar House, Pine, Spruce, and Hemlock, scattered throughout a sprawling compound of grass fields bordered by the forest. They stayed in a room in the Hemlock building, and Gabriel's sister said to him, You know, Socrates killed himself by drinking hemlock.

Not only did Gabriel not know who Socrates was or why he killed himself, he did not know what hemlock was. He was tentative, and said, Why?

Then his sister laid into him. You don't know who Socrates is, do you?

No.

He was a philosopher. And she smiled with possession of her knowledge that she wouldn't share.

He met up with Joe and Jerry Morgan. Their father rode over on his bicycle, and it seemed to Gabriel an impossible ride. Joe had on his black wooden cross, and for the first time

Gabriel felt a pang of loss for the one he no longer had. They ate in the big hall and went up to vespers in the cedar grove beyond the rope swing and the volleyball court. The sun was going down and the minister was illuminated by a single, godly shaft of light, and he preached about the voice of god and the quiet of the mind we needed to hear that voice inside. Gabriel was mostly thinking of the trees and how their roots spread out as far beneath them as the branches did above, and the secrets they were telling each other.

There was a series of sign-up sheets for different activities each day: tie dye, pottery, model-making; or activities like hiking, canoeing, swimming. On the first day, Gabriel went with Joe and a small group of other kids on the forest hike. The forest had a maze of trails with wooden sign pointing off to destinations like Eagle's Nest Lookout, Pioneer's Cabin and The Cemetery. Gary, one of the youth group leaders, took the small group of them on the Eagle's Nest and Pioneer Cabin loop. Everybody stay within sight, he said before they set off. I don't want anyone getting lost.

The hike up to the lookout was steep and rocky. Joe and Gabriel kept to the back of the group. Joe at one point reached down and brushed his hand against a nettle and drew his hand back, saying, Youch, that hurts, and then he laughed and did it again and said, You try.

No way, Gabriel said.

Go on. It doesn't really hurt.

Gabriel stuck his hand out and touched a nettle with his fingertip, but nothing happened. Joe said, You have to touch it with the back of your hand.

Gabriel brushed the back of his hand on the nettle and felt a bristle that seemed to sting. Ow, he said. Joe laughed. Gabriel rubbed his fingers over the sting but it just kept stinging.

I heard the Indians use ferns to rub out the sting, Joe said, and he pulled up a fern branch and rubbed it on his hands. Gabriel tugged out a branch of his own and tried brushing it over his hands. It didn't seem to work. Then, he reached down and scooped a small handful of dark dirt and rubbed it on the sting and that seemed to cool and drain it.

Try that, he said to Joe.

Joe did the same thing. He looked surprised. Hey, how'd you know about that?

The lookout tower stood off on the side of the trail, and they each climbed the stairs and stood at the top looking out over the trees to the north and the west, the flush forest, rich and dark and dense. The sun blazed, and ravens flew in and out of the trees caw-cawing, light shining on their black wings. Back on the ground, Gabriel stood in the light coming down in shafts as Gary told them all about children who had wandered out into the intricate and mysterious forest and were never found again, but who appeared from time to time to hikers, who might see them off in the trees calling for help, and the hikers then wandering after them and becoming lost themselves.

The pioneer cabin was a fallen mass of timbers covered with moss. It was so deep in a gully and buried away from the world, it seemed to Gabriel a sad and lonely, even frightening place to live. The fate of its occupants was a mystery they speculated on with various scenarios:

Bears got 'em.

They probably starved.

Yeah, they ran out of food.

They must have just abandoned it.

Maybe they're buried in the cemetery.

Who could live here?

I'll bet Indians got 'em.

Yeah, they were killed by Indians.

Scalped.

The timeless days drift by. Gabriel made a tie dye shirt and a submarine with a see-through side and intricately detailed interior pieces: little bunks and torpedo rooms and mess halls. He met his sister and his mother at the dining hall for lunch, but otherwise he did not see them that often. Sometimes they even ate with friends instead of with each other, and after dinner there were always long matches of ping pong on the covered porch outside the dining hall. They would all go back to the room at night to sleep, but during the day they went to their own activities. Gabriel's sister mostly spent time in the macramé class and with the older kids playing volleyball. If he tried to join her, she shunned him. And one time one of the older boys approached him and asked if she had hair yet, which was a strange question, he thought. Gabriel did not respond, and the boy just laughed and went away.

Mostly, he was on his own.

One night, Gary took a group up to the cemetery. Gabriel went. They each brought along a flashlight, and Gary wore a miner's cap with a light on it. The woods were pitch black dark, and their lights disappeared into nothing. Gabriel pointed his flashlight up into the branches above and saw the light fade out into a feathering of gray tree limbs. They sang *She'll be Coming Around the Mountain When She Comes*, and Gabriel wondered who she was. When they reached the cemetery, they sat on the ground and told ghost stories. Sometimes, Gary said, people were buried alive. It didn't happen very often, but sometimes, people with sleeping sickness looked like they were dead but weren't, so they were buried alive, and if you listen, you can hear them scratching in their coffins. Listen.

The children leaned down to listen, and as they did, the counselor screamed, Let me out! And they all jumped and screamed, jolted alert by a bolt of fear.

Each day had one hour of silence in which nobody spoke. This was the time to listen to God. And people lay in the shade or walked silently over the fields. It was like a silent slow-motion movie.

Cottonwood seeds drifted through the warm sky. Gabriel was at the oars, now, his turn. Joe and Jerry, the brothers, were hanging over the bow carving lines into the green algae. Then Joe said, I brought some firecrackers. Gabriel turned. Joe pulled them out. They were wrapped in a packet of red paper.

Where'd you get them? Gabriel asked.

One of the big kids let me have them.

He let you have them?

Yeah.

He stole them, Jerry said.

That's a lie.

Does he have anymore?

Nope.

Joe had matches too and lit the firecrackers and tossed them over the water trying to get the timing just right so that they went off right before hitting the water. Some went in with a sizzle. An adult on the shore waved and called out for them to stop that.

On the last night, the local tribe had a salmon bake for them on the beach. They all gathered together and made wax candles in the sand and skipped rocks on the still water and ate fry bread and smoked salmon. Gabriel watched them, trying to see the connection. They were

nice to throw this party, and they were friendly, but there was a distance between them and the church group even though everyone spoke to each other and ate together and played together. Then there was a dance at the tennis court, and they did a mix of native songs and dances and popular line dances, rows of people dancing in unison and illuminated by the court lights. Everyone learned a few new steps. Cookies and punch were set up for the kids in a little tent. Adults smoked and drank sitting on benches at the edge of the court.

At the end of the retreat, Gabriel and his mother and sister packed up their things in the Volkswagen. It was the first moment Gabriel felt the coming end of summer, a change in the light, a change in the air. Then they climbed in and drove over the wooden bridge and out onto the narrow road back to the ferry dock. Some of the others were on the boat with them. One of the younger men had a guitar and was playing some of their church songs as they all sang along.

When they got home and began carrying things back into the house, Gabriel's parents got into a fight. It was brief and it was hushed, but it was severe. Then his father left. His mother sat down on the front steps and crossed her arms on her knees and laid her head onto her arms. Gabriel and his sister waited in the yard. When he and his sister went over to their mother to find out what was going on, she said, without looking at them, without lifting her head yet knowing they were there, Go inside.

They waited in the living room and watched through the doorway as their mother sat on the steps under the eaves in the shade of the yew trees. The sun went down and the light faded. She did not move. She may have cried, but they didn't hear her. They sat a few feet within the door and waited and did not move either.

At last, their mother rose, turned, and came into the living room and said quietly, calmly, Your father and I are getting divorced. The slow, almost imperceptible time of summer seemed

to hold for a moment longer. Then, it broke. Gabriel's sister began to cry. Gabriel, almost like hearing another person speaking through his mouth, almost like seeing himself from outside himself, said, I thought so.

A few days after their father left, he returned, this time to get some of his things. He took one carload. That was it. Clothes and some painting tools. He left everything else behind: all his woodworking tools, his left-over easels, paintings, pottery, wood sculptures, furniture, books. He took so little, it was hard to see by the look of the house that he was leaving. But when he climbed into his car, Gabriel went and stood before the car with his arms folded and would not move. His father sat in the car and looked at him but did not say a word. And they stood there for a long time, but Gabriel resolved to hold his ground and hold his ground he did, until his mother came and pulled him away, not struggling or crying but resisting with his weight until at last he relented and the car moved down the driveway and his father left for good.

Like a miracle, he put his hand into the hedge and pulled out a sword. It appeared there in his peripheral vision, a quick glint of its smooth plastic. He simply reached in and took it out. No one claimed it, among his friends, and so it was his. And so it became a kind of precedent upon which he built a notion of possession: what comes into your possession is yours by right.

He tested this first with one of Peter Ansel's die-caste, desert-camouflaged panzer tanks. He simply reached out while he was playing at Peter's house and took it. At home, he kept it hidden so that he would not have to explain how he came to possess it, and it took on a weird kind of secret charm which worked on him like an intoxicating poison, making him ill while it

was the favorite of all his possessions. When guilt finally overcame him, he smuggled it back into Peter's room and never let on he had taken it.

Then it was the drugstore. He took candy. It was easy. When no one was looking, he took it. The feeling was the purest most beautiful sensation of fear, excitement and power he had ever felt. His heart raced as he moved through the aisle making his selections. He felt his face must show his intent, but when he realized it did not he realized not only that he could conceal his intent but that he had the kind of face which made it easy to conceal intent. He thought that his was a face of unquestionable innocence, and so he would beam, even linger after pocketing some toy or other object, looking around as though he were intending to buy something when already he had in his possession the object of his theft. And later, he had a mixture of shame and pride, and he was unsure which one was stronger than the other. Sometimes he would secretly return things back to the store. Sometimes enough time would pass for him to release his conscience, which became another lesson: for some things, the conscience has a time limit. And always, there was a part of him that watched himself in amazement, amazement at his boldness and amazement at his audacity and amazement at his pettiness and his greed and the vile abilities which grew easier as he became more practiced at it. His room became a dragon's lair collection of treasures he could share with no one, show to no one, and play with only in secret and with the fear that he might be caught with them and be twice guilty and twice charged. It was a strange direction for him to go, he even thought to himself. And all the while he continued to attend church with his mother and sister, he felt himself divided from himself and the two parts ranging farther and farther from each other, until the one could only call out like a brother on the shore to the deaf other heading into the unknown.

Then he became cocky. He bragged to a few friends that he could get them whatever they wanted. He did not tell them he was going to steal. He let them wonder how he would manage to do it. Did he have money? They stood on the corner up the block from the drug store. What do you want, he said. I can get you anything.

One of the boys glared suspiciously at him. Why?

If you want it.

Anything?

Sure. Toys. Candy bars.

All right, a candy bar.

He went down to the drugstore and walked in and looked over the greeting cards and turned and put four candy bars into his pockets and turned back around and looked over the greeting cards again. Then he felt the candy bars move and turned slightly as he looked down and saw two hands pulling the candy bars back out of the pockets. He looked up, saw the old woman who ran the drug store standing behind him, saw her reaching down and taking him by the hand and dragging him back behind the counter. She had steel-white hair and a pair of glasses on a chain and a pink sweater vest with the drugstore logo on it, but she was stronger than he was and yanked him and pushed him down onto a stool and looked down and said, I'm going to call the police.

I'm sorry, he said. I won't do it again. I promise.

Oh, I've seen you at it before, she hissed.

Please, he said. I promise. But he could not inspire her mercy. She went to the phone and dialed.

He sat there in terror. And then his friends came in and saw him there and laughed and pointed and said,

What happened, Gabe?

What are you sitting back there for?

What's the matter, you stuck?

You boys go on, the old woman said. You get out of here, now.

Gabriel said nothing. He simply sat there with his head bowed. Eventually, they left.

She did not call the police, though. She called his home, but his mother was not there and so he had to wait and wait and wait until she answered and at last could come down and get him. When she led him out of the store, he could not speak. She asked, Why did you do it? But he could make no words. His eyes were wide and his body tingled, but he could say nothing, could barely move himself. He allowed himself to be guided by her to the car, and there he sat silent and dazed and ashamed as they drove home.

The gray rain days slithered back in, whiptailing through the fall air. The bamboo rustled like a thousand dry tongues against a thousand dry lips. Gabriel stood in the doorway of Timothy's house with the inner blue glow of the television screen illuminating the dark bare walls with its radiant sickness, the smell of the place, too, like some sick ward of terminal cases and unwashed clothes, and the kitchen a sweet and rancid stench of plutonium water to the brim of the sink with dishes archeologically stacked with days of dried grubbing and little towers of black plumed mold and opened cans and the garbage cannister overflowing with its plumage of waste. The two younger ones, foster children Timothy's Mother took in for the extra money, sat on the wretched couch bathed in the blue electric light, their faces dirty and their mouths hanging

open with the dull and constant expression of hunger gone over to the painless torpor of malnutrition and atrophy. New knowledge, Gabriel was aware of things in a new way, though still on the border where play and the act of playing could override the acute perception of their squalor.

The row of bamboo trees swayed and whipped in the brief and sudden gusts of wind, and Gabriel hovered in the doorway looking out, unsure whether to stay or go. He held a toy car in his hand, the kind that sparked when the wheels turned, but it had the lifeless and waning allure of toys held too long, and he was on the verge of chucking it.

The sounds of radios and voices and children crying rose out of the surrounding apartments. He could not see into any of them, but they were close, separated by thin plywood scrims, each with a little cement patio exactly like the one he stood before, and from behind the building came the constant oscillation of rushing traffic. He turned and went back inside.

He went down the stairs to the windowless room below. It was brightly lit by a bare white bulb, and the white linoleum floor glowed, and there Timothy sat with his own cars, skittering them across the floor. He was a thin kid with wild black hair like a head of snakes. Like the foster kids, he wore filthy clothes and had a perpetual grime about his neck and the joints of his elbows. He was a quiet, gentle boy, and kind so Gabriel became a kind of friend to him, although Timothy was a significant year younger than Gabriel. Their friendship arose only because they walked home from school in the same direction, and one day Timothy invited him over to his house. There, Gabriel also met the two foster children Timothy's mother had taken in and whose names Gabriel never learned since he only came over twice, once that first time to see the house, before he and Timothy went up to the apple orchard by the hospital to play in the creek, and now this time, which in his mind was already becoming the last. He never actually met Timothy's

mother. She was a nurse who worked nights and so had to sleep through the day. Play had to be quiet, and there was a kind of lightly veiled anxiety in the way Timothy and the two others moved silently through the house.

Gabriel looked at the younger boy from a lower grade, thinking with a strange unease that he had come to this place partly by choice and partly by chance, and as he watched the boy playing he knew his own days of play were falling away. Already, something had departed.

Well, Gabriel said, I think I'm going home.

Did my mother wake up? Timothy asked.

No. I didn't see her get up.

They went up the stairs. The two other children did not move or look at them or take their eyes from the television screen. Timothy turned the volume down and went to the door of his mother's room and opened it slowly, looking in. Over his shoulder, Gabriel watched and saw in the darkness a lumped mass like a bear in hibernation beneath the blanket on the bed. The floor was covered in heaps of clothes and alcohol vapor drifted out like a toxic cloud. Timothy closed the door gently, keeping the knob turned until it was fast in the jamb.

They stood in the doorway. The bamboo hissed and swayed. The rain came only in sputters. Where's your dad? Gabriel asked.

I don't know. He never comes around. Does your dad live with you?

Gabriel picked up a dry bamboo branch and whipped it through the air. It whistled faintly with each swipe. My dad died.

How?

He died in a plane crash.

Gabriel walked out through the patio and onto the street and crossed the double flow of traffic on Sandpoint Avenue and climbed the hill, going through the apple orchard where the grass swept across his knees and soaked his pant legs. A piece of the original orchard, he thought, passing the old house buried in the trees where an old man drunk lived, a man they taunted but never saw. He kept his windows shaded throughout the day. They tried to spy him out, but he never showed, and gradually it became rumored that the house was abandoned but maybe haunted. Then stories arose that he was seen up by the children's hospital and that he was hunting children and had even killed them and buried them under his house. They snuck up onto the porch and peered through the windows, but they never saw him inside or out. Adults still inhabited a strange and distant world. As Gabriel passed, he swept his bamboo stick through the grass and watched the place, but he kept a wary distance.

Idle time. Torpor of the screen images, problems, engagements, lusterless characters, even the ones he built himself losing their allure, draining down to the quiet room and a fly at the window. Where was everyone? Then school returned. The music teacher led them in a sing-around of *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. The girl with kaleidoscope eyes. Six times one is six, six times two is twelve, six times three is eighteen, six times four is twenty-four...rote, and the only way he managed it was by song and rhyme. Drear windows in obscure wet rainwater flow. Wet coats hanging on hooks in the closet. Steam heaters hissing and radiating and fogging the window glass. Floorboards warped by a thousand trespasses. And they came and asked him: how did your father die?

He died in a plane crash, he answered.

His mother took him to a psychologist at the church, and he sat in the little office room in a big leather chair with his hands folded on his lap. The psychiatrist was a squat troll of a little man with a smile that seemed to turn inward and pull his nose down and a ratty sweater with the sleeves pushed up to his eczematic elbows. He wore big black glasses and had a balding head with a few straggler hairs pushed up over his dome. He sat with the window behind him, open, with the sound of traffic coming in, the light glaring over his shoulder and keeping his face in perfect shadow. How's school? he asked.

Fine.

What subjects do you like?

History.

Who are your friends?

Dougie and Peter and Giorgi. I play with them mostly.

So everything's pretty okay at school?

Yeah, pretty okay.

And how about at home?

Fine.

What do you like to do?

Watch TV.

And your sister?

She reads.

So how about your parents? They're getting divorced, I hear.

Yeah.

How do you feel about that?

Sad, I guess. But okay.

Gabriel went to see him once a week for a month, and the psychologist asked the same questions and Gabriel gave the same answers, keeping his guard up, knowing he was on the edge of something beyond which lay more scrutiny and interference if he did not make a good show now.

Driving home after the fourth session, his mother said, So, what do you think about going to see this psychologist?

It's okay, he said.

Do you like talking to him?

Sure.

I thought you might want to have a man to talk to, since your father left. Has it helped?

I guess.

Do you want to keep on seeing him? His mother finally gave him the option. He had to be careful. If he answered too quickly it might set off alarms, so did not respond at first. He sat there very still in the seat next to her, the replacement seat for the one that had been stolen, but the same Volkswagen they had always owned with its smell of battery acid and exhaust.

I guess I'd rather not, he said. He looked straight ahead. e could feel her looking at him, but he did not look back.

All right, she said at last. You don't have to if you don't want to.

He held himself. He did not smile. He did not say a word. They drove on, and he thought, not once has anyone asked me about the lie.

The days of school were a kind of watery slow motion, as if one day had been looped over many and repeated itself with minor variations. In the rain they played dodgeball, some kids called it soak-em: two teams on either side of a central dividing line, one or two or more rubber balls that they hurled at each other. There were moments when one team had been whittled down to two or one player, sometimes the least skilled vainly dodging as the prisoners screamed to catch a ball, the best skilled players like Chris and Peter and Georgi and Brian screaming the loudest because they knew they could fight back and bring the team back. One game, Gabriel was the last player. The other side threw the ball at him and missed. He retrieved it and threw back and missed. Another ball came at him and he caught it. The prisoners cheered. The glory was beautiful.

At noon on Wednesdays, the old siren blared. Where once they might have had to duck and cover or huddle to one side of the gym or lockdown in a room, now, no one stopped their play, though the sound infiltrated every game, every body, every nerve. A moment comes when almost all hands go up to ears and cup them and lift away and cup again, playing the sound against the head so that it becomes a kind of wavering stream like the doppleratic sound of a passing firetruck siren. One kid always screamed along with it.

In the drizzle of a gray day Gabriel was walking home from school. The other children were scattered around him, before him, behind him, all on their way home just like him. He walked alone. He passed the houses, and he knew each one as well as any of his deepest memories, the geography of everyday walking to and from school that becomes as familiar as the heartbeat. He ran his finger along the green metal railing in front of the Sorenson's house, where

the little girl Paige lived. He was not allowed to play with her, though. She invited him to come into the backyard to play on time. He had been there only a few minutes when her father came out and said, Paige, your cousin is coming over. Then her father bent down to Gabriel and said, You better head on home. There's a crowd.

Another girl named Charlotte was walking a few paces ahead of him. For some time he had loved her. Anonymously he gave her coins or flowers or little rings or bracelet trinkets from the store, wrapped in school paper upon which he wrote, From an admirer. He hid them in her desk when no one was looking. Then he watched without being seen as she found them and looked around trying to figure out who it was. When he finally revealed himself by adding his name, she looked at him and smiled. But her parents made her give them back. They say I'm too young to take these gifts, she told him. He burned for her anyway. But one day he saw her pick her nose and then put the nugget into her mouth. Something shifted. He stopped giving her gifts. She was walking ahead of him with her umbrella over her shoulder. For no reason he walked up behind her and pulled on her elbow so that her umbrella tipped and water came down on her head. Hey! she said, but she was laughing as he jumped back just as she whipped around, swinging the umbrella out scythewise and catching him in the eye with its metal tip. He dropped to the ground with his hand over his eye. She stopped and stared at him, and he lowered his hand and saw it was full of blood. She saw it, too. Oh! She said. And then she ran away.

He walked home, his eye bleeding and tears flowing a little. He went up the steps and into the house. Hello? he called out. No one answered. He sat down in the kitchen and called his mother at The Beef and Brew, the restaurant where she was working. Someone answered, and he said, Hi, is Molly there?

Yeah, just a minute.

Hello?

Hi, mom?

Yeah, what is it?

I got hurt coming home from school today. A girl hit me in the eye with her umbrella. It's bleeding pretty bad.

Oh my god, honey. Are you all right?

I think I'm okay.

Can you see out of it?

Yes.

I'm coming right home. Stay there.

Okay.

He went up the stairs to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. His face was a horror show, covered with blood. He was shocked by how much blood there was. He turned on the tap and ran the water. He took a washcloth and soaked it in the water and wrung it out and placed it on his eye. The coolness felt good. Then he wiped the blood from his face and tried to open the eye and could only get the eyelid to lift slightly. It wanted to close, but he forced it open with his fingers and looked at his own eye. It was brightly inflamed. His vision was obscured, as though looking through a bottle glass. The pain was sharp and scratchy, and he wondered if a piece of glass or metal were caught under the eyelid. He could not blink it away. He put the washcloth against it and sat down on the edge of the bathtub and waited for his mother to come home.

He heard the car arrive. Then he heard the door open. Gabriel? his mother called.

Up here.

She came up the stairs and saw him. She was still wearing the orange cocktail waitress apron and the short black skirt. He didn't like it and thought she shouldn't be wearing it and felt protective of her. Oh honey, she said, and she sat down beside him and stroked his hair back. Let me see.

He pulled away the cloth. She looked on the verge of tears as she gazed at him. Let's get you to the hospital, she said.

She seemed to want to help him walk, holding onto his arm. But he walked just fine, without any outward show of alarm, down to the car. As they drove, he looked at the world with his one eye and felt a strange post-adrenaline calm. It was all right, now. Everything was all right. He feared his eye was damaged. He covered the other eye and made himself look through the injured eye as the trees flowed past, as the traffic stopped at a streetlight and the people walked before them, as his mother tried to slip between the other cars to get ahead. He saw with shattered clarity the brilliance even in the gray and faltering light.

What happened? she asked.

A girl hit me with her umbrella.

Why?

I don't know.

The doctor took him right in and laid him down in a reclining chair and dimmed the room lights and snapped on a spotlight and pried open Gabriel's eyelid and looked down through a magnifying glass at Gabriel's injured eye. Hmm, he said, and Gabriel could feel his breath against his cheek. There's a small cut in the eyelid. An abrasion on the cornea. We'll have to stitch the lid and see what happens with the surface of the eye. How's your vision through it?

A little watery, said Gabriel.

All right. Well, let's get started, the doctor said.

The doctor brought over a stool and sat down. He prepared a syringe, and then inserted it into the inner eyelid. Soon the eye and eyelid and then the surrounding chamber of the eye went numb. He stitched the eye, cleaned the site, and placed a cotton bandage over it and taped it down. Well, he said, rolling back on the stool and standing up. Keep it covered and dry. Come back next week and we'll have a look.

Thank you, Gabriel's mother said.

The doctor helped Gabriel out of the chair and said, All right?

Gabriel shook his hand.

As they drove home, Gabriel felt the balm of his mother's love, the overflowing concern, and he absorbed it deeply.

When they got home, he went into the living room and turned on the television and sat down to watch. His sister came down from her room and looked at him.

What happened to you?

Nothing. I got cut on the inside of my eyelid. But I got one stitch.

Does it hurt?

A little.

Hmmmh, she said, how can you watch that show? Then she went back up to her room.

Gabriel called out, Mom, can I eat dinner in here?

Sure, she called. Then the phone rang.

He watched the show. The villain had caught the secret agent and placed him in an underground maze full of trap doors and secret booby traps. The agent stepped into a room and the door shut behind him. He turned, but the door would not open. When he turned back around,

he saw the floor sliding away, opening over a pit of boiling acid. Soon the floor would be gone, and he would be plunged into the acid. But the agent took out his gun and inserted a steel arrow into it and hooked a wire to the arrow and shot it into the wall on the opposite side of the room. He shot a hook into the opposite wall and attached the wire to it and then crawled up onto the wire and slid over the pit to the other side.

Gabriel's mother came into the room and went over to the television and turned it off. I just got off the phone, she said. It was the mother of the girl who hit you in the eye. She was calling to apologize. But do you know what she told me?

No.

She said you were teasing her, that you hit her first.

I was just playing. I didn't hit her.

You lied to me.

I didn't hit her.

I want you to go up to your room. No television tonight.

But I was only playing.

Go.

He went upstairs and into his room. He did not turn the lights on. He sat in the dark and lifted his hand and felt the bandage on his eye. His eye was beginning to ache. He could not hear his sister in the room next to his, but he could feel her cold presence. He could feel other presences, too, in the old house, like the previous owner who took all his money out of the bank and buried it in the walls. He died, but they never found the money. Gabriel stood up and put his hand against the wall, sliding his fingertips along it, feeling like a safecracker through the wallpaper and plaster. The house was whispering to him all its little secrets. It was whispering to

him about the money, and outside the trees were swaying and sending their own signals through the shadows that they threw upon his floor.

Well, she said as they sat around the kitchen table, it's either going to be New York City or Berkeley, California.

Why are you going back to school?

Yeah, aren't you too old for school? His sister said.

No, I'm not too old. 'm going because I want to, and because then I'll be able to get a better job.

How long?

It will only be for a couple of years, two, maybe three at the most. Then, I promise we'll move back.

Three years?

They were astonished. New York or California. All Gabriel knew of New York was what he had seen on TV, which made it seem like a scary place. Violence. Dark city canyons. Steam streaming up out of vents in the street. Killers. Gangsters. Now California. How far would they be from Disneyland? The sun. The sun was always shining in California. He hoped it would be California.

I hope for California, their mother said.

Definitely, California, Gabriel agreed.

Yes.

But what about our house? Gabriel asked.

We'll rent it out to some college students. We'll have to pack most of our things and store them in the basement.

How much can we bring?

We're going to drive down. Maybe we'll rent a trailer. A couple of boxes each, I suppose?

Big boxes?

Just boxes.

Won't the people who stay here get into our stuff?

Not if you pack it up good.

When the news came that they would be going to California, it was a kind of relief. But that relief was quickly followed by dread. The time was nearing, and what it meant made it impossible for Gabriel to slide into the floating, boundless dream of summer. And he moved through the house and through each moment with the combined dread of going back to school and the fear of leaving. When he tried to sleep, his mind continued building and boring through scenarios of their life to come. He imagined it beautiful: palm trees, beaches. But there remained the gap of the unknown, and his mind struggled to fill that gap, but he could only fill it with a feeling of dread that made his stomach ache.

He packed slowly: things to go, things to stay. Now they were only going to take the Volkswagen, and since it could not pull a trailer, they could only bring one box each and a suitcase. It was hard to divide himself from much of his possessions, but as he tried to decide what to keep, a strange discrimination occurred, in which once one thing was let go, many other things lost their preciousness and went more easily. He kept a little Lincoln Head bank, two books by Arthur C Clark because he liked the covers, some watercolors, a chess set, some post

cards of Hawaii a cousin sent him, his Bible, a desk lamp, a drawing book, his stuffed bear, and a box of cuff links and tie clips that belonged to his father.

The home was dissolving from within, as they moved their boxes into the basement. They left the furniture. They could not afford to store it. His mother found renters. And gradually, the day to leave approached. And the closer it got, the worse it felt. The anxiety in Gabriel's mind grew, but it also came to him that this was a chance to renew himself, to shed his darkness and become holy once again. He would be a good person again, a person of God, a person in the light of God.

The car was loaded with boxes on the seats and on the floorboards beneath their feet and suitcases on a rack on the roof. When they climbed in, there was not a space to spare. The house fell away. Their home, their possessions, now fit inside a Volkswagen bug.

The intention was to leave by morning. They were driving off by six in the evening. The house withdrew in a last glance back as the wheels of the car stirred up the dry dirt of the driveway, dust billowing up like a reversal of creation. The long shadows fell across the lawns, and the sunlight strobed across their faces as they drove through the streets in the rose glow of the evening.

On the highway, the traffic flowed sparse and melancholy. Gabriel sat in the back right, his sister sat on the left on the other side of the clothes hamper that was filled in fact with clothes that needed to be washed. Their mother drove with her shoulders up in a tense posture of defense as trucks swept by and sent wind gusts that put their little car into swerve. To try and talk meant

having to shout, but none of them spoke, and slowly the road took over. They crossed the first in a series of rivers, and the water gleamed bronze with shimmering snakes of light.

One town gone, another arose, sometimes with the bad egg smell of pulp mills. They passed another river, and the light shot out and gradually the road became a lulling rise and fall as the engine droned them all into daze, and Gabriel leaned his head against the window and felt his gaze go slack as they passed the fields and the cows that stood motionless in the fields and the light that pulsed against his eyes, until he fell into a light sleep and images arose, vivid, and took him with phantom swiftness: he was on a bus in a big city, and he was with someone he knew, but he could not see the person's face because the other was turned away from him in a crowd of people who were standing, waiting, and when the bus stopped all the people including the other descended and Gabriel followed and tried to catch up or at least stay within sight of the other, but the crowds were moving all around him and he could not break through them and gradually he could not see the other and was on his own and knew he had to find a house and knew the person who owned the house although he did not know the name, and in his mind he was thinking I should have gotten the name, then I could look it up and find the place, now I will have to go by instinct, and so he set off in a direction and the streets were steep and rose up and then plunged down through neighborhoods of abandoned buildings and structures in collapse with crumbled mortar and broken walls and graffiti on everything and streetlamps with rims hanging down and abandoned cars stripped of their wheels and doors, and buildings that were once under construction but were now abandoned as if here a whole civilization had lost interest or at least the force of creation had withdrawn and now it was inhabited only by the ones who lived on the periphery, shadow forms moving within partial walls like ghosts, if they were not in fact ghosts, and Gabriel walked down the middle of the street which was now virtually

impassible to cars, the ground bombed, mounds of concrete and more abandoned cars and trucks, some of them on their sides, and he came upon the remains of what looked like an old fort, and he saw children running along the parapets and emerging from the tunnel openings and screaming and swarming over it like insects and he rushed in his steps and walked on until the road took him under the iron stanchions of a towering bridge and there he saw water sweeping below and though he could not tell how to get up onto the bridge, he knew that somehow his destination was on the other side.

They pulled into Ashland that night and stopped at a roadside motel. It was a cheap little one-story building with a blinking sign, and their room had two beds that sagged and a black and white television with aluminum foil on the antenna that only brought in two grainy stations with news and a gameshow. Their mother went out for some food. His sister sat on one of the beds, her back firm against the wall. She was reading. Gabriel explored the bathroom. It smelled of harsh disinfectants, and even though there was a wrapper around the toilet seat, one grizzly little black hair still clung to the seat. He picked up a paper covered soap bar and unwrapped it and washed his hands and face. He lifted one of the overturned glasses from a shelf on the back of the toilet and ran the water in the sink till it felt cold and then filled the glass. When he drank, the water tasted wrong.

He went back into the room and sat down on the bed. The furnishings were meager: the beds, one table between them, a chair by the door, and a framed mirror on the opposite wall. The television was bolted to a bracket in the wall, and the bracket was bent as if someone had actually tried to steal it. The walls themselves had a strange swirled yellow texturing. Everything was saturated with the smell of cigarettes. He had a brief thought that they were hiding out, on

the lam, running like fugitives. The drama was fleeting. The hiss of cars and trucks passing on highway came through the walls.

How far do you think we drove today? Gabriel asked.

I don't know. His sister was pretending not to watch television. It was a medium beneath her. She put her book down and pulled her knees up, scrolling a strand of her hair through her fingers as if it were some sacred text.

I bet we went over five hundred miles.

Probably more.

What time did we leave?

Around six.

Gabriel tried to watch the show, but the picture kept fading and other images crowded in with their ghost patterns superimposing. Then something appeared that looked familiar. A cop show. I think I've seen this before, he said.

I'm not surprised.

Wait, are they speaking English?

How would I know?

Their mother pulled back in and the headlights punched through the draped windows then went out. She came in with a bag of hamburgers and fries. Anybody hungry? she asked as she closed the door. She was smiling, but her eyes were weary and red.

I am, Gabriel said. He reached out and she handed him a burger.

How about you? She said to his sister.

His sister grimaced and said, Hamburgers?

It was the only thing I could find at this hour.

she took one, and they ate the food sitting on the bed in the crinkle of wrappers and the sounds of their chewing and the hazy static voices of the television.

They started out earlier the next day, after a breakfast in a little roadside diner. The tall golden grass of Oregon smelled sweet and flowed in through the open windows of the Volkswagen and over and around the smell of battery acid. Gabriel tried to read the crossword puzzle book their mother had picked up, but it made him sick after a while. They counted license plates:

I see Oregon.

That's easy.

I see Washington.

I see California.

That's the first one.

I see New York!

Hours droned on, and Gabriel dozed in and out of it, gazing and going out over the hills as a disembodied soul. Dark blue lakes appeared like shimmering spiders sprawling in the palm of sudden canyons. Then the Siskiyous hit, and they rose slowly, the Volkswagen laboring, trundling at thirty miles an hour as car after car and towering wind-gusting trucks swept past them. Scrag pines sprawled out through the hills, but they never passed through the kind of forests back north. The land was sparse and dry. Occasionally where a river flowed the oak trees were thick and black. Then they passed the summit and the road began to descend and the Volkswagen seemed to glide without effort, down the road with the land rippling out below them. So they entered California.

The road became a kind of white out. It disappeared in dust and heat, in distance like a salt pan, distance like a flat line horizon obscured by hazy wind, and they drove into it as into a kind of annihilation. Hour on hour, the road was nothing more than the motion of the vehicle, would not have existed were it not for the vehicle, and no town nor any other fragments or outposts of civilization appeared in that netherworld of whiteness, a seer and bleak outer zone of heat. No other cars. The windows were wide open and the wind funneled in. His mouth was dry. The battery acid blew up from under the seat and he tasted it, bitter and stinging as it settled deep in the tissues of his mouth and nose. Occasional the mire of sleep drew him down, but there were no more attending dreams. Only the heat and a constant sweat and drowse and listless dropping away of the body as he swooned and drifted, climbing up and out through the top of his head and soaring into that white hot light.

The names flashed on the green signboards: Red Bluff, Corning, Orland, Willows, Arbuck, Dunning, Woodland, and out of that oblivion, out of that dust the hills rose. Then, a tree. A few cows standing in the shade. A fence. Vacaville and the groves of Live Oak, the brittle scintillation of leaves, the sun and flutter of late afternoon shadows as they pulled onto the highway out of Vallejo, on and passing the defunct refineries of Richmond, the San Rafael bridge, flickering guard rails and the cars and the heat and the cloverleafs like wheels spinning them out into a new life. And so at last they arrived in Berkeley.

The sun was going down, and their mother hunched over the steering wheel, exhausted, a piece of paper with an address on it fluttering in her hand. She drove up University to Oxford

Street, turned left, then right onto Hearst, left on Arch to the corner of Virginia, the address, 1717, their new home.

The first thing Gabriel noticed was the smell. He had never smelled anything like it. It was not a bad smell, but a strange smell, a smell of age, of lives that had inhabited these rooms, as if their accumulation had compounded into a particular smell, which was this smell and which he would never forget. It was a triplex, with two other apartments, joined by a common entry and stairway. On the right was their apartment. It had two floors. The lower floor had a living room and a small dining space and a kitchen. The upper floor had two bedrooms and a bathroom. The stairway was narrow and dark, and the stairs were covered with a non-slip black strip of linoleum. It was furnished with a couch and table and bookshelves in the living room, a table and four chairs for eating in the kitchen. The bedrooms had beds and a desk each with shelves built into the side.

Well, their mother said, this isn't so bad.

No, Gabriel said. It's okay. He looked at his sister.

Yeah, she said, and she rolled her eyes and glanced around with the squint and tight-lipped scan she used on foul things that entered her orbit.

I want you two to decide which rooms you want upstairs, and no fighting about it. I'm way too tired to deal with that now.

We won't, his sister said, and she grinned at Gabriel.

Where are you going to sleep? Gabriel asked.

I think I'll just use the fold out bed in the couch, for now. Maybe I'll get a futon.

Shall we, his sister said, and she lifted one eyebrow.

Okay.

They went upstairs and looked in the first room. Gabriel decided not to make a claim. He would let his sister choose. They looked in the second. There was little difference between them. Then they went back into the first one. I'll take this one, she said.

All right. I'll take the other.

And so he went into his new room. The smell was all he could think about. He opened the window and the smell of jasmine wafted in, but it was still the smell of the lives he noticed. He turned on the light. It was a push-button switch, and the light came on overhead, bright, stark. The room looked cold but was hot. It looked empty even though it had furniture, and it felt crowded, even though he was alone.

Fall was already in the air, but it was different. It was hotter, drier. A few thin arcing clouds drifted above, slivery red vapor trails. He stood across the street from the new apartment. This was the spot. Eucalyptus trees, that's what they were called, she said. She lived across the street and knew what she was doing. The eucalyptus trees hung down like willows, but they were taller with a kind of gray papery bark. The smells were complicated and new. Her apartment had three garage doors with half moons carved into them. Occasional cars came down the hill, but otherwise Virginia Street was quiet beneath a double row of live oak trees; that's what she called them, live oaks. It was a strange name.

A man came up from the street below. He had long hair splayed out from beneath a red bandana. He was leading a group of children. They were all holding hands, and they were all wearing hockey helmets. Some of them were making strange grunts and growls. Some didn't appear to be looking where they were going. They were coming towards him, but before they

reached the spot where he stood, the bus arrived. The door swung open, and he turned to see a large woman with a broad shiny dark face. She neither smiled nor spoke, just held the handle on the swing arm of the door and waited for him to get on.

He took an empty seat. There were four other children including the new girl in other seats, but none of them were sitting together. They looked, in fact, as if they had chosen spots to keep them as far from others as possible. Gabriel fit himself into their stand-off geometry. The bus lurched forward and he reached up to hold onto the seat back in front of him. It had a green rubber matting on the back which had been picked at by the fingers of countless riders, and in one place someone had picked out pieces leaving a line of holes in the shapes of letters that spelled out the words FUCK YOU.

They road down Virginia and stopped to pick up children every couple of blocks. No one sat together. They continued down and gradually the neighborhood changed. They passed liquor stores and vacant lots and a soup kitchen where a row of people stood in line against a wall. Cop cars cruised by. Tents lined the sidewalks, things inside shopping carts or large black garbage bags. One man leaned into the street and shook his fist and railed and ranted and otherwise scathed the people who passed him, and as the bus went by he looked up and for a moment he locked eyes with Gabriel and sent up a searing flare of hate.

The last stop was at a little house with a dirt yard worn smooth as cement, and there a kid with dirty jeans and a dirty shirt swung down from the limb of a tree and landed in the dirt and then ran over to the bus. Gabriel heard someone behind him say, Arl's got rickets.

He turned and looked at the boy who had said it. He asked, What's that?

It makes your bones weak. You get it from worms in the dirt.

And when the boy got on board, Gabriel saw that he had no socks and that the skin around his ankles was blackened with dirt.

When they arrived at the school, the playground was a mass of chaos. At one corner of the playground was a small building with a large smokestack. Beside it was a row of dumpsters, and from the smokestack, black gouts of smoke were chugging up into the air. Seagulls were circling overhead, in and out of the billows of smoke.

Gabriel went into the office and stood in line to get his room assignment. A bell rang, and the hallway outside became a flow of children. An old woman with shivering hands gave him a slip of paper with his name and the name of a teacher and a room number on it. He went down the hall, looking up at the room numbers, until he came to the one that was his. He sat in the back towards the side, but not in the last row. Twitchy, chittery kids around him, zipping up back packs, rapping knuckles on the desk, carving initials into the wood. Another boy was eating a cheese stick and grinning. The teacher called the roll. When she got to his name, she said, Thomas Bear? At first he thought someone would notice, or find it odd because he found it odd. But nobody noticed.

He raised his hand into his new identity and said, Here.

### **The Prisoner's Dilemma**

When he entered the showroom, it was like a carnival. Lights everywhere, cameras, news people interviewing the crowds and the players at the car. People were standing around in the glare of light flooding through the high showroom windows. Light. Too much light. And Jones forded the waves and clusters, people laughing garishly, though he held no ill feeling towards them. They were simply people, like him, trying for something, trying to win something for...the thing? Not just the thing, but to win. Sign Up Here, words on a banner, and beneath the banner a table and another cluster of people. He made his way towards it. All right, like a prayer in his mind, all manner of thing. All right.

He stood in line. He looked around. So many people. It was like a party. He stepped forward in little paces. Once he reached the table, a young woman smiled up at him. She was rushing them through. She was impeccably clean, hair like a fine, brown mane. Hello, she said.

Hello yourself.

Sign in here, she said and handed him a clipboard.

At the table, he filled out a questionnaire, blurry questions on a sheet of paper, questions about his health, his income, family background, and a final statement absolving the dealership of all responsibility if he should suffer any mishap, injury, physical or psychological harm in the process of the contest. He signed it and turned it in.

Very good, she said, and she smiled and took his sheet of paper and lay it on a stack of other papers and handed him a sticker upon which he was to write his name below a greeting that said Hello My Name Is...

Good luck!

Thanks.

One last trip to the bathroom, through the crowds, faces in the mirrors, hands slicking back hair, hands washing faces. In the stall he downed his mini bottles one after another. Ah, fortified. Sounds around him like a shipyard. And replenished, he emerged with the benevolent glow of the freshly anointed, the baptized, the graced. He slapped his sides and waded out into the showroom. He smiled into the crowd. Let us begin.

At the car, he was handed a pair of white gloves, and he dutifully put them on. For the laying on of the hands, he said aloud to no one in particular as he moved in among the others poised there. Are we, after all, to handle a holy relic? But no one really heard him, at least that was what he thought as he stepped in between the shoulders of two other people and slipped his gloved hand in, placing it on the left rear quarter panel of the vehicle.

The crowd was thick. He was jostled in, moved, but he never took his hand from the initial spot he had chosen, as if that particular spot, win or lose, were his to defend and hold. Lay on... People laughed. People told jokes. The camera crews moved in. Then the Dealer came over and lifted his arms as if opening a homily. He wore a bright, starched white shirt and gray slacks, and his hair was thick and black and combed perfectly back over the top of his head. He had strong white teeth that gleamed. The cameras turned to him, and he spoke:

Good morning everyone. Good to have you hear! I'm Don Anderson, and it is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to Anderson's Dealership and to our seventh annual car give-

away contest! He paused, nodding, and the crowd cheered. The lights of the camera crews intensified the whiteness of his face. As you know, each year we have done this, we have started off with quite a crowd, and this year seems to be no exception. Families and friends are of course welcome to stay throughout the competition. We only ask that in your support you conduct yourselves with courtesy and respect to all the contestants. Now, let us review the rules for a moment. First of all, contestants must keep one hand on the car at all times. Accidentally releasing your hold will result in immediate dismissal. In fact, if for any reason your hand should come off the car, you will be dismissed from the competition. There are no exceptions. We will have fifteen-minute breaks every three hours, and as you can see we have food available at the sign-in table, but contestants must be back at their places promptly at the end of the breaks or they will be disqualified. Any physical contact, pushing or harassment of other contestants will result in disqualification. If any support members harass or physically harm other contestants, the contestant they are associated with will be disqualified. There will be no exceptions to any of these rules. The contest will continue until there is only one person left touching the vehicle. The last contestant who remains in contact claims it. This is a promotional event, and no members of the dealership, their families or friends are eligible. Are there any questions? He waited a moment, during which the crowd twittered and muttered.

Someone then shouted out, What about a motorcycle?

They can start their own contest! he shot back, grinning broadly. Now, let the contest begin, and good luck to you all!

Camera crews moved in to interview Don Anderson and he soaked up the light and the attention and puffed himself up before the cameras like an octopus in an ink cloud. Then the news crews began coming around the car and zeroed in on various contestants, asking them their

names and their occupations and their strategies for success. When they reached Jones with their glare of lights and camera lenses, the young reporter in his sharp sport coat shoved the microphone forward, although his eyes remained quick scanning. Jones squirmed to face them squarely while keeping his hand firmly on the car. Yes, a bit awkward, here, can't you tell, but this is all really a test of fortitude, isn't it? The car is symbolic, mostly, the goal itself an abstract reason for the attempt, and the game which finds each of us here is to test the mettle, the game is the field wherein each finds that inner bar of strength, facing the demons and so forth...but before he was finished, the crews moved on.

Then the camera crews left, and gradually the crowd of onlookers diminished until the only people who remained were either the workers or families and friends of the contestants or the odd few people who had actually come to shop for a car. The first few hours after that were like a boat trip in which all of the contestants more or less got acquainted.

Here we are! and they all laughed.

Yes indeed. We are the chosen few.

Not so few, yet.

It's rather like Noah's ark, don't you think?

Except without the pairs.

I heard that last year it went for three days.

Three days!

The hardest part is having to go to the bathroom.

Thank God for the breaks!

Just hope they come when you need them!

And the primary joke was, who would be the first to fall away?

The afternoon faded, and they settled into a pattern of chatting and silent staring. Some struck up friendships, some attended only to their friends and families, but everyone was friendly, everyone was having a good time. Jones kept up a more or less unbroken monologue, the contents of which were the more obscure benefits of the contest, such as the chance meeting over a hallowed possession, you see, which itself is really quite meaningless, since our being here and staying here is the real existential quandary, what we're here to face, the ultimate abstraction ensconced in physical mortification.

Then why don't you step away and just visit?

Yeah, the competition has a goal.

We're all in it for the car.

If the car is meaningless, or if we believe it's meaningless, as you're trying to convince us, then losing is what, a weakness of character, is that what you mean?

That's it! That's it in a nutshell!

You're trying to talk us into dropping off!

Ah, you sense the subtle force and prevarication of my argument.

Everything you say has another meaning.

The meaning of all oration is persuasion.

Did you get that out of a fortune cookie?

Maybe I just mean for myself.

That's right, you're talking to yourself.

Yeah, you're all alone here. No one else exists.

Ah but you do, Jones said. Soon I'll be able to address you all by name. What I mean by the car not existing is that we cannot be attached to its qualities, here, that put us into the chain of

cause and effect. You see, if you really listen, I am giving you clues on how to win. Qualities and change have their origin in nature. I'm saying that if you see the car as the object of your desire, if you set it off in value from other things it becomes a trap, but if you see it through the discipline of one who sees the whole charade with clarity, you will be master of the field!

Okay, preacher.

Yeah, what are *you* selling?

I represent no official denominations.

Then what's your message?

The three gates of hell that destroy the self are desire, anger and greed.

Then what are you doing here?

Ah, training the mind. An opportunity to practice. As long as one is focused on the act without craving the fruit, then one remains free of illusion.

And disappointment.

Absolutely.

So why not step away?

To step away would be a failure in engagement; relinquishing in delusion would become a way of dark inertia.

You're going to feel some dark inertia all right.

Lucid. The object is to remain lucid. That is what I'm here for.

I'm here for the car, and that's lucid enough for me.

Good luck, preacher.

And to you.

And they passed into the evening with no one dropping away. On breaks, they stretched and went to the bathroom and ate from the complimentary food buffet provided by the dealership. Jones replenished himself in secret, but he already knew his supply would never last an entire three days, should they go that long, or even the night as things were going, and so his mind worked on a plan for obtaining drink. But he conjured up nothing, which raised the specter of the possibility that he would run out. And what horrors would that bring? Of course, he could always just as easily walk away if the desire, indeed the need, became too strong, and as he pulled the last of his mini bottles from his pocket and drained its contents and left it up-ended in his mouth long past the thirteenth drop to fully draw in its vapor, this thought both comforted and despaired him. Yes, he could walk away, that was true, if the need were too great. But to walk away simply from a need for drink? And what was it he was really after, a car? A car? A vehicle? The great wheel? Ironic as his statements about the fruits and the goal of remaining lucid, he was not altogether immune from such a lure, even if it had only occurred to him on the spot as a kind of joke.

Thus the trial began. And it began in the legs, the ache in the calves and the chalky grinding in the knees. He stepped from foot to foot in order to keep the circulation going, but he felt his muscles beginning to cramp, then brief and unsettling moments of numbness. The calves and thighs rippled with fiery tingles. The hip joints rocked in angry opposition, and he had no way to escape from the intense awareness of his bones, his flesh like strained fabric. Sharp pains flared up, spikes of weird electric fire leaping through his thighs and up his spine, and he seethed inwardly and breathed fiercely. Even the air seemed to singe as though his nerves were exposed in some kind of horrible, whole-body root canal.

And as the effect of the alcohol began to drain away, he felt the first weight of an enormous weariness. An overwhelming desire to lie down, to sleep. His eyes closed for long periods until he lost balance and jerked awake and clung more tightly with his gloved hand to the edge of the quarter panel. Glancing around, he saw that some of the others had also closed their eyes, trying for little shots of sleep while standing. One man at the taillight stood grinning with a poker stare, an edge of the fire Dobbs smiling and waiting for people to drift off and let go the treasure. So the game began to change.

The first to drop away was a young woman at the fender who simply shook her head and smiled and stepped away, peeling the glove from her hand. The group noticed and everyone awakened and turned towards her, and the general sentiment was an initial shock and brief disappointment, then a wave of consolation and at last a spark of predatory glee as they came together in a sudden cheer. The woman smiled and waved and said, I'm going to go have a good night's sleep. See you all! And as she walked away, they all felt the exhilaration of lasting past the first person quitting and coming that much closer to winning.

In the early morning hours before dawn, Jones began to pass through the fire of the coming hangover. He saw family and friends of the other contestants sitting nearby or even sleeping on the floor around them, and in the red waves of his mind they were circling sharks. His eyes burned. He drank water on the breaks, but he remained as parched as a man who drinks from the sea. His nose began to run and his head reeled with a glaring white hot pain that burned behind his eyes. Nausea persisted, and on breaks he sometimes vomited.

You'd better give in, preacher, Dobbs said, the name by which Jones now considered him. He was a small, wiry man with slick, gray-black hair and a stubble of beard. He wore a green plaid shirt rolled up at the sleeves, forearms tattooed with mermaid and cross and crown of

thorns, and in his breast pocket was a little device with a wire winding up to an earphone in his ear.

Quite all right, Jones said. I am only freeing myself from delusions.

You think that pain in your legs is a delusion?

Quite so. It's not so bad, now.

Well, you know, I'm sad for you because that's really a bad sign. That means your legs are dying, your blood is pooling up in your veins and you're more and more susceptible to clotting. That's really dangerous. You know that?

Are you saying your legs don't hurt?

They do, but I haven't been drinking like you have. I've been in training for this. I'm healthy. I'm strong. Look at you. You look like you're dying.

Another delusion.

That's a bad sign, too, that way you're thinking. Now you don't even see what kind of danger you're in. I feel sorry for you.

I appreciate your concern.

The man smiled with beaded malicious intent. Jones closed his eyes and drifted for a moment in the void, losing the feeling of his legs, even his hand on the car, his body entire. Yet he did not spring back from this, not this time. He traveled forward into it, and his spirit drifted over the mind and its memory and he saw and inhabited his earliest moment as a child, as a crawling creature in a crib, climbing up the bars in the dead of night, maneuvering his body between the crib and the wall and working his way to the floor. He found the front door and opened the lock. The night was silent and dark. He went out into it. He crawled through the tall grass of the yard. He stopped and listened and heard the feminine breathing of the night. He

floated in a swirl of stars. He drifted towards a pale wave of light moving slowly, then flaring in a sudden blast of intensity and brightness as the sun rose, and he lifted his arms as if to a mother and beheld there the vast source of all, the opening from which he had come.

Others drifted away during the night, but he was not aware of their departure, and as the light came through the showroom windows he counted and saw that, now, only twelve remained, including himself. A boy of about eighteen was standing on his left and a woman perhaps in her mid-thirties stood to his right. Jones nodded to each of them and said, Good morning. The woman, it seemed, was the boy's mother, and his father stood directly across from Jones at the other quarter panel. Dobbs stood fiercely at the rear left taillight, a grim and complacent sneer on his face as if he were some demon posted there to monitor the levels of their pain. Jones turned to the mother and said, Increasing the chances by coming as a group, eh?

She smiled. She was a petite woman with short brown hair and deep-set eyes that were now barely open with fatigue. She stood with her shoulders slightly hunched in the posture of coming defeat. I'm not sure how much it will increase our chances being together, she said, and I'm not sure how much longer I want to stay with it. We mostly want to win the car for our son, Carl.

Oh, do stay. You're doing fine. You've made it this far. Surely you can make it a little longer.

Yeah, mom. You can do it.

Carl retained the bright demeanor of a kid for whom it was still a strange and amusing game.

And from where do you hail? Jones asked.

I go to the university, the boy replied.

And what are you studying, there?

Environmental engineering.

Most noble. Most noble. We need your help, I'm afraid. Any specialties?

Urban design, mostly, although lately I've been pretty fascinated by the possibilities of bioremediation.

Bioremediation?

It's a way to use naturally occurring enzymes and organisms for environmental clean-up, which in combination with good urban planning can help to remedy some of our current environmental problems.

I have hope just standing next to you. You'll save the world one day, I'm sure of it, if my generation doesn't foolishly try to interfere.

They're the ones giving me my grades.

I'll put in a good word.

The supporting friends and family had arisen and now they were all back to a sense of support and community. Some news crews had returned and were interviewing them. The general commentary was a complaint about fatigue, especially in the back and legs.

As the sunlight rose, so too did the heat, and in his bleary-minded, hungover and sleep-deprived state, Jones felt his body wavering in a woolly kind of dissipation, as though the borders of his own form were giving way to the morass of the warming air, and he watched through long, trance-like moments as time seemed to slow down and move in tedious, incremental and muffled clangs, as though the escapement of the grand clock of the world had been mired in thick hot sand. The people around him moved more slowly and froze in brief moments into complete and disturbingly motionless cutouts of themselves. Two boys stood

opposite each other on the other side of the room, tossing a baseball back and forth, and as Jones watched he saw the baseball's trajectory leaving its tracer pattern of infinite identical images of the ball succeeding each other from hand to hand.

Now more than ever he felt the urge to sleep. After the afternoon break, he saw that several did not return, including the mother who had stood beside him. And while Carl did not appear disappointed, he, too, now had a vacant gaze and seemed to drift from himself at moments, as did many of the others, several of whom could no longer keep their eyes open. Only Dobbs at the taillight seemed implacable, immovable, almost malevolent in his obstinacy and enjoyment of their suffering, particularly that of Jones, whom he seemed to stare at unrelentingly.

The fatigue of standing in one spot becomes ludicrous. Pain comes in waves. Why choose to do this to yourself? To choose this pain for material wealth, to choose this pain when others suffer for no reason at all? It seemed an insult to true misfortune. There is in this some moral desuetude. Pain returns in waves. It settles in places, lodges like a spider weaving death at its source. To move is not to dislodge the pain but to open up breaks in its general fabric which themselves fill in and begin to radiate even more. The only way to deal with this is to take oneself out of the body. The only way of taking oneself out of the body is to let go. Letting go is like that first dive from the tower at the beach club, the first moment looking down at the black water below, little waves rolling in. What will it be like, striking that water? Something is moving. Light breaks through the face of the water. Crows are watching. I love the grace of the gull coming in on the air from the sea, and looking down he saw his hand plunge through the metal fabric of the vehicle.

She appeared like the queen in a three card monty game. A few faces shuffled, a few hands reached in across the bar for drinks, money hit the counter, and there she was. He waited for his drink. Where was his drink? He had put in his order, hadn't he? So where was it? He wanted to complain, but he didn't want to make a scene in front of the woman. She was beautiful, with black hair and black lips and stone coal black eyes. Her skin was like Egyptian parchment. Her movements were like a tree animated by wind, pure improvised grace. He watched her, and she watched him and smiled. No one around them interrupted. There was a crowd and noise and yet her proximity and coolness were clean and clear enough to convince him that they were there together alone.

Still worried? she said.

He smiled in return, his expression aligned to hers. I'm reminded of the man who kept a Gideon Bible in his bedside drawer to maintain the sensation of living in motels.

Every move is an everlasting one, remember?

Do you mean California?

She laughed. Loss is the hardest shell.

That's true, that's true, and when I had to leave all those things when we left the last apartment, I thought I needed them, when we moved into the garage of...what was their name? It escapes me, now, but I do remember the son was institutionalized. For a brief period they let me have his room, as long as I didn't disturb anything. Line drawings all over the place, self-portraits with a kind of electric energy, the energy of madness I thought would infect me if I stayed in there too long. The things. I thought I needed them. I really did. But after a while, I couldn't even remember what I'd left.

And the hat?

The slouch hat? The top hat?

The hat on the billboard.

Oh, the recurring hat. I never got that one.

No?

No, I never did, but I kept seeing it everywhere.

Try again.

How?

Try. Free associate.

Hmmm. All right. Hat rat cat...head...top of the head...

consciousness...hat...hats...jobs...selves...identities...I still don't get it.

She laughed again. It's a joke.

What is?

Hats.

I don't get it! He smiled lamely.

In a strong wind?

What?

Picture it.

Okay. A strong wind. The hat blows off. Naturally I go chasing after it...

She laughed. You still don't get it?

He smiled. Oh, well, I think I do.

No you don't.

The problem is how to live without feeling trapped in your own skin. Books are not enough, buying time on quick Sunday, the clock, this moment going slow as a slow breath I

breathe, and see, time moves aligned to inhale, exhale, to hold suspended as long as you can, forever, logged into the indelible dream of air.

And as she moved forward, coming closer to him, perhaps it seemed to give him a kiss, he felt himself falling back, falling, falling.

Night. Only nine remained. Carl had left, but the father remained. Dobbs stood smiling at the taillight. A man at the hood did not look well. He was an older man, perhaps in his sixties or more. He was bowed forward with his head leaning down on the arc of the hood. A friend or relative stood beside him, rubbing his back and whispering into his ear. Occasionally the man would lift his head and on his face was a look of such agony that it was painful to see. Those nearest to him turned away. Only Jones and Dobbs looked on unflinchingly. Jones felt locked into his gaze, felt the ache, the nausea, the torpor, the desire to relinquish. Relinquish. The word itself hit him like a blade, and one edge cut his desire for himself, the desire to stand down, to rest, to let go, while the other edge went into releasing the man who appeared in such distress that Jones, in his own compromised state, believed him close to death. And as he watched, the friend at the man's side became not a friend, as he appeared, but a kind of succubus with puckered mouth and tentacled hands that drew at the life energy that rose like a vapor from the older man's back and head. Relinquish and stand down! Save yourself! The man looked up. Tears were in his eyes, and then, as if given permission, he lifted his hand and stepped away from the vehicle, and the succubus returned to friend and led him carefully away.

Well done, Dobbs said. Well done. Now you're learning.

What happened to the support, preacher, the father across from him said.

What? Jones suddenly realized that he had actually spoken aloud.

Yeah, said a woman at the headlight. That was pretty opportunistic of you.

The man was obviously suffering.

We're all suffering, the father said.

Lighten up, Dobbs said. He saw a weakness and he took a shot. It was the right move. May have even saved the guy, too, for all you know.

Jones closed his eyes. He stood on the tower and the water moved below, light constellating over the surface. Let go. How would it feel, entering the black water? The first strike? He took that step forward, hands poised above his head, and dove. The air for a moment was cool, but a rich heat rose from inside. He hit the water, and as if someone slapped the top of his head with a stick, he heard and felt a quick crack. He dove in free and deep into the absolute darkness, and once inside the water his limbs loosened from their tight form and he felt the force of his momentum slow and suspend and stop. Nothing moved. Then he turned and drifted up and saw the light from above splayed out around him like grainy spindle fibers of creation flowing down and dividing all around him. And he lingered in the dark water, drifting with his breath abeyed, calm, motionless, all thought blown out.

I'm the devil, you know, Dobbs said. And you're going straight to hell. You know that, don't you? I'm here at this crossroads to help you, did you know that? I've been here all along, even before you knew it, and in fact it was my idea for you to come down here. I've been listening to your thoughts. I've given half of them to you, tuned your mind for this and every moment like this. You can't lose, now. Look at these people. They don't have your grit. They're dying. But not you. You're feeling good, aren't you? You have to admit it, and you haven't had a drink in...how long now? How long has it been? What do you think you should be feeling like right about now? Under normal circumstances? What would you feel like any other time going this long without a drink? Think about it. You don't have any explanation for it, for how good

you feel. You could go three more days. How many days has it been? How many nights? You can't even remember, can you? That's because I took you out of time. It can't touch you. You could stand here forever. Look at these people. Look at them. That guy there, he better give in because he's surely going to have a heart attack if he doesn't. Why don't you give him a little nudge, a little healthy advice? I think he needs it right about now. He would listen to you at this moment. Just tell him to slip away. And look at that poor father. He wants it for his son, but he doesn't have more than a few hours before he passes out. Look how hard he's breathing. That's it, don't you know? Just the three of you. You're all that's left. Amazing, isn't it? You didn't notice the others had left already. Now it's just the three of you, and you're the clear winner. Isn't it obvious? Just look at you. And you owe it all to me. There can't be any doubt about that in your mind. Not now. Just look at how good you feel.

It's not you, Jones said.

No? Dobbs smiled. Can you be sure? Are you willing to take that risk? To risk your soul?

Then the mother appeared before him, her face drawn tight. Why don't you give up! she cried. She stood facing Jones with a look of bleak and hysterical righteousness. You're killing him. Just stop. Stop this right now! And then she was gone.

He closed his eyes.

Look at me. I'm as helpless as a kitten up a tree, not knowing my right foot from my left, my hat from my gloves. I'm too misty and too much in love...

Where was his drink? He slid his hands across the surface of the piano. How long ago had he ordered his drink? Why wasn't it here? A couple across from him sat with their heads together. They had drinks. Why didn't he have a drink? A few hands passed over his eyes. A flutter of wings. A few faces appeared and then were gone. The piano singer looked up from the

bottom of a long tunnel formed by the surface of the piano scrolling up into a funnel. Jones looked up and back through the long tunnel at a point of light far away above him. He strove for it. He willed himself towards it. But he didn't move. He willed again and this time felt himself rising, slowly, but when he relaxed his will he slipped back and the light became more distant and he felt an anxiety and a beating somewhere behind his eyes. He concentrated again, this time on letting go the weight of his anxiety, and this gave him buoyancy. He floated upwards, or rather the light seemed to telescope and grow, but as he approached it he became self-conscious of his power, and this distraction caused him to fall again. He gathered his will again, this time to fend off all thought other than light. He rose. The light approached. He broke through.

Just you and me, buddy. Dawn was coming through the showroom window. The others had all left. And for the moment, Jones and Dobbs were alone. He stood facing the man with an odd feeling of compassion. Then Dobbs smiled and said, you remember what I told you? I'm taking you to your peak. I'm taking you to that point where you don't think you can go any further, then I'm going to step away, and when I do, you'll have your reward and I'll have your soul. Look at that thing. It sure is beautiful, isn't it?

The news crews returned, and they asked how the last two contestants were doing. Dobbs said, I think we're both feeling pretty good. We might go a couple more days. Dobbs never took his eyes off Jones.

The dealer arrived and circled the two men and said, Well, well, we're at the final showdown, I see. The last stand-off. Let's see if we can't make this a dramatic finale, eh boys?

You should be feeling pain right now, Dobbs said to Jones. Why aren't you? You asking yourself that? Why aren't you feeling any pain?

Time moved in its slow, blear moments, and people and images shuddered in and out of focus in his consciousness, moving on the periphery but gone when he turned his head to see. Vultures fluttered at the windows. Jackals moved in the shadows flickering near the showroom doors, and the floor rippled like reptile flesh, rising and falling, rising and falling, and little blue waves rolled out from his chest as he breathed.

Why aren't you feeling anything?

A boy with a baseball cap approached from outside, and as the automatic doors opened with a hiss, a breeze knocked his hat from his head. He turned and chased it along the ground behind him.

It's a joke, get it?

Light glittered along the surface of all the new vehicles in the showroom. Light gleamed along the tight fabric of his gloved hand. Light emanated from the bodies of the people around him.

I'm taking you to your peak. I'm tuning your mind.

Slow wax world melting slowly, slowly grinding down, coming to a stop. Dobbs stepped back, smiling, backing away, and it was as if he simply vanished into thin air and was gone. Jones was alone, the last one standing at the vehicle, claiming it with his touch.

And we have a winner! the dealer shouted. Our winner, folks!

The news crews gathered around him in a tight circle, their cameras in his face, their lights blinding. How do you feel? How did you do it? What are you going to do now?

We have our winner, the dealer shouted. Here's our winner!

And Jones looked out through the shell of his skull, through the tunnel of his eyes at the strange circus swirling around him.



## **Part Four**

## The Zero-Sum Game

Arl's job was to hold the beggar's sign and stand at the freeway exit where the cars came to a stop at the light. He and the others worked in three hour shifts and any money they got they brought back to the rest of the crew in the camp under the overpass. The sign was a piece of cardboard with the words scrawled in black marking pen:

Homeless

Anything will help

Even a Smile

God Bless

Sometimes people smiled, sometimes they gave him change, mostly they just ignored him. One woman spat on him. Four boys in a dark sedan opened their windows and howled and swerved to hit him, coming so close the gravel sprayed against his legs as he stumbled back to get out of the way. A man in a pickup truck threw pennies at his feet with a vicious sneer, and Arl wondered why a man would bother to give anything at all if he despised the giving so much, so Arl just smiled in return and bent and picked up the money.

His legs turned to pins and needles. Rain no longer bothered him. Cars went by in a blur. Faces all began to look the same, staring ahead, eyes fixed into the distance as though their

oblivious gaze were the universal mind expressing itself in multitude and only a rare kind of consciousness was even aware of his presence. When his shift was up, he folded the sign beneath his arm and headed back to the camp.

He kicked through the gravel street past the convenience store and the abandoned cafe that was made to look like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Planes overhead swept down through the broken clouds and aligned themselves to the airport. Arl climbed through the open flap of wire fence and crossed the muddy field that used to be a schoolyard. He climbed the hill along the well-worn path through the ivy and dropped down into the camp. T was there with a little campfire going. He glanced up when he saw Arl coming and grinned a brief grin over teeth that looked like a mouthful of coal. Jones was asleep under a rug. And Michelle sat leaned up against the cement stanchion and seemed not yet to notice him, her eyes narrow and staring into the fire.

Hey there, cowboy. How'd you fare? T asked.

Nickels and dimes'll do ya, Arl said. He crouched down near the fire and put his hands out and felt the warmth on his palms.

Safe and sound, good to see, T said, speaking more out of the side of his mouth than directly, keeping his face at an angle as though he were constantly turning away.

We'll eat good tonight, Arl said, after a few more rounds.

Arl glanced over at Michelle who did not glance back or even show yet that she noticed his return. He looked back at T who looked into the fire, then he looked back at Michelle and said, You okay? But still she did not respond. So he leaned out and laid the inside of his forearm against her cheek and pulled it back quick and said, Shew, honey, you're burnin' up. Have you had anything to eat today?

She tilted her head just enough to line him up in her vision, and though he could not see her mouth move he heard her say, very slowly and very quietly, as if whispering a secret, I'm not hungry.

Shoot, honey. You got to eat, he said. But she just leaned her head back against the cement and more or less looked into the fire, her eyes barely open if in fact she was looking at anything at all.

T, you got any soup?

Nope.

How long she been like this?

Since she got up, I guess. I haven't really paid her much attention, she's been so quiet. I had to go out on a little mission of my own this morning, too.

What kind of mission?

Just trying to scare up some scratch, same as you.

And did you get anything?

The world hasn't been very generous today.

You were out begging drugs.

No siree, I was not.

And you left her here like this?

I told you, I didn't see that she was having any problem. She just seemed a bit pensive today.

Pensive? Dammit T, she's burning with fever.

And I'm supposed to know that?

We're supposed to be looking out for each other.

I do! I look out for all of us. And if I had been beggin' for drugs, which I wasn't, wouldn't that have been just the thing? Seems to me all she needs is a little pinch and she'd be just all right.

What she needs is food. What have we got around here?

Well, we're fresh out of everything, as a matter of fact, and I'm not trying to be smart, now, that's just a plain fact.

You got any money?

No I haven't.

What about Jones?

I can't speak for him.

Arl rose from his place by the fire and leaned down over the man in the rug. He listened and had he not known better he would have thought the man was dead, but motionless and silent as the body in the rug was he knew that Jones was deep in a drinker's oblivion. Without much confidence he nudged the sleeping man with his foot. Jones. Jonesy, wake up. He shoved at him harder with the heel of his boot, but there was just no rousing the man.

Ah, leave him alone; you know he ain't come back with anything but a hangover.

Then Arl noticed Michelle was speaking, but her voice was quieter than the sounds of traffic above them, a constant howl overhead that never let up, not by day and not in the thinnest hour of night; it kept up, a constant sound like a wind that precedes a storm which never arrives or more likely comes and keeps coming and never actually leaves. Arl leaned down and listened at her lips. Shhh, she was saying. And, Shhhh, as if trying to hush him or hush something else nearby or something she heard only in her own mind.

Well, I'm going to go get her something to eat, some soup. That's what she needs. Arl stood above her, looking around the meager camp of cardboard boxes and filthy blankets and the pile of wood that each of them had contributed to by collecting it from the remains of the school.

Pick us up a bottle, too, while you're at it, will ya?

Arl shook his head slowly and bared his teeth and just about said something but didn't. Instead, he leaned back down and said into Michelle's ear, You just sit tight, honey. I'll be right back.

He went back down the little path and back through the schoolyard and out to the street. The convenience store nearby was like an oasis in the otherwise abandoned neighborhood, where they could pick up just about anything they needed, whatever was on the shelves: juice and soup, some bread and if they had enough money maybe a little meat. She would probably not eat much, and most likely was suffering more from withdrawal, but she would die without liquids. And if he could do anything to prevent that he would do it regardless of what Jones, should he awake sometime soon which was unlikely, have anything to say about how to spend their money, because disproportionate as their sensibilities were regarding communal responsibility, Arl was clear on one thing, that the first and foremost concern was their collective survival. Nothing else mattered, not the desire for drunkenness and its peaceful, brief liberation from the geography of gloom, nor any other kind of escape which was transitory and seemed to include with it returning with intensified awareness of the sorriness and boredom of being nowhere.

He went up the street and into the convenience store. He nodded once to the clerk as if to say, yes I'm here and I acknowledge my state but I'm in fact going to buy something not steal. The clerk was a thin Ichobod man with a long neck and pimpled face. He wore that synthetic green vest of clerks which itself might have leached out some poison, yet the clerk, even in his

position, nevertheless squinted with a sour expression that said hurry up and get your stuff and get on out of here.

Arl grabbed some chicken broth, a jug of orange juice, a loaf of Wonder bread and a package of sliced turkey. He went up to the counter and laid it all down and began to empty out his pockets. The clerk rang up the total. Arl pulled out handful after handful of coins. He counted it out and was exactly twelve cents short. He looked at the clerk. The clerk looked at him.

You got to put something back, the clerk said.

It's twelve cents.

You got to put something back.

What about your little penny jar, there, Arl said, pointing at a little tray with a hand written card taped to it that said, Take a Penny, Give a Penny. The clerk emptied the tray into his palm and counted them out. You're still three cents short.

Three cents?

A man leaned in through the door but did not enter entirely, and he said, you got a bathroom?

Sure, the clerk said, and he turned and pointed at a key attached to a spatula that hung on a hook at the end of the counter. The man came in and grabbed the key and went back out. The clerk stood there and looked at Arl and said, So what's it going to be?

You can't let three cents slide?

Look, that means I have to pay for it. You know how many people come in here and come up short? You know how much a day I'd be giving out if I gave everybody three cents?

I need this food, all of it.

Then go beg someone else for the three cents.

Arl looked around. There was the man in the bathroom. He could go ask him. The thought of it made his temples pulse. He started to go out, leaving the food on the counter. Then he stopped. Three cents, he said. I got a friend who needs to eat. She's sick.

You got to put something back.

Arl picked up the food and started walking out of the store.

I wouldn't do that if I were you, buddy. Arl kept on walking. He did not look back. The clerk did not follow.

Arl hiked down the road. By the time the clerk called the cops, which most likely he wouldn't, Arl would already be back at the camp. He would be unable to go back to that store, at least not while that particular clerk was working, but in time it would pass from the mind and then what would it matter?

He took one look back before ducking under the wire fence. Nobody was following. Nobody was even around. He detoured past the remains of the school and picked up a few pieces of wood. It would be dark soon. Already the rain was coming down again. The temperature had dropped since he had stood by the freeway, and it felt like the night would be cold. They needed a fire and a good one.

Back in the camp no one had moved since he left. Jones was still sleeping under the rug and would probably stay there till morning. Michelle sat stone still, only now her eyes were closed. T crouched near the fire, but his eyes had the agitated light of the animal that wants be on the move. He worked his lips over his teeth and spat once and said, What'd ya get?

Food.

Ah, well, thanks for the provisions.

It won't last past tomorrow, either.

I didn't figure.

We need more money, Arl said, as he crouched down by the fire and added some wood and arranged the meager provisions at his feet.

I suppose it's my turn to go stand by the freeway.

You can't expect Michelle to do it.

I wasn't suggesting it, even if she ain't done it in two days.

Look at her.

Probably get more money in her condition.

She's not going.

I wasn't saying so. T rose and took the sign and was on his way out of the camp.

Hold on there, Arl said, and he slid a few pieces of meat between two slices of bread and handed it to T. She probably won't eat much, anyway. T took the sandwich and crammed half of it into his mouth before he had even left the camp.

Arl opened the can of soup with a pocketknife and tilted up the lid and set it on a stone at the edge of the fire. He glanced over at Michelle. She sat there with her eyes closed, her face as drawn and tight and thin as a cadaver's skull. He reached out an arm and laid it against her brow and felt the heat burn through his shirtsleeve. Michelle, Michelle, he said, but still her eyes did not open. And he thought how even before this sickness she had begun to fade. When he first met her he had seen the outlines of energy in her face, in the shape of it, in the design of the bones and the cut of the features. But she quickly began to alter, as though some current that was gone were needed to sustain a face to meet faces, a face to be beheld and wondered at, living in some now gone dream which might peak out only in the most chronic twitch of sleep, maybe now in the sleep of fever, a face that one could cherish and that could inspire love. Now, mostly

due to her expression, her face was as dull as an old coin, though with the jolt of a few drinks, or as the light now dimmed into evening, something returned, something on the brink of departing, which hinted at something fierce that once was. On first meeting, in fact, there had been the hint of romance between them, but a hidden narrative and experiences and things she would not speak of prevented anything from developing. Her story was not anything new. She entered the world in Texas, father a nomadic outlaw who led them on runs between Mexico and various southern states all of her young life. He had taught her how to survive, and told her a day would likely come, and likely sooner than later, when she would have to do it alone. Then he was arrested and sent to prison, and now she rarely slept without seeing him in nightmares. His spirit was strong, she said, and craved escape and blamed her for her testimony that sealed his judgment and sought revenge directly through her dreams. She feared he would find her when he was released. She was certain that she could never escape him, that no matter where she went or what name she took or how she changed in appearance, he would find her, and whatever life she had created for herself, whatever unlikely family she might even dream of having, he would return to destroy everything. She had tried charms. She had tried rituals and ceremonies, but a psychic once read her future and saw in the mysterious cards the return of the father. It was fated to happen. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

The soup started to boil, and Arl pulled it away from the fire and stirred it with a spoon and set it aside to cool. Michelle, he said. But still she did not respond. He leaned in close and seemed to feel the heat of her burning against his cheek. Michelle!

The eyes opened slightly, gum-crusting along the rims. And a brief smile rose on her lips, the flicker of something there. Arl, she whispered.

I made you some soup, he said.

Ah, you sweetheart. She leaned up slowly, as though working a great heavy set of machinery. Ooh have I got the aches.

Ah, honey. You've got to eat a little something. Try.

I'll try.

He wrapped some cloth from a torn bed sheet around the tin can and lifted it up to her lips. She reached out a hand to take it, but the hand shook so badly he held the can instead and dipped the spoon into the cup and then brought it to her lips. She took little sips. She actually ate some of the soup, and it made him feel better, as though at least he was able to do something.

T here? She asked.

No.

Jones?

Here but unable to answer.

Where's T?

He's on duty.

It's my turn, isn't it?

Not tonight.

She seemed to perk up a bit and pulled herself up and held the spoon and shakily dished up some mouthfuls. I should go out.

No you don't. I won't allow it.

Did you go?

I just got back a little while ago.

How'd you do?

Got this food. He spread his arms as if to reveal a feast.

She reached out a hand and touched his cheek. Angel, she said. And she was leaning forward as if to whisper something when someone stepped into the firelight, a figure at first, just a darkness which caused her eyes to open more so that turning, before he saw anything other than the vaguest of outlines, Arl thought it was her father, returned as predicted. But of course it was not her father. The chicken-necked clerk from the convenience store now stood with his shadow stretched out from him longer than he was but thinner, if that were possible, and wavering like a black flame. He wore the same sneer, and said in a voice much too loud, Here they are! And the absurdity of it, of the motivation of three cents that would send this underpaid and undermined little man out into the dark in search of a transient made Arl smile, until he saw that the man had brought others with him.

They came into the camp and before Arl could even count them they kicked at the fire. They kicked at Arl and they kicked at Michelle and they kicked at Jones in his rug. Arms swept down and then sticks and more kicks and it all came in such a fury that there was no chance for Arl to respond. Every attempt to rise was met with a flurry of vicious blows as if the very effort to rise inspired more attacks. Then he heard laughter of a sick kind and saw only through the blurring flutter of arms and legs and the obscure sweep of smoke, Michelle dragged out to the edge of the camp where others descended like a throng of night vultures upon her. He may have shouted as a blow came to his stomach and stole the ability to make any sound let alone breathe. Then another blow came to his head, and the scene and the night and every thought went black.

When Arl came around it was to hear the voice of T saying, What the hell? What the hell? But the voice came from an enormous distance, as though T were speaking up from a sewer well. Then Arl saw the shapes, the shadows, forms in flux for a brief moment and a face which

locked in on him, eyes that stared into his eyes, seeming on the verge of laughter, skin slick and dark like snake flesh. Then another blow came and he was gone.

When Arl came back around again, he was lying next to the cement pillar. Michelle lay nearby. Jones was up from his rug and gone. T was hunched at the burned-out fire, his bloody face and bloody chin resting on his bloody knees, but his eyes were open and staring. T? Arl said.

Yeah. T did not look up.

You all right?

I'm all right. You all right?

Think so. He felt nauseous. His legs and his arms and his stomach and his chest all cramped with pain. His head throbbed. His mouth tasted of blood and as he rose and opened his mouth he felt the crackle of dry blood on his scalp and face. Jesus, he said.

You look like him.

Arl looked down at Michelle. Her clothes were torn and bloody, her pale blue blouse barely a shred beneath the green wool of her coat. Her jeans were torn open, her legs exposed. He leaned down and said to her, Michelle, you okay?

She groaned a sound that meant she was but did not want to talk further. Arl looked around. There was the empty can of soup before him. The bread had been stomped into the dirt. The meat lay in the ashes of the fire.

We're going to have to move on from here, T said.

Arl said nothing. He closed his eyes and did not to move.

The three of them walked across the schoolyard and down the road away from the store and away from the freeway entrance that had provided them access to a stream of money for three months. They walked past burned-out apartments and abandoned warehouses and rows of caravans with tarps hung over the spaces between them. They walked along the edge of the airport as planes dropped down with engines howling as they landed. They walked down a road that had no sidewalk, just a gravel edge, and below the road ran a creek in a gully of reeds.

They eventually found a spot not too far away from an intersection where a light would stop the cars. This time, their shelter was an abandoned bus in an empty dirt lot. There were no stores or businesses or homes nearby, and only occasional cars seemed to pass. Michelle, her eyes barely open and her coat pulled tight around her, collapsed in a seat on the bus. T sat at the driver's seat and grinned and pretended to drive. Arl went and stood beside Michelle and placed the back of his hand gently against her forehead. You feeling all right? He said. But she did not respond. He pushed the hair back from her face and stroked the top of her head.

“Hey, looks like Jones has found us!” T said up front. And lo but there he was, Jones, coming across the lot, listing like a galleon that was taking on water, one arm wrapped around the blanket he had slept in, rolled up and pointing forward now like a cannon muzzle. He saw them and waved with his free arm, bearing a bright smile, his face a red glow of relief for finding them. He climbed up onto the bus and dropped his carpet and sighed like a steam train coming into the station.

Why what have we here? He said, standing beside T, one hand on his heart, the other on T's shoulder. He looked back down the center aisle at Michelle propped up in a seat and Arl standing there and said, It looks like you've found us a fine vessel, captain!

It'll do for now, Arl said.

And is that a stove it would appear? A nice addition, there in the back? Do you see?  
We'll have fire and warmth and hot food to sustain ourselves. Arl, you've outdone yourself this time! You've got the nose of a hound after a hare!

T looked back. Oh yeah, he said. Looks at that.

Ahhh, Michelle, and how do you fair? Jones said, wobbling on his feet but squinting at her with concern.

No need to worry about me, she said. I'm not the one to worry about.

My solicitation is strictly universal.

I have no idea what that means.

Where've you been, T asked.

I was lost in the mire. I was beyond the pale. Now, I thought I had set off towards far Arden, had it squarely in my sights, you see, but in my haze I hit a dead end. How many of us have come up against that hand of fate? The black oiled gears interlocking as backwards turns the luminous wheel? I could have stepped fearlessly right into traffic. And what cosmic veronicas miraculously danced me from that cool abyss? It looks more like the edge of a cliff, if you read it as such, cracks in the palm and all that. Our previous abode is obliterated, by the way. But I was able to retrieve a few of our sustainables. And he pulled at one end of the carpet, out of which rattled utensils and cups and clothes and a blanket that had been Michelle's which he picked up by a corner and carried over to her, laying it across her lap. She smiled at that.

Just when I think you should have been left behind, she said.

There is only going forward, Jones said.

You always seem to come up with something, T said.

God smiles even on the lowest one of us. Not that we are low. No no no. Our bounty is immeasurable.

Well, bountiful as we may be, Arl said, we still have practical concerns.

I suppose it's my turn, Jones said.

Probably, Arl said, but I'll go. I'm feeling lucky, you might say.

Strike while the iron is hot! Jones said.

You should let Jones go, Michelle said.

I want to, Arl said, and he stepped around Jones after giving him a slap on the shoulder and saying so that only Jones could hear, Good job getting the stuff. It'll be better now with it.

Only glad that I could contribute. I do understand that I have been...cosmically absent of late.

Any port in a storm, Arl said, and looked down at the things scattered from the carpet, found the cardboard sign and folded it under his arm and went forward and down the steps.

Good luck, buddy, T said.

Arl turned and looked up at T. Don't leave her alone, he said.

I won't, hey.

Get her to eat if you can, I think there's another can of soup left. Anything, ok?

T gave him a little salute and pulled the bus doors closed.

Arl crossed the lot, slowly scanning after all for another trapdoor. There was bound to be one here somewhere. The energy was right. Or at least it felt familiar. That electric crackle like dry lightning. Coming from the east. The kind of thing that makes people gather frankincense and Myrrh. I bet if I looked up I'd see a star, even in daylight, or a comet tail leading to one. But

the sky was a gray collection of boxing glove clouds. No doubt about that. A trapdoor might appear anywhere. In the ground, in a tree, sometimes in midair. Most people if they notice one at all just stare at it in disbelief and think that for the moment they've gone off their rocker or it's a trick of the light or a brain burp. Something like that. Not Arl. He'd taken the leap and more than once. Crawled through with no guarantee of coming out on the other side and certainly know idea what that other side might be should he make it. You could materialize in a wall, be stuck there till demolition time, wailing silent in the amen corner. That's happened. Reaching but unable to grasp that bright nightgown. You can see where this is going. That's where the saying comes from: patience is a virtue. Prisoners know that one. He's known that and the white field you cross and cross and never come out of. Not till a trapdoor shows itself. And eventually it does. Drugs might reveal it. Or drink. They lubricate the eyes. But they hamper the reactions. You've got to be ready to leap! And leap fast. It's not a time for hemming and hawing. It's a quick decision. Right into a kid in the trees with an ache in the legs. Have you known the feeling of being brittle? Or slogging through the dark underground. Glass tubes shooting up to some unseen surface, light coming down like dust falling from the brow of a librarian hunkered over a book. Let that one sink it. And ladders, ladders up through the sepia in all directions, crisscrossing with people like shoppers on escalators going up and down. You might get an apocalypse out of that one. Choose one, but choose quickly, and once your choice is made, you're on it and going and no turning back. Know that feeling? The gut-clench. Ooooooh, I hope I made the right decision! You never know. Even if you come out in a bright-lit cafeteria shoveling warm mashed potatoes into your mouth, you don't know. Coulda been right into a plush hotel bar with a lounge singer and a piano like a coffin with a black and shiny surface and people standing around saying things like, Elegant and Oh we must summer there. Or right into

the vein with a miner's cap on and a thin beam of light and that smell of oil and ring ring ring in the ears. Or that dead horse at the end of the street with the shop windows lit by gas flames and overhead sewer mains rattling and dripping and people with their stork masks on as if that could make any difference, skin peeling like seaweed with the pocks of the bad age, those floral scents not even covering up the smell of burning bodies, heaps of rock, rats underfoot, and again, pathways over rubble and time and up and those rays again, those thin rays coming down through cracks and people up above looking down and reaching down. They want you to come up. They want to save you. That's the gist of that one. Standing on the corner of First and Thurston, that worker going away at the two by fours in a mad-dash of movement with the sawblade swinging up and down, you just know, just know, and then sure enough he hits his thigh and cuts it open so fast not even blood knows it can go anywhere, that flesh like white lunch meat, the sirens already wailing before you've made it to the wharfs. Tent camps. Caravans. Drumfires. Random fights, who knows the reason, and that one taking off after a cheap shot. No one's going to chase him down. Walking through walls like they were nothing but cobwebs. Walking through cylinders like throats of disease. Coming out in drip water canyons, towers of the city off in a sluggish sunset fogbank. Slogging through creek bottoms, trying to listen to your own head to see what language this time. That's what it means to be an awake and aware portal-tripping dimension-sliding traveler, not just a blind slug landing in a bag of bones and sinew wriggling in the dark and throwing punches into nothing and gurgling dumb as a sideshow left-over. Crack in the head, brain leaking out like yolk. Sungazing so hard the eyes become world-absorbing flowers of wonder. Gotta keep them open. And even the blind, feeling forward, know it. That's happened, too, house in the dark, the ghost hands brushing up against his, vying for space, those clingers, those hangers-on, mad as a wet cat, spitting mad if

you move one item out of place that's not really there anyway. That's right, walking through walls, walking through people like they're nothing more than street vent vapors. Tell you what. Or plopping down in a train car opposite a man playing suck to a cigar and squinting and giving you the eye and saying right through the skull no sound as such, What you after, boy? Those ones, drifting through with their own twilight agendas. Easily avoided once you know what they are, jugglers, magicians, sticking their faces into people's heads, riding the black blobs in an exhale or a streetlight shadow, right at that moment you're trying to take the perfect picture. The bus that's always there and never actually goes anywhere, full of people wondering, why aren't we moving? Seen it all. Seen the hammering man and the lusty lady in stand-off. The squid of desire rising from the deep waters while you sing home hey home hey home, only to rise up drained and gray and crossing the empty arcade as the papers float down the empty Sunday street, wrapping fast around your legs like leaches, while you vainly grab at them, more and more paper slapping up against your arms and legs and your chest and face, thickening up so you can't even breathe, and you writhe and twist and kick into thin air, and someone sees you struggling and runs to help and pulls those paper away, but you're not there.

Arl stood for a moment, deciding which way to go. Not one vehicle appeared, and he wondered if he had made a mistake in choosing this place for them. Then a truck loaded with gravel came rumbling by, and bits of dust and grit came flying off its haul and hit him in the face as it passed. Then another car came and went. The sky was a low ceiling of throat-singing clouds, and wind rose up as if bringing a new storm or dragging the same old one along. A stoplight in the intersection up ahead swayed in the wind. That seemed like a good spot. He went and stood by the side of the road.