<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norma’s Voicemail</td>
<td>Jean Howard</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patio</td>
<td>Michael Goodman</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting the Stone</td>
<td>Elizabeth Metzger</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Vietnam</td>
<td>Tim Keppel</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>285: Vache, 1894</td>
<td>Owen Lucas</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation for Inese Sharp</td>
<td>Michael S. Harper</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleepless</td>
<td>Anna Poon</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Bone</td>
<td>Suzanne O’Connell</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Theories on Certain Mental Disorders</td>
<td>Paige Morris</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle Memory</td>
<td>Bryn Homuth</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel 17</td>
<td>Moxie Schults</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road Salt White</td>
<td>Moxie Schults</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Sat in His Car</td>
<td>Jordan Taylor</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shut Off</td>
<td>Darrell Dela Cruz</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Drowning, age two by Emma Winsor Wood......................66

Saturday, New York by Emma Winsor Wood...................67

Mrs. Sisyphus by Julianne Hill.............................................68

Under a Cherub Sky by Mitchell Grabois.........................70

This Our Wild and Wonderful by Abigail Savitch-Lew.......72

1918 by Joddy Murray..........................................................91

Flower Burial by Tom Holmes.........................................92

Paleolithic Person on the Burial of the Dead by Tom Holmes..93

Translation of Pierre Senges by Belle Cushing...............94
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Visual Art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Landslapes, Drawing 83</em> by Jaeyeon Shin............................6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nautilus</em> by Bridget Sauer....................................................31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Golo</em> by MJ Batson............................................................42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Kitchen Sink</em> by Ricardo Hiro Nagaoka......................62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Under My Bed</em> by Ricardo Hiro Nagaoka............................63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We are the stairs sped up</em> by Cecilia Salama.......................71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dark Blue Rag</em> by Evan Altman........................................90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Variation on the Human Figure #1</em> by Ivan de Monbrison..106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Variation on the Human Figure #2</em> by Ivan de Monbrison..107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“It was in the silence of my disquiet, at the hour of day when the landscape is a halo of Life and dreaming is mere dreaming, my love, that I raised up this strange book like the open doors of an abandoned house.”

—Fernando Pessoa
“Stage three is a good place to be. Not as good as stage one, or stage two, but better than stage four.”

Her voicemail soothes me as I adore the last slivers of saffron trapped within the willow tree.

The sky is stirring, as all matter—from pear-shaped slabs of cottonwood leaves, to small hidden rodents peeking from fall’s mounds.

The sun settles, a bright inflamed sore on the hip of the hill, while changes in cells make strange ticks in the trees.
This is the stage
to be, as a coyote throws
its hunger into the circuit
of breeze
and night howls
warnings to beds of sedum
whose blood counts have
lowered to soil.

Winter’s white nurse
cracks open the door.
She wants to see
if it’s time to step in,
or if she can still sneak out
for a smoke.
There are termites in the terra firma
Fuming in their formalin, a fermata motor
Rotary phones in the cabana—words are rods and cones—
Cobalt in the pressure cooker, cob corn in the thresher
Cheshire cat with its flesh-tone chrestomathies scurries on the counter
Counterpointing the bounce; hymnal gymnastics on the lawn
Custard pie crusts onto enamel in the interior parlor
Where the dads play parlay and rummage their billfold for rummy arrears

These years, the games get thicker, the names get longer,
the hyphens heighten
The hydrangeas get dredged but don’t budge at high noon
Soon they’ll die, sure, but don’t tell that to the Junebugs,
And keep the patio free from such indelicacies
Where demi-glace forms adenomas on the Salisbury,
Half-touched in its heft, on fine china, on the round mesh, in fine fettle
His little whistle whetted, brittle one gnaws on milk thistle
Makes it grist in his maw, punctuating the sunstroke flares
With postprandial aperçus, wordless sputters, speckling the deck
With anther after anther, another then another, a natatorium
Pooling at the firmament, poplar and cinder, fast and loose
amylose
Gracing the lacquer with ceaseless precinct, persistent
tinctures of beef
Laced with monocarpic thistle;

This summer, it became a game for him to spit in
concentric fixtures
Becoming on the deck, simmering in sunward bunfights
An apotheosis, onward and upward, high heavens
A hamlet on tinplate; while gazing at the gated hominy
Whole-grain and winnowing, wondering where Aeolus
Was and why he wasn’t whispering anything worth saving
How wood had made a poor sieve, whether slats would last
In fricatives and mastics, or whether they’d scatter
Catcalls to lichen, slatternly and clasped
And it was about then when
The brittle one would remember to whittle at the litter box
Coaxing the gorblimey diatomite to detonate
In netted spades.
The sane doctor intervenes
drilling a hole like an ice-fisherman
into the mad dreamer’s carapace of skull.

In pain’s trance, the patient yowls
roped to a wooden throne:
Am I dead, dead already? Master, cut away the stone!

The doctor unearths from the coiled brain
the culprit of this rattling fancy,
a tulip bulb, swollen cosmos of dirt

vehemently sheltering its marvel flower
yet disclosing none of its future hues.
Then cautious, with reason’s tongs,

will extract from alien soil
the voluptuous premature bulb,
transplanting with a caustic ignorance.

And silencing the suffering maniac’s
open-minded laments,
he staples closed the ominous vacancy

but inside the grafted skull,
between the lobes of genius and of fools,
the original furrow gapes wide open.
I.

In 1969, when I was thirteen, my cousin Sonny, just back from Vietnam, came to stay with us for the summer. The turbulence roiling the country had not yet reached us in the drowsy town of Dogwood, North Carolina—until Sonny arrived. And after that nothing would be the same.

Sonny had barely survived a mortar attack in the Mekong Delta—he “died three times” in the Medevac—and after months in hospitals in Guam and Hawai'i he returned home to New Jersey scored by shrapnel and with a steel plate in his head. I’m not sure what happened in those first months back home but apparently Sonny got into some scrapes and my aunt and uncle thought it might be good for him to spend some time with family down South.

My mom wasn’t thrilled with the idea but Sonny was the son of my dad’s only sister, a cultured woman whom Mom admired. Besides, Mom was not one to back down from a challenge. She was convinced that she could help put Sonny on the right track.

“He was always a troubled kid,” Mom told me, “way before he went to Vietnam. It’s just that now he’s worse.”

Mom wanted to define Sonny before he got there, before he had a chance to define himself, before he could exert his influence on me. But her strategy didn’t work because I had always been awed by Sonny. Six years older, he was both the big brother I’d never had and this exotic stranger with whom I incredibly shared the same blood.
Because we lived in different parts of the country, I had seen Sonny only a few times over the years. My first memory of him was of a Christmas at my grandparents’ when the children, like so many trained animals, were instructed to perform. After my younger brother and sister and I trilled out an embarrassing, high-pitched “Silent Night,” Sonny and his two rowdy brothers enacted a skit called “The Viper.” One brother came racing out: “The viper is coming in ten minutes!” And the next: “The viper is coming in five minutes!” And finally out strolled Sonny, draped in toilet paper and holding a roll on one finger: “I am ze viper. Does anyone vant to be viped?”

Another memory was of horseback riding. My horse turned out to be docile and sluggish, while Sonny’s was feisty and intractable. But Sonny wasn’t about to be outmaneuvered. As my horse trudged dispiritedly along, I could see Sonny way over on the other side of the lake, racing at top speed, hurdling logs, wrestling the horse every step of the way. When he returned, his horse was foamy and bloody around the bit.

So when he arrived that summer as the wounded warrior, I worried that I wouldn’t be able to measure up, that he would dismiss me as a thirteen-year-old punk, a Boy Scout with basketball posters papering his walls. I was surprised when, from the beginning, he treated me as an equal.

That first day I took him to the swimming pool at the Country Club, where we were members (I was too young to feel ashamed) and where I was working for the summer as a greens keeper. Sonny immediately charmed the women. His physical features, if taken individually—curly red hair and a prominent nose and chin—were not that impressive, but taken together they produced a striking effect. Even his
slight limp looked less like a handicap than like a hipster’s strut.

“How did it go?” I asked Sonny that night over a game of pool in our basement. Even more impressive than the way he played was the way he looked when he played, crouching menacingly over the table with a cigarette dangling from his lips and gliding the pool cue smoothly through the curled finger of his big freckled hand.

“Man, I love these Southern belles,” he said with that deep-voiced New Joisy accent. “I think this is going to be a nice summer. I just say I’m Dr. Lofton’s nephew and they welcome me with open arms.”

But when Sonny told me he had lined up a date with Renee Poovy, a lance pierced my heart. Kay was a voluptuous blonde eighteen year old whom I had fantasized about when I cut her grass. I had envisioned myself innocently asking for a glass of iced tea and having Kay, alone in the house and feeling frisky, suddenly pounce on me.

“How about you?” Sonny asked, and I noticed the slight wandering of his right eye, which he tried to hide by quickly looking down and taking a drag off of his cigarette. “Got your sights on anyone?”

I told him about Julie Watts, a girl my age who I looked for every time I passed the swimming pool.

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

Not wanting to admit that I was too ignorant and shy to take the first step, I told Sonny what a badass Julie’s father was. Buddy Mack Watts was the clubhouse blowhard, card shark, and hothead. Now that his daughter had begun to blossom, he barely let her out of his sight.

“Go for it,” Sonny said.

That was one thing I always liked about Sonny: his utter lack of caution, which struck me more as fearlessness
than recklessness. Suddenly I heard slippers scuffling down the stairs.

“What’s going on down here?” Mom demanded. “People are trying to sleep. And smoking is not allowed in this house.”

Sonny and I exchanged looks.

+++ 

It was a summer of sweltering heat, wavering in your vision like a desert mirage. And the “Bug Truck” making its rounds in the July twilight, leaving noxious, fragrant clouds in its wake for the kids to run through, hollering with glee. Fireflies flickered and the coarse pavement warmed the soles of your feet.

I worked long days at the golf course and Dad helped Sonny get on as an orderly at the hospital. At night, Sonny and I continued our conversations over the pool table. Sonny told me he didn’t much like shaving and bathing patients or pushing them around in wheel chairs but he did like meeting all the nurses. He had started going out with some of them, among whom, coincidentally (or maybe not?), was the woman who would in a few years marry my father, after he split with my mom.

Young and naïve, I had no idea my parents’ marriage was anything but exemplary. I had bought into the whole upstanding Christian family façade and only the summer Sonny arrived did I begin to see the cracks. Raised voices and slammed doors, sullen looks and silent meals. “Are your parents getting along?” Sonny asked.

Like a lot of women at the time, Mom was going through changes. The women’s movement was in full cry and she was caught up in the clamor. At the age of forty, she told people, she had finally woken up. No longer satisfied
with being the doctor’s wife and the car-pooling mom, she began attending self-actualization retreats, speaking out for women’s rights, and denouncing the Vietnam War.

All this caught my dad by surprise. By no means a hardcore right winger, he was, like most doctors and most small town Southerners, a knee-jerk conservative. He liked things the way they were. He was disconcerted by Mom’s sudden combativeness and her anger toward “the patriarchal society” and “the military-industrial complex.” He felt she had become sanctimonious and insufferable.

Mom’s new project was to try to turn Sonny around. She quizzed him about his activities and the company he kept. She disapproved of his association with Trent Wilfong, the son of Dad’s colleague, a “dropout and drug user.” She scolded Sonny for coming home late and missing church, and told him that if he was going to live with us he would have to comply with the rules. Furthermore, she urged him to start attending AA meetings—Mom believed that anyone who drank on a regular basis needed treatment—and recommended a support group she had learned about for Vietnam vets.

+++  

Chalking up his cue stick and sizing up a shot, Sonny would tell me about his escapades with Renee Poovy, stories I absorbed with vicarious pleasure as well as pain. Kay was really hot, Sonny said. Her father, also a doctor, an obese man with an obese wife, had “put her on the pill.” I nodded right along, pretending to be in the know about this as well as topics such as falsies, g-spots, and strategies of seduction.

In the same way, I picked up useful information regarding how to blow smoke rings, drink beer, and lie with a straight face (to my mom). Sonny helped me expand my
vocabulary of profanities, my appreciation for rock and roll, and my desire to travel. He told me about all his adventures in New York and San Francisco and, on rare occasion, Vietnam. But never about the horrible part: only about the drugs and the buddies and something called the basket fuck, where the sensual Saigon hooker would swing above you in a wicker basket before lowering herself down.

Suddenly I became aware that there was a whole world out there to discover. Sonny had friends in California, among them a guy from his platoon. We could head out West, stopping to work along the way, saving up and moving on. When we got to San Francisco we could put down stakes for a while, or maybe head down to Baja.

For now, though, we set our sights on the Outer Banks. Trent Wilfong would lend Sonny his car. On the island of Cape Lookout there was nothing but endless sand and sea and sky and a handful of fishing cabins. A trawler would take you out, drop you off, and come back for you in two days.

+++  

Emboldened by Sonny’s encouragement, I started courting Julie Watts. First I would make sure Buddy Mack was in the clubhouse poker room engulfed in a cloud of cigar smoke and lewd remarks and then I would wander over to the pool in my work boots and grass-stained cut-offs, all suntanned and feeling manly, and use some of the lines I had learned from Sonny.

Julie would be wearing her canary yellow bathing suit, padding around on the balls of her feet, leaving a trail of water droplets that seemed an invitation to follow, showing off her brand new cleavage. She responded to me discreetly, as if aware of being under surveillance, speaking out of the
side of her mouth, but in an encouraging way. The second day she slipped me a stick of apple chewing gum with a note tucked in the wrapper: 335-7289 / 12-1 p.m.

That night as I waited anxiously for Sonny to come home so I could announce my breakthrough, I practiced my bank shots and smoked Kools from a crumpled pack Sonny had stashed in the cabinet. To avoid detection, I would go back into the closed-off part of the basement that had been built a few years before as a fall-out shelter.

Sonny came home late that night completely hammered, talking nonsense. Then he started making strange moaning and choking sounds, and suddenly collapsed on the floor. He lay there twitching and clenching his teeth. His eyelids fluttered and his eyes rolled back, showing only the whites.

I wanted to avoid calling my mom—my dad was at work—but now I felt I must. She calmly directed me to bring a blanket, which she spread over Sonny’s chest. Eventually he stopped shaking and went limp. His breathing slowed and he appeared to fall asleep.

“He’s been drinking again,” Mom said disgustedly. “He knows he can’t do that with his seizure medicine.”

Slowly Sonny came to his senses, staring vacantly, looking pale and drained. He took small sips of the water Mom gave him. Coming to his senses, he asked what happened. He seemed embarrassed that we had seen him in such a state and disappointed in me for calling my mom.

+++ 

During my lunch hour, I peddled my banana-seat, high-handle-barred bike over to Julie’s house. No one was home except for Julie and her poodle. She led me back into her bedroom, drew the blinds to shut out the intense
sunlight, and turned on the air conditioner. Then she kissed me on the mouth with wet lips and a probing tongue and began to unbuckle my belt. I don’t know where she had learned these things but I was glad one of us knew.

The poodle got all excited and Julie had to lock him outside, where he continued to whimper and scratch at the door.

“So now you’re drinking beer?” Mom asked me that night, sniffing my breath as I entered the kitchen.

“Only one,” I said defensively. “Just because you’re a teetotaler.”

“I don’t like your attitude, buster. I’m not sure Sonny’s staying here is such a good idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“I already told him that if he doesn’t shape up he’ll have to leave.”

“What!” I said with outrage.

“You don’t expect me to let him live here and do whatever he pleases?”

“But he needs us.”

“Well then he’ll have to toe the line.”

+++ 

That Friday when I got off work, Sonny was waiting for me in Trent Wilfong’s Volkswagen. Our sleeping bags were stowed in the trunk, along with fishing rods and a cooler of beer. I didn’t bother to ask for Mom’s permission since I knew she’d say no. I would call her when I got there and deal with the consequences.

We arrived at the coast late that night, slept a while in the car, and took the first boat over to the cape. The horizon was brush stroked with spectacular pinks and crimsons and seagulls with widespread wings squalled and dove in our
wake. Since the best fishing was in the fall when the blues were running, we had the island to ourselves. Our cabin, very Spartan, with only a gas stove and bunk beds, sat right on the beach. You could step out the door and toss out a line.

The fish were hitting as if in a frenzy: drum, red snapper, sometimes a blowfish or shark. We’d pull them out of the ocean and throw them right in the skillet. We’d brought along cooking oil, a sack of potatoes, and cabbage for slaw. And of course lemons to squeeze over the fish. The ocean breeze was a constant caress. After sundown, the only lights visible were the moon and the stars and the slow, ceaseless blinking of the lighthouse. We played cards by candlelight and made plans for our future travels.

When we returned home, Mom barely spoke to me. But I would have gotten a lot more than silence if she hadn’t been so embattled with my dad. I don’t know whether she had made some kind of threat to Sonny or whether he simply started spending more time with the nurses but I began to see less and less of him.

Meanwhile, I was seeing a lot more of Julie. We were at that stage of red hot passion when you are unable to concentrate on anything else, when you are completely swallowed up by your senses. Late at night I would ride my bicycle over to her house with an unruly boner jabbing around in my gym shorts, veering from side to side like a rudder as I peddled, and I would tap on the window of Julie’s bedroom, adjacent to Buddy Mack’s, and she would receive me in the moonlight in her skimpy white nightgown and ask, “Do you want me to make you feel gooood?”

+++}

For my grandmother’s birthday my mom insisted that I accompany her and the rest of the family to visit her
relatives. I hadn’t been in the car with my parents in some time and I felt about as comfortable as if I were on a ski lift, high above the ground, trying not to look down. Dad drove aggressively, tailgating, passing on curves. “Bi-il,” Mom nudged, but this only made him step harder on the gas. They had argued after Dad criticized our “maid” for spilling Clorox on his pants and Mom had taken up for her.

That night over dinner Mom got into an argument with my uncle about Vietnam. My father’s face flushed in splotches and he tried to hold his tongue. Then just as he was about to erupt, my grandmother seized the wheel of the conversation and swerved to avoid a collision by bringing up the subject of her gall bladder.

Because Sonny had accumulated a long list of infractions, including taking me to the Outer Banks, missing church, drinking, running up long distance bills, and scaring my little sister when she was sleeping, the scene we came home to the next day put him over the limit: burnt sofa cushions, a broken lamp, soiled sheets, a half-smoked joint under the fridge—Sonny had thrown a party. I don’t know what Mom said to him but the next day he was gone.

“Did you kick him out?” I asked, seething. “No,” Mom said loftily. “He kicked himself out.” “But what . . . ? He can’t . . .” “He said he was going to stay with some girl.”

With each passing day I grew more resentful toward Mom and her policy of tough love, as she so smugly called it. And disappointed in Sonny for not trying to get in touch with me. Why didn’t he come by the golf course or at least send word? What about our plans? I was tormented by the suspicion that Sonny might in fact regard me as an insignificant little punk.

+++
One morning a couple of the other greens keepers and I decided to play an early round before work. We teed off just after daybreak and were walking toward the second hole green when a ball suddenly whizzed past our heads, landing right near us. “Son of a bitch!” I said. Being worked up anyway because of Sonny’s disappearance, I took out a three wood and unleashed a mighty stroke, rocketing the ball right back where it came from. My co-workers laughed and gave me high fives.

Then a golf cart crested the hill. In the driver’s seat, sporting a tangerine Izod, sat Buddy Mack Watts. We ducked into the trees and circled back toward the equipment shed. We could hear the men bellowing at the top of their lungs: “We’ll get you little bastards!”

+++ I tried everything to find Sonny. My father said he was no longer employed at the hospital and he didn’t know which nurse he might be shacking up with.

Apparently Sonny was still in contact with his parents; Mom said they were concerned. But when I asked Mom for the nurse’s phone number, she denied having it. I asked her to get it for me but she never did. I even called Trent Wilfong but he said he had no idea of his whereabouts.

+++ One day as I was coming out of Julie’s front door casually buckling my belt, a familiar-looking car passed by. Immediately it slowed and began to turn around. I jumped on my bike and cut out through a field of dandelions and down a dirt road, escaping for the moment but knowing I was a goner. Buddy Mack forbade Julie to ever see me again. He said he would kill me if I went near her, and I was
inclined to believe that he wasn’t using a figure of speech.

+++ 

The terrible phone call came from Sonny’s mom. Sonny had overdosed at the home of the nurse. When she found him she feared he would die but she got him to the hospital just in time. Now he was under psychiatric care. One version was that he had meant for her to find him soon but she came back too late, almost.

I was hesitant to visit Sonny the first few days. I thought he might be too embarrassed or depressed to see anyone. By the time I decided to go, he had already returned to New Jersey.

Crushed, I lashed out at Mom, insinuating that it was all her fault.

“Carl,” she said, “we did the best we could. Sonny is never going to live a normal life!”

“WHAT!” I exploded. “How can you say that?” This was the cruelest thing I had ever heard. It seemed completely fatalistic, not to mention self-exculpatory, and I refused to accept it.

II.

The summer of ’69 came to an end. The draft ended shortly before I was eligible, sparing me from Sonny’s fate. I continued with school and sports, drifting along in the gentle current of small town life. In some ways it was as though Sonny had never visited. But in others he had never left. My parents split up acrimoniously, shattering the veneer of that idyllic family nest, and I went off to college, where that restless, searching part of me Sonny had awakened lay dormant. I studied obsessively, eager to learn, and proved I could play the game. Yet when the fruits of those efforts lay
within my grasp, I rejected them. I had learned enough from books and convention. I went looking for Sonny.

Over the years I had received scattered reports about him, mostly from my mom, all of them framed to demonstrate the accuracy of her prognostication. After that abrupt, fateful end to Sonny’s visit, he had gone back to New Jersey and, a true cat with nine lives, had landed on his feet. He met a sweet, quiet hippie girl and married her, only to discover (the story went) that she was the daughter of the heir to Union Carbide.

Sonny and his new bride traveled around the world, setting up residence in Hawaii, San Francisco, and Paris. Once Sonny surprised his mom on her birthday by flying to New York and showing up at the restaurant where she was celebrating. He paid the waiter to lend him his uniform and came up behind his mom, where he began knocking things over and clearing away her food before she was finished. She turned to protest and, seeing him, burst into laughter and tears.

Sonny was living the high life. He didn’t have to work. He had cars, friends, drugs, girls. “Too many of each,” he told me later. “I blew it.” That’s when his wife’s family, who had been against the marriage from the start, threatened legal action if Sonny didn’t sign a divorce agreement, which included sizeable monetary compensation. A severance check which Sonny spent a good chunk of in a matter of months, drowning his sorrows at the Hyatt Regency in Waikiki.

Concerned about his safety, Sonny’s parents sent his brother to Hawaii to bring him home. Sonny was crazed, his brother told me later, essentially keeping him captive for three whole days, holding a revolver to his head and threatening to blow out his brother’s brains and his own.
“It was pretty intense,” Sonny’s brother said.

+++  

I called Sonny right after my graduation. He was living in San Francisco and he told me to join him. He received me with enthusiasm but there was one problem with our travel plans: he had just started living with Nicole, the woman who would be the love of his life.

Sonny had landed on his feet again. Nicole had a good job with an advertising firm and an apartment with a stunning view of the bay. Sonny was “between jobs,” so during the week we would hit coffee shops, smoke pot, listen to jazz, and wander around the city. He took me to Haight Ashbury and the City Lights Bookstore, the old haunts of Ginsberg and Kerouac. Sonny was a fountain of information. When he lived in a place, he learned about it thoroughly. He would have made a great tour guide.

On weekends with Nicole, we would take a picnic to Golden Gate Park, then stop by the military base where Sonny was entitled to a discount for everything from groceries to clothes. This was one of the benefits he received as a war-injured vet, equal to those of a retired officer, Sonny explained, including the right to fly free anywhere in the world on military flights. (With the catch that he had to fly standby, and sometimes wait several days for a seat.) In any case, Sonny had become less comfortable around military types. He had no military friends and hated going to the V.A. hospital for treatment. Gradually he stopped buying things on the base.

At night we would walk along Fisherman’s Wharf, feeling a fine energy between the three of us, with Sonny at the red-hot center. Sonny read three newspapers a day but he couldn’t keep a job. For a while he’d sold paintings
to banks and offices but that didn’t work out. He had to buy all the paintings in advance and got stuck with the inventory. Then he started a coat and tie job as a sales rep but that went awry because most of the deals were made over liquor and he couldn’t keep his head.

Nicole bought all Sonny’s clothes and put together his generously embellished résumé, but even highlighting his Bronze Star and Purple Heart, it yielded few results. Sonny’s next job was as a grape inspector down on the docks. However, with this and other blue collar jobs, there was always a lot of “kidding” and taunting. Some of the workers made fun of Sonny’s wandering eye, his deafness in one ear, and, if he made the mistake of confiding in someone, the plate in his head. At some point he would end up lashing out, throwing a punch, and coming home bloody and jobless.

This was Sonny’s state of employment when I arrived in San Francisco. Together with his taste for booze, drugs, and gambling, it created a certain underlying tension that led to periodic blow-ups. Scenes like this: Sonny, wasted, incoherent, clutching Nicole’s arm, trying to pull her toward me, saying, “Come here, show Carl your tits,” and Nicole screaming, “I’m not an animal! I’m not an animal!”

But he never turned on me.

+++  

Around this time, I was accepted to a journalism program in North Carolina. It was tough leaving Sonny and Nicole, but I hoped we could reconnect later. At the university I met a woman named Lauri with whom I set up house. Sonny and I fell out of contact, which was usually a bad sign. Often it meant that his head, to use his expression, wasn’t in a good place. He preferred not to talk. I would try
to wait him out. Then the silence would amplify and the phone call would never be made because the size of what we needed to talk about had grown too large.

Some years later I learned from Mom that Sonny and Nicole had separated. And then they were back together. And then Nicole was pregnant. Next I learned that their daughter was born with a heart defect, which was attributed to the effects of Agent Orange. The girl, Beth, had to have a shunt put in her heart. It was touch-and-go and the drama of it all and the happiness when Beth pulled through brought Sonny and Nicole closer than ever.

Later I heard that Sonny had been in a motorcycle accident. He totaled his bike and broke his leg, but true to form he came out better than expected because the driver of the car that backed out in front of him was the wife of the mayor of San Francisco, who offered a tidy sum to keep the incident out of the news.

Then there were other unsuccessful career ventures such as the course in ambulance driving, funded by Sonny’s parents, which Sonny gave them updates on for three months after he had dropped out. Then he would be unemployed for months until the family pressures reached a crescendo, whereupon he would make another half-hearted attempt at integrating himself into the workforce and becoming a productive member of society.

Then Mom told me that Nicole had been offered an attractive advertising position in Philadelphia. She was anxious to be closer to her sister, who lived in New Jersey. During her blow-ups with Sonny, she had often turned to her sister for advice. Her sister told her she had a savior complex and she needed to let Sonny go.

Sonny told Nicole he loved San Francisco and had no desire to move back East. Nicole said okay, she was going
anyway. Sonny listened as she made travel arrangements. He watched her pack. At the last minute he joined her.

+++ 

After several years, my relationship with Lauri came to an end. Once again I was looking for a new direction. Once again I was drawn to Sonny. And once again, despite my lack of contact, he received me warmly and unconditionally. (I remember this now with pain.)

I had never been more grateful in my life. I was at loose ends and had nowhere to go. In contrast, Sonny’s life seemed remarkably stable. This was thanks to Nicole, with minimal help from Sonny’s sporadic jobs and meager disability checks, which seemed to shrink every year. Health costs soared for Beth, who would soon need another operation to replace her shunt.

At the moment, Sonny wasn’t driving. He had totaled the Volvo and lost his license. Nicole was working long hours plus taking care of Beth, who sported a scar from her neck to her naval and talked with a raspy voice. I did some copy editing and wrote a few articles for The City Paper but, unable to make ends meet, I went to work at a homeless shelter. Sonny was selling men’s clothing at Wanamaker’s.

Despite our unglamorous professional lives, I felt the buzz of the big city and the sense of anticipation in the air that something remarkable might happen at any moment. I was living right in Center City and Sonny would come in to meet me for breakfast at a diner on Saturdays. We would linger over coffee and cigarettes to (Sonny’s phrase) see where each other’s heads were at. Or on Sundays we would have a barbecue at Sonny’s house and drink beer on the patio or at the Irish pub up the street.

My younger brother and sister had already established
sound professional careers and I was still hanging out with Sonny. I looked at him as my co-conspirator in this alternative lifestyle which I considered audacious. Some facsimile of our original plan to travel around the country. But while I was living it by choice, Sonny perhaps was not.

Although Sonny and I were the black sheep of the family, having abandoned and dishonored its traditions, we inevitably returned to the topic. We analyzed each family member and the relationships between them. We thought about them so much because they were who we were, and yet they weren’t. Because Sonny and I were family, but what did that mean?

The subject of Vietnam rarely came up. Not because I wasn’t curious but because I didn’t want to spoil the moment. Or pry things out of Sonny that might make him feel diminished in my eyes. Sometimes Sonny would come out with Marine Corps sayings like “Good night, Chesty, wherever you are!” and he always had that picture on his wall of his squad, wearing camouflage fatigues and caps, arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders, mugging for the camera, luminous with sweat and brotherhood. The photo had been in Sonny’s pocket the night the mortar fire ripped through the tent where they were smoking pot and playing cards, and was blemished with blood. Sonny was the only one of the six in the photo to survive.

One Saturday, Sonny took me to the town in the Amish country of Pennsylvania where he had grown up. He said he wanted to stop by and visit his ex-girlfriend, Marsha. He hadn’t seen her in twenty-three years. They were in love when he got shipped out. He carried her picture with him in the jungle. He wrote her every day. Then abruptly she stopped writing. He learned later that she was seeing someone else: she’d been stolen from him by his very own.
The brother. The brother he saved from combat duty because the military allowed only one child per family to see the battlefield. Sonny still seethed every time he thought about it.

Marsha lived in a large, well-kept house on a quiet street. She was surprised and flustered by the visit—Sonny had called her from a pay phone on the corner—but invited us into the large sunken living room. Her kids were playing a board game while her husband watched TV. He greeted us and went upstairs.

We had been drinking in the car and Sonny was feeling conversational. Marsha answered politely and in a softer voice than Sonny’s. Sonny said we had more beer out in the car but Marsha didn’t care for one. They didn’t talk about the past. They talked about the present, what little there was of it to talk about, and then we left.

It might have been better if we hadn’t paid the visit.

+++ One weekend Nicole suggested we all drive down to Washington to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. I was sure that Sonny would refuse, but maybe he wanted to make amends with Nicole for something or maybe he thought it was time. I remember the hallowed feeling one gets approaching those two immense walls of black granite. The special reflective stone imported from India that allows you to see your image superimposed on the engravings of the names. This is meant to symbolize the union of past and present. The walls come together in an apex which represents “a wound that is closed and healing.” As we walked along the path, we saw people staring solemnly or praying or making pencil rubbings of a particular name. Some left wreaths or flowers. “Other, non-perishable items
will be stored in a museum facility.”

The names were listed in chronological order, according to the date the soldier was killed. Or, in some cases, the date he went missing. Sonny looked for his years and the names of his friends. Nicole began to cry. Sonny tried to make a joke. “My name should be up there,” he said. “I died there too. I just haven’t finished dying.”

+++ 

After six years in Philly, I accepted a job here in Colombia, South America, where I’ve lived ever since. Sonny and I lost contact again.

When Sonny visited me several years later, Nicole drove him to the Philly airport. Actually, she was kicking him out, only he didn’t know it yet. On the visit, he got into his share of trouble. He knew absolutely no Spanish except for a phrase a Puerto Rican guy from Philly suggested might come in handy: ¡No me dispares! (Don’t shoot!). And Sonny actually had the opportunity to use it. He was wandering downtown at three in the morning with his flaming red hair. “¡No me dispares!” he cried to the gun-wielding ladrón. Sure enough, the guy didn’t shoot; he cracked Sonny over the head and stole his wallet. In three weeks, Sonny managed to get hooked up with a coke crowd, get a woman pregnant, and rack up a monstrous phone bill, mainly talking to Nicole.

He arrived home to discover that Nicole had changed the locks. She had rented him a small apartment downtown. He worked for a while at a coffee shop, but had the same problems with the co-workers. For a while he went out with a woman who was taking antidepressants, but she left him for an art collector.

Once I visited Sonny in Philly. I banged and banged on his door and got no answer. So I called Nicole. “He’s in
there,” she said. “He’s just . . . a strange guy.” When he finally opened up, I was appalled at the untidiness; he had always been so neat. He tried to put on a good face but I could tell something was wrong. On the second day he demanded, “Why did you tell Nicole that my apartment was a wreck?” His glaring eyes looked wild and paranoid. I thought that this would be the time he would turn on me. But he didn’t.

All this time he had been trying to get his disability check increased. There was no way he could keep afloat with what the V.A. gave him. On top of that, Nicole was pressuring him for child support. Plus, he owed money to his bookie. Several times as he was walking downtown he had the distinct impression that he was being followed by a slow-moving white Cadillac.

For a while Sonny, always a photography buff, would take pictures of Philly’s tourist district and sell them on the corner. One day he read in the paper about the gangland-style slaying of a jewelry store owner and his wife. He immediately recognized the pair. The man had recently asked him to snap a shot of them to show off the “new tits” he had just bought his wife. The Philadelphia Daily News, which had no photo of the couple, paid Sonny a nice sum and gave him a byline.

+++ 

For the next few years I got most of my news from Mom. News about Sonny’s deterioration: financial troubles, medical complications, a bicycle wreck where he broke off his teeth. Then, under pressure from his family, he signed up for a special treatment program for PTSD. It was hailed as innovative and prestigious; Sonny was told that he was lucky to get in. It was to last six months. But when he arrived, they turned him away; he didn’t pass the urine test. In order
to be in the program designed to help him with his drug-related problems, he had to be drug free.

Then things seemed to improve when Sonny got a job at a thrift shop that raised money for AIDS. He didn’t find the kind of abrasive atmosphere he had found in other jobs. He liked the work and made some friends. He let a woman who was dying from AIDS stay in his apartment. He enjoyed being on a schedule, riding his bike over early to open up the shop. He had been an early riser ever since the Marines. But then the store closed and Sonny’s hours stretched before him.

One day I got an email from Sonny’s mom. She said she was worried about him. He was getting booted from his apartment and had nowhere to go. I called him. He seemed glad to hear from me. He hated to ask but could he come stay with me in Colombia?

This was my opportunity to pay him back for all the times he had taken me in. I wanted desperately to say yes but I wondered how he would get along. The exchange rate would be favorable for his disability check, but how would he get his medical treatment? Still, I didn’t say no. I didn’t say no but I wasn’t as enthusiastic as I could have been. Let’s talk about it some more, I said.

I sent him several emails and he didn’t respond. I contacted his mother and she hadn’t heard from him either. Even on her birthday, which he always remembered.

Mom was the one who delivered the news. The landlord had found Sonny’s body in the apartment. The neighbors had been alerted by the smell. He had been dead for over a week. Mom was crying; I got off the phone. I stood there in that tropical garden of orchids and birds of paradise where Sonny had seemed so content on his visit. I wanted to call someone and get everything off my chest. But the
person I wanted to call was Sonny.
Ancient orange trees grow in the Lee of the hill, their gray foliage Hanging on the air like gouts of Smoke. Their long branches trail The coarse grass and at their feet Violet sprigs of heather flourish In misty patches. At its edge the Clearing rises to a wall of broad Leaves where fiery flowerheads Repose in their translucent sepals. At the crest of the slope, women Draw drab linen over the stones, Wringing it of its moisture until It pales. They will carry it back Down darkened sentiers to the Fragrant boundary of the village, Perhaps pausing there to speak Some hushed words of solidarity Before they fix upon their worn Doorways, their domestic lights. There are ways to be alone that Do not cry as to be recompensed. And they wash still, while a cow, A soft blur of brown and white, Goes down away from them into The pollen and darkness of the Meadow, down to its warm sleep.
Peacocks	hree of them
under the birdfeeder
cardinals
hunting and pecking
the gray, his brother white with spots,
two cats on the chase
about to be neutered
no longer interested in prey
or their haystack surroundings in the
garage
the vet busy
Sparky the schnauzer no longer at chase and ill-at-ease in
the kennel
cystotomy

bladderstones in a bottle
(a bilingual children’s dictionary I bought for her in Latvia:
lexicon so she can describe what is not there in this world)
scurrying up flights
from washer and dryer

a plant whose fragrance steadies the orchid in the iris
family
The Round

in Riga Elza’s Inese looks over the open harbor
for a cathedral, her flower fortress

and her lost acreage

A Sacred Geometry
It reminds me of those thick summer nights when I would lie in bed and cast my eyes about, tossing sleep among my sheets, my frustrations adding to the heat, and I was full of restless energies and dreams, ill-begotten wishes that could never in the end come to fruition. It amazes me how many listless hours passed not even to bear the fruit of sleep and dreams. I wonder now what tired subjects did I upon the hours waste my thoughtless wanderings.

Then the sound of cars rushing pavement in the dark pretends it’s soothing to the quietly dysfunct. Streetlamp glow seeps simmering between my blinds, a deep electric orange, and they cast the shadow of a tree upon the wall where I still remember how alive the pictures and the stories seemed before they blent themselves into my dreams, long after my father closed the books and left me to my sleep.

I had a dream one summer about a girl who caught the clouds at night with a silver string tied tight around her wrists. She called it fishing for the moon, I called it flying kites of sparkled ice, which cut like glass across the liquid sky. I only met her once but felt as though I’d known her twice. The first time as a girl, the second time as a phenomenon. For the breeze rose, the wind caught. Her body leaned and I almost heard the gasp of breath.
She was lifted in the air and next thing, the cloud was flying her.
If there was a heart bone, it would have been buried too. But the heart is a muscle, not a bone.

She would have buried it with the other bones in order to sacrifice the child. Perhaps she would have scattered the bones amid the metal pumps that stoop to sip the dust, straighten and bend down again and again. Or she could have dropped the bones deep in the fishing hole in the ice. She would have sat dangling her fishing line in that black hole, fishing for a visible sign as the snow stretched out on all sides of her, like the pregnant white belly of heaven.

The cheekbones would be buried first, in order to snuff out all that excess smiling. Next the entire pelvis would be buried, though the specific use for it, and the happiness it might have provided, would not be understood for many years.
The femurs were laid down next, laid deep down in the loamy soil, to put an end to the running, skipping, and hopping they did.

The finger bones were put to rest in a shallow grave, on a sheet of used Christmas gift-wrap, where they could no longer wave hello, reach out, or wave goodbye.

Once the burial was complete, the useless child-parts continued to walk the earth: the useless dust particles, the useless ice crystals, and of course the useless and rusty heart bone that, like the oil pumps in the field, continued to bow and eat dust in order to survive.
Last summer on the coast we saw a woman pacing the shore, stepping on cracked shells and shark teeth and fighting with herself. (We could tell it was a fight because she slapped herself and said, “I hate fighting with you like this.” at least twice.) “She can’t win either way,” I figured, and James said, “You never know. The voice in her head’s probably smarter than she is. More articulate.”

This got me thinking about a lot of things, so many things that my own head was soon overrun with voices. Hours after the beach and the woman and the fight, I settled on a theory.

Imagine every child was born with a radio pre-installed in its skull. Imagine all the wet blood in the baby’s head clogging the circuitry, shorting out the radio. Now, what if the people who heard voices were the lucky ones, the ones whose radios were not as badly damaged? That would explain why they spasmed and twitched. They were picking up signals that no one else could hear.

(An alternate theory I had was that every child born without a radio was born with a TV set instead. They saw things. Sometimes in color. That must have been nice.)

mul-tuh-pul pur-suh-nal-i-tee dis-or-der

“Truth or dare?” “Truth.” “Okay. So. Do you ever wish you
could be someone else?”

James grabbed a fistful of popcorn, salt falling through his fingers. He said, “I want to split myself into one hundred people and have each one do something different. Imagine that. I could be living a hundred lives at once.”

I secretly liked this plan very much, but what I said was, “Living one life is hard enough, thank you.” I wondered if people with multiple personalities felt this way too—exhausted by the weight of one life, overwhelmed at the thought of more. Like remembering one chore you had to do and thinking, “Oh, that’s not so bad,” and later finding an entire list of chores, forgotten, swept under a mess of other papers.

Over the course of our game, I came up with another theory. The more friends a person made, the harder it got to keep them, right? The key was to cut away at them, one by one, eliminating the bad friends and boring friends and cutthroat friends, et cetera, until the only ones left were the true ones. What if you could cut away all the lives you were living until you were living just one—the life you’d always wanted?


dih-presh-uhn

He used to buy these tubs of fingerpaint from the art supplies store, and we’d spend the weekends painting each other all sorts of colors. One time, he bought nothing but tubs of blue paint. I asked him why and he said, “Because I’m sad.”

So we opened all the tubs and painted our faces blue. He
unbuttoned my cardigan and painted my arms blue, and he lifted my shirt over my head and smeared my stomach blue, and when he reached for my belt, I said, “How come I’m more blue than you?” He told me that when he was blue, he wanted the world to be blue with him. This led me to another theory.

Maybe all the people taking pills for depression should stop. They should find the nearest art supplies store and buy ten tubs of blue paint. They should paint their friends blue, and their neighbors, and their pets. They should paint everyone around them blue until they are the only ones left who are human-colored. Then they would feel better. They would feel okay.

Now that I think about it, this may require more than ten tubs of paint.

sahy-kop-uh-thee

He went through these phases where he thought he was literally losing his mind. He told me how his brain seeped out of his mouth and ears as he slept, how some days he tasted blood under his tongue and could hear his own circulation louder than music playing at full volume.

One night, after I had spent an hour convincing him that he was not a ghost, he held my hand. He said, “I’m losing it.” Or maybe, “I’m losing you.” He used to make these kinds of statements all the time, during those midterm seasons when I couldn’t return his calls because I had papers to write, data to sift through and turn in for research projects, an application to some summer program due in fifteen minutes. But these losses were always only temporary. Now I
worried that when he said he was losing it or me or whatever—what if he meant to say that he’d already lost?

I patted his back to stop the crying. Small pieces of a potential theory came close to settling, but nothing stuck. Nothing made sense.

*bahy-poh-ler dis-or-der*

I was in my bedroom folding paper strips into stars when this last theory settled over me, inevitable, like dust.

If there is an ultimate sadness, and this sadness is considered an illness, then there must also be an ultimate happiness, and this too must be some sort of disease. If sadness and happiness could coexist within one person, this might explain bipolar disorder. It might also explain me and James and everyone we had ever known. Maybe it would explain nature and how the world could fall into a cold silence in December and emerge smiling as though nothing had changed in May.

I came up with a resolution: everyone should be allowed to choose whether they wanted to be fully happy or fully sad. Then they should pull the part of themselves that they no longer wanted to be out of their chests and trade with each other until everyone had what they needed. The only problem with this solution was, what if everyone wanted to be happy? Then there would be too much sadness left over and not nearly enough happiness to go around. We would be set back to exactly where we started, and life would still coldly, quietly go on.
Our polka band begins a waltz—
the bass starts the three count
of every measure, stretching
bellows of accordion on the offbeat,
and a couple stands from the seated
audience. The husband, thinning gray hair,
a few liver spots on his wrists
and forearms, bows to his wife,
the edges of her flowered dress
lift slightly with her curtsy,
and then they’re off, stepping in time,
tracing a line all their own.
I imagine them like this
when they were twenty, in a ballroom,
tiled floors shined to reflect the dancers,
like the way a grove of trees might be reflected
in a glassy lake, as though they danced
both above and below the ground,
on that side of their lives, and today—the other.
hit the
ground
with the
insurmountable
deadweight
of a post
orgasm
body
done—
and yet we remain
unconvinced that a man
cannot jump from so high and hover mothlike,
melting.
oak leaves hung quiet
like stiller men
from the rope.

a long night slid underfoot,
the cursing minutes
slit open like an envelope.
George Packenham sat in his car, crying and nursing a suffocating sense of upset with the universe. His eyes were red. He was smoking marijuana. He kept sneaking glances at himself in the mirror. The mirror was off center. There was a shape moving towards him that he was betting might pan out to be a neighbor. He kept glancing up to take in the block and his expression in the mirror because he liked how red his eyes were and he was afraid of forgetting that he was terrifically sad.

He’d been sitting in the car for fifteen minutes. Outside, everything was in patient darkness: the whole block, with its rows of clean lawns bearing realtor signs; that whole side of the world, everything to Lao Bing. George himself was the exact center, in many ways of speaking.

In a dark room inside George’s house, two blocks away, George’s brother Oliver sat up beneath a poster of a girl with enormous breasts. He tried to force himself to sleep by breathing regularly as he counted to ten.

In another dark room lay George’s parents. His sick mother was finally asleep. His father, congested, lay up using the night to muse over an established fact.

There had once been a woman who liked to wear ribbons and had laughed at the red flush her ankle assumed when irritated by a high heel. Remembering the way she’d talked about it, George’s father laughed.

The day before had been a previously planned
success involving a zoning implementation. It had buoyed his mood. He looked over at his wife, broad faced and creaky kneed, snoring and unconsciously strangling her pillow. She looked as if she were withholding some complaint.

He thought, “A family and people respect me. I’ve given up a lot, of course. But that’s how life is: painful because it passes, but wonderful because of what we build. Of course the truth is other people.”

Aware that it was not a sustainable emotion but a residual, happy remainder of the day, he spared a brief thought for his sons: eighteen-year-old George and twenty-year-old Oliver. He wondered whether they had ever felt reconciled, as he did just then.

George hadn’t. George was tall, quiet, and respectful, but awkward. You couldn’t be that uncomfortable without being in some sort of pain.

Rolling over, he thought, “I’ll say something to him tomorrow, something small. I won’t embarrass him.”

It was one of those tragedies that he didn’t get to.

George lit a pipe in the car. He checked his eyes in the mirror clinically. He tested how his features looked under the power of an exploratory grimace that made him briefly resemble a Jack-o-lantern.

George wondered whether his brother Oliver would realize he’d stolen the pipe from his room. “If he does,” he thought, “maybe he’ll guess and I’ll tell him the truth.”

He’d just come from a not-fun party.

II.

At twelve, George had been a clean, diligent, organized boy—weird only in his hatred of the Mets. He was taciturn, but cracked into rare smiles startling for their authenticity. He was so sure of certain facts, mostly come to
him from Oliver, that he sometimes infuriated his friends. He ended arguments with Jimmy Briggs and Bob Boffet without getting angry. Jimmy, who also had an older brother and liked to be the center of attention, gradually started to hate him because he seemed to care about things more important than anyone else. He started to say that George was arrogant—even though he had to make up the evidence.

He arranged a baseball cap on his head before school so that it sat just above his eyes and nose, lumpish and already presaging a growth spurt.

He had a bunch of endearing private habits, like arranging his shoes upside down under his bed after reading a book about scorpions. His mother forced him to go say goodbye to Jimmy when Jimmy moved away—he had to be forced because he didn’t like the fakeness of saying goodbye to someone he hadn’t liked. He had a habit of falling into unchosen friendships and he hung around in the same group of friends for years, a group that came to include Danny Bisaccio, his Mets-loving best friend. Danny and he only ever got into fights that were brief and physical and unprotracted by pride. George was one of those lonely, stolid, dependable people who everyone tries to get on their side in a fight.

He was never the center of attention or the person who drove his friends’ social habits, nor the first to be called on the phone; but he marinated in the circle’s sense of humor and ethos anyhow and picked up mannerisms. He came out with a tendency to make ironic use of the words “Dude” and “Man.” He made certain physical signs when people took him by surprise—a crimped mouth, raised eyebrows, narrowing his eyes and looking right to left as if he were shifty; it was all to show a jaunty, breezy attitude, to say effectively, “Hey dude, here we are.” And it was a way of
hiding.

III.

At twelve, his well meaning, Greek Uncle Peck bought him his own computer, a humming Apple 3 laptop that was always cold to the touch. It was the same holiday Uncle Peck—who was confident in his ability to tell when a boy needed a kick in the pants—purchased a lawnmower for Oliver.

George developed habits during his initial explorations of the Internet. He used his computer a lot. By fourteen he had refined down to the four sites he visited whenever he came home from school. (These including his email and AOL.)

There were two sites that he only used at night: a sequence as private and revealing as his tic of folding toilet paper into a square pad before using it. One of the websites was a MySpace profile belonging to a boy from Manassas.

He stared at it blank faced whenever he went to bed. Manassas was two towns away. The profile was festooned with pictures of the boy, standing in the sunlight, not wearing a shirt, in his driveway, wearing a fur coat. He was sixteen and apparently, according to captions in a grayish font, not only a strident critic of reality television, but also gay. And a model.

Looking at the pictures became an obsession, one that, as a kid, he thought literally nothing of, but knew was secret. He went to bed each night and clicked through dozens of the pictures, closing his door and putting a chair against it as a sort of alarm. It was a strategy used by a character in the same book that mentioned the scorpions.

Looking, he was cultivating some admixture of acid in his belly. It contained hot shame, the joy of subterfuge,
and a more liquid feeling running in the bowels of his chest.

Then, one day looking at a picture which the boy had captioned with a lyric from a song he didn’t like, George pressed his hand against his penis.

That led to another period of exploration and earnest discovery.

It was the whole thing, mysterious sexuality tied in with the awakening of a solitary mind and a stifling individual perspective, inaccessible to others, which accreted in the silent moments and chafed when he sat watching television at home.

Six years later George was a taller, ranker boy. He possessed a more secretive and self-conscious sense of humor. He had started to genuinely like his friends (whom he’d met by accident), but dealt stolidly with occasional bouts of sadness. Without realizing it, he’d become addicted to self pity. He had kissed a girl behind a van once and thought it not earth shattering. He had convinced himself that the key to a less stultifying life was to find someone he could kiss and confide his desire to confide in someone to—that person was to be Danny Bisaccio, his Mets-loving friend, who he’d spent much of the summer trying to drag introspection out of. Danny was going to Angel’s party. There was going to be alcohol.

IV.

He had two habitual fantasies in addition to attendance at Carnegie Mellon. These fantasies recurred to him at intervals during the day, often when he mowed the lawn, which had been transferred to him out of Oliver’s care; and very often when he prepared for a night out.

One of George’s fantasies involved a friend guessing his unhappiness without having to be told. Occasionally
when he was in a place where he thought someone might be watching, he’d turn his face to the side and grimace off into the distance as if he were struck by some worry. He’d laugh once, as if some dark joke had occurred to him or he’d heard that someone he had contempt for had insulted him behind his back. He wanted someone to notice he was upset and ask him about it. He’d prepared a flotilla of brave self-deprecating jokes to soften the impact of talking about his secret desires, jokes he was prepared to use when someone asked him why he was upset. He hoped to reveal everything by being sarcastic rather than vulnerable.

He wanted someone to confront him one day and ask, “George, are you okay?”

To which he would ask the person’s reason for asking, and to which the friend would reply, “You just look sad sometimes.” That would be a perfect excuse for George to explain everything as if there hadn’t been any premeditating or wondering what people thought or anything as embarrassing and universal as spending hours alone staring at a computer in bed.

He’d allowed his room to get messier than he was comfortable with so that people might think him distressed.

No one was ever paying attention. The closest anyone came to asking was when his Uncle Peck looked at him queerly for a moment before inquiring if he had a cold.

His other fantasy was that some night, at a party, he would confront a friend—specifically, Danny Bisaccio, or maybe Evan Galt—and sharing drinks, there would come to inhere in the conversation some special quality that would render the air heavy and sweet. The feeling would bloom through repeated full silences, and would eventually flower when Danny said to George, “I don’t know, I just...”

He’d scuff his toe against the floor.
All this led to him reading Danny’s text messages so that every extended clause was evidence of a special care that you wouldn’t take with someone you didn’t like.

There was an uncomfortable, brief air to that last summer of high school. He went to every party that year thinking, “Why not? Tonight might be the night. It’s bright outside and the music will be good and this is another chance to be wild with my friends and Dan will be there and this is the sort of night where that sort of thing happens.”

He always swelled with a certainty that everything would work out.

V.

But it never did. He got drunk at every party. The poor-quality beer they drank completed a shocking transition on his palate. It turned into a bitter paste and left him moving his mouth around as if he’d tasted a lemon. He always woke up with a headache in the morning, feeling anxious. A sort of noxious chest vacancy yawned like a chasm in his stomach. It was as if he were losing while other people won. It melted sometimes—it succumbed to the happy incident of discovering an envelope from Carnegie Mellon. But it always returned.

The day of the party, he drove to Angel Carrera’s with two friends, Max and Becky. Max and Becky chattered in the backseat. George answered Max’s questions with single words. Becky laughed, looking back at two other friends, drunk and trying to amuse each other. George joked too. He told Becky a story about how he’d woken up late and had had to rush to his summer job. The general sense of revelry and possibility made him turn up the radio.

+++
Angel Carrera let them in. Her house was a mansion with three white columns built piecemeal under the influence of her mother’s mania for adding wings each summer. Going inside, he found himself thrust into an atmosphere of throbbing music and people moving slowly and speaking loudly in the dark. Overcome by a desire to smile at everyone, George immediately needed a break from the pressure he put on himself to match the pace of the room.

He went immediately to find alcohol.

He returned to discover two tertiary friends standing and watching people play beer pong. They had their arms crossed over their chests. One was a boy with tremendous, clownish, red cheeks. He burped and stared up at the roof and kept exclaiming that he was drunk. The other was a boy standing uncomfortably close to George. He wouldn’t stop making comments as if they were in conspiracy against everyone else. (“Isn’t beer pong stupid?” he asked. “Isn’t this music dumb?”) He didn’t seem disturbed or put off when George answered noncommittally.

When the game ended, George and the two others, without anyone to pursue, needed a plan to keep from looking aimless. They decided to set up another drinking game. They argued about how best to do it. Then the boy who was drunk saw someone else and left.

George realized he didn’t like the boy who kept making fun. Suddenly the two of them alone seemed too obviously to be avoiding the rest of the party. George mumbled something about indigestion and went upstairs.

VI.

George didn’t see Danny anywhere and was starting to worry that he was not around. He texted him. Danny
replied that he was sick.

The party moved to a portion in which the lights turned lower, music played louder, and circles formed. George rubbed himself uncomfortably against a girl who’d emerged from the ether. The revelation about Danny had started to infiltrate his mood. There was a sort of unpleasant aspect to the music.

Through some insidious boredom which had crept into the night, plus the realization that he had been chasing a fantasy which would not come true—he began to feel that everyone at the party was acting disgustingly for their own benefit. The dancing started to irk him. Someone made an unfunny joke.

He caught sight of his friend Max, dancing to his right, and saw that Max had found someone to dance with. Max shook his head from side to side with a distracted smile. He grinned at George when he noticed him watching. He stuck his tongue out and wagged it back and forth like a dog would have done if it had been lucky.

Suddenly annoyed, George responded with a small, mysterious smile.

He said under his breath, “Fuck you, Max.”

He thought, “Everyone is here to accomplish something you have not had, and cannot have because you are afraid. They are all happy and young and feeling that joy people talk about when they say ‘I hooked up.’ You alone, out of everyone, are unhappy and scared.”

He told the dancer he had to go to the bathroom again. He stole one last look at his classmates through the slats of Angel Carrera’s banister as he ascended the stairs. Seeing Max from behind, his hips swinging back and forth, he thought, “It’s all cynical. There’s no love at all. That girl wants to have sex with him. She probably will. I could have
sex with her too, if I wanted to; all of these people are just here to have sex, they’re all manipulating each other.”

VII.

Failing to find Dan, he always looked for Galt. Galt was blond and short and had a wheedling tone. He sucked up to people far too much. No one who went to parties had been surprised to find out he was gay, when it came around that he was. George had done his own share of making fun of Galt. Also, after it came around, he went online and found pictures of Galt sitting in his room. He’d convinced himself—reading into certain pictures of him in which he looked less obnoxious than usual, mostly ones taken while Galt had been in a state of ecstasy on the beach—that Galt was loving and might someday support a conversation that wasn’t obnoxious.

The bathroom was on the second floor. He saw three people and shook three hands, talking quickly to forefront his drunkenness. He asked a girl waiting for the bathroom, “Have you seen Galt?”

“Nope!”

Someone helpful chimed in, “I think I saw him go upstairs.”

The person, a girl, grinned at him and laughed. He laughed too, and thought, “Everything’s alright.”

He went upstairs to find Galt.

VIII.

He found Galt alone in a room on the third floor. It was a room full of pastel and earth shades, containing a pink bureau and pictures of the ocean. Galt stood over a radiator, holding a picture in his hand and examining it, scratching the ankle of one leg with the toe of the other. He looked like
a flamingo.

George had imagined being alone with Galt so many times that his throat closed and he became hyper aware of his legs. He said with surprising gruffness, as if Galt had accused him of coming in for no reason, “I thought this was the bathroom.”

Galt laughed. “It’s Angel’s room.” He had the exaggerated buttocks of a baseball player. George didn’t know what to say.

Galt said, “Want to see something?”
“What?”
“Come here.”

Galt led him over to the dresser and pulled out one drawer. George noticed he did it by sticking his little finger into the handle. Inside were stacks of envelopes.

“Angel has tons of these from her dad. Her parents divorced.”

George stared at him.
“They’re great,” said Galt.

George sensed that Galt, who was standing close to him and smiling, his eyes at this distance sort of dull, and maybe indicative of some lingering high from the pungent-smelling weed that got smoked behind school every Thursday, did not have the sort of extraordinary hyper awareness of people which would lead to him say something like, “Are you OK?” or notice that George had only pretended to enter the room by accident and had actually come to see him. George realized what was going to happen. Whenever he got into a situation he’d dreamt of his throat closed and something took over his body. He was never able to act normal; he’d heard all the clichés about taking risks and being a doer and not a planner, and he worried they applied to him.

He was going to say, “Which way is the bathroom?”
IX.

But instead, he said, “I like you.”

X.

It was before he’d even realized what he was saying. Galt said, “What?,” realization dawning on his face. George felt too aware of his body to think, and stood on the verge of sinking into the earth.

Galt grew excited, too excited, and said, not just then but over the next few months, “You need to tell people.” It was the beginning of something. They started to make sort of manic, secret visits to the mall, during which Galt took a crazed interest in pushing George to interact with men. He wanted to hear stories about what it was like to have secrets on the baseball team. He seemed to relish the opportunity to tell other people about George.

This—like the last ones—was one of those friendships George fell into by accident. It was a poor summer for allergies and Galt’s nose was always irritated. Finally there was a whirlwind sort of romance which seemed to have been constructed entirely by Galt, along lines based on something he’d seen in television, consummated by a sloppy kiss one day in the mall cafeteria. George felt uncomfortable and Danny heard and was disgusted: less because Galt was a boy than because he was Galt.

Two months later, when George broke up with Galt before heading to Carnegie Mellon, on his way to meeting a new and exciting group of friends, sitting on the sidewalk outside of the bus station in town with its three parallel benches, he felt cynically that there was a sort of sense of possibility he had had concerning both romance and college that had been eradicated by Galt. When the second guy George dated sent him a text message as he rode
back on the vibrating train a year later, his head nodding gently and persistently against the window as the woman behind him attempted to sort out her traffic violations, he felt ironically that he might have never been happier than that summer with Danny and his other friends. It had been better in some ways when his days had been unfilled with the bitterness of actual experience, but had instead smelt of the painfully sweet feeling of hoping and worrying that everything just might be awful.

XI.

Luckily, George never said that in the room with Galt. His throat closed, as he himself had predicted, and he said instead, hoping to gain a second to regroup from the sensation, “I’m going to the bathroom.”

George usually used his trips to the bathroom to stare at himself in the mirror and break any too-long interactions which made him uncomfortable. He used that one to obscure reality. He convinced himself that he liked Galt. He convinced himself that Galt was waiting in the room for him with an eye towards figuring out what had caused George to be so awkward. He planned to go back into the room and sit Galt down for a talk. He decided to tell him, leaning in, “Look, don’t tell anyone. I’m like you,” relying on the emotion he thought would twist his face then to give him the needed air of desperation.

Then he would say, “So, would you want to hang out one day?” Or he might say, “Do you want to hang out later?”

He at last saw a chance to deal with this thing in the same way he had historically dealt with everything else, being someone whose parents had always laughed at the ineptitude of his subterfuges and who loved the honest disciplines of baseball and architecture. He washed his
hands even though he hadn’t used the toilet. When he went back to the room he discovered that Galt was gone. He thought, “Well, there is another opportunity wasted,” but also felt relieved. He felt suddenly that Galt had the edge on him. He was painfully aware that his happiness depended on Galt. He went back to the bathroom and make a meticulous assessment of his hair.

Going back downstairs, he spied Galt among the dancers pressing his hips against the hips of some boy he hadn’t noticed before. The boy had a pouf of curly hair. He was a friend from camp Galt had invited over for that night.

With a look of deep, almost somnolent satisfaction on his face, transforming his features, bringing to bear a facet that was slightly possessive, Galt opened his eyes and pressed his mouth against the cheek of said boy. The boy pulled Galt closer.

XII.

George stared at them for a moment. He placed himself at the edge of the crowd, ignoring the throb of the music, to stare at Galt. He abandoned all pretension of being somehow superior to Galt, as well as any sentiment of hopefulness. He’d thought it was a cliché, but seeing them there, not just happy but a part of the tableau—Max winked at him—he knew what heartbreak was, was crushed under a more virulent version of the frustrated desire toddlers feel when denied a toy. He knew that his hopes, his statements to himself, were not just false and at odds with the world, but also embarrassingly naïve, even shameful: all of that was in the forms of Galt and his camp friend staring at each other, and specifically in Galt’s expression: his fair cheeks which were flushed and his gaze which seemed free of the calculations that had made it ugly earlier. The new
emotion was so vast and surprising that it seemed to require nurturing.

Knowing that he wanted to stew in the feeling more, alone, wondering if he was about to cry, feeling suddenly the futility of everything and that he had no right to stay among his friends, he turned off his cell phone. He went outside to the car. Still wondering at having such a strong emotion, still internally probing the hollow in his chest (and the pressure in the top of his head), he crushed his face against the steering wheel. He seemed to be punishing Max and Galt by being so dramatic, and he kept imagining a conversation with his mother in which she would cry at how little attention he was paying to his own comfort and be horrified. She would ask whether she had done something wrong.

He drove two blocks away, parked in front of a fire hydrant and twisted his mouth into the sloppy near-smile that connotes true sadness.

XIII.

The pain went on. Sprinklers activated on the far lawn. George finally lit the pipe he’d stashed in the glove compartment, Oliver’s pipe. He forced more sobs out, revisiting the thought process that had made him cry: himself hoping, Galt dancing. In spite of himself, he still thought that the situation might resolve itself cinematically, that someone would see him crying, rap on the window and say, “Hey what’s wrong,” then he could explain the issue so that the person would have sympathy. He cried more at the kindness of the imagined stranger.

But when he saw someone across the street, a dark figure with a small, searching dog, he sat back against the chair as if he didn’t need help. A few minutes later, wanting
to go to sleep, but also wanting to take advantage of the exciting boldness he felt his sadness driving him to, he shot off a text to D.B. (D.B. didn’t answer because he had the flu and was lying in bed with the blankets over his head).

It said, “want talk.” He hoped its vagueness would hint at turmoil.

Then he started the car and drove a few feet away. He saw a slight glimmer out of the corner of his eye which caused him to turn the car so that it rode up on someone’s lawn. He tore into an oak tree. Splintering, it split the windshield and pierced his chest. That caused him to think for a split second that everything he’d just thought was bullshit, because he didn’t want to die. He saw a brief montage of jokes he’d made about car crashes. He thought, “I should have known the night would end like this;” there was a flurry of memories of his parents, a brief wonder what people would think of it. This was followed by a sudden conviction that the car was ruined. It was a last mood with the veneer of truth.
The Kitchen Sink
Ricardo Hiro Nagaoka
Under My Bed
Ricardo Hiro Nagaoka
The valve was hidden in the back of the water heater. My father showed me how to unlatch the lock panel so I could deter the gas that would cause an explosion when left unchecked. *Everything we cared for would be gone, son.* He laughed when I turned the gas ring.

My palm held on to the dial. The degrees declining to an “off” left imprints, my father sighed when he had to twist the knob back to where we could be warm for a winter. When the earthquake happened, I couldn’t perform the simple task he taught me. I broke the valve—I felt the stream of gas press upon my skin. I had to call the company on what I should disable. *When the next available person passes by, he could help me, so I shouldn’t stay inside, instead,*
just in case it might blow,
I should leave.  I waited.
Drowning, age two

Emma Winsor Wood

Slip to sudden
splash into body-warm
viscid chemical embrace,
this sun-fretted blue
swelling of stillness:
return to a home
without this
limbed weakness.

Whose father, what hand
dare to wrench me,
spasm-choked shiver
of crying, yet
again into
the air?
Sun-bask in bathing suit on mottled wool-knot carpet, dog’s warm-panting at the small of my bare, white back. Day so long I fear I won’t outlive it.

Saturday, New York

Emma Winsor Wood
I took your body to the doctor.
That wretched illness I did nurse.
I lived our vows, yet imperfect.
Now I face this constant curse.

You trick’ed Death, kept him at bay,
et lost that private war.
I fought and fought to bring you back.
I wonder still: Could I’ve done more?

I took your ashes to the town square,
to great lakes and River Styx.
I did just what you told me, dear.
I shoulder guilt for my mistakes.

Your death left me alone
to raise our beautiful son.
Your death left me responsible.
My work has just begun.

Now you play in heav’nly sunshine,
a rest you much deserve.
Now to live without you I must toil.
Our son, young master, I will serve.

Each day I push the ball uphill,
run down ahead of it so often.
Your haunting knows no respite.
I stay handcuffed to your coffin.

But one question stands before me here,
every day of every year:

Which of us,
my dear,
is Sisyphus?
Be clear.
Under a cherub sky
fading, then resurgent,
its muscles striated under layers of fluffy fat,
across a long field of corn unrolling from
the front porch of this one-room schoolhouse I call home
cousin Joe’s cows bellow in their field

I remember his mother, my Aunt Tootsie
ungainly, Lithuanian, her muscles powerful
under layers of fat
early in the morning
the world still inky around their dirty barn
way too filthy for a milking barn

I remember how she hit stubborn cows
with a shit splattered two-by-four
it made me wince
I was much younger
sensitive to abuse
my muscles weak
under layers of fat
We are the stairs sped up
Cecilia Salama
They were up the holler, in the backwoods behind the abandoned trailer where they’d squatted during the winter. Remnants of the old life—flasks of moonshine, the frame of a burnt barn—nested in the leaves. Even in day it was dark as dusk, the firs and oaks masking the sky. At the top of the holler the trees cleared, unveiling the country: the mountains, shrouded in mist and resembling sand dunes, the towns tucked in the folds, and the shaved rock of the highwall bearing down like a waterfall of stone.

“Damn doctor,” said Ben, wiping his forehead. He stared down at the half-split block of wood. “All these pills and I can’t feel my arm lifting the ax.”

Rae sat on a log by the fire pit, her eyes on yesterday’s ash, a cigarette smoking in her fingers. It was getting dark and he strained to see her face, obscured by a mop of tangled hair.

He brought wood to the pit, threw in the torn-up cereal boxes, and flicked the lighter till the flame took hold, unfurling in the cartoon faces on the cardboard. Sitting down next to her, he popped open a Budlight and offered her the bottle. She shook her head, blew moonward.

“I reckon Mary washed down to Helen’s Creek by now,” said Ben.

Rae was thinking of the place where earlier that afternoon she had waded into the stream with Mary’s granddaughter. The trees that lined the bank, suffocated by kudzu, looked like the topiary outside the government
buildings in the city where Rae had grown up. Not all the trees had been reduced to smothered stumps; some maintained their height, and bore the kudzu-like lace on their limbs. The stream flowed from the veins of the mountains down to Helen’s Creek, carrying anything man and woman brought to its headwaters. Carrying Mary down.

Leading Mary’s granddaughter down, helping her keep balance in that curve where the water ran fast, Rae had thought, *is it ever natural*, watching the mosquitoes bob one foot in the air above the stream and listening to the whisper of trickling on a clog of leaves, the whisper on the girl’s lips. The prayer. The release. The drift. The ashes—quick as the shadow of a school of fish—disappearing under the bridge. Blunt stones hurt the girl’s feet. They climbed up through the brambles, slipping on the algae-covered tires that protruded from the bank wall like tree fungus. *Ever “the will of God,”* Rae had wondered.

A year before, Mary had held a creek cleanup. One could see it as her first step toward the movement, back when she still feared the consequences of becoming involved. A fair number of local folks showed up, professing their love of nature like a bunch of Northerners, and then there was Rae, who had only been in Helen’s Creek for a month. Rae had expected the activists would have lent a hand, but only she had been new enough not to understand that, as Ben would say, “Fishing cans out of the creek is like praying to the Lord.” A waste of time.

And so, the two women had become friends: Mary—whose hands trembled in between her determined attempts to steady them, whose hair, like the bristles of a dandelion, whisked off in the winds that rustled through the foliage, and Rae, who went barefoot and never washed her hair because she liked to be caked in the earth and leaves of her
new world. They waded through the creek, collected glass and rubber scraps from the banks, and ate wild blackberries off the bushes as they went. Midway, they came across the car tires, moss and mushrooms growing in their cracks, so buried into the sides that they were impossible to remove without bringing the whole bank down. After staring at them for a while, they had left them there because Mary had begun to wilt.

“Tires, tires, out of my creek,” Mary had said on the third to last day, the day she was no longer lucid. Crying, turning toward the wall. As if removing the tires would have saved her.

The fire waned as the wet logs sapped the heat. Ben pushed himself onto his knees and leaned forward to rekindle the flame.

“When they burn me, don’t throw my ashes in no damn creek,” said Ben. “I got well enough of the creek in me already.”

The smoke made him cough and turn away.

“I reckon Mary knew her kids were selling the property and moving North,” he said. “I reckon she didn’t want them taking her up there in a jar. I know I sure would’ve feared so. I ain’t playing skulls with no Yankee ghosts.”

Rae’s fingers trembled as she reached in her pocket for a lighter.

“Look at your fingers shivering,” said Ben. “I told you to eat more ham and grits. Got to add more fat to them chicken legs.” He knocked her thigh gently with the back of his hand.

“I’m fine,” said Rae flatly. “It’s you who’s dying.”

He laughed, but neither stood to go inside the trailer. After a long winter, Ben and Rae liked to cook, work,
and sleep out of doors if they could help it. Both were sick of the rusting walls, the sunken aluminum floors, and the stale air tasting of vinyl. In the beginning of winter there had been others, but they’d gone long before, throwing their belongings into the backseats of their two-wheelers and driving down hill. Two miles on Route 3 brought you to Adel’s, the nearest general store, and one more to the bend where cell phones buzzed with two months worth of messages and voice mails. Of all those Northern hippies, only Rae had stayed till spring, helping Ben plan for the second action.

The previous September, while they were preparing for the first one, Ben had driven Rae up the cliff so that she could see Presswood for herself. Where he had worked. The open land, the stretches of orange dust, replacing what had once been a mountain higher than the one they stood upon. He looked out with his hands on his hips, contemplating the lack, while her eyes strayed into the distance, mesmerized by untouched ranges of green and blue. She was used to seeing industrial yards; it was the mountains that shocked her. She had only seen such colors and shapes in eighteenth century landscape paintings.

Later that evening, he had shown her what was left of the town. The air was warm and heavy that night and the forests leaned in from either side of Main Street as if intending to swallow the town’s remains. They had thought they were alone as they strolled past the closed storefronts, peered through the dust-coated windows into rooms packed with broken jukeboxes, typewriters, and half-packed moving boxes. Ben had recalled his father’s stories about the town back in its heyday, when young people rushed to town on a Saturday night to see a movie in the theater’s red couch seats or to drink chocolate shakes at the counter of
Hopkin’s Diner, or that night when Sam Marshal brought his gramophone outside the grocery and all the girls and boys spilled out from the bowling alley to swing dance on the street. Rae didn’t know what the town had been. She liked it, even though it was dead. She even called it picturesque.

That same evening, when she went into the gas station to use the toilet, he stayed outside under the fluorescent light above the pump. They had been waiting for him to be alone—Tom Sackett and Henry Jones, two of Ben’s friends from high school. They still worked at the mines, and Tom was Mary’s nephew. Henry held a knife and the two men slammed Ben against the gas pump and mumbled livid whispers in Ben’s face—“My job on the line.” “Shit they talking about me up at Presswood.” Ben would remember the dying ring of the doorbell in the general store, the smell of gasoline rising from the gravel, and the brush of Tom’s tobacco breath on his cheek.

“Fucking treehugger. Better watch your step.”
An eye full of spit.

“You should’ve seen Tom Sackett watching me when y’all went down to the stream. If they’d handed him a gun he would have shot a hole in my back,” said Ben. “I say it’s some psycho that will shoot a man at his aunt’s funeral.”

“You better watch out now that Mary’s gone,” said Rae.

“If Tom had brains he’d see he’s the one that killed her. Tom and all them up at Presswood.”

Rae stared at Ben’s hands working the fire. His old bible was in the scrap pile that he had fed to the flame. It was open to Matthew and each water-swollen page of the book was three times its normal thickness. When it finally took flame, it was as if within the book’s covers existed a
miniature hell: the white space the flames, the scratches of words the bodies of sinners. Ben had told her that before he’d joined the action camp, back when he worked at Presswood, he’d been a fanatic, would read the Bible on the hillside between shifts, and had envisioned that as soon as he’d made his fortune, he would purchase land in the backwoods and become a hermit, emerging only once a month to buy Budlight at Adel’s.

Rae had never cared about the book enough to burn it, and the burning seemed wrong, wrong like burning a child’s doll. *For Mary had had faith in it, after she lost faith in the fight,* she thought. When Mary was first bedridden, she would ask for Rae everyday, would even risk her nephew’s life by sending him up holler to pick Rae up. The day Tom didn’t come for her, Rae drove over to Mary’s herself, but when she arrived she found other visitors—the minister, and Ben’s godmother Amber Smith, head nurse at the Baptist Hospital.

Mary had fought until she could fight no more, and folks would have forgiven her if she had battled the enemy within, had made sleep and time her weapons. They would have forgiven her if she’d stuck to her creek cleanups and not been to the capital and back, had not driven into the backwoods seeking out the activists, had not spoken in court during the case brought against Rae, Ben, and the other four who had tied themselves to the dragline. Rae could recall the voice that had awakened the rallying crowds in front of the courthouse, calling for “no more money polluting the veins of this our wild and wonderful” and Rae thought, *In all that time the cancer was swelling, sporing. And it would make a stump out of her.*

The Bible curled, shriveled like a black trumpet mushroom in the leaf litter.
Amber Smith, driving on the main road, wished she’d never have to drive off gravel again, never trip up another dirt holler where the cicadas and crickets crowded the space in her head with their chirping and hissing. *Lord knows I worked from sunrise to sunset and still I’m neighbor to all His children*, she thought.

The cool night air, saturated with the smell of grass, tickled her face through the open SUV window. She drove through Presswood and was coming toward the plant, and though all the workers had gone home it was brighter than any town on the mountain, with lights in the watchtowers on top of the silos and strung along the side of the conveyor belt. The belt stretched above her head like a bridge in a postcard. Amber had many postcards of this kind, sent by friends from high school who had left Helen’s Creek for the Northeast.

*It’s due to my faith that I’m still here*, she thought. *For my duty to the people of Helen’s Creek.* With a free hand, she rubbed her right calf. It was thick as a pillar and sore from the day’s labor. She had visited six outpatients that day, had seven more to call on the next, and prayed the poor children would keep to their own hollers and not haunt her all day and night.

At six o’clock she’d returned home to make bacon and collards for her husband and then she was back in her wagon with a blackberry pie on the passenger seat. Her godson liked a blackberry pie and she had promised to bake it for him with the first berries from her garden. When Ben Roland returned from the capital, no one in Helen’s Creek would talk to him or let him in the house, not even his own mother—though Bess Roland weren’t fit in the head to do so. Amber took it upon herself to call on this godson, for no matter what people said about her going up that holler,
the Lord had told her *all His children shall be saved and none neglected.*

Before her rose the mountains, and below, Helen’s Creek shimmered like scales of a black rat snake. An open-roof train hugged the mountainside, chugging slow. Its front disappeared beyond the curve of the hill, and as she drove on, it seemed like she would never see the first car. Though the train was too tall for her to see its contents, she could imagine the paper-thin chips that filled each transport car. *He made the mountains, He lay down the wealth to sustain us.* *If it weren’t right, I reckon He wouldn’t have put it here.*

She passed three crucifixes in a field of grass. It seemed to her they had been placed there to remind her of His mercy to the fallen. She imagined the patients who lived in the hills that she passed, imagined them sitting in porch chairs in front of trailers strewn like wrecked train cars on mountain ridges—faceless, featureless, as coal-black silhouettes. Here was the holler where Odessa and her father Jack Winfried lived, whom Amber had visited that morning, during breakfast.

A biscuit hung in Odessa’s hand. Milk spotted Jack’s chapped lips. Their shadows ran long in the grass all the way out to where Amber was standing. She didn’t like how it looked.

“Here’s Mrs. Amber come to see me,” Odessa said to Jack without moving a limb, her body in the porch chair like a chunk of granite. “She won’t want anything to drink now.”

“Odessa, you ask her she want anything,” said Jack. There was a dent in the back corner of the trailer where some branches had fallen, and they had nailed cloth over the broken windows.

“I done ask her each time she come she want
something and she say no like she think my glasses are soiled.”

Amber was used to such rudeness. “How are you feeling this week, Odessa?” she asked.

“I tell you they poisoned me and I’ll drop dead any day now.”

“Ain’t no one poisoning you, Odessa,” said Jack. There was an oak tree by Jack’s four-wheeler. The shadows of the leaves crossed the lawn, disappeared into Odessa’s and Jack’s shadows, and then swam out again, out the other side of them. Amber asked to be admitted into the trailer to examine the children.

“One more stupid than the next,” said Odessa. “I right have a reason to think I been poisoned.”

Amber passed Adel’s, where a mother and son were heaving groceries from the store into their vehicle’s truck. On Route 3, another car flew past, its headlights forming a vanishing triangle on the dark road. Poisoned by her own blood mixed back with hers, Amber thought. Odessa wouldn’t tell the father’s name but there were too many kin in that squalid holler for it to be any other way. Those children weren’t made in the Lord’s natural way but the Lord will forgive them for it and he will reclaim them.

A little girl sat naked on the floor of the trailer, playing with a pot of uncooked oats and water.

“Darling, where’s your baby sis?” said Amber. The girl scrambled onto her knees and, squeezing past Amber’s skirt, ran out the trailer door.

Amber noticed a line of ruptured paint in the corner of the wall, a pile of moist rags stuffed beneath.

She found the baby sleeping in a crate of blankets.
Her naked head rolled like a chain ball in Amber’s hands, and there was a bump in the flesh behind the ear.

“I tell you,” said Odessa, standing behind her. “Her head ain’t look right and she gape at a person like she a born idiot. I tell you they right poisoned my water and killing everyone in the holler. I can tell you who they are.”

Amber stood up to take the child outside into the sunlight. “I pray you stop finding excuses for yourself.”

“You right well know who they are. Everyone in this county knows.”

Amber reached the dirt road that led to Ben’s holler. The path was so rough her wheels could barely mount the hill and she had to hold a hand to the pie dish to keep it steady. She could hear a stream flowing on one side of the road. Poisoning the whole holler. Amber grunted and shook her head. Odessa had always liked blaming the world for her troubles, and that was the simple truth. Brothers and sisters mixing blood, drinking life out of death. Amber had forgotten about the train, had never noticed where it had ended, as if at some point the train had turned into the mountain, or the mountain into the train.

“I ain’t a thing to do with y’all,” Ben told Rae. “Y’all up North can’t stick a greased peg in a hog’s ass with two hands and a mallet. If it weren’t for my dying ass, see if y’all would’ve lasted one night in the backwoods.”

In the trembling light he looked for her reaction. He’d been hoping to provoke and distract her. She’d been too thoughtful since they’d left Mary’s and he could tell she was taking responsibility for things she shouldn’t have. Rae never depended on a soul other than herself and when problems arose, she interrogated her soul as if she were the
only cause for blame. He’d learned it about Rae on the very first day he’d met her, at the action camp in Spruce holler. He could recall her dragging her tent, tarp and sleeping bag into the woods to pitch with the others in their tent city with its coolers, water pumps, outdoor stoves and shit composts. To prove she hadn’t come to bum food off the activists, she’d brought her own dumpstered cans of Del Monte Green Beans and Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom to last her the week. He had taken it upon himself to convince her to eat with the camp. During the action, their arms cuffed to the dragline at an angle that kept the blood from leaving them, they had waited ten hours in the open sun for the police to end their scorching misery. After six hours she had finished her canteen, and he had offered her a drink from his own but she had refused, had waited to quench her thirst with the warm water and applesauce served in the capital jail.

In Ben’s estimation, the action had been a success. Operations on the mountain had been shut down for two days, and there was news coverage of the action citing high levels of aluminum in Helen’s Creek. Rae had not been so positive, as if she had expected that somehow, through her sacrifice, she would put an end to the destruction, maybe save Mary’s life. For a while he’d wanted to explain to Rae that one couldn’t fight to win, one had to fight to fight, like a man fights death. He was afraid to say it. Rae and all the other outsiders had no ties, only idealism. They could give up if they began to doubt.

She was staring at the tree where her fox pelt hung from its eyeholes on a branch. Her pointed gaze made him think of a hunting dog.

“I smoked the pelt as that hunter up at Adel’s suggested,” she said. “I smoked it with cow chips but it didn’t kill the maggots. He said the smoking would kill
them but some are in the ear and now they’ve taken over the skin-side. I found some in the tail, and if I don’t get rid of them they’ll eat holes through it. I wanted that pelt for a pair of gloves, because that’s what the guy was wearing and he said he’d kept his hands in shape even when he went logging. It’s nothing like the deer we skinned. It’s too thin—I cut some holes when I scraped the fat. He said stone or sandpaper would do for the brain but I should have gone for sandpaper—the stone wouldn’t stick and made a mess. There are these black spots in the skullcap, I think from the maggots breaking it down, but I don’t know what else I can do because I can’t smoke it again. The legs are already cracked.”

It was unclear to him whether she expected a response or whether in that moment she regarded him as part of the landscape—as another shaved mountain, choked tree, sick creek.

“Why don’t you order gloves from a catalogue,” he grunted.

He rolled a joint and lit the end with Rae’s lighter. Rae leaving would be different from Jackie leaving, he thought. Only, Rae would make no promises and leave no goodbye kiss. *At least when she was gone, she’d be gone*, Ben thought. When Jackie had left, she’d invited him to visit her in New York at her university. He’d gone, and had felt fine during the twelve-hour drive, had pulled over a few times to smoke but never to cough up blood into gas station toilets.

Then he entered the Battery, and for an hour waited in the tunnel strung with blinding golden lights, in the thick of traffic. Even after he emerged from the mouth, he was only entering another type of indoors, with a collage of billboards and exhaust clouds for walls. He left his car in a parking lot run by two mobster types with gold plastic on
their chests, took an elevator down onto the street, and met her at the gate of her university.

The narrowness of the famous city frightened him—the narrowness of bodies, wisps of cloaked forms passing him on the street, and the narrowness of tunnels in the dark. Subway cars reeked of cologne and damp wool. Plastic-packed stores were like an indoors to an indoors.

No one reminded him he couldn’t smoke a cigarette in the dormitory, and the first night he set the fire alarm off and all the dorm residents had been forced to evacuate. Everyone waited on the street for the fire department’s routine inspection; the students, in their underwear and healed boots, stared at him like he was homeless man who’d slipped in through security. Later that night someone had said, “So you’re the hillbilly boyfriend.” Ben had always been proud to call himself a hillbilly, but he had to wonder whether she went around describing him as such.

On other nights when he passed students in the hallway, they said nothing and he wondered if they were still angry about the evacuation, or if it had something to do with his smell. College kids, he discovered, were hypochondriacs. Each building on campus had a hand-sanitizer in the entry, and every day between classes the students rubbed up their hands like they’ve just come from hunting. The bathrooms were always packed with shavers and the jocks showered two, three times a day.

He didn’t think about her or himself because he was thinking about the fluorescents in the dormitory hallway, the street lamps on the avenues, and the pixilated commercials displayed in Times Square—how he had been the blood sacrifice for this splendor. Strolling hand in hand with her, unable to walk as fast, his intestines squeezed, his throat burned, and the people parted around them. He wanted to
be sitting in the cab of a stripping shovel again, pressing pedals and pulling levers to raise the massive iron arm of the machinery. He would release an explosive to loosen the bolts of the skyscrapers, for these metal mountains could be no more rigid than Appalachian rock. Then, he would scoop out the upper stories with his bucket and the billboards would fall like shards of a shattered mirror. He fantasized that once they fell, there would be no light left in them. He would strip the streets, gathering the neon in a pile. The landscape would be flat, and his people would be saved.

“Skinned a fox only so it would rot in the open air,” said Rae. The open land, the stretches of orange dust. Rae had realized she should have seen it for what it was—the mountains, once voluptuous, once living and once breathing, now splayed and tanned for market.

Now she knew she had left the city too late. Been born too late. She was guilty of murder, but only as one hunter among a band of hunters is guilty. Mary, on her deathbed, said “Tires, Tires,” and turned her face away and cried. During the last visit Mary had blessed Rae, but only because she’d given up on Rae, on the activists, on the movement. All her faith was now in God. For we couldn’t cut it back in time, and it consumed her. Vines of kudzu crisscrossing her face.

They heard wheels on the gravel road and saw headlights flashing through the trees.

Rae went out to the vehicle to greet Amber and thank her for the pie. She then went into the trailer to get plates and a chair for Amber to sit on. Ben felt guilty for not standing up, but hated to waste a good joint. He also didn’t know how to talk to this woman who had once deluded him into thinking the Bible would explain why his father had died and why his mother had lost her marbles. He knew Amber
had meant no harm by it, but beyond polite conversation that left them with very little to say to one another.

“I can smell pot and all the beer y’all been drinking,” said Amber, kicking a bottle away from the leg of her chair. They were seated at the fire, each with a plate of pie in their laps. “You know it ain’t right in your condition to drink yourself pie-eyed, Ben. You heard about that kid who worked the cashier at Adel’s. He had problems with his esophagus. Drank a quart of moonshine and they had to take him to emergency.” Amber took a bite of pie and licked her lips. “They say he’s left the job for good, Ben. You know the Lord don’t give two chances for a job like that.”

“I’m well busy already,” said Ben.

“It’s a right shame you haven’t held a job since you left the mines.”

“I have my hands full. Preparations for next winter.” He looked at Amber, but she was staring down at her plate, refusing to acknowledge his meaning.

“Y’all can chop your wood for winter and still hold a job at the same time, I reckon. Your ma could use help with them medical bills and I think if you took this job folks might come around to liking you again.”

“You think I give shit whether folks like me or not?” Ben laughed. He couldn’t remember a time when he had cared.

“Kids today either bum off the land like animals or leave for good,” sighed Amber. “Used to be folk in this county worked like slaves underground and now you can’t get a boy to stand at a cash register! The rest all go North.”

“Mary’s son and daughter are leaving town,” said Rae.

“I know it, nothing does escape me in this country.”
Amber shook her head.

“Selling their ma’s land to the company,” said Ben. “I reckon knowing so would’ve killed her, if she weren’t dead enough already.”

“I figure there are only about six of us from the class of ’85 still hanging on here. But the Lord tells me to stay on and do what I can for these folks. There’s a lot of backwardness in this here country that needs correcting before His word can live among us.”

“That’s what them folk up North think,” said Ben. “But it ain’t backwardness that’s killing people and I reckon you know it.”

Amber said nothing. She thought of all the patients she had visited that day—feverish Mark Bennett and his older sister who couldn’t read, the Smiths, who hadn’t been to church in forty years and had two kids with leukemia, and Odessa’s two simples. Everyone had their own explanations for what had gone wrong in Helen’s Creek, but it all came down to one truth.

Then Amber saw it—the Bible in the fire pit. When her eyes focused on its swollen leaves, she dropped her fork on her plate, and stood from her chair.

“Y’all have a Bible burning in that fire!”

“It weren’t readable, too wet,” said Ben. “Couldn’t think of nothing better to use it for.”

Amber searched for a stick or a pan, but couldn’t find anything with which to fish it out. She stared as the words disappeared into the blackness spreading across the white of the page. Sparks rose from the binding.

“Ben Ronald, you have forsaken the Lord,” Amber said.

“The Lord didn’t do Mary any good and he won’t do me any good. I think nothing but tying myself to a dragline
will do any good.”

Amber stepped towards the pit and extended her hand. Rae saw the motion, but before she could react, Amber had plunged her hand into the pit and grabbed the flaming book.

She lifted it four feet in the air before it slipped from her hands, dissolving into cinders as it fell back into the flames. Amber didn’t scream, but held her scalded hand in front of her, stared at the reddening flesh, the fingertips smudged with ash.

The temple began to fall. Calves weakened, waist bent, and layers of stomach bunched together. Amber fell back into her chair, and Rae leapt up to get the hose on the side of the trailer.

Amber wouldn’t accept a ride, contended she could steer the wheel just as well as before, and had nothing more to say. She wanted to be out of the holler and on her way down Route 3. Home again, she would rebuild herself, drink hot coffee and bandage her hand. No trial was too great. They could never make her leave Helen’s Creek.

“And the Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore,” quoted Ben to the back of Amber’s car as it vanished around the bend. “The Almighty shall be thy defence, and thou shalt have plenty of silver,” he laughed.

Ben and Rae sat on the edge of the pit, passing a second joint back and forth in silence. Above their hands, wisps of cloud swaddled a yellow moon. They were cold but they remained a hands-width apart, embarrassed and unwilling to move closer. The fire crackled, and each stared outward as if they could see their thoughts taking shape in
the flames.

Ben thought about his race against time, here in this slow country with its long, torpid nights. He promised himself that unlike Mary, he would live to see the day the destruction ended. And if “the Lord has other plans for me,” he can bet I won’t ever ask his forgiveness, be it the day I die.

Rae thought about where she would go next, if she did leave Helen’s Creek. She wouldn’t go back to where she had come from. Perhaps there was a place where you were neither the skinner nor the prey, where death was natural. Or maybe it all depended upon how you looked at it—maybe death was always natural, even Mary’s.

Rae curved her body against the rubber and pulled the tire from the shore with all her strength, pulled until it tore free, and she fell backwards, splashing into the stream with the tire in her arms. The water rushed around her, glittering in the sunlight that stole in through the trees. She stood again in her soaked clothes, curved her body around the next tire, and pulled until her fingers burned and her sweat mingled with the mud on her shirt. The shores shuttered, released the tire and sent her flying backward; she heard the sliding of sand and stone as layers of earth settled into the tire’s place. Another tire! Another!—freed at the expense of all her remaining faith—and then the bank roared like a mountain and collapsed, and uprooted trees toppled into the creek. Another tire! Another! She dodged the falling trunks and tumbling rocks. Blood poured from her scraped elbow and mixed with the stream, but she would not stop—Another tire! Another!—until she’d removed every tire in the bank wall. When it was done, she lay in the water and felt it rush over her, blurring her sight of the erupted ditch, the undergrowth and wild trees. The stream carried her down.
She’s not yours to love
or ground to bury the ripened,
or a palace for our symphonies—
she’s a throw, a trajectory
pieced into the throat like
the curve of a fishing hook, coarse salt
so friendly to our brow as
it becomes a smile over water.
Her taste is a drop of lip,
a battle of sugar and lime
as sails rise and fall over the ocean’s
eyes: a slower tide by an eyebrow moon.
Here we are, here we balance
the course of pulses with disease
and one last wish for the end.
We are not our own last storm—
our own falsity and disguise.
At the burial in the cave, a corpse
is wrapped with a red ochre stained shroud
in silence, and time begins
to revolve like echoed breathing.

Mortality and life intersect
as art of death and burial artist,
like brightly colored flowers
woven between a dead child’s fingers.

From cornflower, hollyhock, and hyacinth,
pollen settles on the corpse
and on the floor. If pollen enters
the nose, the corpse revives

like an association revives the forgotten,
and deep within a cave’s memory,
years hang like a stalactite
and the cure to forgetting drips.

The day the corpse is discovered,
with red ochre stained bones,
associations reassemble,
and someone inhales the pollen.
With each scoop of earth,
I pile the dead’s urges
and bake them in the sun.

I turn over the mounds
until the dirt is dry
enough to inhale or paint.

If I mix in red ochre,
the dead return as bulls.
With yellow, as horses.

If I mix in spit and manganese,
they will fly
into their next life.

If the dead trust my mixtures,
these genderless hands
will dig them another life.

If not, they’ll decay into a memory
of ochre-stained bones
that no one will remember.
Selections from *Silhouette studies* / *Études de silhouettes*

Sometimes we come across bits of paper, tossed into a corner, abandoned—not even drafts, but hints of drafts, the beginning of the end of something (in the words of Henry James). Intended to inaugurate vast novels, they stop short at the end of the first sentence. The false start is forgotten and—like a clue, or half of one—it now lies hidden, waiting to be found.

We might have simply admired these remnants as they are, sickly, full of hope—but for the existence of two irrefutable laws: 1) Nature abhors a vacuum; 2) we will never stop asking for stories. And that’s why we couldn’t help but pick up these feeble beginnings and add three more lines, or thirty, or a hundred, only to find out after these hundred lines have passed that it’s true, what we already knew: the end is an impossible lure.

Each of the interrupted beginnings taken up in the following pages comes from Franz Kafka’s pen; see this as chance or coincidence, read into it a deep significance, or an attempt to harmonize these disparate stories around a single figure. (No matter what they say about Kafka, as a patron, he is hesitant: infinitely airy, infinitely discreet.)

Let’s hope you find delight in these three, thirty, or a hundred lines, before they bang up against a wall.
I sailed a boat into a small, natural bay. Let’s be clear; it wasn’t really a boat. For clarity’s sake, let’s call it a canoe, or a board, with a front and a back (what do sailors call that? Er...the rump, if I remember correctly; sailing was never my forte; to me, navigation is an enigma, a crisscrossed world map folded into a hat to be cocked on the head of a pirate, one-eyed, peg-legged). So instead of a boat, imagine a board, and in place of the bay, picture a staggering volume of water in cubic miles, while I, rather than sailing into anything in particular, was adrift, praying to God, gnawing on the wood of the board and ripping off my skin to make a flag that might alert the coast guard. I was lost. I was dying. I was going to disappear along with this piece of rotting plank. I was swallowing myself up for good, when, just then, the board turned back into a boat and a million cubic feet of brackish water became again a small, natural bay.

The door opened a crack. A revolver appeared and an outstretched arm; that is, in any case, what half of the witnesses saw, contradicted by the other half, who were convinced that the revolver was actually a dagger and the outstretched arm was really limp like a stringless puppet’s, or like an arm half-asleep, fumbling for the alarm. According to several experts from abroad, it was neither a revolver nor a dagger but a receptacle, like a vase, or maybe a pot since there was a handle, and it didn’t appear through the crack, as many claimed, but simply fell out of a window, causing quite a bit of commotion down below and, unsurprisingly, the confusion of eyewitness accounts. One spirited detective, the smartest of the bunch, that character we know so well, directed everyone’s attention to a period—barely visible—
between the clauses the door opened a crack and a revolver appeared, pointing out that nothing, not logic, not grammar, not our lazy habits from reading so many detective novels, permits us to establish a nonexistent a priori link between door and revolver, or crack and outstretched arm, and still less to affirm that this revolver is held in a hand, one hand, when the expression and an outstretched arm could just as easily lead you to believe (in an admittedly audacious, slightly hypocritical move) that the revolver appeared by way of an ingenious system of hooks and strings—it all depends, as always, on what you want to deduce. By the time the investigation is closed, reopened, criticized, corroborated, translated into English, and annotated sixty times, everyone has agreed to deny any causal relationship between door, crack, and revolver in outstretched arm—which is not a definitive refusal, but more like a prudent hesitation based on almost scientific rules of accuracy and procedure. A door opens a crack; somewhere else, on another day, something appears, like a shadow of the moon, at the end of an outstretched arm. If a drama ensues, a murder, for instance, the mutilation of a corpse, the desperation of a killer, the lament of families, the badgering of suspects, the voice of denunciations, a trial, and a hanging, it’s purely by chance, as neither door, nor revolver, nor crack can claim anything whatsoever in common with bloody crimes.

A shout arises out of the river—someone is drowning. Logically (part ethics, plus the impossibility of doing otherwise), I have a duty to jump in, without knowing if my jumping in will save the drowner from his drowning or only add a second corpse to the first, just as heavy, adrift, with his
boots still on, swirling in the eddies of the treacherous river, so that a call of two voices will arise out of the river and up to the banks, tenor and countertenor, not quite fine enough to join the choir of sirens but convincing enough, I hope, to attract a savior our way: whether or not he can swim matters little, as long as he joins in.

A shout arises out of the river—it’s a monster, an unfathomable monster, more unfathomable even than the river itself, and hideous, darker than the chasm where the river must thunder and roar. It’s the shout of a Minotaur or of one of those monsters invented by the Greeks to distract us until the dragons get here. The timbre is hoarse, its breath must be rank, but he is shouting, “Pull up a chair, please, do sit down!” or some other kindly invitation. Numerous are the lost passers-by. (At least, that’s what the minstrels want to think, adding the listener to the number of the missing.)

Once I broke my leg; it was the most wonderful experience I ever had in my life, no doubt because it was the first time I’ve ever had an accident like that; my osteopaths can attest to my admirable skeletal structure, and my ex-wives had, thankfully, spared me up to that point. I devoted myself to a peaceful existence—idyllic, free from adventure—made possible by the fact that, in addition to my excellent bone health, I have solid flesh, powerful lungs, immaculate teeth, skin that no flea can touch, and blood like ambrosia—or cherry juice, at least. This one fracture was enough to make that day, November the 24th, the most beautiful day of my
entire life, the most adventurous, if the least peaceful. (I’m so sick of peace, sick of shy, sheltered hope; bring on the broken legs! Give me pathology and an accident-prone world! I’m not ready to go back to the healthy one.) All it took was a slippery stair, and the fall, the pain, the cast, and later, some complications, and at about seven o’clock, the threat of gangrene, the word septicemia uttered by the doctor, repeated by my wife, then by the neighbors, as if septicemia was Beelzebub’s cue. No sooner was it said then the will was signed and the beneficiaries had arrived, and so it began: quarrels between legitimate sons and secret love children back from abroad, murders, back-stabbings, resentments as old as Aeschylus, the settling of scores, pieces of minds given and received, and all manner of killing under the guise of poetic justice—afterward, my sickroom resembled a mass grave of Ancient Greece, like the House of Atreus after the incense had all burned out. No one made it out alive except my doctor and myself; he rectified his diagnosis, though a bit too late. I felt better than ever, entirely aware that my vigor stemmed directly from the broken leg, the fracture, the precise breakage point, this crack delicate as a thread. I owed it my life, and three full hours of the best entertainment. (I did eventually get better; the bone is healing, as my doctor, now a nervous wreck, told me again this morning. The good news: I could attend all the funerals on my own two legs.)

A long time ago, a very long time ago, I wanted to come to this city. It is a large, lively city, many thousands of people live here, every stranger is allowed in. A very long time ago would put me back in the earliest days of my youth, my most tender years. Maybe my memory is playing tricks on me (after
all, that’s what memories are for, to replace the bad with the good and put you at ease), but for me, this tender age so very long ago calls to mind an enormous stone mansion, and in the courtyard of this mansion, a vast patio, a pond, with green all around, plants I know nothing of now that my life is lived from city to city. Here I existed in perfect harmony, on my best behavior, with rhododendrons, bougainvillea, and rubber trees. I didn’t know their names at the time, but thinking of them now, I must have lived in a villa in the tropics, maybe in Portugal or Brazil, where maybe I was the landowner’s son, on endless tracts of land shielded from the world by stone walls and mangrove leaves. A very long time ago is this childhood, pieced together from remains, guesses, hints, mistakes, memory’s errors, or lies I told myself—but I do know that it wasn’t the rhododendrons or the mangroves that captivated me then, as I played among them somewhere in the Argentine countryside, or wherever it was. It was the city, this large, lively city, so foreign to me but so precious, just as I now know nothing of my childhood but hold it so dear. As I struggle to make my way through the streets of this city, I long for my mysterious childhood. I long for it as if it were a large, lively city—what the city meant to me when it was still a mystery—a city with many thousands of people, hospitable to strangers like me. For now, though, I’m here, a stranger in this city. I want to run away, I want to run but most of all I want to hide, because this haven for strangers, strangers of all sorts, anyone from anywhere at all, well, it’s not as comfortable or as pleasant as you might think, from afar, from abroad, from a patio under trees with wide leaves, trees leaning in as if to whisper their names…mangrove…rhododendron.
The robbers had bound me and there I lay close to the captain’s fire. As the hours passed relentlessly—twelve hours, sixteen hours—until nightfall, I had time to reflect and realized in this time that a bound body engages in the best reflections (compared to a body lounging amid the comfort of bedsheets, for example, where reason loves to spread out, under the pretext of expanding his empires—a question of fluid mechanics, I suppose, and of channeling thought through the narrowness of a bottlenecked body). Time to reflect: bound, prostrate, on my side, my belly, really, nose in the dust and eyes blindfolded—what possessed me to call my kidnappers robbers? What made me aware of a fire nearby and then attribute this fire to a captain? Until that moment, I never had much to do with robbers, and I knew no robber to be a captain; it’s also true that I had never been tied up, as far as I can remember, whether on my back or my belly, and that in novel circumstances the mind relies on all sorts of intuitions often superior to reasoning. Even now, I don’t find my hypotheses bizarre. After all, I could feel them tying me up (imagine contusions on the wrists and ankles), and bondage is one of robbers’ specialties, they do it best, unless we’re thinking along the lines of erotic pursuits, stories of cords and whips told by virgins and seniles to jazz up their drab lives with a little Thousand and One Nights—not for me. So, there seems to be a line, more or less direct, between my bound body and the robbers with ropes gathered round, and at the head of these robbers, let’s say there are six or seven of the brainless brutes, a boss, more slick, more cunning, and as we have come to suppose the existence of a boss, why not call him captain, or even, commander.

Lying close to the fire, I followed my reflections, the healthy reflections of a bound captive, and by bringing
together words with pieces of evidence, like fire with ligatures, I arrived at the most plausible conclusion for the time being: I was a rabbit, skinned, tied, salted, garnished with thyme and ready to roast, soon to be served for a captain’s supper—and with that, I could reclaim the serenity of prey, making itself comfortable in its trap.

Poseidon grew tired of his seas. The trident fell from his grasp. Silent, there he sat on a rocky coast, and a gull, stupefied by his presence, flashed in wavering circles round his head. But what would he be without his seas? To have had enough of them, to be sick of them, that’s an understandable, if human, frustration—but to be rid of them completely? to take off and leave them behind? Poseidon sat for a long time on this rock, trying to remember what it was like to stand on solid ground, based on the encounter his bottom was having with this bit of rock for the first time in a very long time. He had assumed human form, but the novelty was lost. It couldn’t offer him the hope that he had once known in the ocean’s depths. You can’t win when you trade divine omnipotence for the weariness of man—at least, not always. Weariness can be richness only so long as it is still possible to run far away from whatever troubles us, but that’s hard to do for an omnipresent god. It becomes, then, the slowest form of death, or of letting yourself be stripped of all you have—to the benefit, for instance, of a gull and his cronies. (By the way, after Poseidon resigns, the gulls will take up his trident and govern the waters, but in the fashion of gulls: obstinate, squawking, mottled, imperfect. The stupefied gulls in charge? Never!—and here comes Poseidon, back to his sea, not yet reconciled to the millions and millions
of gallons of water, but never once taking his eyes off the
birds from the moment they began to waver above his head,
their beady eyes fixed on the trident and visions of glory. He
returns to the water because it is his destiny to reign over
the great depths and because, decidedly, a pointy rock under
a human’s buttocks isn’t comfortable in the least.)

To grow tired of the seas: the sea god cannot escape
this fate, this weariness as vast as the ocean, a weariness that
subsumes the ocean entirely, its gulls, its wrecks, its tides,
its mythology of heroes and shells (and maybe Poseidon,
too, if we count his exile on that rock, with his trident and
his net, when he abandoned all that he had been). But
oceanic weariness, a weariness of ebb and flow, is a poor
replacement for the ocean itself: The ocean will always have
a few surprises in store, but weariness is absolute, its end
known from the start. Poseidon will realize it sooner or later.
Instead of taking refuge in his weariness like in a second
sea, he will ride out to meet it head-on, as if it were another
Poseidon.

The pale moon rose, we rode through the forest; we were
young, as you might imagine, with the arrogance of youth,
and the strength and speed of our horses to prove it. All
during the ride, we pitched our indifference this way and
that, a sincere indifference, never put on, and the whole
world was our audience and our stage, including the moon.
So what if it’s pale, if it rises or it doesn’t—what does it
matter? Our autarkic pride dismissed the moon or mocked
it as no better than a basement window; we tolerated its
paleness because it served the purpose of our adventures:
at night, on horseback, through the forest, as knights of the
Holy Grail or boys with rich fathers shouting and whooping past midnight, terrorizing the poor and knocking over containers of milk and wine as we went. Let them fall over, let them drain out.

I lay sick. Because it was a severe illness, the pallets belonging to the other occupants of the room had been taken out and I was alone for days and nights—after two weeks of isolation and heavy fever, I had no choice but to proceed with the surgery myself. First order of business: locate the anesthesia. Then, teach myself how to use it. Next, figure out how to perform a delicate operation all while submerged in the deepest sleep. Believe it or not, I did it, and to this day—happy, fully recovered—I couldn’t explain exactly how I brought myself to do it and then sew myself back up. In comparison, the aftermath is a walk in the park. I put weight on one leg, then the other, and as for the rest, it’s simply a question of balance. Yesterday, I managed to collect all the other pallets and gather them back in my room.

I lay sick. Because it was a severe illness, the pallets belonging to the other occupants of the room had been taken out and I was alone for days and nights—and for the first time in my life, I could blow into this trombone without holding back, this beautiful trombone in copper, red, and gold, left to me by a great-great uncle who played in the Leipzig brass band. With no one to disturb, day or night, I played Mozart in notes that were round and thick as doughnuts, notes that filled the barracks before they
slipped out a window to startle some unsuspecting weasel or squirrel—and after Mozart, the Stravinsky.

I lay sick. Because it was a severe illness, the pallets belonging to the other occupants of the room had been taken out and I was alone for days and nights. As further precaution, the other occupants were made to leave as well, though it didn’t take much convincing to get them out of this room that smelled so foul (my ulcers had erupted) where they had been sleeping on the floor. And after the pallets and the patients, they decided (Who exactly? In the desert, where I am now, I’ll never know; if I cried out, no one would hear me, my cry drowned out by the goats) they decided to knock down the room’s walls and, to complete the quarantine, they managed—by I don’t know what miracle—to make the whole room disappear, and with it, all of humanity off the surface of the earth. I was contagious, I must still be; my solitude is absolute. My illness is so severe that it pushes away even death, the way that cancer chases away a cold or insanity relieves stomach pains—and so, sickly, immortal, alone in the middle of the desert, I wait. One day, I will have recovered enough strength to declare myself God and, somehow, begin it all again.

I sailed a boat into a small, natural bay—and without further ado, I scuttled the boat. My shipwreck and my death were to be carried out discreetly; I was ready to die. I had sung a hymn, delivered my eulogy, and bequeathed my body to the ingrates. I was ready to die, except, well…I could touch.
Variation on the Human Figure #1
Ivan De Monbrison
Variation on the Human Figure #2
Ivan De Monbrison
Evan Altman is a senior at Brown University concentrating in Visual Art and Computer Science.

MJ Batson is a senior at Brown University concentrating in Visual Art.

Darrell Dela Cruz graduated from San Jose State’s MFA Program for Poetry. His work has appeared in *Thin Air*, *Third Wednesday*, and *ZAUM*, and will appear forthcoming in *Two-Thirds North* and *Clackamas Literary Review*.

Belle Cushing is a senior at Brown University concentrating in Comparative Literature.

Michael Goodman is a senior at Brown University concentrating in Literary Arts.

Mitchell Grabois’s poetry and short fiction has appeared in over seventy literary magazines, most recently *The Examined Life*, *Memoir Journal*, and *Haggard and Hallow*. His novel *Two-Headed Dog* was published in April by *DIRT eBooks*, founded by agent Gary Heidt. He was born in the Bronx and now lives in Denver.

Michael S. Harper is a professor of Literary Arts at Brown University. He has published over ten books of poetry, two of which have been nominated for the National Book Award. Among other honors, he has received a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation and a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Award, and served as the first Poet Laureate of Rhode Island.

Julianne Hill’s nonfiction work has appeared in outlets
including *This American Life*, *Morning Edition*, Chicago Public Radio, PBS, The History Channel, *Real Simple*, and *Health and Writer’s Digest*. Her essay film *So, Mary?* screened at the Cleveland International Film Festival, the Talking Pictures Film Festival, and the Chicago International REEL Shorts Festival. She is an MFA candidate in the creative nonfiction program at Northwestern University and is adjunct at Loyola University Chicago where she teaches journalism.

Tom Holmes is the editor of *Redactions: Poetry, Poetics, & Prose* and the author of six collections of poetry. His writings about wine, poetry book reviews, and poetry can be found at his blog, The Line Break.

Bryn Homuth teaches composition and serves as poetry editor for *Touchstone* at Kansas State University. Previous poems of his have been published in *Catfish Creek*, *The Meadow*, and *Mosaic*.

Award-winning video and performance poet, organizer, producer, and participant in the original development of the internationally-acclaimed “Poetry Slam,” Jean Howard has poetry published in over one hundred publications, including *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and her own book, *Dancing In Your Mother’s Skin* (Tia Chucha Press).

Tim Keppel teaches literature at the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia. The Spanish translation of his novel *A Family Matter* was recently published by Alfaguara, as was his story collection *Earthquake Watch*.

Owen Lucas is a British writer living in Norwalk, Connecticut. Since moving to the United States, he has
featured in numerous British and American journals and poetry reviews. In September, Mountain Tales Press will publish his first chapbook, entitled *Afterworks*.

Elizabeth Metzger is a founder of *The Round* and a Brown University graduate. She is an MFA candidate at Columbia University.

Ivan de Monbrison is a French plastic artist from Paris. His works has been shown and published globally.

Paige Morris is a freshman at Brown University and a member of *The Round*.

Joddy Murray earned his MFA in poetry at Texas State University, San Marcos, and his Ph.D. in composition and cultural rhetoric at Syracuse University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in over 65 journals. He currently teaches writing and rhetoric at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

Ricardo Hiro Nagaoka is a sophomore at the Rhode Island School of Design studying Photography.

Suzanne O’Connell currently works as a licensed clinical social worker. She attended several writing courses at UCLA and is currently a student of Jack Grapes’s advanced method writing group. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review, Foliate Oak, The G.W. Review, Permafrost, Sanskrit, The Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts*, and *Talking River*.

Anna Poon is a sophomore at Brown University concentrating
in English, and is a member of *The Round*.

Cecilia Salama is a graduate of Brown University. She assisted Tony Award winning set designer Eugene Lee in his studio in Providence for over a year, and in 2011 designed and built the set of the Merce Cunningham Residency at Brown. She now lives and works in New York.

Bridget Sauer is a senior at Brown University concentrating in Visual Art.

Abigail Savitch-Lew is a junior at Brown University concentrating in Literary Arts.

Originally from Vermont, Moxie Schults is a student at University of Chicago, abroad for the year in St. Petersburg, Russia. Her current interests include multi-media interactive poetry, and making the perfect poached egg.

Jaeyeon Shin is a junior at the Rhode Island School of Design studying Painting.

Jordan Taylor is a senior at Brown University concentrating in Literary Arts and Political Science, and is an editor of *The Round*.

Emma Winsor Wood is a junior literary scout by day, and a writer/reader by night. She lives in New York.
Editorial Staff

Editors: Lucy Kissel
Sylvia Tomayko-Peters

Associate Editors: Michael Goodman
Kevin Pires
Jordan Taylor

With special thanks to Sienna Bates, Lizzie Davis, Hanna Kostamaa, Paige Morris, and Anna Poon.

We thank Brown University and Brown Graphic Services for their help and support.
Note from the Editors

Thank you for reading the eighth issue of The Round.

The Round is based at Brown University. We consider literary and visual art submissions from any genre and source. Please direct all such work for consideration, as well as any questions, comments, or suggestions, to:

TheRoundMagazine@gmail.com

Sincerely,

The Editors

To find previous issues online, please visit:
http://students.brown.edu/theroundmagazine/