

Fission and other Complications

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Senior Honors Thesis  
Creative Writing  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

4/7/16

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### Aid Station

I'm holding out water cups—that's all. I'm handing them to the last of the serious runners and the first of the charity ones at the 1996 Chattanooga AIDS Project 10k when the man I was in love with comes huffing up to me. All at once, here is Wilson Tuttle. He has on a racing bib and his shoes are very new and unused, very buoyant.

"My God," he says. What he means is he's looking right at me.

He stops his watch and I hold out the water. He hugs me, I spill the water, and he is four miles into a 10k but he smells like cinnamon and synthetic cedar. All of him is synthetic.

"You look good." That's what he says.

I pull my surgical mask a little higher behind my ears. "You're back from Chicago?"

"I'm out here."

More runners chug by. I grab water cups but Wilson's arm is already over my shoulders, his striated sleeveless bicep. It's been four months since he left me, but it looks like it's been closer to four years for him. Four years in the opposite direction.

He gives me a little squeeze. "How's Bennie?"

“Still wearing that suede jacket.”

“I thought it was cute,” he says. “It made him look like a graham cracker.”

Both of us standing there idiotically, blocking the water station. My own idiocy is enhanced by Wilson, who can only look like an idiot by stopping in the middle of a charity 10k and putting his arm over my shoulder. When he taught kickboxing at Cory Everson all of his classes had a three-week waitlist.

“Anyway,” he says, “how *are* you?”

I give him the same look as the time he dragged my nightstand through the dining room across hardwood floors.

“You look good,” he says. “You look okay, I mean. Healthy.”

“Like a fern,” I say.

“Like a person,” he says.

But I have these blue veins in my forehead. My collarbones crest at the top of my volunteer vest; I actually look like an organic coat hanger.

Wilson lets go of me. “I think about you.”

Charity runners funnel by. I pick up more cups and hand them out. I’m who they’re running for, in a way. I’m sick. Eventually—inevitably—I will be very sick. My latex gloves make a squeaking noise every time they brush someone’s hands, like a tiny alarm is going off. *Don’t touch! Don’t touch!* I guess Wilson can’t hear that.

Sweat scrapes down from the collar of his shirt. “Anyway,” he says, “maybe I’ll see you.”

The place where I'd been staying had a sponge for a roof. I mean it was leaky, the skylights hadn't been installed properly; you should've seen it in December when the Northeasters tumbled through. You should've seen it in October when Wilson was still hanging around. Perched on that ladder with a tube of caulk, running it all over the trim. I walked in behind Bennie that first afternoon with my arms full of sweaters and here was this quivering vision up there in nothing but gym shorts.

“That's our pool boy,” Bennie said. He was making a joke. Who would put a pool in a hospice?

It was a day full of jokes for me. The bed in the middle of the dining room, the last guy's sheets in a plastic biohazard bag on the floor, Bennie promising that they hadn't had much time to prepare but they'd sterilized the mattress. Not that it mattered—we were all here for different kinds of the same reason. Want turned to need turned to ruin. I was a human Rubik's cube.

This was a place for men whose families wouldn't take them. Two mattresses in every room, two men striving slowly toward the soft drip of the morphine bags. The neighbors didn't even know it was a hospice; we were in western Chattanooga, Mockingbird territory, where the rotting husks of old mansions jutted up from the suburbs like so many teeth.

Federal funding arrived on the hush. Twice a month an unmarked van pulled into the driveway with medical supplies: needles, IVs, catheters, and—comically—whole boxes of condoms stacked up like parables. A little late, Bennie would say, and the guys who weren't too sick would help him string them up along the rafters like Chinese lanterns.

The final joke of that first day was something I wouldn't appreciate until later. Not until I was coughing out the lining of my esophagus, crinkled up alone on my mattress. Not until I was

lying there, melted snow and loosened caulk splattering my face, reaching and reaching with nothing to hold on to. The final joke of the day was when Wilson Tuttle climbed down his ladder to meet me. He checked out my folded turtle-necks with his thumbs on the creases of his hipbones, his gym shorts hung low around his waist.

“Welcome to camp,” he said.

Wilson was the one who told me the thing about the Rubik’s cube. I was the one who figured out that he wanted to solve me.

Bennie has the golf cart. He drives it right up on the heels of the final runner—a heaving, wilting mess—and waves at me to climb in.

“Channel five is going to be at the finish line,” he says.

This is Bennie’s ninth year in charge of the group home. He is equal parts father and commiserator, and the importance of this, the moral weight of it, pushes through each sentence and step. First thing he did when we got here was clip his director badge to the volunteer vest.

We drive real slow, picking up cones along the way. The runner crumples forward. When he comes through the final stretch there are loads of nonprofit types cheering.

I used to be the kind of guy who came out to the park with my coffee in the morning. I’d watch the runners go by and look at their legs, the slick fluid curve of them. When the races were over I’d pick out a guy and shake his hand, good run and all that, maybe slap the butt jock-like and connive my way to a brunch date. You just know after a while. It’s the way the horny ones stand, I’m telling you. As if we’re presenting.

Anyhow, pretty soon I'd be holding on to the glorious hips of these fast ones throbbing my way through my own personal rosary. Over and over, many mornings and many brunches. Not a lot of questions, either. Before my great ruin I was an investments analyst, and I lived off the spoils of calculated risks.

This final runner crosses and about twenty photographers come over. Bennie had made sure our sickest guys were working the finish line, the ones who look like they're imploding behind the surgical masks.

"How's my hair?" he says. He parks the cart and goes over to pose with them. I wander off looking for ruin.

The sponsor booths are something else. Hospice, obviously, but also Trojan. There's a booth—haha—for life insurance, with a whole lot of guys in surgical masks huddled around it. When I'd first moved in Bennie had asked me if I'd made my will yet. He had a deal with this lawyer, thirty percent discount for everybody dying together in that leaky house. Did I need a will? Did I want to establish a trust to look after anyone? No, I'd said. My mother was dead and my father was entering his thirteenth year of denial, an attitude he'd maintained ever since I brought a boy home with me from Vanderbilt. I had no one to look after. I'd never been afraid for anybody but myself.

There are kiddie pools full of ice and Gatorade. I take the color that's supposed to make your junk shrink and sulk my way around the healthy people. Plenty of them are my type, plenty I'd like to take to brunch. I try to brood but it's hard looking suave in an orange volunteer vest.

Then I see the flashy shoes. The oversized watch on the stippled forearm. I see Wilson drinking something green from a plastic cup, but that's not even the part that puts the irk in me.

The new one is a curly blonde yacht club type. They're holding hands and the kid is looking up at Wilson in this way—I mean, it's *mushy*. His face is very smooth and he is very, very young.

I would slink away, but I've seen that look before. Plenty of times: in the glinting window pane, in the soft reflection off the skylight above my bed, cropped down to a rectangle in the rearview mirror when Wilson was driving me. That's the look you get when you're vulnerable and gay and you think Wilson might solve you.

"Hey," he says. "Hey buddy!"

And I'm sweeping over—that's my idea, to billow toward them dramatically—but my foot catches a kiddie pool and I stumble into them instead.

"Who's this?" I say, pointing at the new one. "Your nephew?"

But of course it isn't his nephew. It's Arnold, Arnold is a freshman at Rhodes, Arnold's relationship with his parents has been strained to say the least since he came out and Wilson is here to mentor him on a strictly volunteer basis. Wilson will make it all better because Wilson has big pecs to cry on.

I shake the kid's hand. You can tell he uses pumice stones. "Arnold," I say, "I'm so sorry to hear about your situation."

Of course I'm not talking about his parents.

"So everyone's here?" Wilson says. "Bennie and all of them?"

"Everyone except George, Claude, Pete, and David."

"I thought George was doing better."

“He had a kidney thing.” *Had*, is what I say. When you live in that house long enough you learn to be careful about tenses.

We stand there for a while. Bennie keeps looking over at us like he wants Wilson to wave.

I point to the biggest cluster of surgical masks. “You can go say hi if you want.”

But here’s the thing: Arnold is looking around. He’s checking out all the runners I’d had pegged for brunch dates and Wilson is distracted, he has his arm and his eyes all over the kid.

“I should stop by,” he says. “I’ve been meaning to.”

I’m looking at Arnold, too. I’m looking and looking and trying to drain some young out of him.

I tell Wilson, “I don’t know if anyone there is your type.”

This time he doesn’t try to hug me.

In hospice, time becomes biological. It moves through your molecules. It runs right ahead of the ruin spreading through your immune system. Finally you’re aching in bed with a hundred machines pushing breath out of you and the ruin overtakes it, time halts, it blends into the sustained drone of the morphine drip.

I’ll say this: I moved in early. Right after the flu symptoms that weren’t really flu symptoms. For a while you don’t feel anything; that’s when the virus is laying out camp. That’s when Wilson was getting his hooks into me.

Each of us got an escort. Not like *that*, though—no hanky-panky. The escort was the guy who came in and tricked the time out of you. Five visits during the week and one long one on Sundays. These escorts would take you anywhere platonic.

Can you believe who mine was? Can you believe the ideas I got when Wilson Tuttle sidled over in his gym shorts? Forget platonic—you bet our first visit together was brunch.

We went to my usual place and ordered from my usual waitress.

“Haven’t seen you around in a while,” she said.

I told her I’d had some things.

Wilson knew to laugh at that. He’d been escorting for three years by then; he took pains to act like a good guy.

“You’ve got some pluck to you,” he told me. “I bet you were wild in your day.”

“*Carpe diem*,” I said. “It’s French.”

And it couldn’t have been easier.

First time was like this: we were at the Carmike 16, we were sitting in the back. I had popcorn, he had bottled water. He kept the bottled water on the outside drink holder. What I have can’t be transmitted by saliva—still, could I blame him?

On the big sleek screen Bruce Willis fumbled through space. He was stranded in a shuttle and running out of oxygen. The shuttle was orbiting somewhere far-off that wasn’t anything like earth. Bruce Willis hovering around in zero gravity, trying to keep still and preserve oxygen while his distress signals throbbed out across the void. That’s what it kept cutting to: the great big black outside of the shuttle.

“That’s the worst way to go,” Wilson said.

“Suffocation?”

He shook his head. “Alone.”

How carefully he looked at me, how well his shoulders swelled up into the collar of his flannel. I’ve said he took pains to look like a good guy. To project empathy. He should have been the one on the film reel, I’m telling you, the way he grabbed tight on my thigh and *felt* for me. So I did the stupid thing—I leaned in, eyes closed—and he was gentle then, too, when he pushed me away.

His jeans were very tight. He wasn’t wearing a belt. So I did what I could; I used my hands on him.

Bennie and I go around picking up trash. Bennie points it out, I put it in the bag. Whole lot of Gatorade. Whole lot of race numbers. This charity is for disease, not the environment. All the booths have already packed up and left.

“Saw you talking to Wilson,” Bennie says.

“You should’ve come over.”

“I was dealing with media.” He wipes his neck down on the volunteer vest. “Anyway, if he wanted to talk to me he’d have talked to me.”

We get to a kiddie pool and dump the water out. All the ice has melted already, all the Gatorades have been sipped twice and tossed to the pavement. I go after more trash but Bennie isn’t following.

“He wanted to talk to *you*,” he says.

I tell him about the water station. I tell him about the arm over the shoulder and the casual hug. The nerve that guy has, playing it *casual* around me.

“He stopped running?” Bennie says.

“And hugged me.”

“Did he at least stop his watch?”

“It was so slick. You saw the kid, right?”

Bennie nods. “Could you imagine being eighteen and holding hands with him?” He lifts up the garbage bag like he has something to show me inside it. “He’ll be spoiled for the rest of his life.”

We go a little farther down the sidewalk. All the other guys are taking a break, they’re cooling off in the shade. Pretty soon I’ll need those kinds of breaks, too. I’ll lose a little more weight and time will sag down on me. Down, down, down, all the way to that morphine drip.

I stoop to grab something—a clear cup flecked with green stuff. It rolls with the breeze right into the gutter. “The kid’s parents kicked him out or something. Wilson said he was *mentoring* him.”

“So that’s what he’s doing now?”

“It’s who he’s doing.”

Bennie shakes his head again. “Don’t say it like that.”

“He’s going to fuck that kid up, Bennie. He’ll act like he’s helping and ruin him.”

“Let’s get this last bit.” Bennie stoops for a Gatorade bottle.

“How long do you have to stick around to be a mentor? Is a couple months good enough?”

“Fine.” He drops the trash bag and sits on the curb. His pointy yuppie mustache is unfurling from sweat. “You want to talk about Wilson? Make it personal?”

“*He* made it personal.”

“No,” Bennie says. “That’s the point. Wilson escorted with us for three years before you got there. You think the first time he wore his flannel was when he came to pick you up?”

“What are you saying?” I say, but I know what he’s saying. I’ve been waiting for someone to say it since Wilson left me curled up alone on my mildewed mattress, hoping time will slow down enough to put the words off a little longer, but here—*drip, drip*, like morphine—it is.

“Wilson was good at his job,” Bennie says. “He knew how to make you leave everything else in the background. He also knew how to never make it personal.”

All I’m thinking of is Bruce Willis locked in a foil cylinder, floating around with the air running out. That’s how the movie ends, by the way: he isn’t dead yet, but he’s dying. He’s all alone when the credits roll, and when you walk out of the movie theater you’ve stranded him.

*Drip, drip.*

*Flat line.*

“Look,” I say—and this is a lie—“I’m just worried about the kid.”

Let’s talk about the end of things. Let’s talk about the roof concave with snow in December, huddling on my mattress while my want turned back to ruin.

It was Christmas. It was Christmas, and he brought me a plastic fern.

“I thought I should tell you first,” he said.

There was something vague and important in Chicago. His mother. His inheritance. Chicago—that was the important part. It was windy there, but I bet he found plenty of sturdy men to hold on to.

What happened to us—to me, I mean—was memory. I remembered that a whole side of the Rubik's cube was missing. I remembered my cresting ribs, the bleat of the morphine and oxygen and dialysis machines at night. Each of us alone, an island on our mattresses. Reality grows in the space between people.

So he brought me this fern. Plastic, he said, because it wouldn't ever wither. It didn't require oxygen and I'd never have to water it. Plastic, I knew, because he'd only have to give it to me once. He balanced it on my nightstand.

“Look,” he said. “It catches water from the leak.”

I didn't feel it until I was crumpled in bed that night. Until there was enough space between us, I mean. But that leak in the ceiling? Where the snow was coming through? Well I rolled onto my back and water was skidding right down my face, tugging at my hairline.

*Drip, drip.*

It was the last lie he told me.

We're on the porch. It's Bennie and me in the rocking chairs, taking a break from the grunt of dialysis, and here comes the Nissan. Same sleek red with new rims. Those are from the inheritance, I guess.

“Maybe you should go inside,” Bennie says.

Even through tinted windows I've noticed the blonde hair.

Wilson is dressed like a hippie instead of a runner. Poncho, UFO-shaped hat. Arnold comes out of the passenger's side and flicks off his sunglasses. There's no other way to explain it: he struts.

They creak up the steps. Wilson catches the edge of his Birkenstocks on a loose nail but turns the trip into a bound.

"Here to check in?" I ask.

He laughs. "Arnold needs volunteer hours."

"Hi Arnold," Bennie says.

"No one signed off on the glory hole?" I say. Maybe that's a little much; anyway, Arnold doesn't look at me.

"I want to help my community," he says.

Wilson's hand is on his back. The way he's rubbing it—it's more from need than want. I recognize that just like I used to recognize brunch dates at finish lines.

"And what do *you* want?" I ask him.

His hand comes away a little too fast.

"So you're back permanently?" Bennie says. "From Chicago?"

He drains the green stuff out of his cup. Always carrying cups around, emptying them. This one goes on the porch railing. "I was thinking Arnold could have my old job."

"Throw your damn cup away," I tell him. I'm out of my rocking chair.

Bennie stands up, too. He's sweating all over his suede collar. "I'm sure we can find something for Arnold to help with. Jason, why don't you show him around? Inside?"

"I should go," Wilson says. "I'll be back at noon to pick him up."

Arnold puts the phone away. He puts his arm around Wilson and tilts up his head. It's not a goodbye kiss, it's a *goodbye I'll miss you* kiss.

"Anyway," Wilson says, pulling out of it, "good seeing you, Bennie."

And he goes back to the Nissan sans cup. Arnold watches the shrinking license plate until it turns out of the neighborhood. He smells like Wilson's aftershave and his feet are very small.

"There you go," Bennie says, as if it's advice.

We walk inside. The machines beep and squeal. Someone is groaning on the other side of the ceiling.

"What's that sound?" Arnold says.

Bennie gives me a look and goes upstairs.

We get still for a while. Arnold pivots around, checking out the mattresses where time is at various phases of stopping. I try not to do that anymore; I'll see it for myself soon enough.

"My dad burned me," he said. "When he kicked me out of the house. He used a skillet."

"That's tough."

He struts past the shriveling bodies and into the dining room. Here's my empty mattress.

"What happened to this guy?"

"I'm that guy."

"Oh," he says. "I thought maybe they—you know."

"I am," I tell him. "A little bit. I'm getting there."

He touches the leaves of my fern. Very gentle. Very familiar. He's looking at the places where I pruned it with a bonsai trimmer.

“These won’t grow back,” he says.

“I know.”

He’s so tender with the plastic stems and he’s so young, his feet are small but I’ve already said that, and he smells—well he smells the way I spent months wishing I could smell, before I forgot what it smelled like. He’s a kid and he’s blonde and he thinks that he might be fixable. He’s the one who needs an escort.

I take the fern from him and set it back down. It’s eleven a.m. A film of fog sags just beyond the skylight.

“How about brunch?” I ask him.

Condensation funnels through that leak. *Drip. Drip.*

We go to the usual place and get the usual waitress. She puts her hand on Arnold’s shoulder when he orders.

“It’s good to have family in town,” she says to me, curving it into a question.

“I’m mentoring him,” I tell her.

Arnold asks for waffles. He brushes hair off his forehead—he’s preening for her.

The hard truths must be approached peripherally. When I lie in bed aching about Wilson am I really only aching about him? Maybe the whole thing is a gift; he’s a safer outlet for my suffering.

Arnold purses his lips to the coffee mug. This is what being with him does to me. I start thinking in abstractions.

“I’m not that hungry,” he says.

“Me either.”

He is very thin. His collarbones jut out from the top of his crewneck. He’s familiar in the same way that a fundamental truth is familiar. The familiarity, I mean, is looming, vague. Ominous.

I’m sipping my water—that’s all. I’m looking right at him. Looking without saying.

“Are you sad?” he asks.

“About what?”

“You know.” Again he’s avoided the real word. That real, terrible word, lurking big and black in some invisible void.

The waitress walks by, wanting to top off our drinks again. She looks at Arnold like Arnold looks at Wilson. She looks at me like I look at Wilson, and I look back at her trying to let her know the unspeakable. I’d like to see Wilson unscramble that.

But for now, Arnold. Arnold is right here waiting for an answer.

*Drip. Drip.*

I tell him he looks good.

## Hungry

I'm not the quarterback. I'm not the point guard, the first baseman, or even the Olympic swimmer, but they still fill gymnasiums with folding chairs for me. And now I am here—in Raleigh, North Carolina, where even the software execs eat macaroni out of Styrofoam cups—to speak in the schools, to motivate that most precious liability: our preteen children.

*World Record Holder*, the banner behind me says (yes, I turned to check). What it doesn't say is that my record is measured in units of hotdogs—sixty-four in a minute, consumed on a makeshift stage in Times Square in June with ESPN present to commentate. Platter to gut, every single frank. What that banner also doesn't say is how to do something no one else has done. People want to know how to commit an act of unprecedented originality. That's what I'm here to explain.

The mayor shakes my hand. The meager audience applauds. Everyone looks like they're on the clock, either the city's or the event organizer's. The speech, theoretically, is open to the public.

“Thank you,” I say. “Too much, too much, thank you.”

*Inhale.*

I tell them that the secret is consistency. Other times, on other stages, I've said it was visualization. B vitamins. The promise isn't in the substance; it's the internalization, the act of consumption, that matters. I have a gluten intolerance and I ate sixty-four Nathan's hotdogs. Maybe that means you can do the impossible. But really the old record was sixty-three and a half; I was only original for .5 hotdogs.

I go on for fifteen minutes. When I belt out my concluding shtick the gym is half empty. Banners arc up to the rafters from the force of the A.C. unit—"GO TIGERS!" "COUNTY CHAMPS!"—and the mayor comes over to shake my hand again.

"Tremendous," he says. "I meant for you to sign our picture." He's checking his watch. He doesn't offer me a pen.

Then the custodial crew enters through the side door, and no one is here to tell me where to go next, and I walk out to the parking lot to my leased Corolla with my nose to my touchscreen waiting for a text from Lorrie, who three months ago accused me of being shortsighted during our sterile, emphatic breakup.

"Where will you be?" she'd said, dumping the last of her sweaters into her car. The keys were in the ignition, Tony Robbins jangling throaty affirmations through the speaker system. "Where will you be, Josh, in one year? Is hotdogs your vision?"

That was June. That was right after I stumbled back from the airport with the belt, the world record, the check that was more for product placement than performance. My jaw was wired shut from surgery; I'd torn my esophagus setting the record. Even if I'd had something to say, how could I have answered her? Our apartment had been quiet for a long time.

I'm just thinking of that—how silent she was in those last few months, passing me in the bedroom or the kitchen pinned down between a set of headphones—when someone yells my name from across the parking lot.

“Hold up!” this guy says, and he is jogging my way in overalls, looking very granola. A whiff of something out of a *Home and Garden* ad precedes him. “My God,” he says, doubling over. “My God, Jesus, I went to the wrong place, I missed it.”

I stop with my keys in the door. “My God,” I also say, because this is Graham O'Connor, my old friend from college.

His handshake is all callouses. Under the mouthy odor of fertilizer is whiskey, maybe, and his fingernails are very long. He looks a little like some kind of nature god. We stand there for a grating second.

“So you're the new champion,” he says.

“Well.”

“I saw a flyer at the co-op.” He wipes his hands on his overalls; they get a little dirtier.

“Sorry I missed the talk. I mean I *just* saw the flyer.”

“You didn't miss much,” I say, thinking of all those lonely folding chairs. Thinking, too, that Graham looks even smaller than I remember. The way he moves to scratch one leg with the other boot—it's birdlike. I want very much to go back to the third floor of the Days Inn and make an itinerary out of the TV guide, but there's something about his rictus smile; I get the feeling that he's waiting to confess.

“I have this new crockpot,” he tells me. “It cooks lamb in five minutes. You should come to dinner.”

At App State Graham and I were equally lost together. We disguised our floundering with obsessions—his art, my eating. He filled canvases with vague, sweeping forms. He won some awards. His paintings were abstract and beautiful without any cohesion. It's been three years since I last saw him, and his getup has me morbidly curious. Maybe a little ready to compare favorably to someone, too. I check my phone as if all of this might have prompted a text from Lorrie.

He tugs on his overalls. "My place isn't far. I took the bus here."

"Okay," I tell him. "Crockpot. Great."

When I unlock the car he goes around to the passenger's side.

I drive with the radio off so I can process Graham's directions. In a few blocks we move from suburbs to office parks, then to streets where hubcaps sprawl beached and glinting on the medians. The whole city is rammed on top of itself. While we drive Graham dumps the gist of things onto me. He is still finding occasional work as an artist, still losing his tan from the Peace Corps, and he has this ball of pus behind his ear but he's certain his herb garden can cure it.

"What about you?" he says. "How's Lorrie?"

I glance at my phone, the empty lock screen poking out of the cup holder. "Wish I could tell you."

"Oh," he says. Then he says it again: "oh."

Here's the thing about Lorrie: since moving out she's been AWOL. I picture Tequila and bathing suits, but probably I am exaggerating. Probably she's at night school or the Y teaching spin class, and probably—unfortunately—she's too busy for second thoughts. I sent her twenty

texts in July and ten in August; still no word back. Not even a chat-bubble ellipsis. Tomorrow is the first day of September. It will be—would be—our fifth year together. Not that I'm thinking about it.

Now Graham is being careful not to look at me.

“What kind of stuff are you working on?” I ask.

When we brake into a stoplight he shows me the birdhouses.

They're big and gaudy and painted like Christmas. There is a notable absence of birds in any of these pictures—glossy prints, creased into quarters, that he removes one at a time from his wallet.

“They're ornamental,” he says. “They have contests for it.”

He points me down a street with a boarded-up Exxon at the corner. The houses are brick and crumbling. No cars out front. No for sale signs, either.

“It's spookier than it used to be,” he says.

I try to look casual locking the doors. “It's quaint.”

Graham shakes his head. “Quaint would be nice. It's hard to believe, but this was the suburbs twenty years ago.”

Graham has moved back to Raleigh—back into his childhood home—to look after his father, who has a particularly tragic form of dementia. We sit in the driveway, the engine idling, while he takes me through the trajectory.

“It's speaking first,” he says. “Your mouth stops working. Think about that: you know what people are asking, but you can't answer them.”

“Guess you can't ask them anything, either.”

Graham nods. His mother died suddenly when he was still in high school. I wonder which is worse—the shock or the drawn-out expectation.

“You know what?” he says. “Let’s not think about it, actually.”

The house is the only two-story on the block, the only building that isn’t brick. Instead it is wrapped in beige stucco and oddly convex. It’s the kind of place Lorrie used to circle in her real estate magazines. She’d wanted to be a homeowner by twenty-five; when we renewed our lease on the apartment at twenty-six, then twenty-seven and twenty-eight, the magazines had migrated to the recycling bin.

“My parents wanted to live in Arizona,” Graham says. “They had this idea that if you moved to the desert you could drop acid at work.” This from a man who I once watched swallow an entire bag of mushrooms on the way to an anthropology final.

In college Graham was small and awkward enough to be mistaken for a genius. Beautiful girls dated him in brief increments. As he fumbles the door open I remember him fumbling with a blunt on the back porch of some dismal house party freshman year, dropping the lighter while trying to introduce himself. Even then he’d solicited a certain reputation: Graham was the kind of guy who I’d always expected to be made into a martyr.

He leads me into a carpeted living room. The blinds are closed. The TV is unplugged. Tapestries woven with intricate mandalas swallow every vertical surface. The decorating strategy, it seems, is nirvana by osmosis.

Graham calls up the staircase. “Dad! I’m home!” To me he says, “Please, dude, take a seat.”

A toilet flushes somewhere in the back of the house. Pipes gurgle through the walls.

“He’s usually napping,” Graham says. He raises his hand to his mouth and chews on his fingernails.

Mr. O’Connor comes out from the hallway, not the stairs. He wipes his hands on his poncho. There’s a miniature whiteboard hanging around his neck, the kind of thing you’d see mounted on the door of a dorm room and decorated with obscenities. This, Graham has explained, is the easiest way for him to communicate. He looks like he should be illuminated by candlelight. Other than that he looks like Dean Martin.

“Dad,” Graham says—speaking loudly but normally—“this is Josh. He’s going to eat with us.”

I stand up, somehow feeling that this is most appropriate.

The sound Mr. O’Connor makes is like a bee in the mouth of a horse. He chuffs and buzzes for two corrosive seconds before saying, “What the good to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

He shakes my hand the way you might hold a shovel.

Graham is working on his fingernails. “Josh does speeches for the youth,” he says. “He’s a world record holder.”

“*Well—*” I say.

Mr. O’Connor nods at my assonance.

“I meant to ask if you were in training,” Graham says. “Do you need like extra food or something? To practice?”

I tell him that I haven't been in training for a while, that I'm on doctor's orders. There was that issue with my esophagus after the big contest in June; since then I've been idling, convalescing on small portions at a regular pace.

Graham shakes his head as if this is the tragedy. "What a shame. You're getting better, right?"

"Well," I say again. There's a reason that I never went in for the follow up. I've been on this press tour for nearly three months, and there's a reason for that, too. I think of Lorrie's question—*what's life after hotdogs?*—and I think of it echoing, swelling and mournful, in my empty apartment.

For eight years I grunted barbells off of my chest. There were breathing exercises and concentration exercises. Then the fasting and gorging, the heads of lettuce I'd keep stocked in the fridge to put away in one sitting. I stomped to the table in Coney Island, Times Square, Sacramento, Louisville. I beat the Korean and I beat the Canadian. I had face paint I would wear, the blue stuff out of *Braveheart*, and before I sat down I'd point at my plate like Babe Ruth with the fence. I visualized. I actualized. Tony Robbins rattled through my skull on an internal loop; I was the one who'd given Lorrie those damn CDs in the first place. So if she would just let me *explain* to her—if she would just *take a moment to respond*—I think I could get her to understand. I was never shortsighted, I just had tunnel vision.

Now a tone like clashing silverware plinks through the living room. I look at Mr. O'Connor, thinking this is him trying to speak again, but Graham moves for the kitchen.

"Lamb's done," he says.

Mr. O'Connor winks at me. "I'm *psh psh* the eat out of." He makes some more buzzing noises, then he sighs; that, at least, is a sound I can understand.

The meat is parched and corded. Graham dishes it into bowls from the industrial-sized crockpot, which sits like an altar on the edge of the greasy counter. He is lamenting about the ornamental birdhouse market.

"They want you now and never later," he says. "You get pigeonholed: your style is expressionist, you use colors like this one kid from Ohio and you do the same little flourishes on the trim as Christine Doyle."

"Who's Christine Doyle?" I ask, scrolling again through the most recent bits of my one-sided conversation with Lorrie.

"The trim lady," Graham says. "The *bane* of my existence."

He sits down with beers for all of us. Then Mr. O'Connor reaches for each of our hands and bows his head, eyes closed. I glance at Graham, who as far as I knew came from an evangelically pagan household. He has the fingernails of his free hand in his mouth again, looking a little panicked. He coughs emphatically.

*Exhale.*

Mr. O'Connor raises his head and for a moment looks as though he's walked into the wrong movie. He squints at Graham and jerks his hands back to his lap. Then he laughs, as if to play all of this off as a joke.

"Ba-bu-bu go," he says. He takes a marker off the top of his whiteboard and writes *just fucking with you*. Each letter is crisp and linear. The sign dangles from his neck like one of

those awful social justice campaigns, and—also like an awful social justice campaign—he doesn't erase it.

“Good one,” Graham says, but he keeps his fingernails by his mouth.

After dinner there is more drinking. Graham takes me out to his shed. We sit there talking for a long time. He's twice as deep into the beer as me, and weighs not far from half as much; his mood is confessional.

“I'm glad I caught you,” he says. “It's good to have visitors.”

The shed is full of canvases and rusting machine guts. Graham's current birdhouse is propped in pieces around a table in the middle of everything. He only keeps one at a time in the workshop, he's explained, so he doesn't get ahead of himself. I told him that made sense.

He swivels around and nearly topples out of his rolling chair. “Wow,” he says, wedging the beer between his legs. “Wow. I don't get out much.”

I tell him that makes sense, too. It occurs to me that this is the first time I've had anyone to drink with since Lorrie.

“I bet you're exhausted,” I say. More observation than guess.

“It's just empty. I mean Dad's here, but still. Empty.” He does one slow rotation in the chair. “Then there's stuff where—well, you saw. The prayer thing at dinner, I mean. Sometimes we're sitting around and I notice he has this look like he can't remember how he got here. Things seem okay for a while, then he does something that scares me.”

Graham has already told me that his grandfather died senile and hysterical in a nursing home at sixty-four. There isn't much that researchers understand about dementia, but they do know it's hereditary.

"He just scares me," he says again. What neither of us will say is who he's scared for.

In the naked light of the single florescent bulb Graham seems smaller and vaguely presidential. Shadows ache through the lines in his face. Think of this: spending the last of your twenties—the first of your thirties, I bet, too—watching your father collapse from the neck up. The things you'd have to visualize.

I lean heavy on the counter. The whole space is cluttered with Graham's art supplies, everything arranged into Tupperware containers—brushes, sandpaper, shades of paint. He's labeled each of them with tape and Sharpie; the blocky letters look just like the ones from Mr. O'Connor's whiteboard. Even with all this mess, the guy is organized.

"Lorrie's cousin is a nurse," I tell him. "I've heard some good stuff about assisted living communities in Wilmington."

He nods. "I thought about that—early on, I mean. Then I toured one." He's going after his fingernails again. "There was this smell, man. It was like they were trying to cover everything up with chemicals."

Both of us put down our beers. I am thinking again of my empty apartment in Charlotte, of the ring buried in the bottom of my sock drawer that I'd bought with the winnings from Times Square. I'd come off the plane with it in my pocket and just because my jaw was wired shut, just because I hadn't put in any applications for a 'grown up job', my girlfriend had walked out with her entire closet in her arms. No chance for me to explain to her. Even if I'd been able to open

my mouth, what was there to say? That I wanted her to marry me instead of break up with me?

There you go, Lorrie—I *did* have a vision.

Graham stands up. He grabs a brush as if he's about to start working, then he drops it again. "Anyway," he says.

Something metallic squeals from inside the house.

We tumble breathless out of the shed and across the yard, gasping and knock-kneed, and I am thinking fire or worse but instead here is Mr. O'Connor getting bowls out of the pantry. He turns and waves to us. At the edge of the counter the crockpot alarm wails freely; the lid is gone, the heat is on high. Graham shuts it off and peeks inside. He gets a mouthful of steam.

"Did you turn this back on?" he says.

Mr. O'Connor ladles out a serving of wrinkled protein. "Ba-ga-va spoon." He swallows, shakes his head. "It's full of B-vitamins."

"Dad." Graham puts his hand over his father's. His fingers are tiny, bitten jagged down past the cuticle, and I get the feeling that I am intruding on something sacred.

I remember walking back inside after Lorrie left. I remember the soft, distant throb of the fading pain medication. I stood in the empty living room—*empty*, really, for the first time since we'd moved in together—and grabbed the couch to keep from toppling over. The feeling I had then must have been the same one Graham has right now, seeing his father set the table for a dinner we've just eaten—the feeling, I mean, of being suddenly and agonizingly an adult.

I look into the crockpot. The lamb has shriveled into something like steel wool. Mr. O'Connor is watching me and Graham is watching me and Lorrie, wherever she is, ought to be watching me because this time I know what to do next.

“Let’s eat,” I say.

I carry the bowls over to the table and sit down. Graham and Mr. O’Connor sit with me. Mr. O’Connor puts down his marker as if it’s a piece of silverware. I smile, then I breathe, then I take a bite. The lamb burns my tongue but I chew through the stinging heat of it.

“Go ace to find?” Mr. O’Connor asks. *What do you think?*

“I’m happy to be here,” I tell him. For three months I’ve been eating alone.

Of course I think of Lorrie. *You’re shortsighted*—that’s what she said. But here with Graham and Mr. O’Connor, I’m starting to see that she’s the shortsighted one.

We go slow, each of us already full of beer. The lamb settles rough and heavy in the top of my stomach. It tastes like ashes. It could taste like anything and it wouldn’t matter. It’s the act of eating that’s important, the act of consuming together.

While we do that we talk. Graham tells me more about the birdhouses. The market is in the crease of another upturn. The contests are doubling in size. People have been buying these things for two hundred years; it’s becoming difficult to be original. There’s only so much you can do with the trim.

“Anyway,” he says. “I should shut up. I’m talking too much.”

“Positive,” Mr. O’Connor says.

He nods to himself, smiling. I crack the lid on one more beer. I’m right there with him.

When our bowls are clean we push them to the middle of the table and ease into silence. From where I’m sitting I can see into the living room. A gaudy mandala looms over Mr. O’Connor’s shoulder, reds and blues that seem to move with the swish of the alcohol in my gut.

Lorrie isn't here. Lorrie isn't anywhere. I stare into that mandala and it begins to feel a little like I'm meditating. *Visualize*, I chant. *Visualize, visualize, actualize.*

Finally Graham pushes out his chair.

"Woah," he whispers. The time on the microwave clock is just south of midnight. When the digits click over my phone's alarm pulses through the silence. *Anniversary*, the label says.

*Call her?*

Five years ago I started dating Lorrie. Three months ago she moved out. She took my Tony Robbins and my tunnel vision. Back in Charlotte, my apartment is empty; I have nothing left to share with her.

The alarm throbs louder. It wails and it wails and I don't turn it off.

### Fast Car

Lina Lyons hurt like a hangover. She hurt like her name, and by that I mean she was all high notes, refrains, plastered to the leather interior of her convertible with both her hands on my hips doing ninety down I-10 with the radio tuned to Chopin—which is what it was like one time, all the time, the short time I was with her. I'm talking seasick. I'm talking matches in the fuselage. I'm talking about Lina Lyons, the girl who ruined me. Now I'll talk about how she did it.

All that summer I dealt in brochures. I'd been working the information kiosk at the airport since my most recent parole, eating shrink-wrapped airport food, breathing recycled airport air. I choked through recycled conversations with men in bucket hats and women whose buggy sunglasses choked out their faces: is this your first time in Orlando? Is it your first time outside of Milwaukee? Is it your first time *as an independent person, living on earth?* Are you staying at the Plaza or the Hyatt? The shuttle left ten minutes ago.

My shift was eight to six. My apartment was a mile away. The music in the airport was set on a two hour loop: elevator jazz for the first hour, then uplifting elevator jazz for the second.

My P.O. showed up after the uplifting hour waving pamphlets. Sometimes I got his pamphlets confused with the travel brochures—someone would ask for Disney and get *Changing Your Outlook*, they'd ask for Busch Gardens and I'd hand them *Impulse Control: 5 Easy Steps*. Time started to flatten and roll up around me; I was stuck inside a time burrito, working my shifts at the airport information kiosk. So it really jolted me, I mean, that first time Lina Lyons showed up.

She stood there and all at once it was as if she'd always been standing there. She was chewing through her manicure. She had flecks of purple nail polish in her teeth. She had about three pounds of silver poking out all over her face: nose piercings, lip piercings, eyebrows and ears and one little pearl on her tongue as if her mouth were an oyster.

"I'm here for a job," she said, and *whoosh!* the pearl was gone. She snapped her mouth shut—just like an oyster.

I suppose it took my brain a moment to click out of inertia. I said, "The shuttle left ten minutes ago."

She said, "I don't need a shuttle. I have a convertible."

I blinked at her. I must have looked stupid and fish-like, my own mouth gaping. Wide open as if waiting for a hook.

"I'm here for a job," she said. "For you."

"I have a job," I said.

"This isn't a job. This is daycare." She smacked her lips at me and her lips—the metal in them—clinked. Her hair was dark and glossy like teakwood. She wasn't an Orlando type; folks, she wasn't even a *human* type.

“You like money?” she asked. “You know the shuttles, right? I need a guy who knows the shuttle routes, for this job I have. You want to see my convertible? It’s parked out front, I’ll take you anywhere.”

How poetic. How funny the universe can be, conniving around you, because looking at people’s convertibles and taking them anywhere was exactly what had gotten me into trouble in the first place. But the uplifting jazz was in its forty-fifth minute, meaning that my P.O. would be here imminently, and I’d stayed out of trouble for three months by then, which was long enough, I guess, for the worst parts of my brain to get rusted. Like I said, I was working off inertia.

“No thanks,” I told Lina Lyons, and if my P.O. hadn’t sidled up right then she might very well have come over the counter for me. Instead she took one of those pamphlets: *Mind over Motive*.

“I could use this kind of thing,” she said. Then she spat her gum into it.

In my apartment on the fourth floor of the tenement I sat with my pamphlets spread in front of me. I kept these pamphlets everywhere, so anytime I looked around I’d see help instead of empty. After Lina Lyons left the information kiosk I spent all night like that, just looking.

I’d had a girl before I went in last time. She stuck around and went for groceries and sometimes rode in the convertibles with me. But once I went to prison—that first time she visited me—she saw me in the jumpsuit and said, “I can’t see you like this. It hurts me to see you.”

“Will you write?” I’d asked her.

“I can’t afford writing,” she’d said. “Not if you’re in here.”

Now she was back with her husband, where she belonged.

But what about Lina? What about these shuttles? Even with the pamphlets in front of me all I could see was her mouth like a scar. Open and close, open and close. I warmed up Ramen on the stove and listened to the sharp throb of the Somalis yelling below me. The third floor of this tenement was reserved by the government for refugees. There were boys running around outside with hearts too big for their shirts, with shirts too big for their bodies. These boys would catch you watching them sometimes, and it was like a ghost passing through you.

I cut the stove and could hardly eat. All that blood was going to my cock, thinking of Lina Lyons. It was her mouth that did it. Because of the *Impulse Control 4* pamphlet I didn’t have to wonder what it would be like with all that metal. I didn’t have to imagine my hands moving over her or coming out from my information kiosk for the kind of job she was talking about, which—because of my history, because of my time in the jumpsuit—I already had a vague but correct idea of. It couldn’t have been anything legal.

In my apartment on the fourth floor of the tenement there was a light bulb right above my bed. I hadn’t had a woman in months, and sometimes when it got dark the shadows would swirl together into that woman who had left me for her husband or any of the other women I’d had or wanted or even imagined wanting; one big ache of feeling. In my apartment on the fourth floor of the tenement, I slept with the light on to keep from seeing faces.

Next day I got in behind my kiosk. The jazz played, and then the uplifting jazz played. I answered everyone’s questions and slowed down a little with the women who came by so I could

get a good look at them. They unfolded behind their buggy sunglasses so I could see what they were; they were puzzles of pulse and limb and soft flesh. Lina Lyons had loosed whatever the P.O. and his pamphlets had stopped up in me. I pressed myself against the inside of that information kiosk and *felt*, actually, for the first time that summer.

I looked not just at the women but out the window. The city was full of the kind of heat you could see—ripples of it quivering off every blacktop or synthetic surface. Cars went by. Cars disappeared. A convertible pulled up, and Lina Lyons got out.

“You came back,” I said.

She was in a fur coat with a leather jacket under the coat. The jacket was unzipped so you could see the sweat streaking down the verticals of her abdomen.

“You look different,” she said.

“I feel different.”

“You thought about it?” she asked. “This job?”

“I have a job,” I said, but the words crumpled like paper between us.

She looked around and put her hands on the counter. The nails were painted different today: a zag of zebra print split each cuticle.

“You’re Zeke,” she said. That was my name. She said, “I know you. I know all about you. Some of my friends are some people you know, okay? They told me everything you’d been up to, making amends and all that. But I know all about you.”

You know the first moment of a terrible car accident? How, if you’re witnessing, there’s a greased kind of suction where you recognize how both vehicles are colliding? And everything seems to glow, and your body pulls right away from you. Well that’s what it was like, folks,

when she reached right across the counter and caught my hands. It was the first time anyone had touched me since I changed out of my jumpsuit.

“I know you,” said Lina Lyons. “And I know you want to drive fast in that car with me.”

I could feel her pulse in her hands. The jazz thudded along. I breathed the filthy airport air—then, my friends, *collision*.

The convertible was a stick. Right away I could tell you didn’t get a car like this from a dealership. You didn’t get it off the street, either. I put my hand on the throttle and it was like the first time sliding your hand between a girl’s legs, it was that good.

“Go ahead,” Lina told me.

Oh, did we fly out of there.

It was good to have water in my eyes from the air again. It was good with Lina tuning the radio, fast lane on the Interstate until the skyline shrunk to swampland. Knowing Lina knew who I was—the reputation I’d built, doing the things that had gotten me in trouble—that was good, too.

My phone rang. My P.O. was calling. Lina reached in my pocket and threw the phone into the wind. Then she smiled—metal jangled—and reached back into my jeans.

That night we made Tallahassee. We put up the top on the convertible and climbed all over each other right there by the highway in the corner of the rest stop. Lina Lyons took my body right out of me. She bobbed her head up and down and her metal jangled.

We put the top back down to sleep. We cranked the seats backwards and looked at the windshield full of sky and I swear to you, we were radiating a kind of heat but also a kind of

light. I remembered a particular night with my last woman, that first time after she'd left her husband, how we had laid there in my apartment under the dangling bulb while our bodies lit up with a thin, opiated glow. "It's the stars," she'd said. "Look, Zeke." And I'd looked. But there weren't any stars; we were just tripping acid and I'd forgotten to turn off the light.

"What are you thinking?" Lina Lyons asked me.

This far from Orlando the night wasn't dark. The streaks glinting off her metal were from real starlight. Her face was from starlight. I looked at Lina Lyons and it was like I wasn't looking—I wasn't thinking, either—I was just drifting, watching. Cars siphoned by on the highway as if sucked through a tube. They roared and whispered; here, then gone.

Lina's job for me had to do with the shuttle buses. There was a particular kind of trim the manufacturer used on the guts of them, and if you scraped this trim off and huffed it you'd lose track of yourself for a few minutes. You couldn't get the paint anywhere else. The stuff had been used up and discontinued. Plenty of people wanted to buy it: kids, vagrants, anyone smart and sad enough to wish they were brainless.

We drove back to Orlando. We were going to follow the shuttle routes—the ones I had memorized—and pull over at the places where the drivers took breaks. There was a twenty minute lag every three hours, scheduled in to compensate for delayed departures or traffic accidents, and at this time the drivers would park at whatever hotel they happened to be departing from next and go inside for coffee, breakfast bars, air conditioning. The buses would be right there unattended.

Lina Lyons had done this before. She'd done it in Miami, and she'd had a guy there, too, but that guy had been arrested. So she'd come up to Orlando. She'd left her guy there, and she'd left a good house, too. Then she'd heard about me. I was a guy who could get into cars in the middle of the day and who also knew the shuttle routes.

"Did you treat this last guy like you're treating me?" I asked her. I wondered where the last guy had been working before she'd found him.

"You don't want to hear about that," she said, and that by itself was an answer.

First place was the Hyatt. We pulled in and waited with the car off. I had an ache in my fingers like when you see someone climbing the side of a mountain—it was a *don't fall* kind of feeling, a timid one.

The shuttle unloaded. The shuttle driver climbed out. The hotel doors slid open and shut like jaws.

"Okay," Lina Lyons said.

"Okay," I said.

The trick was to walk over real slow. That's what predators do in the jungle. We positively sidled to that shuttle and when I got my hands on the doors each of my fingertips was like its own little heart pumping full of blood.

Whole time Lina was talking to me. Or maybe she was singing. She hummed the song they use for the slow motion bits in movies. People walked by with bucket hats and sunglasses. They looked at maps or they looked at their phones but they never looked at each other, and they never looked at us. I teased the doors open and we climbed in right there in view of anyone. If it

had been night and they'd seen us they would have said something. But it was daytime, so we only looked like people doing our jobs—no one wanted to know any better.

We worked fast. Lina had chisels and bags to hold under the chisels. She showed me where to scrape off the trim, then she put on a mask like a surgeon wears to keep from getting blotto off of breathing the stuff. Did I want one?

I told her no thanks. Frankly I didn't mind getting blotto.

We had to step over the seats to reach the trim. My forearm started to ache from scraping, but when I switched hands I couldn't scrape right. The paint flecks were getting to me. I had a feeling like the sun pooling in front of my face, and I had to squint through this light—reach through it—to keep going. I stepped over a seat and slipped. Some kid had left their Mickey Mouse doll in the floorboard. It looked up at me with big plastic eyes hooking through the back of my skull. To me that doll looked more ready to move than I was. I'd begun all at once to feel inanimate.

“Hey,” Lina said. Her hand was on my shoulder as if it had always been there. “Hey, Zeke. Let's go.”

I followed her out. She walked me out, I mean. She had two bags full of paint flecks and I had half a bag. In the car we sat quiet, breathing for a moment. My brain inflated again.

“Where next?” I said. I'd forgotten we were following the routes.

“That's on you,” Lina told me. “That part's your responsibility.”

We did it five times to five buses. We scraped up thirteen bags full of the stuff. Every time Lina put on the mask. Every time I breathed in a little more of the paint chips. There was a

feeling of unfolding; my brain stopped working in sentences and reduced itself to image or color. I saw things without putting names to them. They appeared abruptly basic and logical, broken down past words.

In the fourth bus I began to feel euphoric. I grabbed Lina Lyons and kissed her right through the surgical mask.

“What was that for?” she said.

We were embedded in the first times of things, which are the best times.

I had momentum under my feet for the first time all summer. For too long I’d been stopped up with memories of my last woman. I’d been thinking of how what had ruined us was knowing each other too well. But here I was with Lina Lyons, the most human part of her that metal around her mouth. She might have drifted off like a ghost without that metal as an anchor. She was all body—there was nothing else to her.

After the fifth bus Lina Lyons took the keys from me.

“Get in,” she said.

I got in.

She counted out five twenties from her jacket. She handed them to me and I held them stupidly, fist extended. “Good work,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said. “So what? Are we going to sell this?”

“I’ll sell it,” she said. The transmission rumbled around the keys. This car hissed and spat, but I’d checked under the hood; there wasn’t much to it.

Lina said, “Where to?”

“What?”

“Where do you live? You want to go home, right? You don’t want me to leave you back at the airport?” She pursed her lips, but the metal was silent.

One more thing about your first time with a new woman: folks, you get ideas. They spread up from your cock like the swell and pitch of orgasm, and you think—because things have been reduced to warmth and damp—it could always be like this, maybe, if both of you could stay still and keep from knowing anything more about each other.

I wanted to go where Lina Lyons was going, but Lina Lyons wouldn’t take me. My impulse was to hit her. My other impulse was to kiss her. Instead I told her, “Home would be good.”

In the parking lot of the tenement the children of refugees ran barefoot behind a soccer ball. Lina Lyons whipped right by them close enough to touch. She parked at the curb and kept the engine running.

I got out. I put my hand on the door as if poised to say something.

“Good work,” she said. She reached into the glove compartment and took out a pair of sunglasses.

I couldn’t look at her like that. I let go of the door.

The staircase reeked of the chemicals they use to cover up piss. Cockroaches were splayed belly-up in the corners. On the landing outside my room a woman was crying. She knelt barefoot under the exit sign and her lowered head—oblong, distorted—was the darkest and baldest thing I’d ever seen.

“He came back,” she said. “He’s in there now, waiting for me.” She pointed down the stairs and I saw that her hands were blistered. I saw that she was a girl, not a woman.

“Will you go back?” I said, but I didn’t wait for her to answer. I walked down the hall and into my room.

The best parts of a woman are celestial. You look up and ache after them—everything is gravity and surface and collision. You press against her and hope for impact. But after you get around that first throbbing, longing reality, you remember that there’s more to a woman than her lips or her legs. She talks to you, maybe, and tells you something that you never knew about her. But with Lina Lyons there was nothing to know. She was gone before my body turned up again.

In my apartment on the fourth floor of the tenement, someone had slipped a letter under my door. Next to the letter there were pamphlets from my P.O.: *Visualization, Coping with Others*. The letter was a summons. I left it on the floor.

My cellphone was shattered on the blacktop of I-10 and I had a hundred dollars in my pocket and it was only noon; I’d been gone with Lina Lyons for less than a day. Now I was home, and I could see right through all the pamphlets. I moaned my way to bed. My body was turning up empty.

The mattress, the light bulb, the window. Down in the grass the Somali children ran barefoot. They toppled forward with jutting arms like coils leaving their chests. I watched their faces. I was thinking of that first night with my old woman, how we had sprawled across my mattress and filled the dark with our own swelling ideas of each other. Back then I’d begun to let myself think that I could be anyone. That’s how I’d met that woman. I’d told her I was anyone, and she’d believed me.

No. Our first time together; that's not what's important. The throb, the pant—that, too, could have been anyone. What's important is what happened after.

I'm talking about the chuck and heave of my chest to her spine, the two of us watching the window instead of each other. It was summer, and the children ran out through the dark as if celebrating what was happening between this woman and me. Sometimes they stopped and looked up and I was certain that they could see us.

The best and closest moments are the ones before knowledge. The first smile, the first kiss, the first aching mutual crescendo—what's left after those? A slow crawl, a descent into separate but mutual pits.

Lina Lyons hurt me like a hangover. She took everything I'd ever done and slammed it against the front of my skull. She showed me that I lived for the beginnings of things.

What I'm talking about is this: I loved Lina Lyons before I knew her. I could love anyone if I didn't have to know them. I could love those children who'd seen me with my woman in the wet smack of the summer. Writhing, panting; to them we must have been ghosts. To ourselves maybe, too.



## Jamais Vu

Remember this: the screen door open. The breeze funneling through it. The town built over reeking swamp, pillars tangled in rising sulfur. The Lodge built in the town; one node of a larger finger. The woods behind the Exxon across from the care home. Mud lapping the last of the concrete—swamp reclaiming it.

Remember this: chlorine and chloroform, separated by a few molecular distortions. When isolated, chlorine is poisonous. But when diluted—as in a pool, a salt shaker, even drinking water—it is undetectable. How many times have we heard of them? These near misses, all the deadly things that are only deadly by proximity. Exposure. Radiation. Water, too. Past the screen door on the patio of the house, you can dive in and sink right through it.

Later Benson would have to reconstruct everything. There was the report, of course, and also the trial, the deposition, the visits from Federal guys who were nudging in on jurisdiction. Then the TV crews aiming at him with bulging lenses, trying to pin down some small part of it for themselves. One part Benson gave them was both of the starts.

The first—the call from the granddaddy—was deputy stuff. The baby and the mommy had gone missing. The mommy, Shirley Matheson, had been known to leave without explanation, disappearing to unspecified places—sometimes after the daddy, Garret Long, sometimes after things less obvious—but she'd always come back. Owen Matheson would wait for his daughter in his big stuccoed house, and when she knocked on the door he wouldn't ask for specifics. This time, though, it had been thirty days. One whole month, and then Shirley's truck had turned up in the tow yard. That was what it took for Owen to call it in. Real sticky, the deputies agreed. It was an intricate situation.

But none of that was Benson's business. He'd been slogging through a homicide in Ogden for three weeks, and he heard everything about Shirley and her baby peripherally, slumped by the coffee mug in the break room with case files still stapled to the backs of his eyes. Everything was shaky to him; he hadn't been sleeping enough, his head was on the wrong end of a funnel. He picked up files and read through the same sentence ten times. So it was natural—logical, even—that Shirley Matheson and her baby had remained peripheral. That was the first start.

It was September. It was the fifteenth week of hurricane season, a tropical storm spinning itself dry only fifty miles off the coast, and Benson's father was holding him up at the care home. Benson had come straight from work with takeout from Indochine, and when he'd

eased open the door—hurrying out of the hallway, squinting through the florescent ache of the walls—he'd found his father barefoot and bleeding.

Clothes all over. Pillows all over. The plasma screen fractured on the floor. Seventy-two inches of tube and crystal splintered down the middle, that easy. Benson put hands on his father's shoulders, feeling the shake and the bone in them. He groped the wall for the call button.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey. Hey. *Hey.*”

The aid came through the door with her phone out, texting.

“What happened here?” she said.

There were bruises. Cuts in his foot from the TV—he'd put a heel right through the center, was what it looked like. No telling how long he'd been stumbling around in here. The last time the aid had been by to check on him was lunch. So bandages, a cleaning crew, a doctor speaking in trademarks: Exelon, Klonopin, Tronofil. Whole time, Benson's father reaching for him. Those big, blue collar hands puckered tight around the knuckles. Hands just like Benson's. While he talked with the aid, he tried not to look at them.

The care home wouldn't replace the TV. The budget didn't cover property damage. The aid rubbed her eyes. Mascara was smearing at the corners. It was after six, the rest of the nurses on her shift had already clocked out. She was tired like Benson was tired. He had the feeling that there was something else he'd meant to say, but the words had gone slack in his mouth; he couldn't remember. His fingers ached for a cigarette. On the bedside table, the curry congealed in styrofoam boxes.

“I get it,” he told her.

He went outside. He eased onto the curb with a Marlboro, breathing deep, the guts of it haloing over him. The air was burnt leaves and pollen. At the Exxon across the street, there were two patrol cars. Benson thought about the homicide in Ogden, the new leads that were unfurling in disparate directions like the legs of something scuttling and poisonous. He lit his second cigarette, and then the sheriff's car pulled up.

The sheriff got out. He looked across the street toward the care home. He put his hand over his eyes.

“Detective?” he said.

“Yeah?” Benson said.

“Is this a good time?”

“It's a time,” Benson said.

The sheriff slicked his fingers back over his bald spot. It was a habit he'd kept from when he was still wearing the toupee. “Well how about you come over here and have a look.”

That was the second start.

Owen Matheson answered the door in his boxers. He smiled at Benson the way a patient smiles at the dentist. Benson almost asked if he should come back later, the reek of the whiskey was that bad.

Owen took him to the living room. Books everywhere; opened, folded, stuffed and divided with papers. Compasses. Protractors. Owen had made his money raising houses north of town. He'd bought the land waterlogged and funneled all the wet into ditches, canals, slick-walled retention ponds where legless things with groping mouths left ripples in the water. He'd built the

whole neighborhood. What was that like to live in something you'd created? To drink whiskey and watch it disassemble. His daughter was missing and his daughter's son was—well, Benson didn't like to think of a word for that.

“Wife around?” Benson asked.

“She has an apartment across town.”

Benson told him that he understood.

It was a nice neighborhood. It was a patio hot tub neighborhood, a neighborhood that fined you if your grass was too long. Benson's father had lived in a neighborhood like this before he started forgetting things.

Owen tugged on the elastic of his boxers. “How about I give you the tour?”

Mahogany floors. Chrome in the kitchen. A damp reek everywhere, lidded under citrus. Problems with the well, Owen said. Plumbers were coming on Monday.

A door propped open at the end of the hall; a study. Benson poked his head in. More books and instruments. A desk stacked with blueprints. That same odor—like standing water, Benson thought—pooling here, congealing in the air.

“Do you mind?” he said. They stepped inside.

The back wall was all tapestry: embroidered in blue and glinting gold, two pillars and a staircase unfurled from the sky. Sun and moon in parallel eclipse. In the foreground, a sword. A compass. A stone hoisted on an iron lewis.

“Tracing board,” Owen said. “For degree ceremonies at the Lodge.”

“Shriners?”

“Freemasons.” He smoothed his hand over the fabric. “See these symbols? Everything is encoded. You memorize the relationships, and when you’ve recited all of it the Masters explain what they mean.”

“What do they mean?”

Owen smiled. “Lots of things.”

“Give me an example.”

“I think of it like this,” Owen said. “All it is, is an architecture for living.”

Benson winced. That smell of mold was putting needles through the back of his nose—it couldn’t be good for you, sucking that in all the time. Loose particles in the air. Spores in his throat. He moved for the door.

“As long as you aren’t hurting anyone,” he said.

Owen Matheson laughed.

They climbed a staircase. Benson’s brain was feeling loose—fumes, maybe. Or he was just tired. Sleep tugged at him from organ and marrow.

“Not much to see up here,” Owen said.

There were three bedrooms on the hall. The master. The guest, which was empty. In the third bedroom—the one with ladybugs painted on the trim—Owen stayed in the doorway while Benson looked around. Before Shirley Matheson had gone missing, she’d been living with Owen and her baby. She’d been driving an hour each way to work, only the deputies had gone to her work and found out that she was fired three months ago. So the question was, where had Shirley been driving with the baby?

On top of the dresser, a sheet of stickers. Holographic stars in every color. A strand of sunlight sifted through the blinds and pinned them down—red, green, glinting blue. Benson noted that.

All day long, Benson melted in his office. Files plummeted onto his desk. Tax records, photos, family credit card history. He put back coffee until the words in the margins quivered. Nothing was sticking. He'd called the care home twice about the TV, been transferred both times to the same speechless aid. "I'll put you on with the nurse," she'd said, and the nurse had told him to talk with the aid.

This wasn't his job. He'd slogged through the insurance company, toured the facilities, signed over fifteen thousand a year for his father to be taken care of too long after he'd run out of ways to do it himself. For three years he'd lived in his father's house, left notes on the fridge reminding him to turn off the stove, watched him stumble naked from the bedroom with his mouth going loose. He'd lost a good woman for it. *You don't know when to stop*, she'd told him. She'd been right. Either way, his father was still wilting.

So maybe he'd been irritated. Maybe when a deputy had walked in with soot on his shirt, telling Benson that he'd left the coffee maker on—that the heat of it had melted through the plastic and laminate—Benson had been thinking that this was something his father would have done before the diagnosis, imagining those same codons that had wrecked him tangling into his own skull. Maybe the caffeine had crested right up to the glandular part of his brain and siphoned him out of his seat speaking too loud, hands waving too hard, coffee coming loose from his mug and fracturing out toward the deputy. Tendrils unfurling over the desk, the files, the

deputy's shirt. Benson had looked out the window of his office and seen the rest of the force at their desks glancing away from him.

The labs had come back for the baby. In the coroner's handwriting, more actualizing: *asphyxiation. Blunt force trauma.* Blonde hair recovered from the garbage bag. DNA testing inconclusive. Everything was correlations, probabilities. Each file a new angle for the story to unravel from. The baby. Shirley Matheson. Also, under all of it, one more: a thin file, nearly empty. A file on Owen Matheson.

Six months ago, a call to 911 from the Matheson house. The daddy Garret Long had been showing up too often, demanding to see Shirley or the baby. When Owen wouldn't let him in the door, he'd broken a window. He'd stuck his head through and gotten a mouthful of barrel, Owen Matheson sighting him from the back end of a Mossberg. The deputies had shown up and found them that way, Owen leaning out the broken window in his boxers and Garret Long talking into the barrel of the shotgun, frantic on glass. He'd wanted to take the baby. He was yelling about secret chambers, rituals, symbols in the walls. Saying that the baby wasn't safe. The deputies had cuffed him and brought him in for the night; he'd rubbed callouses off his hands feeling along the sides of the cell.

Two weeks later, a second call from the house. Shirley Matheson drunk, mumbling, afraid.

"He's after me again," she'd said. "I'm hiding. I'm in the basement."

The text of the transcript pushed past the detective's eyes and scrawled itself into his skull. With it, the suggestion of a new story, looming like a shadow.

"Who?" the operator had asked.

Through the static-bound connection, a sound like running water. A slamming door. Shirley Matheson's voice submerged in the clamor.

When the police had showed up, Shirley Matheson was asleep in the living room. The baby was asleep upstairs. No one else. No evidence of forced entry. When they'd interviewed Shirley the next day, she'd told them she'd been drunk. Why had she said she was in the basement? There was no basement in the house. There were no basements for a hundred miles—the water table was too high. But Shirley Matheson hadn't remembered anything. She'd kept looking over her shoulder at her baby, who was bobbing through the pool in Owen Matheson's arms. Was this important? The deputy had noted it, at least. Six months ago, Owen Matheson had issued a restraining order on Garret Long.

The sheriff came in before lunch. He had a file in one hand. With the other hand, he wiped down his bald spot.

“This a good time?” he said. He'd been standing over one of the deputy's desks that morning.

“It's a time,” the detective told him.

The sheriff sat down. He and Benson had been partners for a few years when Benson first joined the force. They'd worked a robbery as their first case together, a typical gas station holdup. There were about twenty witnesses hanging around in the aisles, and the newly deputized Benson had stood there taking statements for half an hour before his older partner called him into the backroom. The security tape had caught the front plates of the getaway car, a

black Escalade. The sheriff had taken the detective outside and pointed to the apartment complex across the street. There was a black Escalade parked by the dumpsters.

“Easiest answer is the best answer,” the sheriff had said. Benson never forgot that.

Now—funneling through the new file he’d brought in—the sheriff moved his lips, groping for words. He had a look on his face like he was trying to make the answer easier.

“Garret Long,” he said, finally. He slid a mug shot across the table.

“The father.”

“Just got flagged on a parole violation. We checked around. He hasn’t showed up at work for thirty-one days.”

“Thirty-one days,” Benson said.

The sheriff handed him the rest of the file. “Got a record, too.”

Benson squinted at that mug shot. He saw the ballistic jaw, the scar over the eyebrow, and he remembered the trash bag in the woods behind the Exxon. The blonde hair glinting inside. Benson looked at Garret Long and the rest of the files fell away. Owen Matheson and his tapestry and the phone-bound nurses at the care home—all of it, splintering, fell away. The easiest answer. The best answer.

He blinked away from the picture. The sheriff was watching him from across the table.

“Did you say something?”

“You were talking,” the sheriff said. “You just trailed off.”

Benson sat down the file.

“How’s your old man?” the sheriff asked.

“He’s fine,” Benson said. “He’s okay, I mean. His TV’s broken.”

The sheriff rubbed his bald spot. "Guess we're old men now, too."

There was something he'd been meaning to tell the sheriff; symbols pooled behind his eyes, chisels and swords and blue stars glinting. He couldn't hold on to his thoughts anymore.

"Jamais vu," the sheriff said.

"What?"

"Jamais vu. You know—tip of the tongue. You were about to say something, then you lost it." The sheriff stood up. "Take a look at Garret Long for me. I bet you'll find something." He was halfway out the door before he remembered his hat. He doubled back, picked it up from the desk, fixed it tight over his bald spot.

"I'm not telling you how to do your job," he said.

Benson understood.

Garret Long's trailer was crunched onto cinderblocks. It sat at the back of a lot at the back of a neighborhood that sagged into the lip of the Cape Fear estuary. The whole cul de sac was flooded, the dirt road so viscous that Benson had to park at the top of the street and slosh through the approach. He was shin-deep, knee deep. Forties and grocery bags swirling past on vague currents. Folding chairs submerged over their seats. Garret Long had been evicted five months ago, but the Jiffy Lube still sent his checks to this address. Benson tried picturing him here: shirtless, tattooed to the teeth, shouldering Shirley Matheson through the door.

The door dangled from its hinges. Benson knocked twice. He had a warrant. He had the momentum of that mug shot and arrest record behind him. He knocked one more time and the door swung inward. It was that easy.

Water had found its way through the floor. Water through the whole belly of the trailer, swamped through his boots, rising in a mouthy, mildewed fetor. That same stink from the woods. From Owen Matheson's study. He groped for the light switch.

Of course there were pipes. Of course the product flashed jagged, crystalized in Ziplock plastic, gleaming like the lights in those tiny shoes from the garbage bag. On the back wall, incised in the sheetrock: two pillars. A chisel. A single eye, right there on the molding, the pupil obscured with a blue star.

Benson's father was in the common room. He'd pulled a chair right under the TV, past the wheelchairs and sofas. He was funneling through channels. Benson sat down next to him.

It was channel five at five. The same story—the same version of it—expanding on every station. Pictures of Garret Long. Mug shots. They'd made it out to his trailer. Benson had stepped down into the mud and gotten a face-full of cameras. He blinked out from the TV, his own eyes rendered in plasma. His father stood up from his chair. He groped for Benson's shoulder, pointed.

“Goo bob,” he said. “God bolt. Good boy.”

In Garret Long's trailer, Benson had seen the product and the pipes, but he'd also seen toys. Stuffed animals. In the bedroom, sunk under an inverted dresser, pictures of Garret Long and Shirley Matheson with their baby.

How many stories could one person occupy? To be a bad guy and a daddy. A detective and a son. A bad guy and a boyfriend. You could try to be both, but you'd probably fail.

Benson's father jumping in front of the TV. The gauze coming loose from his heel. Benson watched himself on the plasma screen and it was almost like watching someone else. It was almost like being lifted out of his own body.

*Any leads?* The reporter was asking.

"Too many leads," the Benson on TV said.

This time Owen shared his whiskey.

Benson followed him into the backyard. It was a beautiful day. The air was cool, and the sun was bright but distant as if walled off by glass. Benson was tired. He'd looked at so many files that the words had bled together and stamped themselves into his vision. He looked out across the yard and saw twelve-point type imposed over it.

One house over, two girls tossed pine cones at a lowered basketball goal. These girls were twelve, thirteen maybe. They stooped to pick up pine cones and their skirts pushed high up their legs. Benson sipped his whiskey. He noticed the way that Owen was looking.

"I'm curious about Garret Long," Benson said.

Owen inhaled as if emerging from water. He moved his hands to his lap, and Benson noticed this, too: what they were moving to cover. It was nearly enough to say something, but Owen beat him to it.

"That man is a bastard," he said.

Benson took out his notebook.

The sun beamed down. The breeze kicked up, wiping ripples across the pool, and the story assembled itself. By the time Owen Matheson was done talking, Benson had filled up ten pages. He'd hardly asked a question; it was that easy.

"Thank you," he said.

"That's it?" Owen asked.

"That's plenty," he said.

They went inside. Owen shut the screen door behind him, but it bounced out of its hinges. He shut it again and it seemed to stay.

In the living room Benson paused. He'd noticed a picture on the end table by the couch.

"This new?" he asked.

"No," Owen said. "It's been there."

Angled in the four-by-six frame, the baby floated through the pool. Its arms were stuffed into inflatable wings. A floppy hat sagged over its eyes.

"That boy loved to swim," Owen said.

Behind him the screen door lolled open.

Benson looked at the baby's picture. He looked out the screen door, at the pool with the wind smoothing over it. He looked and he looked and a new kind of story unfurled itself.

The screen door open. The pool where the baby liked to play. Shirley somewhere else, occupied with her father. Chlorine lapping up, up, up. Ripples tangling outward, then the pool still again, too.

Owen Matheson looking at the girls in the yard. That 911 call—*he's after me*, Shirley had said. Someone had wanted to hurt her. If the baby was gone, Shirley might have started to worry about herself.

*Might have—*

The best answer. The easiest answer. That was Benson's duty. Like smoke—like steam—the story unraveling itself before him dissipated. There was a hole opening up between his head and his mouth. What had he wanted to say?

Benson looked at the screen door. He looked at Owen Matheson. Then he looked down at his notebook full of facts about Garret Long, and his eyes glazed over.

“Okay then,” he said. “Thank you. I've got more than I need.”

“Happy to help,” Owen Matheson said.

The two men shook hands.

The plasma screen barely fit through the entrance. Benson had to angle it sideways with an aid holding the door for him. Shriveled necks craning in the common room, pivoting on wheelchairs to watch him go by.

His father was in bed again. He was facing the window, curled inward. Each day he got smaller. The dementia had risen tide-like and seeped through the highest structures of his brain, deconstructing language and thought. At night—alone and awake in bed—Benson would close his eyes. He'd listen for the sound of that same flood rising in himself.

Benson angled the TV onto the wall. Eighty inches of phosphor-wrapped halides, photons bedded in glass cells and an anti-glare display. Classy, was the word the kid at Best Buy

had used. Clearest image on the market; you could watch a movie and see things that you'd missed in the theaters. Benson peeled off the stickers. When he turned around again his father was looking at him.

"Hey," Benson said. He handed over the remote.

News again. Channel five. Stapled over the scrolling slide, pictures of the baby. Garret Long. Shirley Matheson. Footage of the Mason Lodge on its hilltop. Owen Matheson in his robes and blazer, smiling, shaking hands. *Community leader*, the anchor was saying. *Well known, well liked. Tragic loss.* A cut to the lobby of the Mason lodge, members idling before a meeting. Benson squinted at the plasma screen. He squinted at the far wall, rendered in the clarity of a thousand pixels. There was the eye. There were the pillars, the staircase, the sun and moon in glinting symmetry. One more time, the symbols arranged themselves.

The Mason Lodge folded back from the road. It was a single story of bricked-over windows, built on a hill at the highest point in the county. Still, dark water lipped over the top of the ditch.

No cars in the lot. Benson parked up front by the handicap sign. The symbols, the files, the pictures from the woods; all of it jumbling in the front of his skull. His father hadn't been much older than he was when he first started forgetting things. He smoldered through a cigarette until his brain settled.

The lobby was damp and cool. Glassy tile. Books boxed off by display cases. A Bible, a Talmud, a Quran refracting the chandelier in its gold-leafed pages. A set of double doors at the

back. He tugged twice before they opened—stuck on something, an air current, maybe—and blinked into the darkness.

It was an auditorium. It was a room walled with tapestries, circling tiers of granite sunk deep in the floor. The place was empty. It was unlocked. How easy to walk inside, to pass through the door and see all this rock descending under you. He found the steps with his flashlight.

The staircase bottomed into naked rock. There was a tapestry hung across from it. Benson moved his flashlight over it like a finger: at the top, a single eye, glinting blue. A reek like standing water. A draft moving toward him. The fabric rippled.

Benson pressed his hand into the tapestry, felt it give. No wall behind. He slid right through.

The chamber was small. The walls were weathered limestone, rutted with helictites. A hollow in the far corner. Benson put his light there; bread, rock, sulphur and bone and reeking vitriol. The skull of some rodent with fangs honed to splinters. Water drowning all of it, slicked over the walls and slivering off the ceiling.

*A greater architecture.* That was what Owen Matheson had told him.

A pile-up on MLK. Benson funneled through a yellow light onto Oleander, driving north, doing eighty. Ten minutes to Owen Matheson's place if he hit the lights right. The sky gone to smoke—drooping rainclouds, trees skewering the sunset. Two lanes closed for roadwork. Blacktop jackhammered apart; under it, already rising, water through the mud. Swamp finding its way to the surface.

Matheson's car was gone. The front door dead-bolted. Benson went around back, hugging the azaleas. He paused on the patio. His fingers throbbed for a cigarette; he drew his Colt instead. The sky was sinking. Grey clouds sank their maws to the dirt. Behind him, the face of the pool went glassy with raindrops. He breathed, opened the door, submerged.

Here was the study. The tapestry. That stench pressing into him, fist-like. He smoothed a hand over the fabric: the pillars, the chisel, the stone trestled on its lewis, and that single blue eye, watching. The bag in the woods. The star. The hair. Bread, water, bone, sulfur—everything intentional, single stones in a greater structure. Assembled correctly, they revealed a higher kind of truth.

He pulled back the tapestry. Here was the door.

It opened inward. It opened onto a staircase. The dead-water stench screaming into him, needles through his nose and the backs of his blurring eyes. The beam of his flashlight unfurling onto ripples—water lapping over the bottom steps. Here was the basement, the structure under the structure. Here was the swamp reaching up for it.

Benson waded through the water. Ochre on the walls, those same symbols from the Lodge. A bed frame rusted into the corner—besides that, the basement was empty.

The crackle from his radio moved through him like a sword. He dropped, spun, tracking with the Colt. The sheriff's voice filtering over static: "We have him at the station."

"What?"

"Garret Long," the sheriff said. "The father. Our man."

Benson's hand went loose on the pistol.

"He was holed up by the state line. Gaston County got him."

The mildewed stench funneling up to the ceiling. The darkness like smoke rising with it. Dissipating. Just like that, another kind of story reasserted itself.

What did Benson have—a basement? A fabric full of symbols? A search without a warrant. Evidence that had to be omitted. He'd been molecule close. He'd traced the asymptote. Later, in the part of the story that he never told, Benson would haunt back to this moment. He'd feel the water on his feet and the story fracturing, splintering into pixels, symbols, arbitrary syllables loose of structure or meaning. They had their man now. Everything else was hypothetical.

“We’re saving him for you,” the sheriff said. “His lawyer’s on the way. Come on over quick.”

Benson slid the Colt back into its holster. He climbed the steps. He stooped through the door and felt an entire world collapsing behind him.

Rain funneled down. He went out the way he'd come in. The surface of the pool shattering and reforming, absorbing the torrent. Out front the ditches spilled over. Water frothed onto the road. Benson unlocked his car and got pinned down by headlights.

The Lexus pulled into the driveway. The door swung open and Owen Matheson got out.

“Hey,” Benson said.

“Howdy,” he said. “Were you looking for me?”

He was blonde. He was smiling. Squinting through those bright blue eyes. The rain sank his tee shirt onto his chest. How much of the story had Owen Matheson seen?

“I was just dropping by,” Benson said. “I thought I should tell you. Garret Long is down at the station.”

A moment like gravity—everything heavier, the air gone tectonic. Too dense to breathe. Then Owen Matheson laughed.

Water rising. Words swirling in and out of meaning. The swamp swallowing houses, roads, minutes and hours arranged into aching years. The sheriff went bald. He went to Bermuda to live on a yacht and Benson replaced him. He sat at his desk in the big oaky office and waited while his mind twisted apart.

Daddies went away. Children went the way of their daddies, sinking in the same faulty strings of alleles. After a time Benson wouldn't remember any of it. He'd drive north of town forgetting where he was going, see that rotting neighborhood where the ditches had spilled over and eaten the houses. Water that couldn't be pushed back. Water rising over the city, destroying our greatest architectures, imposing its own inevitable structure.

Stories will dissipate. Thoughts will tangle away from the reach of any sentences. Everything will be reduced to its fundamental elements. And always—in lungs, in dirt, in basements and backgrounds—the water will linger.

## Lucid

Zamir walked right into the head kick. He was jabbing, circling, moving with that fourth round slouch that no amount of road work could knock out of him. And then—like a cartoon, like *fucking teleportation*—his face was flush with the Budweiser logo. Dropped anvil. Birds spinning. In his corner, Kanoa and Ridley wincing through the cage.

The Russian collapsed on top of him. The Russian had a longer reach, a better record, and apparently feet that could time travel. Had Zamir clipped him on the chin at weigh-ins? Had he leaned into the guy—giddy on diuretics—and whispered something vulgar that he'd found on an online translator? *No power*, he'd told the media. *No ground game. Three rounds, tops.*

Now the Russian was landing elbows that sank all the way to the back of Zamir's skull. Kanoa and Ridley yelling. The two of them, for once, telling him the same thing—no cursing or meditation cues. *Chin down! Get guard!*

It was one thing to make promises. To visualize for five months: synching the arm bar, three taps to the mat while the ref pulled them apart, hands up, hop the cage. But to keep them? To make good on those promises when your whole spine had curled up into your brain and the

roar of the crowd ached down on you? That was the part of it, Ridley always said, that you could never practice. When you got pummeled all the training fell away. You were honed down to gland and instinct, your brain gone limbic and left to decide. How easy it was to stop moving. To sink into the throb of your body and wait for the ref to pull him off of you.

What he needed to do was move into guard. Roll him, take the back, finish with a triangle. Ridley making fists at him from the corner. Slurring. His own brother, mouth clamped in that permanent smirk. Ridley wanting this more than he did.

Zamir dropped his hands; he stopped moving.

The medics. The press conference. The swollen face and knuckles, his brain swollen, too—words coming at him slow, staccato, dispersing into nonsense before he could latch onto them. He was tired. He needed sleep like he needed air. *No comment. Next question.*

The Russian on the far side of the table. The Russian smoothing his three-piece suit, grinning for the promise of a title shot. All at once, the Russian behind him. Hands on his shoulders. The stale slash of cologne and vodka moving up his nose. The Russian was telling him something, and then the Russian was kissing ground.

Zamir stumbled up. For a moment he thought that *he'd* knocked him over, his body finally separating from his head, but then he saw Ridley, looming, rubbing the red out of his fist.

Lenses zoomed. Security unfolded from the wings. They pulled Ridley back and left Zamir marooned under the key lights.

He stooped to help the Russian up. The guy's jaw was already purple—more damage than he'd taken for most of the fight. He held it with his big hands.

“You should ask your brother,” he said—his English clipped, loosened—“to teach you how to punch.”

Ridley had fought at 170. He’d signed a contract with the big show at twenty-two—they’d pulled him from the feeders in Thailand, where he’d been kicking trees until his tibias were PVC-thick and calcified. That was just one of the stories. There were things Zamir had only found out about later, third-hand through the Muay Thai forums: twenty mile training runs, daily spars at full contact. His brother was a gym hero.

He’d had five good years. Two title shots—both lost in decision—and a highlight reel crowded with elbows and leg kicks. Ridley was a stand-and-swing kind of guy. A psycho punch eater. He’d swallow an uppercut and just grin at you.

When he’d started moving slower, no one could be sure if it was the punches or his joints that were catching up to him. Two consecutive fights he got stapled to the mat: steamrolled by a hook to the temple, then flattened by a jab from a rookie who had no business finishing him. Just like that, he was off the roster. He got picked up by a Japanese franchise on the momentum of his name. He’d call Zamir from Okinawa and slur dick jokes through the phone line. Had he always talked like he was tipsy? Was it just the static that sliced through their connection?

If it had happened all at once, it might not have happened at all. Each face-bender left Ridley stargazing for a little longer. He’d hang up on Zamir and call back ten minutes later to tell him the same story. He was cutting down to 155. He was bullying guys.

Zamir—fighting in the UFC himself by now—had flown out to Tokyo to see it. Ridley was going to pick him up from the airport. The plan was to hang at Ridley’s condo and talk shit all day before weigh ins. But he never showed.

Zamir had hung at baggage claim for two hours, thinking maybe he’d fucked up the time change. Ridley’s phone was going straight to voicemail. So he’d taken a taxi. He’d wandered around the condominium parking lot for ten minutes, no clue which of the characters stenciled on the doors meant 15-C, before noticing Ridley asleep in the front seat of a Honda. Keys in the ignition, engine on.

He’d hammered the window until Ridley blinked out at him.

“Hey,” Zamir had said. “Hey, fuckhead.”

Slow as a beer buzz, Ridley rolled down the window. That was when Zamir had seen it: the facial muscles seizing, the ceramic look to his pupils. Like his brain and his body were in two different time zones.

The MRI had looked like a hail storm. Ridley slouching on the examination table, loose in the jaw, the doctor clenching his hands in front of them. Zamir staring at those hands and wondering if they’d ever had to hit anything.

“What are the white spots?” He’d asked.

The doctor had tapped the projector. “Those are the problem.”

Scar tissue. Plaque on the cerebrum. That was why Ridley shook when he talked. Why he fell asleep in the middle of conversations. Why he blinked awake sometimes and didn’t recognize his own brother.

*Come home, Zamir had told him. Crash with me. Help me train.*

So now he was a corner guy. He yelled combinations like bomb threats and held the mitts. *Let me have it*, he'd say, hoisting the body pad with both hands, and Zamir would snap through a sidekick, feel him catch it through the foam. Ridley treated the pads like they were gloves. He was groping for something he'd lost a long time ago, but that wasn't why he'd punched the Russian. That had nothing to do with it.

Mind and body. Brother and brother. Two things unified; tangled like neurons.

In the hotel room, Zamir wilted. He sagged through the couch with both hands on the remote. There was a movie with the blonde one. Meagan Fox—no, Alba. Jessica something. His head kept tilting like his brain was sinking to the back of it. He'd lean forward—neck muscles synching—and blink at the grout work between his feet.

At least the suite was bougie. Twelfth floor, MGM Grand, the Vegas Strip unfurling in neon and steel through every window. Marble bathrooms and a full kitchen. Kanoa had been at the stovetop since they stumbled back from the press conference, humming, brewing something smoky meant to soak up the ache of the concussion. He'd flown in from the Big Island to guide Zamir through fight prep; since he touched down in Stockton he hadn't stopped moving. He was dense, thick-waisted, quietly demanding. He'd made some money fighting out of Honolulu in his twenties, then spent years on the Ucayali chanting himself into ayahuasca trances.

“Do you see this?” he said. The SCOBY that rimmed his flask of kombucha had been contaminated overnight. He was trying to show Ridley the bubbles cresting in the yeast, talking about Saturn and cosmic momentum. “This is what I'm worried about. The outer orbit leaves us open to infestation.”

Ridley rubbed a beer over his knuckles. “I’m going over there,” he said. “I’m going to watch TV now.”

When Zamir had brought Kanoa into camp, he’d told Ridley that the guy was a movement coach. How could he explain to his brother these dreams he’d been having? Sweating himself awake each night, stumbling naked out of the trailer—mornings on the mats, rolling with guys in a kind of moving coma. The same dream spitting him from sleep, never remembered. He was getting three hours a night. He was pushing less weight in the gym. In drills he pulled punches early. Ridley screaming at him, face going purple. *You fucking pussy.*

Ridley had never needed visualization. He’d stepped into the ring and had it—even when he lost, he’d had it. But Zamir was coming up empty. On the first day of fight prep, he’d seen the whole thing unraveling in front of him like smoke: that moment on the mat. The one where he decided.

So Kanoa. Guided meditation and eight weeks of waiting to spar until the right planets tumbled into their respective houses. Had Zamir still been waking to those same dreams? Had he still been pulling punches? Despite this, he’d felt—well, more *whole*, in some abstract way. The fact was that Kanoa did teach a kind of movement; chakra realignment, was what he called it. Still—in the cage, in that critical moment—the world had plummeted out from under him.

Ridley eased onto the other end of the couch. They hadn’t talked about the fight yet. They hadn’t talked about the press conference, either. Truce.

“You watching this?” he asked.

On TV, a car unfolded into a glinting robot. Each pixel a needle in the back of Zamir’s eyes. The reek from the kitchen, too—jagged, woody. He handed over the remote.

Ridley blinked through channels. He went all the way to the music stations, then all the way back down to Pay-Per-View. On his second time through, he stopped at the same channel they'd been watching.

"*Transformers*," he said. "Sick."

Zamir stood up. His brain felt like it was sliding down his spine. He took a step, stumbled.

"You're blocking the TV," Ridley said.

Kanoa came over from the kitchen with a cup full of green shit, the stuff from the stove. He handed it to Zamir. "Drink this. We need to get your head right."

The stuff was steaming. Zamir swallowed it before the taste caught up to him—dirt, dry rot, toothy metals and something sweet like benzene.

"Go on," Kanoa said.

He was too tired to think. He leaned back, opened up, spluttered through it. There was the ceiling. The tile. Kanoa steadying him. His brother on the couch, craning his neck.

"If you're going to fly me out here," Ridley said, "If you're going to make me stand in your corner and watch your lose four rounds without throwing *one decent left*, would you at least stop standing in front of the fucking TV?"

Zamir just blinked at him.

Kanoa had dumped everything from his bag into the bedroom. Candles, incense, shafts of quartz like teeth arranged between pillows.

*Listen to me*, he was saying, and Zamir was trying, really, but the whole world felt like it had plunged underwater.

He crawled into bed. He was still stoned off the concussion. When he'd been fighting on the undercard, sometimes he'd showed up in the gym two days after a bout. But two days had become four. Six. A week. Your chin could only take so much—each rattling stayed with you a little longer. It made your tongue go loose and dragged down the ends of your syllables. It made you forget things. Get angry at things. If you got greedy like Ridley and took too many rattlings, you stayed that way.

The drink had gone heavy in Zamir's stomach. The earthy taste of it was stuck to his teeth. He noticed that. He ached his mouth open.

"What did you give me?" he asked.

Kanoa was rearranging crystals. "You're vulnerable. Saturn is exposed. I want you to lie down and let it pull the weakness out of you."

Zamir was tired, that was the problem. Sleep tugged at him like a current.

The light of the Strip screamed through the window. It rose, darkened, plummeted to the rhythm of traffic and billboards and a million spitting, breathing mouths. The ceiling went green. Orange. Antiseptic blue. Was the city doing that, or was it the drink?

*Saturn auspicious. Prone to infestation.*

"You're part of the vine," Kanoa said. "Go from the branch to the trunk. That's the monad, the oversoul. That's the origin and sum of everything. Do you see the way you're connected?"

Anchors in the backs of Zamir's eyes. Sleep cresting in him. Too easy. Too tired. He groped for that vine—squinted for it—but all he saw were the lights on the ceiling.

All he saw was Ridley in the doorway. Looming, wet-lipped, dragging the reek of hops behind him. He jumped on the bed; crystals scattered.

“Stop the voodoo,” he said. “Come get drunk with me.”

And it was that simple: everything Kanoa had chanted together fractured.

Ridley picked up a crystal. He got these tremors sometimes that shook him so hard his teeth chattered. Even then, his hands would stay steady. He pointed the crystal at Zamir.

“Who beat you up?”

“Zamir fought today,” Kanoa said.

Ridley's pupils contracting. You could see the words clicking together.

“Right,” he said. “Zamir. I know.”

He stood up. Kanoa stood up, too. Zamir tried getting to his elbows, but his head felt too far from his body.

Ridley waved the crystal. “What is this, anyway? Are you trying to summon something?”

“The opposite, actually.” Kanoa caught his hand. His hairline was at Ridley's chin, but his shoulders seemed twice as wide. “You're throwing off the energy. How about you go watch TV?”

Ridley's bicep striating, straining out of Kanoa's grip. Fingers going purple against the crystal. He gasped. Covered it with a laugh. “Are you seeing this?” he said to Zamir. “Do you believe this guy?”

Zamir blinked, shook his head, submerged. The medicine was feeling like a second head kick.

It wasn't about believing at all. There were no vines or planets or spirits. There was only your brain, and all the ways you could trick it into keeping your hands up for a little longer. In the fourth round with a face-full of canvas there was nothing left to believe in. Everything reduced, and there was no training that could get you out of it. But you had to fool yourself into thinking you were doing *something* to prepare. You had to pretend. Just so you could sleep.

Ridley's fingers coming off the crystal. He was still laughing, acting like this was a joke to him. Like he and Kanoa were fooling around.

"Come on man," he said.

"Give me the quartz."

"Come on man."

Kanoa twisted. The crystal landed on the rug—no sound, leaflike.

Ridley swung once. He was high, Kanoa slipped, but still; the noise of that fist. Like the air was unzipping behind it.

Ridley stumbled on his own momentum. He tripped into the dresser and caught his chin on the way down. Standing, shaking, blood between his teeth. Leaving.

He slammed the door. Opened it again—looking at Zamir now.

"Do your spiritual shit," he said. "I don't care. If you really wanted to win, you'd have pulled guard."

Kanoa rearranged the crystals. He stayed quiet and didn't look up and that was worse than if he'd followed Ridley out the door. Eight weeks of camp. Two a days, three a days, rewinding fight tape in the trailer between workouts. All that momentum halted in one crucial moment. What was it like to stand helpless on the far side of the cage while your guy folded up on the mat? Tearing your throat open yelling. Your fighter. Your brother. All Zamir had needed to do was reposition his hips. Get guard. Twist, bite, scream—anything.

“Okay,” Kanoa said. “Everything’s ready.”

“Okay,” Zamir said.

“Do you want to keep going?”

“Yes.”

Kanoa knelt by the bed. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to,” Zamir said.

He laid back. Sounds rose like smoke. Traffic. Music. The yawns of a building built for twelve thousand, gutted with people. Thirty floors; thousands of rooms. Each one a vertebrae in a larger spine, a body of steel and glass curling up from the naked blacktop. Was this what Kanoa had meant? The monad. The oversoul. The root and origin of all numbers—many branches, one trunk.

The cage only gave the appearance of isolation. When Zamir stepped into it, he was going with Kanoa. With Ridley. When he folded, he was folding on them, too.

His head swelled. He felt hollow. Tired in muscle and marrow. Kanoa chanted, and the sound of that breath was incense in his nose. Neon, florescent, pitching shadows in his eyes. Too tired. He closed them. Finally, he slept.

A cage. Pads, an island, a rose bush. A dream and a memory:

Zamir was fifteen. He was thick-lipped and greasy. Weekends Ridley picked him up in the VW, drove him out past Salinas. Tumbleweeds and trailers. Creosote splintering like skeletons from the floor of the desert. They made some money moving crystal for an old Paiute named Yellow Foot, flaky stuff that he cooked right there in the kitchen of the Res lodge; two hundred each by Sunday and then they were back in San Joaquin. They funneled down I-5 stapled to the skylight off fumes. They'd stop in Modesto to see Ridley's girl, and there always seemed to be a girl hanging around for Zamir, too. *You look like your brother*; those girls would say, and they'd pull him onto the air mattress.

Years before that they'd been stamped into the news cycle. Dumped at the door to the children's home in Stockton, naked and shivering, knotted together at the wrists with an extension cord. Both toddlers. Both speechless. The first of their memories siphoned down to heat and light: nicotine, plasma, the cluck and sting off a plastic lighter. Identical welts burnt into their backs. When the aids untied them Ridley had screamed himself silent. Police investigations turned up nothing—they'd crawled up from the sagebrush, orphans in the eyes of the state. The scars eased under their skin within a year, and the last of their history disappeared with it.

First thing Ridley taught him was how to get hit. He liked pushing the fosters. He'd work them up slow and ease off until their hands went heavy. When they finally landed he'd sag with the angle—eyes closed, slack in the neck. If you let your bones fall loose the force of a hand, a belt, or a bottle would siphon right through you. When that happened Ridley would grin; next day they'd be back in cots at the children's home.

The last folks who took them had rooms in the back of an antique shop. The lady was all rasp and varicose. She pointed out chores for them from the sofa, haloing through Marlboros between hits of oxygen. The guy was small, swollen, maybe ten years younger. When he got purple with liquor he'd spit at them until his dentures fell out. Ridley would kick them under the couch and then the guy would pull his Ruger. Zamir—sweeping or polishing the stovetop, old enough now to be scared—always kept his head down.

Mostly they lived on the sidewalk. In Stockton you had to swing first. They'd slide out of second period and lift Snickers from the Exxon, post up on Weber Street picking out kids to follow. Ridley's mouth worked like his knuckles; even then he'd talk right into a haymaker. Zamir would lay back and wait for the friends to jump in. It was something to do, at least. That wet smack of bone onto pavement was the most honest sound, realer than chores or algebra. Every jab helped him put off thinking for a little longer.

Things got worse with the fosters. Ridley and the old guy laid into each other nightly. If Ridley came for him he'd aim down with the Ruger and put a slug through the hardwood. Ridley would just laugh and walk off. He'd already started scraping for ways out. Where he ended up was the convention center, a city-wide all comers tournament with two grand for the winner. He ducked around the ring with socks on and pulped five guys in three hours. Zamir watched all of it from the corner: the face plants, the blown-up check. The way Ridley grinned when they handed it to him—he looked like someone who'd never have to think anymore.

With Ridley gone the house got meaner. Weekdays the fosters stacked dishes in the sink for Zamir to wash. He had a list on the fridge: three pages of boxes to check daily. Mopping, vacuuming, greasing down the guy's ferret with a medicine that smelled like lighter fluid.

Ridley was three years older, liberated by now, living out of his van and making some cash brawling on the local circuit. *You come stay with me*, he said. *Next time those fuckers touch you, you call me.*

But Ridley wasn't around much anymore. He was getting flown in to fight weekends in Reno. Houston. Jackson. He stopped showing up in his VW, and then he was calling long distance from Thailand. He'd sold the van for the plane ticket. He was all in. He was fucking guys up.

*You want to get out?* He said. *You want to do something? There's ways.*

In the bedroom, the fosters were fighting again. Toppled furniture. Fractured glass. Zamir cupped a hand over his ear. *Tell me.*

What Ridley gave him was an address.

It was an old school kind of gym. It had bags out back that Ken Shamrock had trained on. The guys let Zamir in on the momentum of Ridley's name. They set him up in the closet with a sleeping bag and didn't ask questions.

He sparred with guys who were missing eyebrows from Ridley's elbows. He cleaned mats, he washed towels, he crossed the street to McDonald's and ate off the Dollar Menu. Every pad he hit, Ridley had hit before him. Every guy he fought, Ridley had beaten. He was getting sucked through the feeders, yanked into the vacuum left by his older brother.

*You look like him*, guys would say. *You move like him.* He was eighteen, nineteen. He'd catch an arm bar in the third round and people would shake his hand afterward, mistake him for Ridley. But he never stood and swung like Ridley. He never took a pummeling and kept

throwing elbows through all of it. Zamir was a good fighter. He was technical, precise, consistently lucky. But if he ever got stapled to the mat, he stayed there.

*Neon. Quartz. Incense. Breathing.*

The medicine twisting up his spine. He was awake and asleep. Talking and listening. One more time, he dreamed:

They were in Tokyo. They were done with the doctors. The lease for the condo was up. The promotion had made its last payout. They were leaving Ridley's place, taking a cab to the airport. Luggage piled into the seat between them.

Three years. For three years Ridley had been fighting here, and now he was leaving with one suitcase.

The city siphoned by in grids and alleys. Thirteen million people. How many of them knew what it was like to get punched in the face and feel the world reduce around you?

Ridley was still pissed over the doctors. *My head's fine*, he'd been saying, but then he would walk into a room and not know which way he'd come from. Whole ride, he'd been spitting fractured Japanese at their driver—arguing, threatening, sagging into the seat. Shaking his head.

The quiet was what got Zamir to look at him.

Ridley. The first part of two. The end of the branch. In the far window—in the glint of the rain and the softened streetlights—their reflections had overlapped, and Zamir hadn't been sure where he ended and his brother began.

The medicine was easing out of him. He breathed it out in lungfuls, savored the last of it on the backs of his teeth. Three a.m. and the whole hallway was silent. It was Vegas, it was the biggest hotel on the Strip, it shouldn't have been like this. Zamir moved through the spine of the building as if he were alone. Under his shoes, the carpet still wobbled.

The elevator spat him into the lobby. He walked past gutted restaurants. Chairs stacked on tables in alcoves the size of showrooms. He walked for minutes without seeing the concierge desk. It was Vegas; everything should have been open. He needed a drink like he needed air.

He was going the wrong way. He was walking past doors with room numbers. He passed three stairwells and an ice machine. A leather-slicked business lounge. He passed a fitness center, and then he stopped walking. Someone was shadowboxing in there.

His key card worked on the door. He blinked into the mirror. Into the face blinking back at him.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Ridley said.

Ridley dropped his hands, sagged next to his bag on the bench. He was wearing his corner clothes. The wicking fabric hugged his shoulders; he was still at fighting weight. Every day of camp he'd run and lifted with Zamir. At night, when Zamir was meditating or looking over tape, Ridley had gone back to the gym to hit the bags. He'd gotten this far on the momentum of his body. Spinning elbows, uppercuts with his whole torso behind them—it was like he thought he'd lose all of it if he ever stopped moving.

Zamir watched him pant. “Come get a drink.”

“I got a drink,” Ridley said. “I'm in the middle of something.”

He bounced over to the counter, held a cup under the beverage dispenser. He waited; the cup stayed empty. He tilted the dispenser forward. Nothing. He picked it up and shook it.

“Here,” Zamir said. “Wait. Look.” He held down the tab.

Ridley laughed too loud. Under the spigot, his hand was shaking.

Two brothers. One future. One mutual goal and outcome. Zamir could keep swinging after those face-benders. He could pull the anvil off his head and spit punches back at guys if he hadn’t seen where that got you—asleep in the driver’s seat, confused in a country where no one knew your name, sweating through combos at three a.m. Groping for something that had left a long time ago.

Ridley was moving again. He coiled across the carpet, low stance, slipping invisible jabs. “I feel good,” he said. “Fucking slippery. Like a shark.”

“A shark?”

“Yeah.” Jab, cross, wheel kick. Air ribboned behind Ridley’s foot. “Sharks swim all night.”

Well it was night, wasn’t it? It was three a.m. in the fucking morning. Zamir pulled the mitts out of Ridley’s bag. He slid them on.

“Go ahead,” he said.

It was a cartoon. It was teleportation. Ridley sliced combos into his palms. The punches dragged heat past Zamir’s face. The sound his knuckles made; it was like a door closing. Like the sound of breath or thought leaving his body. In the mirror, Ridley’s body blurred.

## Fission

When the lights go out in Southport, there are places where the water turns to sky.

A long time ago Liza and I liked to kayak through the sound and pretend it was air that splashed over the paddles. We'd lean over the bow and watch our faces warp in the ripples. That was before I understood what made the water glow: microscopic plankton, guts gone florescent from the runoff of the nuclear plant upstream.

I tried not to think of the neutrons splintering. I tried not to think of the isotopes severed and funneled down to heat, light, radiation ebbing invisibly. I wouldn't think of the water siphoned off to churn turbines from the same river I swam in, boated in, wept and forgot and drowned and renewed myself in. The Cape Fear needed absolving. You opened your mouth underwater and your gums stung as if the salt of it were needles. As if, when it passed into the breath and heat of you, it turned into something else entirely.

The Waccamaw who lived on the river before anyone else did believed that the land around Southport was cursed—not condemned so much as separated. What I mean is, they thought the ground pointed a little into heaven. Things here are thicker. You can feel the weight

of a different universe folding into the land like a breaking wave. You put your foot down on the wrong patch of sand and you just might plummet into the spirit world; that's what Di told me, at least, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

First I should tell you this: the same spring that I stopped drifting I saw Bigfoot.

It was May. It was ninety in the shade with chewable humidity. Liza and I had been camping along the river for a while, eeking by off the fumes of my severance check from Pacsun. I'd gotten the boot as soon as management changed. The new boss—some tapered twenty-three year old with a bachelor's in business from an *accredited four-year university*—had promised me that twenty-nine was too old for retail work, that I should broaden my horizons, that later I'd turn on the seat warmers in my souped-up Escalade and thank him for the kick in the butt.

"Take this opportunity," he'd said, "to step back, to ask yourself: *what do I really want?*"

"Not an Escalade," I'd told him, and I'd emptied the tip jar on my way out.

For three weeks Liza and I played nomads. We swam naked in the Intracoastal. We out-slept the heat in the cab of my Tundra, and at night we languished through six packs yelling the squirrels out of the trees. Liza had been watching yachts slice through the marina downriver, getting ideas, accusing me of aimlessness. We'd started loving each other for a faulty promise: simplicity, plainness, a boneless life. We'd spent the back half of the winter diverting each other, but lately Liza had started feeling a new kind of emptiness. That's what she was yelling about the night that my life began to loosen.

We parked the Tundra in the guts of a pine glade north of Southport and dove into it. My savings were puckered; the guy filling up across from us at the Exxon had flashed me an ounce of Killer Purple and I'd tossed off the last of our cash for it. Liza cried for a while, then she

yelled for a while, then I carried her down to the river and eased her skirt off and panted into her. When we were finished, we crawled onto the bank and let the wind tickle us dry.

“I’m tired of drifting,” she said. “That’s all. ”

She fell asleep right there in the marsh grass. Like I said, we diverted each other.

For a long time I laid there letting the breath and the thought ease of out me. The air felt alkalized, the particles pulled taut around the reactor downstream. In the glow of the power plant sky and ground melted together; we were perched on an asymptote. Everything quivered with the promise of movement. When a shadow severed from the trees and stepped onto the bank, that promise actualized.

I sat straight up. My brain just slid down my spine and landed at the bottom of the food chain.

At the edge of the bank, it slumped. It pivoted. The lights from the reactor haloed up behind it, pinning silver to the clouds, green to the river, grey to the edges of its coat, matted fur dense at the neck and shoulders. I squinted into that darkened face and my brain went electric. Every idea I’d been avoiding crystalized, expanding, scraping the back of my skull. It was a feeling of swelling but also disintegrating: the black face of this monster was as empty as my future.

The buzz dropped out of the air. Even the gnats sagged earthward. Then—quick as thought—the creature slouched back into the trees.

I sat there listening to the river, waiting for the world to congeal together. The gnats rose up again. Turbines churned in the power plant, the pitch of them quivering through me.

I shook Liza awake. Her wrists were as thin as two of my fingers. She lifted her hands and rubbed vision into her eyes. In small ways, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever touched: the bones of her knuckles, the indented swathe where her nose rounded into her cheeks—these parts of her were perfect.

“What a dream this is,” she said. “I never have dreams about you.”

In the morning she was gone.

I winced up from the sand and looked around. My face felt loose. The sun bored shade out the backs of the trees. The tread of the Tundra was stamped into the dirt like a ghost—she'd taken the truck and the debit card. She'd done it before. Who knew where she went; it was never the right place. In the end, she always wandered back to me.

I stumbled out to the highway and got a face-full of camera. Behind it was the thickest, most striated woman I'd ever seen.

“Are you union? Are you a plant?”

I blinked right past her. There were about twenty guys in Dickies swearing around, standing by the road. A Sprinter van was parked on the shoulder with its doors lolling open.

“I'm not anything,” I said.

She lowered the camera. “Well you look like hell. You want a beer or something?”

That lady turned out to be Di. That's how I met her.

The van was bloated with metal. Besides tripods there were flashbulbs, boom mics, Budweisers necked into coolers. Incense simmered in the cupholder. Di sat on the floorboard—the chassis of the van sagging with her torso—and talked her way through a forty.

The guys in the chaps were from the power plant. They'd been seeing strange things on the night shift—trees bending behind the fence line, shadows moving through the dark. They were pretty spooked. That's why Di had showed up; she was working on a documentary.

“Ever heard of a wendigo?” she said. “Witches, big fangs. Think Bigfoot meets Satan.”

All I could picture were those shoulders sliding out from the tree line. “I get the idea,” I told her.

I stuck around all afternoon. Di set the plant guys up along the fence that marked off the reactor. She shot them one at a time, staccato, cutting the camera to offer instructions.

“Would you say you felt threatened?” she'd ask. “Did this feel *supernatural*?”

The guys who hadn't talked yet idled around, plunging the cooler for beers. Every one of them was watching the tree line.

I sat there getting drunker while the story assembled itself: the plant was built over Waccamaw territory. The tribe wanted it back from the state. There were rumors of sorcerers, hoodoo. And now this—a two-legged monster haunting the perimeter. It was nearly enough to cover the emptiness that the creature had opened up in me.

When the last of the guys had wandered off, Di sidled over. She looked like an anatomy poster. Her shoulders sloped up to her ears, but her hair was seaweed sleek and delicate. It spilled down her neck and gathered all the woman of her.

“You some kind of pervert?” she said.

“Not really,” I told her.

She opened the passenger door. “Me either.”

She drove me back into town.

All of Southport was a cobweb. Rotting Colonials sagged into their porches; the whole community looked like it was sighing. Di tuned the radio to something fast and horn-heavy. It had me thinking about the time I'd taken Liza to salsa night at the Fat Pelican and twirled her so hard across the dance floor that she tumbled into the guitarist, dizzy with momentum. Later I'd wiggled her out of her dress and discovered a thong that made the back of my throat go dry, soaking through the fabric of it with just the heat of my mouth. It was exactly the kind of diversion I'd been looking for.

We eased down the main drag. A terminal sun rippled heat over blacktop; the same ground we were driving on melted down to liquid before our eyes.

"I can drop you off wherever," Di said.

Carless, jobless, ditched by Liza—I had no place to be. I could have gone anywhere and it would have been the same. I could have asked her to drive me straight into the river, tires scraping shells until the water sluiced into my lungs; maybe then some current would give me direction.

Di cut the radio. She pushed her bangs off of her forehead and her whole scalp slid back. That beautiful hair was a wig.

"Tell you what," she said. "I have to drop something off. After that you can tell me where to take you."

We turned off Main Street and climbed inland. The road went to gravel, then to dirt, then to asphalt again. We funneled through a blind curve and nearly flattened a toppled mailbox—that was where Di pulled over.

It was a yard full of concrete. Statues groped up from the turf like so many teeth: gnomes, swans, mermaids, a menagerie of real and imagined fauna in two-thirds scale. Di dug a bill-bloated envelope out of the center console. Twenties slid out of it like sardines.

“My movie money,” she said. “I got a grant from the Coalition for Indian Sovereignty.”

I waited until she was on the far side of those statues, ringing the bell of the doublewide at the back of the lot. Then I rooted through the console for cash.

Across the yard, Di stood with her arms folded to her chest. A short, withered woman opened the door. Blood vessels pushed through the tissue under her eyes. When she stepped outside, Di went concave; she must have talked for five minutes before the woman blinked. She looked over Di’s shoulders and her pupils nailed right into me. We shared a moment outside of gravity that way—staring reciprocally, spinning loose from orbit. I was thinking of witches and monsters, ions splitting apart and aching toward new rotations. I was thinking of that shadow that had stepped out of the woods last night and splintered my world apart. What uncommon tragedy had put the red in this woman’s eyes?

She held out her hand. Di put the envelope into it. Then—like a vision—she evaporated. The screen door rattled off its hinges behind her and Di stood there watching it shake into stillness. When she came back to the car, her eyes looked just like that woman’s.

“Where to?” she asked.

Where else? I told her to drop me at Liza’s house.

For months Liza and I had hid behind each other.

We met in a corn maze in Pender County the night before Halloween. I just came around a corner and smacked into her. We'd wandered in separately without realizing the maze was haunted; teenaged zombies with acne under their makeup flailed at us through the stalks.

"Sorry," she said.

"Thank God," I said.

Both of us were completely lost. You can't make this stuff up.

Right away our bodies found a melody. She wrapped her thighs around my face and nearly drowned me. Everywhere I reached I found newer, softer parts of her to hold onto. We throbbed into each other and forgot everything else. I had to suck down a toke just to get to sleep; besides the drinking, she was drugless. She wanted to visit Moscow and I wanted to stay on the coast. She'd sit up late at night practicing Russian—*shto*. she'd say. *Shto ty dielaesh*. At first it sounded like a threat. Later she'd tell me it was a question: *what are you doing?*

We'd been doomed from the beginning, but we'd also been desperate.

At twenty-eight I'd run out of inertia. I was six years clear of UNCW, stocking racks at Pacsun and skipping grocery trips to scrape together rent. The last of my brothers in Delta Sig had gone corporate. I showed up at keggers where no one knew my name. The house had been ransacked by flip-flopped Millennials who didn't even remember the motto. That motto, by the way, was *better men, better lives*. When a senior brother mistook me for a pledge, I started to meditate on it. Did the four hundred square feet of sweat-stained floorspace I kept on the ground floor of Mill Creek speak to either half of that motto? Better was directional—it implied upward, outward, three swift lines behind the feet. Movement. What I craved was some kind of vector.

So I put three months of rent into a cap for the bed of my Tundra, a window-mounted A. C. unit and a propane generator. By the time the eviction notice slid under my door I was staked into the sand on the north end of Carolina Beach. The sun scorched my brain, then my lungs, then the rib-bound throbbing meat of me. I slept through weeks in one suspended dream—working, eating, floating on my back in the filthy Atlantic while the salt slid through my loosened molecules. *Shto?* I was asking, but I didn't have the words for it yet. What scared me more than stagnation—more than the shadow that stepped out of the dark and onto the riverbank—was aimlessness. Abstraction. When I met Liza I let her turn into my structure.

Liza's folks had been partial nudists and full-time Zodiac freaks. They'd encouraged deviance, and she'd deviated until she was booted out of Cape Fear Community in her sophomore year—which was fine, really, because she'd never settled on a major anyway. She withered around town for a while, waitressing at the Crab Shack, sucking the plaque off her teeth with mouthfuls of Everclear from flasks that the busboys kept tucked in their aprons. Her twenties had melted down to a pond—stagnant, opaque, empty of current or life. Then she ran into me. We slid out of our clothes and panted over each other. Other than that, we didn't talk much, and the distance gave us room to fill with our ideas of each other. Example: I had this idea that I could complete her. Pretty quick, she got the idea that I wasn't enough.

In December started waking up to an empty bed. She'd go off without warning, hitching up the coast, looking for something better. Who knew what kinds of promises she found on the stools of those beer-battered dives in Pasquotank and Currituck? I had my ideas, but it was easier to wait than explore them; she always showed up again empty-handed.

What she wanted wasn't a condo. It wasn't a ring or Russia or even a man—it was the structures behind these things. I'm talking about a current. She wanted direction the same way I wanted to forget all the vectors I'd been missing. All we ever did was divert each other; there was no part of me that could cover the breadth of her emptiness.

Liza lived in the swampiest part of town. Her mobile home—rented, rotting, nearly windowless—was crutched onto cinderblocks turned vertical to keep it out of the floodwater. When we were too thorough in bed, you could feel the floor yearning down toward the mud.

“You live here?” Di asked.

She kept the window rolled down while I walked to the porch. The front door was locked. My truck was nowhere. I turned back and waved to her. It was a moment, I think, of mutual pity. Huddled on the darkened stoop, I must not have looked too different than Di had in front of that doublewide. Who knew what kind of story she was imagining for me?

I watched her drive away until her van slipped into shadow. I'd swiped nearly half a grand in twenties from her center console.

For two hours I stiffened on that porch, waiting for Liza to show up. Moonlight swelled past the clouds and calcified in front of me. The cool glint of it off the ditches felt like another omen—this was the closest I'd ever come to chasing after her. I just kept my eyes on the tree line, looking for that monster.

She screeched in after midnight. She drove my truck like a rally car, like quicksand. She parked at the mouth of the driveway, left it running, stapling me down in the headlights. I

squinted through the windshield; she was talking with some big silhouette in the passenger's seat. They pressed their faces together before she opened the door.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” she said. “Get out. I don't want you here.”

“Some balls you have.”

She clomped over to the porch. She was mummified in stilettos, mascara, a sequined dress I didn't recognize. The reek of liquor sliced up my nose. “Do you want to do this here?” she said.

“Who's your friend in my truck?”

“Take the truck,” she said. “I don't care. I don't need you.”

That made me laugh; I'd never heard a lie more desperate.

“How about this?” I said, and I pulled all the cash out of my pocket.

I took her to Myrtle Beach for the weekend. That Holiday Inn by the boardwalk was exactly the diversion both of us needed. We holed up in our room for two good days, and if I kept the blinds drawn I could nearly trick myself into thinking we were back where we started—horny, happy in our stupidity, satisfied because we'd only occupied lowest parts of ourselves. The sheetrock of that place worked like a womb; things seemed insulated. It felt good to return to that.

Still, something had shifted. I could feel it in the cruxes where our bodies joined: tangled arms, sunburnt lips. I kept leaving bed to peek through the blinds, looking for that

monster from the riverbank. A curse, I think, can be as simple as memory. All the loosened parts of me were chafing. Liza felt it, too. On the second night she started accusing me.

It was nine p. m. outside and eternity in the hotel room. We'd just finished tugging on each other's hips until both of us came simultaneously—grunting, grinding, our brains gone limbic. I was stooping by the window again while the monster pooled itself behind my eyes; Liza was still in bed, the flush fresh on her face.

"I feel interchangeable," she said.

I didn't turn around. I hardly even heard her.

"What I mean," she went on, "is how easy it is for you to play Zen. What's your plan? You don't have a plan. You're stumbling along and I'm your distraction."

I pressed my nose into the glass. I was thinking about Di out there with her camcorder, talking about monsters but filming the reactor. What the hell was *her* plan?

"Got somewhere to be?" Liza said.

"What?"

"Look at me, asshole. Of course you don't. What do you think?"

"I think you're about right," I told her.

The light dulled down and something heavy knocked the breath loose from my back. I spun around; she'd thrown a lamp at me.

"Fuck off," I said.

"You fuck off," she said.

I fucked off. I went outside.

The hotel was two blocks from the ocean. Squeals and baselines echoed up from the boardwalk. There were more souvenirs here, but all these beach towns were the same. People showed up on the coast looking for a diversion. Land plummeted into water; the familiar hinged off toward the unknown. Perfect for a getaway, but try living here.

I wandered off toward the Interstate. Away from the womb of that hotel I sank back into my body. I was thinking of my fraternity days, that motto I'd been puzzling over since I first started feeling empty. Better men. Better lives. Which half came first? Something had moved in me, that was for sure. I just couldn't tell its direction.

Next morning Liza had to get back for her shift at the Crab Shack. We ached up US-17 while the whiskey drained out of our bones. We groaned and slapped at each other, fighting about all the same things that should have severed us a long time ago. The walls had been blown down for months, I was realizing, but both of us had kept hanging around the ruins.

"You're awful," she said.

"You're still here," I said.

We pulled over at an Exxon in Calabash to fill up. I went inside to piss, to get away from her. I soaked my face in the tinny sink water, chanting the motto, then I stepped out of that bathroom and into an empty parking lot.

The truck was gone. The cash was in it. Liza had ditched me again.

I walked north up the highway. Shards of glass glinted all over the blacktop, spitting heat up at me. I found some pine trees tall enough for shade and stopped there to pant with my thumb out. Cars whistled by, sucking the fumes of the highway behind them—salt, grit, the syrupy odor

of benzene. The sun went west. It flushed over the tops of the trees and stapled light in my face. I was squinting, then I was sitting, then I was putting my thumb down. When the Sprinter van pulled over it looked to me like a vision smoking itself together from the glare.

The window descended. Who else could it have been?

Di ran a hand through her wig—blonde today, frizzed with heat.

“This is turning into a habit,” she said.

We sped toward the state line. Di’s fingers skidded over the steering wheel and the dashboard, brushing the crystals glued there. She talked at me like it was breathing. She’d been in Georgetown all day for a meeting with the Tribal Board. The Waccamaw were the ones sponsoring her film. They’d caught wind of the sightings at the power plant and smelled blood; they wanted that land back from the state. Something about the charge of her voice—about that motto bouncing off the back of my skull—was putting me in the mood for confessing.

“My girl ditched me,” I said. “She took my truck and my money. I don’t think she’s coming back this time.”

Di’s hands went still on the wheel.

I shook my head at her. “It just happened all at once.”

“Nothing happens all at once,” she said. Then she told me about the power plant.

The reactor was poisoning sacred ground. It was built in the same furl of riverbank where the Waccamaw used to maroon their young warriors, feeding them mushrooms and sneaking off just as the psilocybin warped its way out of their back-brains. Alone in the dark, they’d close their eyes and feel the sky groping down to the spirit world. The dirt pinned under

that power plant was an axis flickering between dimensions. You couldn't pass through it without feeling your molecules tugged into new shapes.

“Think of a womb,” Di said. “No—think of a cocoon.”

What if I extrapolated down to liquid? What if a current encompassed me, a force I felt without seeing or knowing? Boundaries gone loose. Edges dissipating. Unifying. What if I was funneled toward a heat so white that my body broke down to steam and lifted itself to churn the cogs of heaven? All at once, my purpose would clarify. That's the kind of cocoon I imagined.

We were passing through Shallotte. Blacktop funneled under us in darkened swathes. Night plunged down and swallowed up the highway. Besides that joint, nothing seemed familiar. The greens and browns of our state had ebbed into abstraction. I kept my eyes on the place where the stars and the blacktop unified; that might as well have been our real destination. While we sped toward this axis, Di confessed to me.

She used to be Nick. Nick had managed pine growth with the state forestry service for ten years, taking cone measurements and importing seeds from upstate. Then he'd been sent north of Southport to mark off trees for a controlled burn and felt the hum of that power plant sync up with his skeleton. He'd understood that as his roots taking hold of him—he was Waccamaw on his grandmother's side—and a veil had lifted. His soul had flown out and sunk back through his cells at the wrong angle. A small, quiet thought in his hindbrain had screamed to the front of his skull: Nick was not Nick. Nick was Di. That shrunken lady in the doublewide was Nick's wife.

“I had a life with her,” Di said. “We have two kids. But I couldn’t stick around and ignore myself.”

There was a clinic in Columbia. The doctor had given her hormones, injections, an outline of procedures. Then he’d given her a bill. She whisked a hand over her head; the wig slid back a little farther.

“Out of my price range,” she said. “I mean, *way out*.”

“So what do you do?”

“I save up. I suffer.”

For a long time I kept quiet. The ache that passed through me was too wide for words. Landscape flashed by and I kept my eyes on the tree line, looking for that shadow.

“I’ll go back to my kids,” she said. “When I’m finished, I mean. I just can’t go like this. You have to understand.”

She rolled down her window and sucked in a mouthful of breeze. Salt and static choked out the last of the incense. A car bolted south on the far side of the median; pinned in its headlights, Di looked monumental. Her features honed down to geology. Etched granite, timeless, unmovable—but only for a moment. That’s how I’ll remember her.

“Honestly,” she said, “realistically, I mean, I wish I hadn’t found out. I was doing okay. And then all at once, as soon as I got near that power plant, I wasn’t. I couldn’t stand myself.”

Imagine that—being trapped mid-leap, exposed naked and shaking with the threads of the cocoon melting at your feet, stumbling around half-metamorphosed. Living between worlds while every changing atom of you gropes for spare particles.

I told her I understood.

Brunswick County flicked past our windshield. The highway pitched east toward the water. In streetlights and porches, the landscape was beginning to clarify. The empty stirred up in me again and I started thinking about Liza, talking empathy and forgiveness, pleading for her to remember the good times. I couldn't remember too many good times specifically, but I was ready to start hoping again.

"You can just drop me off in the same place," I said.

"You're going back?"

"She has my truck. "

"She has your balls," Di said. "Your balls are what it sounds like she has to me. "

"It's where I want to go. If you drop me off here, I'll walk. "

Di held up her hands. "Okay," she said. "Jesus. It's your life. I'll take you. "

She turned on the radio and toggled through stations. Both of us, I think, were trying not to look too hard at each other.

"First thing I did," Di said, "after I realized, I mean, was go up to Virginia. I just north until I stopped sobbing. I ended up at a shrine near Heathsville. Wicomico stuff. There were these amulets all over—like crystals. Talismans. I asked the guy what they were for and he wouldn't tell me. Everywhere I stopped in Algonquin country they had these things. Well I kept asking around and it turns out they're for warding off the wendigo. There are all kinds of Algonquin witches, but wendigo are the worst. They disguise themselves as animals. They grow fur and go around on all fours, but they don't move right. That's how you can tell. They're still stiff like a human, and they have human eyes. These stories are all over. *Yee naaldlooshi*,

is the Navajo name for it, but the Navajo have another one for them, too: *clizyat*. Want to guess what that means?”

I had no idea.

She leaned across the center console. “Pure evil,” she said. “The worst kind of curse is disguising yourself.”

Right then she looked no different to me than that shadow that had stepped out of the woods.

We were nearly to Liza’s house. We split down the main drag, past the forts and inns and rotting Colonials. Everything here had a plaque on it. The same houses had lipped Front Street for two hundred years; no one built anything new. I couldn’t get the Delta Sig motto to stop rattling through my skull. *Better men, better lives*—wasn’t that a blueprint for change?

We turned into Liza’s neighborhood.

“I took some of your money,” I told Di.

She just grinned at me. “Movie funds,” she said. “You took it from the Waccamaw, not me. Anyway, I had a feeling you needed it. Why do you think I opened that center console? You and I are the same.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re cocooned,” she said. “You need transforming.”

I’ll tell you this: I’d never heard anything like it.

My truck was in Liza’s driveway. The porch light was on. The keys and the cash would be inside. What else would I find in there with her?

Di put the van in park.

“Listen,” I said, “I should tell you something else. I saw something in the woods. I was camping back there by the power plant. ”

Di tapped the steering wheel. Her hands were shaking. The quiver passed up through her arms and out the thickened back of her to the floorboard, the chassis, aligning with the pitch and fume of the engine. Think of a birth canal. Think of contractions. Before my brain synced up with my eyes, she leaned over and kissed me. Her jaw was obsidian but her lips were as soft as the texture of dreaming—the axis, I mean, of thought and body.

“Since we’re confessing,” she said, “I have something to show you. ”

I’d never had a better reason to be afraid.

We drove out of town. Not far north, the light of the power plant haloed up to the clouds. The air was denser here. A tinny hum shook through my skull. I was thinking of all the cocoons I’d passed through, wombs outside of wombs stretching off to infinity. I didn’t have to ask where we were going.

The access road was all gravel. The sign loomed yellow and black under barbed wire. Behind it, the concrete angles of the reactor impended over the river like a promise. Di parked by the gate.

“Take off your shoes,” she said. “This is holy ground. ”

The dirt on my heels was as cold and hard-packed as marble.

I followed her to the back of the van. She dug through boxes glinting equipment, camera stuff and jagged forestry instruments that I didn’t recognize. The thing she pulled out was long and sleek. It rippled grey in the moonlight; from where I was standing, it looked like the night just crystallized between her hands. An animal pelt.

“Now you earn that money,” she said. She handed it to me.

The fur was water in my hands. It must have been synthetic—it wasn’t from any kind of animal that I recognized. When I brushed the coat, a charge slid past past my knuckles. I’m talking about electrons doing dominos.

I didn’t have to ask. I knew what to do.

I followed the fence line toward the water. The pelt sat heavy on my shoulders. Di walked behind me, holding the camera. Through chain links the power plant buzzed. Darkened figures gathered at the windows.

*Better men. Better lives.* What did it take to match that motto? Momentum. A vector to channel it. You’d keep settling for the same things until you deviated.

The night was thick with the river’s scent and movement. Dense, also, with something else: static. The ghosted distortions of atoms split, severed, reformed, quavering through the reactor, stitching a veil from the dark. I stepped out of the tree line and crossed an asymptote. My foot in the sand felt to me like the follow-through to a movement initiated in the spirit world, the collapse of something vague and loosened sinking into the tangible. Electrons swarmed. Vectors clarified. Landing on that riverbank was like coming up for air.

The Waccamaw who settled here told stories of mermaids. They spoke about their lips, their breasts, the slick jut of their tails breaching water. But the part that they could never quite articulate was the joint between woman and fish, that axis where flesh turned to scale. A splintering. A union. Fission—that’s what I’m talking about. I waded into the river and felt a hundred new currents tugging at me.