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DUPLEX: A NOVEL

by

Brian Phillip Whalen

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ABSTRACT

Duplex is a novel that tells the story of a young man who is serving his final day as an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteer In Service To America) in Des Moines, Iowa. A critical introduction locates the novel between the genres of fiction and memoir within the contemporary literary environment.
Out of the Archive, Into the Street:

a Critical Introduction

This introduction takes a critical look at the methodological, literary, and theoretical constructs that have informed the writing of my dissertation. In lieu of a chapter outline one might find in the preface to a critical dissertation, I offer the following plot summary of my novel:

Duplex tells the story of a young man who is serving his final day as an AmeriCorps VISTA: a Volunteer In Service To America. His routine on this final day is typical, the same routine he has followed for three years. As a “paid volunteer” for the government, he is stationed at the Central Iowa Homeless Shelter in Des Moines, where he works closely with a Vietnam veteran named Ken, a retired middle-aged therapist named Charlie, and the shelter director, Tony, who spends more of his time at board meetings and public relations events than he does in the shelter itself. There’s also Elton John: the name of Ken’s little dog, a rescued mutt who never leaves Ken’s side.

While the narrator goes about his day, filing paperwork and encountering the usual names and faces — including the homeless men and women he has devoted his mid-twenties to helping — his thoughts are occupied with his girlfriend, Amanda, who is recently pregnant. As the narrator obsesses over notions of service, responsibility, and commitment, he thinks back to his own family tragedy: his mother’s untimely death, his father’s obsession with engineering and real estate, and his younger sister’s drug addiction: an addiction that led to her own homelessness and her recent disappearance.
As the novel progresses and the day draws nearer and nearer to midnight, we learn more about the narrator’s past, including his failed efforts in a PhD program in the History of Science and Technology: an endeavor prior to his joining AmeriCorps. The themes and subplots of the narrator’s personal history begin to resonate with the technological history of both ancient and modern times, as the narrator struggles to make sense of the past – as a brother and son – while coming to terms with his own future as a father.

As a creative writer I do not have an established archive, and methodology factors into my work differently than for a scholar writing a traditional critical dissertation. My methodology is rooted in critical conversations, interviews, and essays on craft, as well as my own critical readings of contemporary literature: out of which my specific contextually-dependent disciplinary lexicon is built (questions, concepts, and terminology contingent on my creative needs, which are dependent on the work I am writing at the time I am writing it). My primary sources are my life experience, my understanding of history, and the works of memoir and fiction that inspire my work. The theoretical component of this preface demonstrates the beneficial relationship between theory and literature, with the caveat that for fiction writers the limiting of influence is as important as yielding to it. The bulk of this introduction takes the form of critical close readings of texts that have informed my decision-making processes while composing my creative work. I believe a fiction writer’s greatest intellectual tools are his capacities to read closely and to emulate good style. At the end of this preface I will speak directly of my own work and the ways in which the materials I discuss here have influenced my novel. In this way the conversation about my own work will arise out of my critical readings,
mirroring the way in which my creative work has developed over the course of my five years as a doctoral student.

_Craft as Methodology: Narratology and Thematic Layering_

As a creative writer I am interested in conversations about narrative theory insofar as they yield useful concepts for thinking about the writing of fiction and practical approaches for the writing of fiction. One of the conceptual and practical approaches I find helpful revolves around a story’s shape, both deliberately structured and left to implication. The following passage from Peter Turchi’s _Maps of the Imagination: the Writer as Cartographer_ clarifies what I mean by shape:

When we talk about entering the world of a story as a reader we refer to things we picture, or imagine, and responses we form - to characters, to events - all of which are prompted by, but not entirely encompassed by, the words on the page. As writers... we expect, we require, the reader to understand more than we spell out... a story or a novel is a kind of map because, like a map, it is not a world, but it evokes one (or at least one, for each reader)... the first word of a short story, even the first sentence, doesn’t usually imply a complete shape; but as the story goes on, no matter how ‘linear,’ fragmented, or collage-like it may be, the reader will work to find the story’s shape or possible shape...to discover an intended whole.

Turchi continues:
Readers get one kind of pleasure from a complete shape and another kind of pleasure from perceiving a shape only partially represented - from playing a role in bringing the work to completion. As writers we need to determine how much of the shape to supply, how clear to make it - and to understand how much work we’re asking the reader to do. If we provide too little, we fail to communicate. If we provide too much, there is no room for the imagination. But when we get it right, we’re the best of guides, leading the way to a place that allows for the reader’s discovery.

In writing Duplex my central dilemma has been in deciding how and when to have my narrator reveal the events of the past, and in what order to do so: in other words, when to map things out explicitly and when to be suggestive. In terms of design, the relationship between chronology and narrative can be framed using a set of terms that date back to Russian Formalism:

**Story** - The CONTENT plane of narrative; the WHAT of a narrative; the basic chronological material/events of a narrative

**Form** - the EXPRESSION plan of narrative; HOW a narrative is arranged; the material/events of a narrative as presented to the reader

A number of novels from my exam reading lists complicate the relationship between Story and Form in ways that have proven useful as models for the writing of my own novel, and I turn to brief synopses of these now.

In Denis Johnson’s novel, *The Name of the World*, the first-person narration of protagonist Mike Reed presents the reader with an incomplete, fragmented backstory. Though the frame narrative is told chronologically, Reed’s thoughts are preoccupied with the past, and he invokes multiple times
the trauma of losing his wife and only child in a car accident five years ago. But since Reed is unable to fully face, and cope with, the tragedy, his narration can only dip into the past in fragments, and the reader is left to infer, or piece together, the totality of what has happened and how it effects his current state of mind. This is because Reed, as a narrator, is drawing specifically from a limited palate: he cannot move past the car accident, so we do not get any information about his or his family’s life before the accident, nor do we get full access to Reed’s life in the present, except for what he does and where he goes: he tells us what happens, not what it means. It isn’t until the cathartic ending of the novel that we readers are finally allowed to see inside Reed’s house (figuratively and literally), where we get a full view into the ways in which grief has stunted Reed’s enlightenment: a rented house full of the moving boxes he never unpacked three years ago, when he first moved in. Johnson’s skill lies in how he is able to represent Reed’s trauma through the way Reed tells his story: keeping the reader interested enough in Reed’s potential redemption (or the threat of his collapse) while providing just enough memory/history to lend emotional depth to Reed’s despair: a perfect balance between concealing and revealing, and a perfect union between story (novel of redemption) and form (fictive memoir).

Mary Robison’s novel Why Did I Ever is a collection of fragmented first-person anecdotes told by a woman who drinks too much and takes a lot of Ritalin; the narration (over 500 vignettes) reflects her state of mind, and represents the fractured state of her familial relationships: a former heroin-addicted daughter and a traumatized son who was the victim of a sexual crime and who may, or may not, have HIV. The text and space-breaks run through the book in a pattern not unlike cracked glass – like cracks in a glass, the fractures Robison presents us with allow just enough of a glimpse into the mindset and backstory of the characters to allow readers to fill the
gaps and fissures with a “wholeness” of our imagining. The form—scattered, like out-of-order index cards, and reflective of the character’s mental state—provides the space along and between which the story takes shape. My reading of short-short stories—which rely heavily on the implied—has also helped me to understand the way fragment and partiality can work to suggest imagined shape. So have other novels, especially David Markson’s Reader’s Block and Lynne Tillman’s Motion Sickness. Tillman’s novel is presented as a series of (travel journal) entries and unsent postcards. Markson uses historical, philosophical, and literary anecdotes to build an implied sense of a narrator who never reveals himself: the reader only knows what the narrator knows, via what the narrator has read and what he remembers. Each novel works to establish a sense of the whole—an implied shape—while working in non-linear, non-chronological forms of narrative. Another experimental text that relies heavily on the reader’s ability to provide shape to a story (and to find meaning in absences, gaps, occlusions) is Ben Marcus’ The Age of Wire and String. Marcus’s book draws the very idea of character/narrator—and the notion of Story and Form—into question. Composed of “stories” without a main protagonist and narrated in the form of Encyclopedic entries where even the author (“Marcus, Ben”) is a citation in the book’s catalog. The collective text of The Age of Wire and String relies on the reader’s ability to imagine a full story where only fragments and code-like prose poems exist. The reader must piece story together like a detective working from a series of partial clues.

One of the difficulties of writing a novel in which world history, personal history, and conjectural history (imagining the lives of others) mix in fragmentary, harmonic ways, is choosing how to handle the layering of thematic elements without getting bogged down in purely conceptual modes of narration. That is, how to work themes, images, and recurring ideas into the narrative without losing the centrality and forward-momentum of the frame
narrative: to not let form and thematic conceit co-opt story, but rather to marry the two. The novels I have just examined have proven useful in my approach to writing Duplex, especially with their first person narration. But one memoir – (I might maintain that first-person novels are, by implication, a form of fictional memoir) – has proven essential in my comprehension of how theme and literary allusion can be layered and woven into a narrative in complex yet seamless ways: Nick Flynn’s Another Bullshit Night in Suck City.

In an interview, Flynn addresses the need for universality within, or stemming from, the personal: “In order for memoir to succeed, you have to dissolve the self into these larger universal truths, and explore these deeper mysteries. If it’s purely autobiographical and ego-driven, it’s going to fail.” In that same interview, Flynn suggests that aspiring memoirists “seek out archetypes,” claiming that “persona is good for the messier emotions.” The following extract from the chapter “button man (the musical)” exemplifies one of the ways in which Flynn drops archetypes/citation into his memoir; it also serves to represent the governing principle behind the structure of Flynn’s book and the organization of his chapters: a series of scattered boxes (Flynn might call them “jars”) seemingly haphazardly arranged, but with a deliberate, and also thematically implied, set of structures at play:

My father’s room is filled with boxes, inside the boxes are his masterpieces, his novels-in-progress, alongside notes for future masterpieces, the blueprints for his stories. But open the boxes and you will find only emptiness. The elements are there – torn photographs, notes scrawled on cocktail napkins, check stubs, ink on paper – all meaning shattered. No one could reconstruct a life from these scraps, no one would find the thread that would lead to the
particular stories he tells. Only his voice does that, the air moving through him, vibrating out as words. *What is word made of but breath, breath the stuff of life?* (321).

The italicized sentence comes from *Hamlet*. The later chapter in which Flynn depicts his own internal mess, his mental breakdown, is entitled “santa lear,” a reference that juxtaposes the mental instability of sons (*Hamlet*) with the mental instability of fathers: archetypical King Lear. In the chapter “ulysses,” Flynn writes: “Many fathers are gone. Some leave, some are left. Some return, unknown and hungry. Only the dog remembers” (23). This adds yet another archetypal father, an absent one who is fated to return: “All my life my father had been manifest as an absence, a non-presence, a name without a body. The three of us sat around the table, my mother, brother and I, all carrying his name. Flynn?” (24) The chapter closes with: “Some part of me knew he would show up, that if I stood in one place long enough he would find me, like you’re taught to do when you’re lost” (24). In the “ham” chapter, Flynn makes an overt archetypical allusion: “Ham came upon his father one day, naked and ranting, building his impossible boat in a blackout. God had spoken, God kept speaking, God wouldn’t stop speaking. For witnessing his father naked and drunk, Ham and all his offspring became accursed forever, to the end of time” (234). In a later chapter Flynn describes seeing his father naked, standing in a bathtub: this time an indirect reference to Ham.

Another example of Flynn’s sourcing and how his allusions layer in harmonious or deliberately dissonant ways, comes in the chapter “chet’s last call.” Here Flynn writes about his experience in the homeless shelter:

“Often I feel like a glorified security guard, often a guest is asked to take a walk because there isn’t time to deal with him any other
way. And if a guest begins to ‘escalate,’ to ‘go off’ (Look! here comes a walking fire!”), it threatens the whole building, poof, up in flames. Some days it feels like an unending play, a play that began from an idea, the idea of bending down to someone struggling, but that idea kept expanding, like some theory of universe, until it grew so large that it will be impossible to ever stage. It has become nearly the size of air, or water. A map the size of the world” (59).

The italicized, parenthetical phrase is from King Lear, as cited in “some notes” (an addendum to the memoir in which Flynn lists his sources). Flynn’s imagery and metaphors are closely knit and tailored to suit multiple purposes, both acute (in the context they are delivered) and in the broader context of the work as a whole. Each metaphor or allusion serves to represent and tighten the memoir’s central conflicts, acting as a series of microcosms reflecting the larger story itself (if not like stacked boxes, then perhaps like wheels, individually spun but connected to the other spinning wheels by common threads running through and between them: spools threading together). One of the most recurring metaphors in ABNISC is introduced in the second chapter, “the inventor of the life raft” (6). Life rafts - a metaphor for the binary between drowning and rescue - play a predominant role in Flynn’s work. Flynn concludes the chapter following “the inventory of the life raft,” “the apologist,” with a direct reference: “The slogan on the side of a moving company truck read TOGETHER WE ARE GOING PLACES - modified by a vandal or a disgruntled employee to read TOGETHER WE ARE GOING DOWN. If I went to the drowning man the drowning man would pull me under. I couldn’t be his life raft” (11, emphasis mine). The drowning man in this instance is Flynn’s father, about whom Flynn later admits: “I could have given him a key, offered a piece of my floor. A futon. A bed. But I never did.” Flynn justifies his reasoning by introducing a second governing
image/idea that subsequently recurs in the text: “If I let him inside I would become him, the line between us would blur, my own slow-motion car wreck would speed up.” From the chapter “fire:” “(1960’s) I crawl toward my father’s face as we lay on the grass beside a white-walled tire – a snapshot, an artifact – evidence that at some point, at least once, I was an infant in his arms. The father as ship, as vessel, holding the child afloat. But there was a parallel father as well – the drunk, the con, the paranoid. The father as ship, but taking on water, going down” (63). And another boat reference, this time mixing with the loss of mother, in a later chapter: “My sock fills with blood as EVOL drifts free” in a spot where Flynn could “almost see the spot off Third Cliff where we’d scattered her ashes” (154).

These boat references serve as yet another central metaphor that also holds, in this case implicit, citational connection to external, canonical texts. Nick’s foot being stuck to the deck by a nail symbolizes his inability to free himself from the binds of family and fate that threaten to sink him. But – unlike Ham – Nick’s way of coping with the loss of his father’s authority is to claim authority himself: to write his way out of the curse: to co-opt the father’s story, to alter archetype and to make it his own – to mythologize himself (like Stephen Elliott, see below), to use writing as a way to get out from under the influence and burden of his father. There is a line Flynn imagines for his father, while the man is sitting in a cell somewhere composing his novel: “I will write one word after another and then flow them like a rope out of my cell. Like a chain. Follow the chain of words back to my life.” In the third chapter, “the apologist,” Flynn writes about the explanations he would give when asked about his father: “I’d say, Dead, I’d say, Missing, I’d say, I don’t know where he is.” Flynn juxtaposes then with now: “Ask me about him now and I’ll say, Housed. Twelve years. Subsidized. A Section 8. A disability.... Ask now and I’ll say he’s a goddamned tree stump, it’ll take dynamite to get rid of that
motherfucker” (8). On the next page Flynn admits of himself: “He wished his father was dead” and much later in the book confesses, “Some nights I imagine running him over with the Van” (274). Flynn desires to cut the threads – literal and symbolic – that bind him to his father, and to make his own chain of words to save himself. All the complex layering of archetype and character, past and present, come together in the final monologues delivered by Flynn about the book itself, the “book you hold in your hands:” The memoir is Nick’s life raft. In lending experience form and order, Flynn has gained power over his experiences - and his father - by becoming the author: by telling, thus controlling, the story.

Genre and Style: Memoir as Literary Tradition

I have written what might be called a fictional memoir, and for that reason my dissertation is situated between genres; I owe as much to my study of contemporary memoir as I do to my reading of American Minimalist fiction. The thin line between fact and fiction is the subject of much of my work, as well as the creative bridge that generates much of my writing. For this reason I have closely studied, and borrowed story-telling techniques from, contemporary memoir, focusing on the relationship between story and form specifically in the handling of “backstory” and the structuring of “frame narratives.” Stephen Elliott’s The Adderall Diaries and Paula Fox’s Borrowed Finery are two memoirs that have closely informed my dissertation.

By the second page of Stephen Elliott’s memoir, The Adderall Diaries, he admits to his reader: “I feel ready to kill myself.” In her essay “Make Me Worry You’re Not OK,” Susan Shapiro tells memoirists: “The more of a wreck you are from the start, the more the audience is hooked.” There are other moments in which Elliott draws his reader into his story: “We understand the
world by how we retrieve memories, re-order information into stories to justify how we feel” (178). And: “What we remember, and how we order and interpret what we believe to be true, are what shapes who we are.” (202) The use of “we” invokes a universality to what could otherwise be self-indulgent reflection on his own writing, and recollecting, process. Instead of self-indulgence, it becomes about the universal nature of inquiry, something all readers can relate to: ie, “The facts are correct but the questions are wrong” (172). Elliott hooks his reader by making us worry about his state of mental health, while also making his memoir about more than just his own experiences: he invites us into the conversation, and Adderall Diaries becomes a memoir about writing memoir: about how all of us are searching for meaning and structure in our daily, lived experiences while seeking order, and form, to our pasts.

Adderall Diaries follows Elliott for a year and a few months, during which he follows closely the court case of Hans Reiser. The cover story – the frame narrative – of Adderall Diaries is a true crime, courtroom drama. Elliott carefully crafts his memoir so that backstory is only incorporated if arising out of the context of the main story; memories or personal anecdotes about the past are triggered by encounters with the people/characters who play a role in the flashbacks – or if there are similarities between a main-story character/event and one from Elliott’s past. An example of how Elliott’s memories come out of concrete situations in the present is what follows immediately after Lisette, Elliott’s on-again off-again lover, is first introduced: “Lisette used to cut me. She kept a knife by my bed, a present from a client. It had a grip handle. My breathing would slow down when the blade opened my skin. I would close my eyes and feel my body lift from the mattress. It was like being on a raft” (25). Later Lisette would tell Stephen, in another memory, that he has “no sense of self-preservation.” Elliott marries content with form by allowing for dissonance in flashback
sequences, in this case the feeling of floating “on a raft” ironically juxtaposed with his observed lack of “self preservation.” In another flashback stirred by a present encounter, Elliott creates further dissonance: “Before I leave Chicago I grab lunch with Roger,” one of his oldest childhood friends, who was around during the time Elliott’s mother was alive and through whom the following memory is provoked: “I was eight when she got sick and thirteen when she died and I can’t fully reconstruct what happened between us” (85). The juxtaposition between long-term friendship and the shortness of his relationship with his mother, not to mention the discrepancy between long-term memory and having little to say about certain parts of it, open space into Elliott’s past in unsettling ways: the reader is clued in early to the fact that for Elliott the past is not a place of comfort and orientation, but a painful place with confused, dissociating coordinates – both literal (childhood violence and displacement) and figurative (psychic distress).

Elliott establishes an early pattern of abuse by recollecting a memory about his father: “I dreamed of footsteps, then screams, then something hitting my face. I woke trying to hide from my father’s fists. He pulled me by my hair into the kitchen where he had a set of clippers waiting. He forced me to kneel at the cabinets while he shaved my head. It was the second time he had shaved my head” (37). Toward the end of the memoir he writes: “I’ve written about him and made him a villain. I’ve made him unhappy. I’ve mythologized myself and withheld my love, pretended my actions were justified by his actions. I put that on with my clothes and wear it throughout the day” (197). The prose style in these passages illustrates another of Elliott’s signature techniques: matter-of-fact representation of violent, or highly cerebral (ie, “mythologizing”), behaviors or experiences. He glosses over his heroin abuse in the following passage: “Two years later we were living in Chicago’s Ukrainian Village. By then I’d overdosed on
heroin and Josie was overcoming a cocaine habit. We spent time on our front porch. The neighborhood was changing” (26). Elliott writes about drugs and sex and violence as matter-of-factly as he does about the courtroom, or meeting up with friends, or choosing a publisher for his book, or heartbreak. This approach to story hides, and at once reveals, a deeper, hidden pain: the cut behind the scar, at a remove from the present, but never forgotten – a history that is always informing, and limiting, new experience.

Elliott’s understated style is similar to that of Paula Fox’s in her memoir, Borrowed Finery. One of the most important structural elements of Fox’s memoir is that the chapters are organized by location: a chronology of Fox’s childhood displacement. Fox’s interchangeable use of the names “father” and “daddy,” and “Elsie” and “my mother,” highlights the here then not, push-and-pull relationship between her parents and Fox: there is a great deal of emotional distance between father/daddy and mother/Elsie, as there is also a great deal of emotional, as well as physical, distance between Paula and her parents at any given moment in the text. When Fox’s parents are absent, Fox seldom allows the reader to see or hear her child-self thinking about them; Fox keeps us in the moment, in the place where she was at the time, with the people she was with. If her parents are mentioned in the text when they are away, it is often by way of another character’s mentioning their location, or Fox over-hearing a conversation about their whereabouts or an anecdote about them. Fox is not interested in sugarcoating a tragic story, nor is she willing to make it more tragic than it was by over-emphasis or drawn-out self-reflection. When Fox does enter into reflection, or considerations of the heart, she is in and out quickly, swift as a surgeon: only offering a glimpse into her vulnerability before leaving it behind and moving forward to the next location in her story. There is no “mythologizing here, as with Elliott.
Fox’s style is one of emotional distancing via diction: of calculated reserve. When Fox hears of her parents return, she describes the moment in an understated, though curious, way – full of distance and desire, want and fear: “The word father was outlandish. It had an ominous note. I was transfixed by it. It was as though I had emerged from a dark wood into the sudden glare of headlights” (22). Later in the book, Fox uses understatement – a single analogy to represent a vast complexity of inter-personal relations – when she goes shopping with her mother in a NYC department store: “During the time we were together, it felt as if we were being continually introduced to each other” (105). Fox never feels familiar to her parents, and in turn she never feels at one with her self, or at home in the world: “I would have been one of those children found in a wilderness, written about in case histories, if it had not been for Uncle Elwood.” Like Elliott, Fox is searching: but she does not know the territory, and she remains cool, distant from the events she recalls, like one tentatively stepping in uncharted lands. She cannot trust her parents to guide her: “I had not thought of them as married. How could it be that Elsie was enough of an organic being to have carried me in her belly for a term? What I was sure of was that fate had determined that her presence was the price I had to pay in order to see my father. But when I did see him, his behavior with me – playful, sometimes cruel, a voice of utterly inconsistent and capricious authority – confirmed my uneasiness, my ever-growing sense of being an imposter, outside life’s laws” (127). A few pages later, Fox’s mother asks her: “Do you love me?” and Fox writes: “Who was I to love such a person, and who was she to be loved? I was frightened by her question; there was something in her voice that made loving her a punishment. But I said yes. I was painfully aware of the neighbor listening nearby” (130). This posturing for others (the eavesdropping neighbor) is another form of “borrowed finery,” something Fox admits later in the book she learned from her father: how to “behave in
parlor circumstances, to temporize and compromise,” just as she learned “to contend with the madness in people” from her mother (191). In a few lines Fox provides just enough of a glimpse into the ways in which her parents affected her behavior, and her thinking of/relating to the world, to allow the reader to feel the depths of emotion under the surface of the detached narrative style.

In an essay published in The New Yorker in 2011, Joan Acocella quotes another critic’s comment that Fox is “sometimes hard to the point of cold” in her presentation of worldly realities. Acocella continues: “In Fox’s]world, unloved children don’t grow up to take heroin or kill somebody. They just develop a ‘hardened heart.’” Even the title itself alludes to the putting on of false personae (like Elliott “wearing” the knowledge of his vilifying his father): the wearing of attitudes and emotions that were never truly her own, because she never learned from her parents authentic, reliable ways of relating to other people. Acocella goes on to fault Fox “primarily in structure,” complaining that “her characters go from encounter to encounter, in the course of finding out how they feel.” I disagree with this last assessment of Borrowed Finery, in which Acocella claims that the memoir “dithers in its second half: this happened, then that happened.” The entire point of the structural design of Borrowed Finery is to create that episodic, “dithering” effect. Fox in an interview: “I think it’s not helpful to over-psychologize. It substitutes for the chaos that most of us live in. Except that we emerge now and then in order to play the violin or go to work or whatever. And that’s what I’ve been writing about, that chaos.” All of the displacement, and the love/hate, here/not relationship with her parents, all of the seemingly random places in the memoir, the disconnected chapters – it all flows toward Fox’s final chapter, in which we learn that Fox mothered a daughter in her youth whom she gave up for adoption.
Fox opens the final chapter with Elsie, in order to center herself (Fox) as the daughter/mother in between her absentee mother and her own estranged daughter. Fox enters the chapter with her usual understatement: “When Elsie was ninety-two, dying of old age and emphysema” followed a paragraph later by the summative line, “I had not seen her for thirty-eight years” (205). After she visits her mother for the last time (an unremarkable encounter), she receives a phone call alerting her of her mother’s death. “When I hung up, I felt hollow, listless. I had lost out on a daughter’s last privilege; I couldn’t mourn my mother” (208). A white space follows, after which Fox begins the second story of the final chapter: “When I was two weeks away from my twenty-first birthday, I gave birth to a daughter” (208). (Earlier in the memoir, Fox writes of her own birth: “When my mother was nineteen, she gave birth to me” (71).) This subdued way of finally arriving at the most central aspect of the book – Fox as absent mother – elicits a mood of great sorrow and longing, tempered as though by a damper pedal by the detached style of prose with which Fox, as narrator/character, presents it. “Many years later, Linda found me,” Fox tells us, and the two of them plan to meet for the first time in San Francisco, where Fox lived when she was pregnant with her daughter, Linda. Fox confesses: “When the airplane was a few hundred yard from the ground, I wished it would crash. In the face of great change, one has no conscience” (209). In these two lines, one hears resonate the comings and goings, the push and pull, the love and the refusal, all the longing of a lifetime (“For years I thought about this moment with my parents, an intimacy out of time, larger than language” 110.) Fox and Linda meet, and at one point over the course of their weekend together they sit outside the apartment where Fox lived during her (accidental, unwanted) pregnancy. Fox concludes her memoir: “I’ll leave us there, sitting close together on the curb. Now and then someone passed by but paid no attention to us as we told each other stories from our lives, falling silent every so
often” (210). It is no coincidence that the final chapter is titled, “Elsie and Linda,” the only chapter named after people and not places. This is because for Fox, people are places; places that come and go as often and as freely as we visit them – and they us – in person and in memory.

Theoretical Brace: Bare Life and the Archive

In the three years I was taking coursework and working on my qualifying exams, two theoretical interests predominated my thinking: Georgio Agamben’s idea of “bare life” and Jacques Derrida’s notion of “archive fever.” As a creative writer, these theoretical constructs are most illuminating when put in conversation with works for fiction: for this reason I turn to Imre Kertész’ work to provide an example of how theory and fiction can find a dialogue with one another on the conceptual level and in terms to craft.

In Homo Sacer, Georgio Agamben makes the claim: “the growing dissociation of birth (bare life) and the nation-state is the new fact of politics in our day, and what we call camp is this disjunction” (175). Agamben extends this sober view, calling for a more realistic comprehension of modern history and its dark potential: “we must expect not only new camps but also always new and more lunatic regulative definitions of the inscription of life in the city. The camp, which is now securely lodged within the city’s interior, is the new biopolitical nomos of the planet” (176). Agamben formulates a negative (death-bound) definition of bare life in terms of the camps at Auschwitz:

The truth – which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils – is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as
Hitler had announced, "as lice," which is to say, as bare life. The
dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religion nor
law, but biopolitics (114).

In an introduction to a volume of scholarly essays written about his own
work, the Hungarian writer Imre Kertész offers a solution to the problem of
the Holocaust(s):

Only knowledge can elevate man above history. In the time of an
omnipresent, distressing, totalitarian history that deprives us of all
hope, knowledge is the only honorable means of escape, knowledge is the
only good. Only in the light of this lived knowledge may we pose the
question: Can all that we have committed and endured in fact create
value, or, to be more precise, can we ascribe value to our own life?
("Europe’s” xi)

Kertész’s first novel Fateless(ness) both illuminates and problematizes
Agamben’s notion of bare life. If bare life is to be considered along the
lines of what Hannah Arendt calls “natality” than bare life is life that is
only life, no value other than its being, no options other than its
continuing or its ceasing: for Agamben, it is life that can be killed but not
sacraficed.

In his novel Liquidation, Kertész puts a spin on Shakespeare’s famous
question “To be or not to be,” rephrasing the question in terms of the
character Kingbitter’s dilemma: “I am or I am not.” This is the ground zero
of existence: a point of being where the question of to live or die, or to
let live or to let die, comes into play. There are moments of this type of
pure survival, this bare life, in Kertész’ first novel Fateless(ness). One
scene takes place as Kertész’ narrator, a 12 year old boy, confronts the
choice to speak up and live, or to let himself be over-looked as one of the dead, and thus be carried away (one supposes to the crematorium) as already dead:

And in spite of any other consideration, rational thought, feeling of resignation or of common sense, I still couldn’t mistake the furtive words of some kind of quiet desire rising from within myself, as if embarrassed because of their senselessness, but yet consistently stubborn in their persistence: I would so much like to live a little longer in this beautiful concentration camp! (138)

Here Kertész’ narrator is preoccupied with life – with the barest survival – that he does not care about his freedom. His only concern is food: he does not care about freedom, or about his fellow captives. His desire is only to keep himself alive one more moment, one more day. The boy-narrator is focused on survival, on “proceeding” (a word that comes into play again in Liquidation). Where Agamben focuses primarily on bare life as assessed by those in power, Kertész’s account of his survival in the camps of Auschwitz offers perspective on what bare life means to the community of prisoners inside the camps, and what it means, ultimately, to one’s self. Kertész finds value in bare life. Forgetting, and the resistance against forgetting, are major drives that help propel the narrators and story-lines in later Kertész novels: the troubled relation between “yes” and “no:” affirmation and refusal.

But what happens when bare life lives beyond the camps? What happens when bare life is written about, when it becomes an account – a subject (narrator), a narrative (memoir, novel), a document? This is the subject for much of Kertész’ work after Fateless(ness). In his novel Kaddish for a Child Not Born, the decision about life and death is elevated to the realm of
procreation: in the (pre)natal space of life or no-life, to bear a child or not to bear a child (to am or not to am another human being). The decision of bare life becomes ethical now, not just an existential choice of suicide or letting go, but the decision to bring another life into the world: the responsibility contingent to the contract of new life. In *Kaddish*, the question of value and life—and of bare life itself—is rendered as a simple Yes or No. To bear or not to bear. To make life or not to make life. Ultimately, this decision is about the son’s decision to become, or not to become, the father.

*Kaddish for a Child Not Born* begins with pure negation, the word “no.”

“No,” I said immediately and forthwith, without hesitation and spontaneously, so to say, for it is quite obvious that our instincts actually work against our instincts, so that, so to say, our anti-instincts act instead of, or even as, our instincts... (1)

The word “no” echoes throughout the novel, a recurring end-stop (figurative), a recurring indentation (literal), and a structural mimesis (in a scene between the narrator and his wife (68-9)) of a typewriter beginning a new line—or of gunfire (the narrator delivers the word “no” like bullets in response to his wife’s asking for a child, each “no” beginning a new line even before the previous line has ended). This “no”—all of them—is a refusal of life, a refusal of continuance, a refusal of survival on grounds more valuable than the bare life of the camps. Similar to the way the character B. in *Liquidation*, in his death note, explains how he has “no inclination to step out of the prison into infinite space to watch the dwindling and evaporation of my superfluous...Surely I was about to say ‘tragedy!’ How ridiculous” (77), the narrator B in *Kaddish* only wishes to survive in the most bare, biological sense possible.
In her article, “Kertész and the Problem of Guilt in Unfinished Mourning,” Esther Faye writes of the meaning of the narrative “no” in Kaddish:

A ‘No’ addressed by the narrator to the very object-the-child-whom-he-refuses-to-be-let-born, and to the woman whose desire for one he refuses to satisfy. With this ‘No’ he not only murders his potential child, but destroys his whole world. And, in place of everything that he destroys with his refusal, and in place of this non-existent child/children whom he refuses to beget yet still keeps ‘alive’ as a negative ‘ex-istence,’ he chooses instead to live a life of work...[which] ‘in its essence was nothing more than digging, the continued digging of the grave that others had begun to dig for me in the air’, and which, in recalling the chimneys of Auschwitz, keeps him fixed to his fate - the fate/fatelessness of a Jew (114-5).

Faye goes on to address what I believe is an essential point in all work written by Kertész:

One can only say No to life, No to desire, when one is already on the side where life (the only kind possible to live under the reign of the signifier) and desire are possible... (120)

The invocation of the Kaddish complicates the life/death yes-no ethical dilemma at the center of the novel. Eluned Sumners-Brown, in her article “Imre Kertész’s Kaddish for a Child Not Born,” explains the relevance, and the significance, of the formal Kaddish prayer and how it comes to mean same-but-different in the context of Kertész’ novel:
At funerals... verses from Scripture concerning the Judgment are uttered, and the kaddish is then required to mark the disruption, caused by the funeral, to the study of the Torah that is of the same order as these... While Kertész’s Kaddish is a lament for a child unborn, its function as an outcry at odds with its subject, issuing forth to a community of readers, means that it shares the kaddish’s paradoxical movement, even though the father/son relationship has been reversed...

...It is the bereaved son who bears the responsibility to assist the departed to find solace...And yet perhaps it is this same orphan, the child who has no father because he will never be born, who is charged with rescuing Kaddish’s afflicted narrator, in so far as this child is present in the book that stands in for him, and in so far as this book that stands in for him is the enigmatic instance of life that we hold in our hands (229-30).

Sumners begs the question: “if there can be no more life after Auschwitz, why does the narrator of Kaddish continue speaking to us, the readers? Why does he seek to share his burden?” (229)

Derrida’s notion of “archive fever” helps to illuminate this aspect of Kertész’ narrator. One could call Liquidation a “novel of the archive.” His is an oeuvre obsessed with the possibility of hope in a hopeless world: to say yes or no to life, knowing that life is at once the truest of values and of potentiality of no value at all. It suggests a “promise” of the archive, something Derrida explains in Archive Fever:

The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future... Achievable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives. It begins with the printer.” Impressions... “This archival technique has commanded that which in
the past even instituted and constituted whatever there was as anticipation of the future (18).

Derrida explains this aspect of the archive fever:

The trouble de l’archive stems from mal d’archive. We are en mal d’archive: in need of archives... It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest interminably, from searching for the archive, right where it slips away... it is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement (90-91).

Compare this with the scene in B’s apartment, when Kingbitter is searching in a “lather” – or a fever -- for the “vanished novel:”

I searched in a lather and with growing desperation through all the cupboards, drawers, and every imaginable place, as I could not find the novel, or rather manuscript of the novel, that I guessed B. must have written before his death... there was this veritable yawning gap: everything in those literary remains cried out for that novel, the fulfillment, the apotheosis (67-8).

Kingbitter is no longer Kingbitter. Kingbitter is mal d’archive, he is archive, he is archiving it(and him)self.

Derrida writes:

It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past...It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question
of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. A spectral messinaity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it...to a very singular experience of the promise (36).

In his “Postscript” to Archive Fever, Derrida’s mode of writing shifts from critical psychoanalysis to a style that borders on the autobiographical. He writes: “by chance, I wrote these last words on the rim of Vesuvius, right near Pompeii, less than eight days ago. For more than twenty years, each time I’ve returned to Naples, I’ve thought of her Gradiva” (97). Derrida’s placement of himself, as narrator, on the rim of Mt. Vesuvius in “postscript” evokes the concept of “invagination” that he introduces elsewhere in the book. In a book that places such emphasis on circumcision and the male foreskin, to conclude on location at the site of a volcano, a literal infolding (not to mention lava), is an obvious allusion to the vaginal, the womb, the natal. The ultimate of biological, social, and ethical contracts: pregnancy, and the will to birth. Kertész and Derrida are each consumed with the feminine, with procreation – of ideas as well as bodies – and each are compelled by a drive toward communication, a desire to tell, perhaps haunted by what Derrida describes as the “paternal phantom, that is, who is in a position to be correct, to be proven correct – and to have the last word” (Archive 39). Each of the novels and memoirs I have mentioned in this preface have a relationship between wanting, and/or having, the “final word.” It is also the impulse, even in Derrida, toward memoir: toward the valuing of personal experience over ideas, of knowledge gained via dialogue over the right to “final words.”
The benefit and difficulty of completing a creative dissertation is knowing which influences to allow into your headspace, and which to keep out. Being exposed to a number of different literary, theoretical, and methodological paradigms has been of extreme importance to me; so too has the ability to limit my influences, so as to focus on producing my own creative work: its production, revision, and refinement. Jane Hirshfield offers sage advice on this point: “Cultivate necessary selfishness. The world – even the literary world – will ask you to do everything except write new poems. That, you must ask yourself.”

As a fiction writer I do not speak in response to other texts, I speak through them and for them and hope their voices can be heard in my own work: perhaps also I speak in spite of them, which is why I am hesitant to expose too much of the inner workings of my creative processes. Like Paula Fox, I give pause at the thought of revealing too much; I believe my work speaks for itself in ways I could not speak about it. Five years ago, when I entered the graduate program in English, I began working on a memoir. In the years since I have made strategic decisions, and accidental discoveries, that have led me to write a novel. For me, the question has mainly been one of genre, as I have expressed in this preface. For my narrator, it is not so much a question of genre but a question of responsibility and doubt: my narrator is troubled by contract: social, paternal, and authorial (the anxiety of inclusion, exclusion, and the historian’s burden of lending a story – causality, artificial or true – to the accumulation of events). My narrator and I share a fundamental obsession in regard to writing: what experiences – what histories – are meaningful enough to be included in our narratives? The source material and thematic elements are the same for the novel as they were for the memoir, and the content shares much of the same ground.
dissertation is – it has become – a fictional memoir. The reading of the novel itself will best expose the ways in which the texts I have analyzed in this preface have influenced the style, structure, and thematic approach of my narrative; but for the sake of this introduction, I will briefly describe the ways in which my intellectual pursuits and disciplinary thinking have most significantly impacted my work.

In terms of minimalist, understated styles of writing, I have found Fox, Elliott, and Johnson to be most useful in the writing of my novel and one will find echoes of their work in every chapter of Duplex. I understand minimalism in my own work as it relates to the question of Story and Form: when to divulge, when to indulge, where and how to conjure the past. My use of fragmentary mini-chapters – short-short sections – owes much to the recent trend in micro and flash fiction that I have studied and taught in recent years, and to experimental works like Robison’s and Markson’s, as well as to the prose poetry of Anne Carson (whose work I only allude to here). My narrator’s treatment of the recurring themes of flight, radio, Zen Buddhism, 1970’s rock and roll music, and anecdotes from the history of technology and the history of ideas borrow some of the layering techniques I have analyzed in Nick Flynn’s work. The structure of the novel relies heavily upon Denis Johnson’s novel The Name of the World and Paula Fox’s Borrowed Finery, in so far as the final chapter is one in which a secret – a confession, of sorts – is revealed; the chapters are organized around place (around circuits, actually, the routes around Des Moines the narrator has taken on a weekly basis for three years). History plays a part in my narrator’s journey in ways that history does not play a part in Johnson’s novel (ironically, as the protagonist of The Name of the World is a history professor), and the notions of guilt and grief are drawn to the surface: my narrator’s central dilemma, the source of his guilt, is that his grief is intellectual – he does not feel grief as he thinks he should (whereas Johnson’s narrator can only feel it).
My novel’s temporal frame narrative – a single day in the life of the narrator – is pocketed with reflections, anecdotes, and miniature histories that reveal the backstory and its relevant tensions and imperatives as the novel proceeds. In this regard I also owe my study of the minimalist authors on my list, those memoirs and novels that proceed in similar fashion.

The narrator of Duplex recalls the past with ease, but never at ease. Late in the novel my narrator quotes Sophocles: “All good things must flow into the boulevard.” But he is never certain how to define the good, he isn’t quite sure what is worthy of being made public, of being raised to the level of art. Similarly, I troll the depths of my experience - and my family history - with an uneasiness that generates more questions than it does answers: more deliberation than deliberateness, deciding what of the past has anything to do with the present. I have made things easier for my narrator. The rules of his game are limited. His story has - it must have, for it is drama - an ending. My narrator can not leave Iowa: he is caught between his desire to be free of - and to be in union with - Amanda. He stays, because he must stay; the novel demands it. Every story must have an Ishmael, and the story of Duplex is the story of the future - the past is just window dressing. The past is archive. The other archive - literally, the “archive of the other” - is Marlow(e), and the narrator’s desire for a secret that does not exist - the narrator’s desire for sacrifice, for something sacramental in the home-less and name-less lives he has been privy to. And what of his sister’s side of the duplex, the one she has never lived in?: the one reserved for her, like an open, or yet-to-be archive, the promise of a contract never made. Or perhaps it is all a construct of his own devising, a new way for him to hide from his life: to hide behind the guise of The Author. The memoir become fiction. (But even in a diegetic world, to pen something - to publish - troubles the telling: it draws into question the “character” of the narrator.)
The concerns and problems facing the narrator of *Duplex* mirror my own. As a fiction writer with a memoirist leaning, how much of my true story to include? Where to use fact, and where to write fiction? Where does my story, my narrator’s story, and my sister’s story branch off from another? Stephen Elliott writes: “It doesn’t matter if I call it fiction: I know as well as they do that’s not an excuse. I don’t bother trying to defend myself. It’s not defensible, it’s just what I do. I spend years crafting a two-hundred page story, all the time my life sits next to me like a jar of paint.” Later in *The Adderall Diaries*, Nick Flynn (appearing as a character) tells Stephen: “*The Ticking Is The Bomb* is not really about torture... it’s really about me, and what it’s like for me to wake up in a country than sanctions torture.” Elliott responds: “We’re all just writing about ourselves” (56). And Fox, in a *Paris Review* interview: “Everything you write is autobiographical... the only thing you really know, reasonably well, is yourself... I think what happens in memoir is that you write directly about yourself. The light is not on other people, it’s on your response to what you see.” The light is different when it comes to fiction; where to shine it is of upmost importance.

Speaking of her memoir *Nox*, Anne Carson writes: “Yes, I wrote the book because when my brother died I hadn’t seen him for twenty-two years, and he was a mystery to me, and he died suddenly in another country, and I had a need to gather up the shards of his story and make it into something containable. So it’s a lament in the sense of an attempt to contain a person after they’re no longer reachable.” My sister is reachable but only partially so. So I search for what is reachable: what archetypes or stories might contain her, since she is unfixed, uncontained, unhoused and incalculable in real life. And so does my narrator. The difference is that my narrator searches history, and I search literature: my narrator is preoccupied with the ancient past and with science and technology, whereas I
am interested in the contemporary – fiction, memoir – and the ways in which living writers have explored similar themes and storylines as the ones I traffic in. In responding to Joan Didion’s famous phrase “We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Russell Banks writes: “We tell each other stories that we pray will be transformed in the telling...made believable and about us all, no matter who we are to one another and who we are not.” As my life and manuscripts evolved, my true stories took on the tinge of the fictional, and even the truest of the stories found in my dissertation are no longer factual, they have moved from the archive of lived experience into the street: the boulevard where everything belongs to somebody else.

I do not have Freud over my shoulder as Derrida does, but I am writing with two “phantom” readers in mind: my sister, and my son (the promise – and burden – of future readership). My narrator, like myself, does not have the Holocaust or real-life tragedy, on a grand scale, to inform his writing; our obsessions are local, and in place of concentration camps, my narrator has the homeless camps of Iowa (themselves liminal to the city, not a part of it like Agamben’s idea of the camp). My work like my narrator’s is an attempt to seek grand scale drama in the small, often forgotten or over-looked theater of the commonplace. Camps, shelters, cars, bars, apartments: in each of these matters of life and death play out on a daily basis, and one of the central dilemmas I and my narrator face is how to justify calling personal loss a tragedy with the knowledge of history – and global politics – as a backdrop to individual suffering. And how to justify or condemn the sacrificing of individual family members in the name of larger ethical or artistic “callings.” As I struggled with whether or not to write memoir or fiction – whether to expose or to create, to document or to dramatize – my narrator struggles with his own notions of the public: isolation vs. participation, volunteerism vs. occupation, the safety of privacy vs. the risk of publicity, the sustained connection with community vs. self-reliance.
come by self-exile. In a manner of speaking, the narrator must decide which archives to keep open, and which to close—what promises, old or new, to invest in. It is fitting that Duplex ends with a conjectured future conversation between the narrator and his father. In the end my narrator has to give up the archive—give up the grand metaphors, the mythologizing, the anxieties of influence and the embarrassment of private sorrow. He must transition from the duplex to the boulevard, to move from bracing himself against the world to embracing it.

Were real life that simple.


Electra: Hermes, he-god, help me and get them to hear me, the spirits I pray to, that prosper this palace.

Chorus: Our lives have been one long meal of mourning, one life-long banquet, one blow-out of bale.

- Aeschylus’ The Oresteia

Now the standard cure for one who is sunk is to consider those in actual destitution or physical suffering - this is an all-weather beatitude for gloom in general and fairly salutary day-time advice for everyone. But at three-o’clock in the morning, a forgotten package has the same tragic importance as a death sentence, and the cure doesn’t work - and in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning, day after day.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”
Reproduced in this novel is an excerpt from Chapter Eight ("In the Midst of a Whirlwind") from the book *Isaac Newton* by James Gleick.
EXIT NARRATIVE
In the lobby of the Central Iowa Homeless Shelter a fern tree sits planted in a heavy, green ceramic pot, fanning out in the corner near where the entrance door swings open. The fern’s a *cibotium shiedei*, or Mexican Tree Fern, with dark green blade-shaped leaves that taper yellow at the edges. The plant was a gift from the Des Moines Arboretum, the first donation I processed at the shelter, the first paperwork I signed three years ago when I started working here. By all accounts and measures, the fern should be dead by now, its leaves should have browned, brittled, pinched off and spread crisp as egg shells across the lobby floor. But the fern survives, owing perhaps, in a less than scientific way, to the resemblance it bears to a poison sumac tree – with its hooped branches bent like fishing poles, and long ovoid leaves – and what I’m saying is every morning for the past three years I’ve pushed through the shelter’s steel-reinforced front doors and thought about my father.
On my desk in the north wing of the shelter there’s a little package wrapped in orange tissue paper set on top of a stack of unsubmitted mileage charts. The package is a gift from Ken’s girlfriend, Beth, who has attached a note with a yellow ribbon – the ribbon ends are Little Orphan Annie curled, a technique my mother used when I was a child by pulling the blade of a scissor along the length of the ribbon, against the thread grain. Beth’s note reads: “don’t open ‘til closing time.” I smell the package and know that it’s soap.

“Orange wrapping paper?” I ask Ken over my shoulder.

“Orange you glad,” Ken says, “that she didn’t use blue paper?”

Ken is hunched over his desk like a horologist, tinkering with a vintage AM/FM radio, not a watch. The orange package on my desk smells fragrant. Jasmine, I think, or eucalyptus. Beth is a homeopathic clinician and works at her own health food kiosk at the Jordan Creek Mall. Next to her package are piles of paperwork – mileage reports, IA-014 and HS-032 sheets, volunteer request forms – needing to be sorted, signed, and filed in one of four double-wide metal file cabinets. The only light in our small, compact office comes by way of a small iced-over window and a green banker’s light on Ken’s desk. (We keep the central heat and fluorescents off during the day.) A kerosene space heater sits in the corner of the room – against city ordinance: we keep it burning indoors anyway. Behind the office door is a
cold aluminum coat rack, where Ken keeps a fresh button-down white shirt and a pre-knotted black tie hanging “for emergencies.”

Ken has a radio on his desk and he turns it on to test reception.

“Hey Ken,” I say.

“Hey what?”

“Does that modern marvel pick-up U-boat signals?”

The sound of the radio’s tuner dragging slowly through static sounds like water boiling, and it reminds me of my mother’s favorite joke: “a watched pot will boil – it’s just very boring.” Ken makes a farting sound with his lips, spinning the dial faster so the static whips like gusts of wind tunneling through downtown Des Moines. The winds in central Iowa originate in Canada. When we’re out at one of the camps and a big gust blows, Ken will say: “Epic moose fart.”

I ask Ken when the Iowa game is on and he says noon.

“It’s a little early for the radio,” I say, but I know he knows I’m only shuffling paperwork.

Today’s radio is a black Emerson pocket receiver with a square silver speaker and a telescoping antenna, the entire thing is about the size of a flipped-out wallet or one of those bibles you find in hotel drawers. Ken keeps a hardback bible in the top drawer of his desk, for squishing ants and spiders and for cracking the occasional nut. Ken’s party trick is he can crush a walnut in his bare hands. I’ve seen him do it, the sharp edges of the cracked shells leave imprints in his palms for hours. I don’t keep much in my own desk, just mechanical pencils, aspirin, smelling salts, and an extra pair of socks. Only the top drawer of my desk opens, the three side drawers have been locked since before I started working here. No one has the key. Ken says the mystery drawers are filled with the bones of the homeless men who have died in their sleep in the shelter. I figure the drawers are
jam full of mileage charts, or lost ID cards, or sticks of chalk or confiscated gum from when this building was a schoolhouse in the 1970’s.

“You finish your Exit Report?” Ken asks, even though he knows I haven’t.

“Yeah.”

“Want me to proofread it?”

“No.”

Ken turns down the volume of the static on his radio.

He waits a moment and asks, “When’s your lunch with Tony?”

“Noon.”

“Pedal to the metal then,” he says, and I say, “Rock Chalk, Jayhawk.”

Ken is a diehard Iowa Hawkeyes fan, and he groans at my mention of the number one seeded University of Kansas men’s basketball team. On his desk between the radio and a six pack of warm Tab cola, Ken keeps a black and yellow University of Iowa Hawkeyes pennant, the plastic stem placed in a vase that once held tulips Beth gave him on Valentine’s day. There used to be a note on the vase that read “No More Meat!” but Ken threw it out, adamant that his weight issues and trouble sleeping are a symptom of “his nerves,” not Culvers butter burgers.

Ken has been pestering me all week to fill out my bracket for the office pool. Today is the first day of the NCAA Men’s basketball tournament, round of 64. Today is also my last day working for the shelter For three years I’ve been serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA – Volunteer in Service to America – stationed here at the Central Iowa Homeless Shelter but also serving the Iowa Homeless Youth Centers, where half a dozen AmeriCorps VISTAs share an office in the basement. I’m their supervisor – my official title: “VISTA Leader” – but at 5pm my ride is over. Three years working for the government and I’m getting off exactly where I boarded. In the morning I’ll wake up and no longer be a paid volunteer. I’ll just be unemployed.
Ken clucks twice with his tongue like a hen and Elton John’s floppy ear perks up. I can feel by Ken’s movements that he’s reaching into his top drawer for a Circus Peanut.

“Incoming,” Ken says, tossing a hard stale candy onto the floor.

Elton John is an eight pound Boston Terrier mix who, until now – skittering over the linoleum floor after the Circus Peanut – has been nestled like an egg on a brown meditation cushion placed atop a stack of old phonebooks – his canine throne – in front of the space heater. Ken tells strangers that Elton John is a mix of “terrier, rock, and gospel.” Elton John has a fetish for blue food and blue toys. Ken says it’s canine synesthesia – the dog may be colorblind, but he knows “the blues” when he smells it.

I glance at the poster of Elton John – the man, the pop star, the icon – that Ken has hanging on the back of our office door: the rock icon dressed like Daffy Duck sitting in front of a grand piano on stage with a tear in his eye after playing “Candle in the Wind.” Ken has a tattoo on his left bicep of a pink ballet slipper, sometimes he’ll flex his muscle and say “Not so tiny dancer.” He got the tattoo for his daughter – a sophomore poly-sci major at U Iowa – when she was still a child taking tap lessons. On the triceps of his right arm, Ken has another, faded tattoo: Semper Fidelis.
"Hey Ken," I say.

"Hey what?"

"Do you get Oprah on that radio?"
“Falafel” is what Ken says when he doesn’t get a joke or if he’s too tired to think of a clever comeback. “Good Lord” is what my father used to say, his catch phrase in response to everything: Good Lord to the sports page in the morning, Good Lord to the tax return, Good Lord to my mother’s t-cell reports — a phrase that carried about as much voltage as the AA batteries in Ken’s radio, about as useless as this year’s weather predictions. It’s been the longest, coldest, wettest winter on record in Iowa, and there’s a fresh foot of new snow on the ground. Last night, freezing rain and hail as hard as diamonds fell against the awnings and gutters of the duplex where I live in the north end of the city, north of I-80 just off MLK parkway, on a cul-de-sac located half way between the Basilica of St. Johns on University Ave and the Vietnamese Buddhist Church north at Hickman Road. The rain froze on the pavement and turned to snow in the early morning: a top sheet for the bed of ice still clinging to the surface of the roads. The highway department ran out of sand months ago, and the city has been paying farmers to supply them with corn kernels to spread on the road for traction. Someone hung a tarp from the I-80 overpass that was spray-painted “Got Spring?” — as if Spring were being held hostage in a box somewhere.
Our office is so small that when Ken and I sit at our desks — mine facing the south wall, Ken’s facing north — our chair backs press together. Ken is six foot tall and 300 pounds with biceps the size of butternut squash and a neck as thick as the width of the tires on the 1989 Plymouth Voyager we take on our daily runs to the homeless camps. Because of his girth, when Ken swivels to look at the clock on the wall above my desk, our chairs engage in a kind of duel rotary action: like two spools advancing film inside a camera.

When Ken leans forward to scratch at the ice on the inside of the office window, my chair glides back on its rollers.

“Beware the ides of March,” I say, and Ken says, “March is one cold bitch.”
Around ten o’clock I pick up our office phone and ask for DJ Ken, the
dial tone humming in my ear. The rules to “DJ Ken” are simple: I sing
something off an album I remember from my parents’ record collection – one of
many sets of boxes that got lost in my father’s move to Virginia after my
mother died – and if Ken guesses right, I owe him a plate of cookies from the
shelter’s pantry. If I stump him, Ken owes me a dime. The first round this
morning I choose an obscure Elton John lyric, “Life isn’t everything,” and
immediately I feel Ken shaking his head.

“Song for Guy,” he says. “Don’t phone it in, man, just because it’s
your last day.”

“Double or nothing,” I say.

Ken cranes his neck to eye the pyramid I’ve made on my desk out of
rolls upon rolls of dimes, and he tells me, “You’ve got enough there to buy a
new car. You’re hustling me again.”

Grabbing a roll of dimes, I say, “Let me pay for a bracket, then.”

“Do I look like a piggy bank?”

Later, I say “Hey Ken,” and Ken answers me by turning up the volume on
his radio.
Ken has a bronze star hanging from a nail in his garage where he keeps his collection of old radios, among engine parts and lost keys and broken jars and rusted useless junk he finds on the side of the road or in the woods when we’re making runs in the Outreach Van. I’ve been inside Ken’s garage, but not his house.
When my father took a job in the private sector I rode shotgun with him in the big yellow truck while my mother and five year old sister drove in the family car behind us. 600 miles from Fort Bragg military base north to a small town in central New York where we were to live in that subterranean house at the top of a hill near the Kopernick Observatory, a half mile from the Pennsylvania border. This was the spring of ’92. The year Boris Yeltsin and George Bush Sr. declared an official end to the Cold War, the same year, in March, the Duke Blue Devils won their second NCAA men’s basketball championship in a row. My father and I watched the game on a black and white television balanced on moving boxes in our old house on the base, a few nights before our move, and I remember him shouting “Back to back!” when the buzzer sounded and I thought about all the stories he’d tell of his dead brother and how soldiers in warzones slept back to back at night to keep their sightlines covered.
I remember walking with my father along the perimeter of the new property after we moved in, surveying the land. In Elizabethan times this was called rogationtide, a ritual of the feet, marking boundaries of privately owned lands before public surveying was invented. Among the harmless vegetation on our new homestead were a dozen poison sumac trees bordering the eastern tree line, and my father, always looking for an opportunity to build my character, paid me to remove them. A quarter per shrub was like gold to a nine year old, but the deal was I had to kill and dispose of the sumacs myself. My father — a former aeronautics specialist in the Army Corps of Engineers and a newly acquired aeronautical engineer designing cargo holds for planes and helicopters in a military division of Lockheed Martin — did, of course, provide a protocol: first kill the leaves with a toxin of his creation (he was fond of turpentine, and lye, and I remember their aseptic scent from childhood as clearly as I recall the smell of the Dimple Pinch scotch my father drank while watching sports on TV or after a long day of working in the yard); next, wait two days, cut the trunks and bag them in thick black plastic with the branches; next, dig up and spray the roots, bag them, and spray the dirt inside the hole with toxin, too; finally, leave the tied-off bags at the curb for the garbage truck to haul away.
I sprayed and I cut and I dug and I sprayed again and I bagged it all up, beginning the first Friday after our move and finishing Sunday, and at the end of the weekend the hedge line was clear of sumac trees and my body was covered in burn blisters. By evening on Saturday, my hands and forearms and shins were already lit with pink ribbons of raised flesh the texture of raw tripe. The burning worsened after the sun had set on Sunday and the blisters ballooned with fluid. My mother drew me a cold oatmeal bath mixed with witch hazel and baking soda, for the itching and pain, while my sister helped in her small way, dabbing my blisters with mashed-up jewel weed: my mother’s healing contribution, taken from a wild patch of the weed she’d seen growing along the creek in the side yard. My father’s contribution was a crisp five dollar bill he took from his wallet late Sunday night as I lay still on top of the sheets in my bed. Five dollars was two dollars more than I’d earned, and my father spoke of waiting until morning, about needing a new bank anyway, about how the bill he held over me could, and should, be broken into singles. My mother scowled at him from my bedroom doorway, her body lit in outline by the hall’s white light.

“Hank, don’t you think the boy deserves it?”

My father’s name is Harold, only my mother called him Hank.
The shelter’s hallways are dark during the day to conserve energy, but at night this place is as brightly lit as a stadium. I traipse down the main corridor, Elton John at my heels licking the soles of my boots as they lift with each of my steps. I round the corner near the Recreation Room, and Charlie steps out of his office wearing brown suede loafers and a tee shirt that says “Got Homeless?” Elton John abandons my boots in favor of Charlie’s shoelaces, the tips of which Charlie says he dips in bacon grease. Really it’s because Charlie bought blue laces.

“I had this special made,” he says, pinching the collar of his shirt, tugging it for emphasis. The shirt I’m wearing reads “I’m Homeless” on the back, a runner-up slogan for our awareness campaign. Charlie, looking pleased with himself, says to me, “Every Plato needs his Socrates.”

“We could take this show on the road,” I say, and Charlie claps me on the arm.

“Now that’s a solid career choice.”

Charlie looks at his Buddha-shaped watch, the hands rotating inside Buddha’s belly.

“I’m no mathematician,” he says, “but off the top of my head I’d say today” — he pretends to calculate before saying — “is your one thousand and ninety-fifth day on the job.”

“Call Britannica.”

“Three years!” says Charlie. “Seriously, you make me feel old.”
“Time flies,” I say, nudging Elton John’s butt with my toe to get him moving forward.

“Fruit flies, too,” says Charlie. “Like a banana.”

“Do you know what falls like an apple?”

Charlie lays his arm on my shoulder and says, “A tower made of oranges.”
Charlie and I fall into a measured stride, the smell of cleaning solution tincturing the air as we enter the freshly mopped cafetéria.

“Speaking of time,” I say, “your man Dogen took the long road. Seven years just staring at a wall.”

“True. But Dogen had a reason.”

“His reason being?”

“It was an interesting wall.”
Elton John tumbles over himself chewing Charlie’s laces, and every few steps he shoots between our ankles like a soccer ball with too much English on it. Through the Cafeteria windows I see the ice-sheathed bars of a jungle gym that I always thought looked like the ribs of a wooly mammoth skeleton, like they have in the Des Moines Science Museum. As we cross the Cafeteria, I imagine a homeless man in caveman fatigues picking at the playground’s bones. Near the kitchen doors Elton John gets one of Charlie’s laces untied and plants the soft pads of his paws, holding the shoelace between his teeth like a long strand of blue spaghetti. His plump little body drags behind us, like the kids I’ve seen butt-planted on the ice behind their mothers, towed by the lengths of their argyle scarves.
Amanda took me to the public ice rink my first year in Iowa when she found out I’d never been skating before. It was our first unofficial date.
On the wall outside the kitchen entrance a sign reads: START A MOVEMENT; EAT A PRUNE, and someone has added in black marker: Caution: they don’t open the shitter til noon!
I open the door for Charlie and the aroma of simmering black beans hits me in the face like a wet glove. Down the line two 30-quart blue aluminum pots over low flames on a ten burner stove release hot bursts of steam from cock-eyed metal lids. The exhaust fans that normally ventilate with a steady whirring sound are broken and the kitchen is filled with condensation. Two box fans sit under the windows, but the windows are frozen shut and the fans sit there unused. Corn bread is baking in the oven. Michael, the cook, must be on a smoke break in the loading bay.

I scoop Elton John off the floor before he has a chance to scamper about in search of scraps, while Charlie heads straight for the coffee machine and fills a Styrofoam cup. I peel a paper plate off a stack beside rows of plastic cutlery packed in unmarked cardboard boxes set on a wheeled cart in preparation for the community lunch that begins in an hour. Charlie grabs a handful of creamers from a faux-wicker basket, sorting through the plastic cutlery.

"Would it be that hard to label these things?" he says, lifting the corner on several cartons before he finds a box of spoons. He stands tall, his coffee cup held in front of his chest between the words "Got" and "Homeless" on his shirt, and says, "Holy cow, I’m having a God moment." He looks wide-eyed down at the open end of the cardboard box full of spoons.

He says, "Tiny little shelter filled with tiny little legs."
“Yeah,” I say, “but do they move?” and Charlie says, all serious-like, “Only on my command” and he shakes the box of knives over my head like he’s blessing me with a censer.

Charlie waits at the top of the stairs sipping his hot coffee while I shoulder Elton John like a burping baby and carry him down a dimly lit stairwell that leads to the pantry. The pantry in the cellar is where the schoolhouse’s fallout shelter used to be. Going underground like this reminds me of my childhood home: that subterranean dwelling chosen by my father. I’d never heard of an “earth-bermed” structure before we moved into that house – the technical term is “earth shelter” – let alone had I seen one. I was nine years old at the time and when I heard “subterranean” and “berm” I imagined dank lairs and dark caves connected by underground tunnels reached only by steel cage elevators lowered down rusted chain pulleys. But the house itself was just a house – southern-facing, made of brick and wood, built into the side of a clovered hill with the roof exposed and two sides like a normal house, with the north and east facing walls buried into the earth. I took the bedroom in the northeast corner, underground with just one window, and our second week living there my father installed a window in the roof above my bedroom. I’d lie awake at night looking out that window as Orion’s belt turned a cartwheel in the sky, east to west as the midnight hours counted away toward dawn. As I grew older I’d climb out the window in the roof, in the middle of the night to meet friends or girls, and years later, after my mother died and my father moved everything to Virginia, it was through that window that I broke into the empty house. The sale hadn’t closed yet, the house was empty, and in the kitchen I opened one of the cupboards and found it full of cans of tuna fish and soup and beans, and boxes of crackers and pasta: food my mother had bought for us before she became too sick to do the shopping – food left behind for some other family to eat.
In the cafeteria again I set Elton John on the floor and Charlie and I retrace our steps. Charlie grabs a newspaper someone, probably Michael, left on one of the metal picnic tables.

“Here,” he says, rifling until he finds the Classifieds. “I hear Asia is hiring.”

“Maybe I’ll stay local,” I say. “Drive a tow truck. Or get a job at Social Services.”

“Is there a difference?” says Charlie.

Charlie spent ten years teaching English and studying Buddhism in China after his wife died in a car accident, and later retired from private practice to work for the shelter pro bono.

I humor him by asking, “Do they have homeless shelters in China?”

“Yes,” he says, nabbing an oatmeal cookie off my plate. “They’re called monasteries.”
When we reach his office, Charlie opens to the front page of the business section.

“Our fearless dictator,” he says, holding up the picture of Tony, the shelter’s director, standing in front of the City Council. Tony and the shelter’s board of trustees have been trying to buy land from the city for a new shelter location, one closer to the bus station and more central to downtown. But residents and local businesses near the proposed site are protesting, arguing about crime and neighborhood depreciation, threatening to sue. Howie of Howie’s Tow and Plow is leading the opposition. Charlie holds Tony’s picture high over his head, and I ask him if he knows what Stalin’s real name was. He says no, but he’s willing to wager that I do.

“Josef Dzhugashvili.”

“My mensch,” says Charlie, folding the business section and swatting it against my arm.
The duplex where I live is about a mile from the proposed site of the new shelter, on the north side of University Avenue half way between the hospital and Drake University. My father owns the duplex, and I’m his only tenant — though he’s landlord to several buildings in Virginia where he lives. He purchased the property in Des Moines on spec when I decided to take the AmeriCorps job, and I agreed to live in one half of the duplex because I wanted to believe, like he did, that my sister would turn her life around. After one year on the job, I wanted to leave the Midwest, but my father urged me to stay. “Give it time. Your sister is doing better. She’s bound to come around.” The plan as my father devised it had always been for my sister to move into the apartment next to mine, the other half of the duplex, and I would help her get the services she needs. After my mother died, each of us had gone to some extreme, coping or not coping in our own ways. I fled to the middle of nowhere to push paperwork around a desk and bring socks to homeless men in camps on the outskirts of a dead-end city. My father retired from engineering and became a maintenance man, a landlord snaking drains and shingling roofs, sealing other people’s homes with caulk. And my sister? My sister is another story.
Charlie feigns a yawn and leans against his doorframe. In a terrible attempt to act casual, he remarks: “I’ve noticed Amanda hasn’t been around here lately.” I say, “Yeah” and break off a piece of cookie, toss it down the hallway toward where the fern tree sits beside the front door, and watch as Elton John tears down the dark corridor.


“The hardest.”

“Worker bee with the charm of a queen.”

I change the subject by asking Charlie for the Sports page. He tells me he’s got Duke and Kansas in the final, and I admit I haven’t filled out a bracket. Charlie gives me the look I’ve seen him use on clients who walk out of counseling mid-session, and he digs his wallet out of his pants pocket and removes a five dollar bill.

“I’m not a charity case,” I say, and Charlie says, “Hey, I owe you for the Stalin thing.”

I don’t want another sermon about loving-kindness and alms and charity and brothers-from-another-mother and global citizenship, so I accept his money, rolling the bill up thin and tight like a matchstick, closing my fist around it. Charlie smiles at me from his office doorway.

“Narcissus,” he says, pocketing his wallet. “Enter the friggin’ pool.”
Ken’s radio is gargling static again at a low volume while outside the shelter, standing on the frozen sidewalk, Esmeralda pounds her fists against the front doors. It’s eleven o’clock on the dime, noon east coast time. The basketball games are about to begin. Twenty minutes, by the office clock. The clock hanging on the lime green wall above my desk has a second hand that keeps on moving, no tick or tock, just a smooth propeller-like rotation.

“That woman keeps time like an owl,” says Ken.

The hollow booms of Esmeralda’s pounding sound like depth charges echoing through the shelter’s empty hallways, when she switches to smacking with her cane the sounds are higher pitched, more like gunshots. Elton John is asleep on his cushion, which was a gift from Charlie who I hear, despite Esmeralda’s drumming, whistling the theme to Gilligan’s Island in the recreation room down the hall. Ken is stacking cookies in a tower next to his radio and the dim light through the office window casts an almost religious hue, spreading softly over Ken’s shoulders and shining on the bright blonde tips of his crew-cut and the pale scar on the side of his neck that he got in the war when he was stuck with a bayonet.
When the stack of cookies reaches the height of the radio’s antennae, Ken says, “Hands of a surgeon,” but his hands are shaking and he takes a deck of cards out of his top drawer and begins to shuffle. His doctor said it would help with the nerve damage. His shuffling sends cool, subtle air across the back of my neck. I lean over and adjust the knob on the space heater.

“Sails,” I sing in my best falsetto, adding: “They’re just like wings.” Ken fills in the line, “You can fly from things” and says, “Orleans, easy cheese.” Ken’s singing is more like tromboning, fumbling over and under the pitch two octaves too low, his voice searching for the tune like a drunk driver groping under the passenger seat for a pack of lost cigarettes.

“Have a cookie on me, then,” I say, and Ken says, “Don’t mind if I do.” He takes an Oreo off the top of his stack and scratches the back of his neck, his knuckles grazing my scalp. Normally this close to Ken I smell his Old Spice, but instead I smell rosemary oil, because Beth finally got Ken to cave and start using baking soda instead of deodorant. The rosemary is meant to invigorate, but mixed with Ken’s salty damp skin it reminds me of turkey juices at Thanksgiving, and I think about Reggie’s SleepOut last November, when the first snow of the season fell and Amanda followed me to the A/V booth in Drake stadium where I pressed her thin soft body against the cold railing overlooking the coaches’ box and she told me she loved me.
I pick up a mechanical pencil and click it to see if it has lead and I start tallying volunteer hours, double-checking Ken’s math. Ken opens a warm can of Tab from the six pack on his desk. The cola pops and hisses, whispering in secret language to the static on Ken’s radio.

“So,” Ken says, “are your AmeriCorps buddies throwing you a party tonight?”

“If they are,” I say, “I haven’t been invited.”

“Poor bastard,” says Ken, belching, and I say, “I’m a regular Robinson Crusoe.”

Ken sips his soda and shuffles his deck of cards while I shuffle the folders on my desk. I sign some mileage charts so my VISTAs can get paid for gas expenses. Elton John snores lightly in the corner on his raised bed, his snout just inches from the toaster-red coils of the space heater. His blue stuffed ox rises and falls with each of the dog’s quick breaths. The dog sleeps with all four limbs sticking straight out like table legs, his toenails flared. Beth says sleeping alert is a symptom of dogs who were rescued from a shelter. Ken says Elton John sleeps about as soundly as a POW.

When Ken gets tired of shuffling he spins the radio dial and, at last, he finds a station playing pre-game commentary. One of the announcers says something negative about Iowa and Ken says, “They pay these numbskulls?” A different announcer counters, praising Iowa’s skill inside the paint and Ken
“Give that man a degree.” I hear an announcer mention Duke, or he might have said juke. A commercial comes on advertising Howie’s discount plow rates. I look up from my paperwork and watch the clock.

“Hey Ken.”

Ken hesitates. Sips his soda. Shuffles his cards.

“Hey what?”

“Hand me the Meal Logs, will you?”

Ken makes a farting sound with his lips, reaching to the top of the file cabinet next to his desk, and hands me a three ring binder. Down the hall I hear the industrial vac scream into operation as Daveed, the custodian, begins his rounds in the sleeping quarters. I can hear Esmeralda’s knocking over the sound of the vacuum, faint now like the ticking of my heartbeat when I lay my head against a pillow. On the cover of the meal log someone glued a picture of a chicken perched atop a Wendy’s hamburger, the L in “Meal” crossed so it reads “Meat Log.”

The office phone rings and I tense up. Ken turns the radio off. I lift the phone off its receiver and hand it over my shoulder to Ken. By the tone of his voice I can tell it isn’t Amanda.

I relax, and when Ken hangs up, he says, “Tony says to meet him at the Homestead.”

“Jesus,” I say, re-cradling the headset. “He must really want me to stay.”

Ken says, “Bring me back a 50 dollar T-bone, will you?”

I stare at the cover of the Meal Log and ask Ken if he knows why the emperor of Rome cried when a messenger told him that Rome had been sacked, and before he can answer I say, “Because the name of the Emperor’s pet chicken was Rome.” Ken adjusts roughly in his chair and my chair swings side to side with his movements, like a rowboat rocking in its moors.

“Falafel,” he says, downing the rest of his soda. “I need to pee.”
With Ken out of the office, I turn to the Meal Log and thumb down the list of names, tallying for my daily report. We ask everyone to sign their name for community meals, to track the numbers for our yearly budget. People don’t have to give their real names or show ID for lunch, but they do need ID to spend the night. One of my jobs is to tally the numbers: to count the Aarons and Bills and Carols and Deans, every burrito, every bed. When I started working here I imagined people would give outrageous fake names at lunch, noble or funny or dirty names. But I discovered that most people don’t want the lies they tell to draw attention, they’d rather lie quietly.
Through the corkboard walls I can hear Ken singing in the bathroom. The vacuum is off now and I hear Esmeralda’s pounding full force. The ice on the window pane distorts my view of the parking lot and everything is blurred in blues and greens and grays that drip oily out of their shapes like an impressionist painting. Elton John notices me staring at the window, and a growl rolls up his throat, ending in a sharp, punctuated bark. If you stare in one direction long enough, the dog thinks something is there. I shut the Meal Log and turn in my chair and point my finger like a gun at Elton John, and Elton John sits up in the begging position on his hind legs, his forepaws tucked under his chin like a squirrel and his nubby tail timing back and forth like the hammer of a ringing bell. His plush blue toy bleeding white stuffing through the torn eyehole. Elton John only knows two tricks: beg and play dead. I reach and open Ken’s top drawer and grab a Circus Peanut and hold it in the air. Beth dyes the candies blue, and I can see already the dye staining the tips of my fingers. I hold the treat in one hand, and with my other hand I point an imaginary gun again at Elton John, thumb cocked. The dog stands at attention, waiting to play dead on my command.
Three weeks ago a group of high school students found a dead man in the river. The body had washed up on the shore half a mile south of the city limits. Ken got the call and I rode shotgun with him in the Outreach Van. On a good day driving in the van feels like riding a keg of beer in the ocean, but it’s worse in the winter and on our way to the river Ken captained the van like a seasick rhino. When we came to the traffic light at Fuller and Old Road, where the road hadn’t been cleared because there’s nothing south of the city save for empty lots and the dregs of old industry and, of course, the shelter. Ken tried to slow the van to a halt, a simple stop at a red light, but the van kept moving forward, gliding at 1 mph in such a perfect dead-straight line that I could almost imagine members of a curling team brooming the ice in front of us.
At the end of Old Road Ken jumped the curb, scraping muffler on the asphalt as the van bottomed out onto the access road leading to the river, and after a quarter mile driving on the snowy dyke we reached a clearing where I saw yellow police tape and Mayberry’s ridiculous Russian officer’s hat behind a cluster of bent and sagging dogwood trees. A Howie’s tow truck with a big plow on its front had been called to clear the access road, and its driver stood with a couple uniform cops leaning on the bumper of a squad car. Mayberry came out from behind the bushes, smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee, against DMPD protocol. Behind him, the Des Moines river churned in a wide arc, deep and broad and as black as the pints of Guinness Rico and Mayberry drink at People’s Pub on cop night. The group of teens that found the body had been riverside for school business, collecting frozen soil samples for an earth science project, two boys and one black-haired blue-eyed girl who struck a sharp image against the wintry backdrop. I watched as Mayberry, shivering a little in short sleeves, gestured a deep pass, pantomiming one of his old ESPN highlight clips from when he played Division I football, starting tight end for Toledo University. The blue-eyed girl wore a coat too large for her, the letters DMPD stitched into the back of the dark blue jacket.

Rico met us at the edge of the police tape and led us down a steep icy bank that opened to a short frozen creek that fed into the river. It was cold outside and I’d forgotten my gloves in the office and my fingers were as
swollen and stiff as the Circus Peanuts in Ken’s desk drawer. Ken and I
followed Rico to the river’s edge, holding onto each other’s coat sleeves for
balance and walking duck-footed along the creek, careful not to lose our
balance on the hard round stones that broke through the surface of the ice.
At the river’s edge the ice was solid enough to support my weight, but Ken
took only a few more steps before his boot heels cracked the ice.

“Don’t say anything to Beth,” he said, turning back. “I’ll capsize
you.”

When Rico and I reached the body I saw the dead man slumped with his
torso on the ice and his legs submerged in cold black water. In its crumpled
position, his body looked like it was about to slide down a laundry chute.
The man was naked save for a pair of socks with bright yellow bands on the
ankle that were visible in the dark water. Brittle brown stalks of river
reeds poked through the shore ice.

“I saw the socks,” said Rico, “I figured maybe he was one of yours.”
The sky above the river was low and blue, spreading flat in all directions like the roof of a revival tent. I scanned the horizon of the fields and saw the hot breath of the men huddled by the squad cars and it reminded me of the hot breaths of the cows that pastured in the field across the road from our old house in upstate New York, their thick heads loped between the wooden rungs of the fence so they could get their hard flat teeth and sandpaper tongues into the crab-apples that had fallen into the ditch beside the road. The field behind where the high school kids and Mayberry and the two uniformed officers and Howie’s man was white and lifeless. A bird took flight in the distant tree tops and clumps of snow slid off bent limbs of the evergreen trees. To the north, east of the rectilinear gray city, I saw the very top of the Capitol building’s dome, glinting in the sun like a cap without a brim, or a thimble without a thumb. Spreading southeast were a few square acres of city-owned woods, and in the thick of the woods, a quarter mile south of here on the near bank of the river, was a homeless camp we call The Ritz.

I took a long look at the dead man in the river. His hair was black and at uneven lengths, like he’d long outgrown a paid-for haircut, but not as shaggy as the hair of the men who sit on overturned buckets begging for change at the Interstate off ramps. The puffed, bluish skin of the body’s exposed flesh was flecked with black and brown grit, and Rico told me the coldness of the water slowed the bloating, so the dead man’s arms looked thin.
and boney. Lengths of bright yellow nylon rope had been secured under the armpits and tied to a tree stump on the shore to keep the body from floating away. It reminded me of something I once read, about when the Church, holding on for dear life to the idea that the universe was fixed - that the earth revolved around the sun, as designed by the hand of a generous, deistic God - had Galileo tried for heresy. Galileo, the story goes, whispered skyward on his way to house arrest, “Ah, but still it moves.”
I told Rico that I didn’t recognize the dead man, and we shuffled back to solid ground. Along the shore bits of shale the color of cobalt were scattered like loose, broken shingles. Rico lent me a hand as I climbed up the bank.

“How long has he been there?” I asked him.

“A day or two, maybe,” said Rico. “The current took him.”

Rico pointed in the direction of The Ritz, upstream.

“No ID card?” I asked.

“None that we found. Berry’s calling him Harry Floater. Get the drift?”

I looked at Rico and he ran his finger under his brow.

“Cause of the scar.”

I said, “That’s a high-end pun, coming from Berry.”

“We’re thinking of giving him a ribbon.”
The squad cars shot sporadic light into the air, blue and white alternating strobes flashing like cameras inside the cruiser’s I-bars, as daylight slipped like a coin behind the bridge and the exhaust from the idling vehicles plumed downwind in shapes I’ve seen flocks of black birds diagram across the sky. Ken was waiting in the van and I watched Mayberry light another cigarette and hand one to the girl, her small white hand touching his, before he launched into another football story, animating his heroics with large, sweeping gestures, kicking up the snow as he juked and leapt in the air for an imaginary ball.

I turned to Rico and said, “How long do you preserve the crime scene?”

“It’s not a crime scene,” Rico said, as the radio on his hip crackled. “It’s a drowning.”
The last training expo I attended for AmeriCorps was in Chicago, about a year ago. I skipped the afternoon panels one afternoon and went to Lake Shore Park and walked the bike paths from downtown where the ferris wheel and skyscrapers loomed large, all the way to the end of the park limits from where the ferris wheel was not visible and the skyscrapers looked like a movie set. There was a dog park near the north limits of the park and there were all these dogs running loose inside the cage perimeter, the dogs could run around on grass and also on a sandy beach and they could run and play in the water and catch frisbees or fetch tennis balls thrown by their owners. There was this one dog whose owner had him on a leash, inside the dog park, but the dog got free of the leash and ran havoc everywhere and barked and yelped and nipped at people’s heels and scared some of the other dogs. The owner chased after his dog but the dog kept slipping away from him, the leash just an inch out of the owner’s grasp, and it wasn’t until a big brown dog came lunging forward and got his teeth around the wild dog’s neck, putting him down – hard, on his back – that the wild dog calmed and his owner leashed him.
At 11:30, a half hour before I have to meet Tony for lunch at the Homestead, I sit staring at the red phone on my desk and smell the fragrance of Beth’s gift mixing with the smell of kerosene from the space heater. I hook the plastic clip of my mechanical pencil on my lower lip and I close my eyes, exhaling all the way until my lungs hurt, like I used to do in the bathtub as a child just to feel the full weight of my body against the porcelain. Ken’s breathing is slow behind me, and unlabored, which means he’s asleep.

Outside, something moves slow and loud across the parking lot as Esmeralda hammers tirelessly at the shelter’s gates. The moving object is a plow, I’d guess, given the deep pulse of its downshifting engine: a delivery perhaps to the kitchen’s loading dock, on the east side of the building. The sound stirs Ken, who scrapes at the ice on the office window and peers outside.

“Not much of a line today,” he says, as people are cueing for lunch on the sidewalk.

“Must be the guest list for my going away party.”

“I told you no one likes you.”
Ken’s tower of cookies is nothing but crumbles. He swivels in his chair to see the clock, his mass dictating my movements until we wind up leg to leg, both facing the open door. Ken’s torso is as thick around as an oil drum, his legs the size of duffel bags. My entire body could fit inside Ken, like my father’s military rifle tucked inside its padded camouflage sleeve, or like the 236 men stowed away each night in the shelter’s 236 beds. I could stow myself away inside Ken’s body like the souvenirs my sister brought back from her 8th grade school trip to Moscow, the Matryoshka dolls. The set my sister gave to me were in the likeness of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, with a small gray Splinter – the rat – in the middle. My father got dolls painted like Soviet dictators: Gorbachev, Brezhnev, Khrushchev, Stalin, one uniformed General Secretary inside another, and a tiny wooden Lenin in the center.
"Post haste," Ken says, twisting his elbow into my ribcage. "All bets are off at noon. Bracket or hatchet, man."

"That doesn't even make sense," I say.
At fifteen minutes to noon and I put on my coat and grab the keys to the outreach van off a hook on the coat rack. I reach into my pocket and hand Ken the five dollars Charlie gave me. Ken hands me a blank bracket from the folder on his desk and says he’ll make an exception if I get it back after lunch and promise not to listen to the radio in the meantime. I ask Ken if he’ll give me a ride home after work, since my car is broke-down in my driveway like it has been for weeks, and Ken says, “It’s lonely out in space,” meaning I’m on my own.

“Dinner at the mall,” he explains. “With Beth.”

“Quinoa pancakes with a side of tabouli?”

“God help me,” Ken says, licking his finger and dabbing at the crumbs on his plate.

“I’ll find a ride,” I tell him, folding the Sports page and slipping it inside the pocket of my coat.


The last time I ate at the Homestead was with Amanda, two weeks ago - one week after they pulled that dead man from the river. Amanda and I sat in a corner booth, dressed to the hilt to celebrate the job she’d accepted at Drake University in the admissions office. Amanda was three months pregnant, I already knew the child was mine, and it was at that dinner Amanda asked me to stay in Iowa, to move in with her. And it was at that dinner I told her that I’d be leaving Des Moines for good at the end of the month and that I
wanted her to have an abortion. We haven’t spoken since, but I hear things through the grapevine. Her appointment is tomorrow.

Ken hands me his emergency shirt and tie from off the coat rack, three times my size.

“I look like I’m wearing a parachute,” I say.

Ken says, “Later, Rocketman.”
In the hallway I pluck a green leaf off the fern that looms like a security guard beside the entrance and I lean hard against the heavy metal door, pushing with all my strength, as if a dead horse lay on the other side, and when the door gives way, cold air buffets me and I find myself engulfed in the big yawn of the shelter’s wind tunnel, immersed in a strong rush of wind like when I was a child exiting the Syracuse Carrier Dome after a basketball game, thirteen years old and my father telling me, “Get ready to fly,” and his hand catching me by the collar of my shirt to keep me from falling down. But the air this time is in my face, rolling in, not pouring out, and I wonder when my father is alone fixing something for a tenant does he think about the way my sister slipped away from him like vapor, eluding his grasp the way I’ve seen leashes slip quickly from grips in the dog park - and the poor owners go tumbling after.
On the other side of the shelter’s door I find myself face to face with Esmeralda. In her sixties, Esmeralda looks a little like Gene Hackman but with long tangled hair and slumpy breasts behind several layers of long, dirty sundresses, with long-johns underneath, and that long walking cane, made from a bull penis, clasped tightly in her quivering hands: her “bull dong cane.” Her spectacles are so scratched up it’s a wonder she can see well enough to walk, but she’s fast as the wind when she wants to be and she slips past me now without a word as I step carefully onto the sidewalk. The shelter’s door swings shut behind me, aided by a strong northerly wind, and I brace myself against the cold with my coat pulled to my throat, walking alongside the line of men and women waiting to be let in for lunch, and I think how if only we got money for every homeless man the way Howie does for cars, if we rolled them up in sleeping bags and exchanged them at the grocery store like dimes, we could raise enough money to build a shelter anywhere we want on earth.
A man among a group of men on the sidewalk, each holding a steaming styrofoam coffee mug and a cigarette, recognizes me but I can’t remember his name. He asks me what’s for lunch today.

“Shit,” I tell him, and he says, “Dang, I’ve been eating that all my life.”
The sky above the parking lot is a gray slab that if chiseled just right might slip out of place and crush us all. The Outreach Van is parked in its usual spot in the tow zone at the end of the sidewalk. I climb inside the van and put the sports page on the passenger seat and I rub my fingers over the dried red mark on the cloth cover on the horn. I use the screwdriver to turn the ignition. The engine starts on the third try and I let the van idle, waiting for the heat to kick in as I smell the old Culver’s wrappers and the grease-sodden french fries containers that Ken stuffs under the seat. The back of the van is filled with paper bags stuffed with pamphlets and plastic bags full of athletic socks. From where I sit I can see into the window of the old locker room outside the sleeping quarters where Esmeralda is performing her solitary ritual, standing on a wooden bench with her bull dong cane raised in the air. Every day she stands alone waving that cane around at the dotted ceiling panels, her dark gestures browning the ice-blurred window pane like shadow puppetry. Esmeralda believes that Oprah Winfrey lives in the crawlspace between the shelter and its roof, and Oprah Winfrey divines to Esmeralda secrets about Russian spy cells and the delicate balance of the spirit world: not to mention vital premonitions as to the future of all mankind. Only Esmeralda is privy to the coordinates of Oprah’s fine divinity, there in the uppermost regions of the shelter. I wonder what has kept her all these years from raising her cane just a little higher, why not poke and lift one of the ceiling panels, get a good true look into that
heavenly space? Ken told me there was a stretch of a few years before Tony came along where the previous director had banned Esmeralda from the locker room. But in these long cold days of winter it just seems cruel not to let the woman get a prayer in before lunch, seeing as her God unlike all the others is so near and charitable.
I remember waking up to see my father standing in the middle of my bedroom drinking coffee out of his aluminum mug and staring out the bedroom’s small north-facing window, telling me in a hushed pre-dawn voice about how the one thing you don’t do with a sumac tree is burn it, because the toxins vaporize and you don’t want that bad air in your lungs. The five dollar bill was on my nightstand, tucked under my father’s old field copy of Epictetus’ Discourses. My father, bathed in partial sunlight, wore civilian clothes – the first time I’d ever seen him do so on a weekday – and stood tall, his trim figure rising like a tower over the unpacked moving boxes on the floor. He reached up with his right hand and pressed his palm against the ceiling of my bedroom, his head full of calculations.

“You need more light in here,” he said. “Get dressed.”
MARS AMERICANO
Before I started working for AmeriCorps I was a graduate student in the History of Science and Technology program at Iowa State University. A man named H. Hamilton Banks was my advisor, a scholar whose work on the history of fire technologies and changing cultural and linguistic conceptions of “home” (I’d read his work the previous year, in college) inspired me. My senior thesis had taken the form of a long lament on man’s relationship to nature (I was a double major in English and American History) and a critique of modern man’s inability to harmonize with the natural world: thus the violence of tools. It wasn’t a very complicated thesis, but my research covered all the environmental bases: Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, Annette Kolodney, Gary Snyder, Ed Abbey, among newer varieties of eco-criticism. Though I passed with honors, my English professors said my work was too historical, and my history professors told me my work was too literary. I was caught between two disciplines, either side tried to pull me toward its camp like a man being drawn and quartered. I saw Hamilton’s work, his historical and mythic syncretism (he made references to Shakespeare and Aeschylus and Faust, alongside Aristotle, Butterfield, Euclid) as a solution, an escape from the boxed in dualism I’d been facing: a way to hyphenate my interests in lieu of choosing one side of a line in the sand. When I asked my college advisor for a recommendation letter, she asked me why I wanted to go to graduate school. I said it was because I wanted to help people. She laughed and told me if I wanted to help people, I should become a social
worker. I meant that I wanted to teach, and to write, and to make use of history like Hamilton did. It took me years to understand that my advisor had meant something else entirely.
Hamilton met me at the Des Moines airport the morning I arrived in Iowa, one short week after my college graduation. I did not walk at the ceremony, no donning of the cap and gown, instead I packed my bags and bought a plane ticket. It was a humid 90 degree summer day when I touched down, mid-June with solid walls of wind leaning across the flat black tarmacs, oily with the heat of the sun, and as Hamilton helped shoulder my bags on our way to his car I asked him if I needed to be afraid of tornados. Hamilton did not laugh, which I found disconcerting, and he told me, “Yes, certainly, perhaps. Though we aren’t in the belt, not exactly, this isn’t Kansas after all. The good news is, you can see the weather coming from miles away.” I had never seen such flatness, that was true, everywhere from the plane’s birds-eye view I saw square cuts of flat property, cut up like slices of flatbread. Hamilton proceeded to explain to me that winters in Iowa could be, without a little preparation and an instinct for self preservation, “quite dangerous, possibly.” He told me a story about a man, a friend of a colleague of his, who had gotten waylaid on a highway during a blizzard a few years back and made the mistake of getting out of his car, of trying to walk on foot for help. When the blizzard had passed they found him: less than ten yards from his car, frozen dead.

“The weather here is rather charming,” said Hamilton, popping the hatchback on his green Subaru. “It’s the only thing in Iowa that can kill you.”
“The only thing,” I said. “What about people?”

Hamilton laughed without exhaling, a look I’d come to recognize after years of studying under him. It was a look – a frozen gesture – that came over him when he was amused by something. The first time I saw it, there in the airport parking lot, I thought maybe the sun was in his eyes or he was going to sneeze.

“Of course, of course,” he said, closing the hatch with my bags inside. “People can kill you anywhere.”
I slept my first month in Iowa in Hamilton’s son’s bedroom. Jacob was a junior at Oberlin College and was spending the summer in a Critical Theory Workshop at Cornell University. Hamilton boasted that the program was typically reserved for graduate students, but his son had been accepted based on the “prescience” of his application essay (he let me read the essay, and I did not tell him that I noticed less than subtle traces of Hamilton’s prose style throughout the essay, the signs of a ghost-writer, perhaps, imperfectly concealed: a palimpsest). I wanted Hamilton to boast of me the way he boasted of his son. I wanted to excel intellectually beyond all measure, beyond expected speed. I slept between the walls of Hamilton’s son’s bedroom, beige walls covered with posters of Dylan and Franz Fanon, sleeping and dreaming of my rise to academic stardom: anything to keep my thoughts away from home.

I was a guest in Hamilton’s house until July, when I found an apartment and Jacob returned. The corn was “knee high” by then, so goes the children’s rhyme. I moved into a garden apartment on the west end of town within walking distance of a Hy-Vee grocery store and the bus line. I spent the summer studying, gearing up in preparation for the fall term, and I walked everywhere to pass the time, all over the small city of Ames, and everywhere I looked I thought I’d find a hill like back home, some rolling low mountains or any sign of altitude other than birds and the thin glint of planes needling the blue sky. Such mind-defying space, such unimpeachable expanse.
I found nothing but flatness, prairie, edgelessness. You could throw a stone in one direction and like a cartoon, never see it land, it might even hit you in the back of the head if your aim is true. Plumb the depth of sky all you want and you’d never find a point higher than a tree. The campanile on campus was about the highest thing for miles, probably as high as the radio tower at the airport 40 miles south. You were supposed to meet at midnight under the campanile and kiss, it was a tradition on campus, an amorous rite. The children in upstate New York were taught about the Erie Canal and a mule name Sal, low bridge, everyone down – while in Iowa the teenagers were being taught to meet in the dark under the tallest object, like it were a cauld for their sins, or the speared broken rib of a primitive divining rod, forgotten by giants and kings.
Des Moines’ business district is a ghost town. Only the main intersections and thoroughfares have been cleared by plow, the side streets remain buried under a foot of snow with a thin skin of ice hardened over top like frosting on a cake. The lack of cars and people isn’t that unusual. The only time you really feel a sense of movement in the center of the city is when government is in session, on weekends during festivals in good weather, and the Farmer Market Saturdays in the summer and fall when this place looks like a real community: baby strollers, straw hats, candy apples, Great Danes. All the good Americana, all the shoulder-rubbing you can handle. Today the streets are empty as a blueprint. Tony boasts about parking in the middle of the street, he says he does it all the time and he once left his car in the center lane, engine running, for fifteen minutes while waiting on a latté at Starbucks and he didn’t get a ticket. I asked Rico about it once and Rico said, “If it’s not a hot blonde or a Hispanic, most cops think it ain’t worth pulling over.” Tony stopped in the center lane because two other cars were double-parked. There was a convention that day. Typically, two single-spaced cars would have been considered “traffic.”
There are two circles of clear glass in the windshield where Ken wiped it away first thing this morning, when he took the van early to pick up a box of clothes at the American Legion, and I really should have scraped the windshield clean before I left the shelter. Navigating the narrow side-streets, I feel like I’m looking through a billboard with two holes cut out of it, or like I’m maneuvering inside one of those Chinese heads they wear during celebrations, a dragon or a monkey or a clown, and around any corner now I’ll see a parade, fireworks, food on stick and fat-faced children running in the streets. Everything inside the van is noisy, it rattles and vibrates and shaking like a box of Tic Tacs. Each year mice take shelter in the van’s heating vents, occupying tight spaces inside the engine, and you can sometimes hear them scurrying about in the vents. Daveed and Ken set all these traps, year after year. They even tried shoving dryer sheets and steel wool in any opening, and they soldered steel grates over the ends of any open tube. But the mice found a way in. Boiling water down the outside vents will clear about anything that gets in under the wiper run-off, but it’s harder when they nest in the interior. Some damn mouse chewed through the electrical wires about a month ago and killed the radio. Ken becomes truculent driving in silence, and I’d tried to get Daveed to take a look at the wires but he hasn’t had time. If you run the heat for too long you’re stuck inhaling chalky whiffs of rotting nest and scat, and when I clear out the trash in the cabin I often can see the chewed ends of the cardboard from
Ken’s fast food that the mice use to keep rebuilding their homes when we destroy them. We used bleach to clean the vents of the van but the bleach gave us headaches. Most of the time we drive with the heat off, when we’re able to withstand the cold.

The gears of the van stick as I downshift and turn onto Main Street, and when I accelerate the van lurches forward and an odor of smoking oil wafts up through the floorboards. I barrel over a barrier formed by the snow plow onto a side street a block away from the Homestead. Driving the van in good weather feels like trying to steer a keg of beer in the ocean. In snow like this the steering is extra fat and I’m sliding left and right like a coffee mug on an oversized saucer. I manage to balloon the van to a halt inside a delivery zone parking spot, which is the only space I can see on the street that’s been dug out even partially. I keep the engine on and sit there for a minute and adjust the temperature and fans, putting a rush of heat on my boots and cutting it off before I smell the mice. The CO2 begins to pool inside the cab of the van, you have to watch how long you stay inside, in neutral. Even in idle, and in this cold, the van’s rpms are in the red zone, on the cusp of over-heating. In the summer it does overheat, often, but the bitter winter cold keeps the engine just on this side of functional. When I get out of the van I close the door with the engine running, and I walk east half a block toward State Street, toward number 555 where the Homestead is. I keep the van running because I don’t want to get stuck downtown and have to be towed. As Tony says, “That moving scrap yard ain’t worth the 100 bucks at impound.”
The parking meters on the street are hooded in blue plastic bags, they look like giant lollipops you’d find at Santa’s Village in the mall. Before Christmas the Salvation army had volunteers ringing bells in every entrance of every store in the city. We recommend some of our clients for the low-paying jobs, because it pays to pay volunteers when there’s charity to be made. Today the sidewalks are covered over with snow and ice and you can’t even see the grates on the sidewalk vents. There are no cars coming at the intersection and I walk in the road down State to avoid trudging over the snow on the uncleared sidewalk. The city is in the process of changing to electric parking meters, which is why the parking meters are covered in plastic bags. It isn’t cost effective to collect for coins anymore, goodbye meter maids, when the snow melts the city’s Spring initiative to install auto tellers on each block will begin. No more nickel and dimes, just a swipe of your credit card to pay as you park. One of the parking meters is bent at a forty five degree angle in front of the Homestead, and yellow squares of plastic are scattered across the snow, the remnants of an accident. I don’t see or smell any signs of fuel, probably a hit and run, just the one car and the busted meter. There are no coins scattered in the snow, it must have been a low speed crash.
I pull on the hard-wood door at number 555 and enter the Homestead where I’m met by the smell of sage and clarified butter and fresh yeast rolls. On a chalkboard inside the entrance the daily lunch special is written in cursive in white block lettering shaded in with yellow chalk: garlic crusted ribeye with pearled potatoes sautéed in clarified sage-butter, and the soup is hand-riced beet served cold with dill sprigs and a locally sourced crème fresh. It’s taco Thursday at the shelter. I’d be on line with Ken by now, or helping a group of volunteers distributing plastic spoons.

A pretty, tall-legged hostess steps out from behind her station in a tight-fitting black dress you’d expect to see on a Swiss bank manager or a cocktail waitress at one of the monthly luxury car shows at the arena. I used to stand behind a lectern much like hers when I was teaching, imbued with authority, but today I’m the one being told that the restrooms are for customers only. I forget the way I look sometimes, a nine-month growth of beard and who knows how long since my last professional haircut. I’m wearing the Reggie’s SleepOut baseball cap Ken gave me a week ago, with its moon and stars logo, and I must look a little like a terrorist or self-appointed sage.

I take off my coat so the hostess can see Ken’s shirt and tie.

“I think I have a reservation,” I say.

The hostess glances over the list. The place is empty save two tables. I look around the dining room at the men in shirts and ties and cufflinks. If I had borrowed cufflinks from Ken I might look like I were wearing
handcuffs. The hostess has a marker on the lectern and she picks it up and pops the cap and draws an ex through Tony’s name.

“Mr. Tony?”

“Tony. Mr. Tony, sure. That’s him.”

“Reservation for two?”

“I’m meeting him.”

“That’s fine.”

“He’s running late, I’m sure.”

“That’s fine. We’ve got a booth ready.”

“He’s like, Mr. Meeting, you know? Very busy.”

“Of course. Follow me, please.”

As we’re walking to the booth I notice the hostess’ long legs and short torso make an awkward fit in the dress, you only really notice it when she walks. I feel a little sorry for her and I feel badly that I look so ragged, she probably feels bad about trying to turn me away, at the end of her shift she’ll go home to a boyfriend or roommate or call up her parents, tell someone about the man she misjudged for a bum. The hostess leads me to a booth at the window and sets two large, heavy menus on the polished birch wood tabletop. I know it’s birch wood because each table is made out of a different kind of wood and branded, labeled in scorched marks and this table reads: BIRCH WOOD. The hostess bows slightly, or maybe she’s adjusting her dress, always riding out of position because of those long legs and short torso, and I look out the window as she tells me the special and then look back at her and smile.

“Something to drink?” the hostess asks, turning over two water glasses that had been set upside down on tri-folded black cloth napkins. Ken’s shirt so envelopes me I could fold and tuck everything just right and ship myself off as a parcel.

“Please,” I say, trying to roll up my sleeves. “Just water.”
Outside, a young Hispanic man in short sleeves and a black apron walks into the frame of the window and starts scraping at the ice on the sidewalk with a bent-handled plastic snow shovel. Behind him, across the street, there’s a storefront of a bank that’s closed and on the corner at the intersection, the revolving entrance doors to the Des Moines Hyatt hang on a vertical shaft, unmoving.

Inside the Homestead two flat screen TV’s above the bar are showing two basketball games airing simultaneously. Iowa is down by 7 points at the half and the other TV is too far away for me to read the score. By the colors it could be Syracuse or Tennessee, and the opposing white jerseys could be just about anyone. I figure Ken is in the office crushing walnuts in frustration over the Iowa score. Several pitchers of ice water have been set on a tray table next to the bar, not far from my booth, and the waitress is back with my water before I’ve had a chance to adjust my tie and look at my menu. Her demeanor is gentler this time around, or maybe I imagined an earlier discomfort on her part that was really my own.

“Good luck, hey?” she tells me.

I give a hard look at the glass of water on the table in front of me.

“Should I have someone else drink from it first?”

The hostess smiles, removes a strand of curly brown hair from behind her ear, and I notice her hair is dyed red in places, it isn’t noticeable until it catches the light just right. She smoothes the curly strands
between her fingers and lets them recoil. She’s wearing silver-rimmed
eyeglasses that don’t quite flatter her features, she would look more
interesting in rectangles. That’s what Amanda would say, I’m sure. Amanda
who told me women’s faces are considered more attractive when they’re not
symmetrical, because symmetry is a trait we associate with men, with
handsomeness, whereas women are considered more beautiful if a little
crooked. I don’t know what she’d say about legs.

“I’m sorry,” says the hostess. “I thought you were on an interview.”

“More like an exit interview.”

“You’re getting fired!” she says, clenching her teeth in a display of
empathy. “I’m so stupid. I’m really sorry.”

I’m about to correct her, then I don’t.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” I say, folding my hands one over the
other to appear unburdened. “I know some people in the unemployment
business. I’ll be ok.”

“It’s good to have friends,” she says. And she says, “Are you sure you
don’t want a drink? I know someone in the bartending business.”

“I’m ok,” I say and she says, “On the house” and I say, “Really, I’m
fine.”

She touches me on the over-sized sleeve of Ken’s shirt, missing my
actual arm, and says gently, “Your waiter’s name will be Shay. I’ll tell him
you’re here.”

She leaves me and I chew on ice chips for a few minutes and take in the
menu, which is printed on heavy bond porous paper affixed by red-tipped tacks
to a small corkboard, with the meat entrees listed under the heading CHOPPING
BLOCK and the vegetables under FREE RANGE VEG. The listings are as verbose
as they are sensuous and I’m barely through the white meat entrees when a
short-haired waiter named Shay wearing salmon-colored pants and sporting a
well-manicured dick van dyke beard appears from the kitchen and lopes across
the dining room carrying a granite cutting board topped with rolls and three kinds of flavored locally-sourced, in-house churned butter smears – salted smoked paprika, cilantro mango, and cashew fig, he explains in an actor’s voice – and he deftly slides the cutting board onto the birch wood table without scratching the polish.

“Gratis,” he says, and I say, “Cool.”

I tell him I’ll wait for Tony to arrive before I order and he leaves me with a brisk turn and bee-lines toward a table on the far side of the room, and I realize on this snow-capped day he’s probably the only waiter.
I had to have a reservation the night I came here with Amanda, the night we were supposed to celebrate her getting in to graduate school: the Social Work and Planning Dual Master degree at Drake. I put the reservation under “Arman Duh,” to be funny, it’s Amanda’s Arabian alter ego, something Adam came up with during poker one night, and of course if I’d known I’d have bailed on her in the middle of the second course—well I wouldn’t have given that name. It’s the least I wouldn’t have done. Every table in the house was packed that night and there was a string trio playing Bach and the waiter, not Shay, made a joke about playing a Bach quartet down a man and I can’t remember how the joke went but I remember thinking it could have been funny.
Amanda wore a black dress with a neck line cut low so it revealed the trio of freckles beneath her left ear, halfway between her chin and clavicle. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her neck was long and flush, and she looked much older than she was, so capable and put together, and when I arrived all sleepless and hastily arranged, she was sitting at the bar, sipping on seltzer water, glowing bright among the crowd of business men that surrounded her. When she spotted me she looked so expectant, so beautiful, so eager to see me. There was a fire roaring in the fireplace and the live music, two violins and a bass playing softly in the corner. I only made it half way through the mussels in curry broth, with the crustless little toasts soaked in browned butter, before I told Amanda to deal with the pregnancy, to abort the child inside of her, and I left her to foot the bill and made for the door. Passing the chalkboard with the list of specials written on it – pineapple upside down cake for dessert – I thought, what a shame: Amanda loves sweets that have a little bitter in them.
That night outside the restaurant as I hurried to my car, parked around the corner, I passed a group of well-dressed women on the street who’d left the restaurant ahead of me. The women were drunk and full of mirth and taking up the entire sidewalk, garrulous and heady, all fun and fantastic in their button coats, until one of them stopped short in her tracks and said, “Oh no!” She raised both hands to her face, cradling her cheeks, and announced to her cohort that she’d forgotten her doggie bag. The women huddled and discussed and every second or so one of them looked distraught in the direction of the restaurant, a full two blocks behind them. I had to press myself against the concrete façade of a Key Bank to make it by them as they deliberated whether or not to go back for the leftovers. As I neared my car I heard one woman repeating to herself, “oh dear, oh dear” while another one said, “This is terrible!”
Before Shay returns, the hostess approaches my booth and she tells me, in a tentative voice, as though she fears her words might break if she says them too quickly, that Mr. Tony called and said he’s held up in a meeting.

“We took down his credit card information,” she says with a sympathetic look. “Mr. Tony said for me to tell you to order anything you want. He told me it’s your last day and I should make you order.”

I tell the hostess I want the fifty dollar Homestead special: the T-bone steak, medium-rare, with a side of those sage potatoes braised in clarified butter. “Everything to go,” I say. The hostess shares what she thinks is a secret smile between us, the pleasure of complicity. She gathers the menus and takes away Tony’s glass and place setting. I notice over her shoulder that Iowa has tied the game with under a minute to go and I think about the people in Iowa City, and how everyone must be going crazy. The hostess makes for the kitchen and I call after her.

“And a slice of pineapple upside down cake.”

The hostess turns around mid-stride.

“You’re my hero,” she says, pushing backward into the kitchen through the vinyl-sided double doors.
While I wait for my order I take out my basketball bracket and turn it over on the table. On one side I write Born Too Early and on the other side I write Born Too Late. In the born too early column I write Socrates, Newton, Shakespeare, Melville, Fitzgerald. (I put a question mark next to Fitzgerald, he might belong in the other column where I’ve written some other names.) In the space between the two columns I write: MARLOW(E).
The game is over by 12:45, and my food arrives shortly after delivered by Shay, a perfectly arranged combination of Styrofoam containers and cardboard dividers with a staple to seal the brown paper bag it’s all packaged in. I turn my bracket over and write IOWA in the victory slot and fold the bracket and stick it in my coat pocket. I carry my paper bag and my bill to the front of the house where the hostess waits.

“I had them put an extra slice of cake in there,” she said. “No charge."

I want to offer her a roll of dimes but that seems like a small gesture in a place like this. I leave her a ten dollar tip on Tony’s card and tell her to keep the receipt and I exit into the street. The bus boy is done scraping the sidewalk but now he’s carrying a 50 pound bag of salt and spreading the crystals around with a plastic McDonald’s soda cup. I say Hey as he takes a moment and leans against his shovel, waiting for me to pass. He’s Hispanic with a generic heavy wool touque on his head like they sell at truck stops on the thruway or in gas stations. He’s smoking a cigarette.

“Cold,” I say, and he replies, “Better than in the kitchen."

“Hot in there, yeah?”

“A fucking sauna,” he says, gesturing as if wiping sweat from his brow.

When I’m past him I hear him scoop salt with the plastic cup and then I hear the sound of the salt pellets cast upon the ice.
In the summer you find a lot of homeless wandering around or lying under cardboard in the concrete plazas downtown. Not that long ago I saw a guy sleeping on a sidewalk vent under a tent of a blue blankets that had blown up like a parachute, two corners pinned under his boots and the others tied to the vent grates, the hot exhaust churning upward from underneath the Wells Fargo Arena. I left my card in the tongue of the man’s boot, careful not to wake him.
I carry the food Tony paid for down the middle of State Street to the Outreach Van, an oasis, a warm bubble of vibrations and heat in this stark, still-frame city. Inside the van I roll down the windows to let the exhaust fumes out and I take one of the salted rolls out of the bag and bite the end off and chew on it until my jaw aches, and I put the van in gear and it slips and stutters out of the tow zone. I’m on my way to Mars Café, on the northwest side of the city on University ave across from Drake University Field, the venue where Reggie’s SleepOut takes place, the fields just a mile or so from my duplex. Around the corner from Mars Café a quarter mile south, overlooking the I-80 underpass, is the Drake Diner. The last time I ate at the Drake Diner was with Alice, the night she told me the real name of the dead man in the river. An image of Alice in all her whiteness, stenciled in by all those tattoos: and the birth mark on her back that looks like a W, like Cassiopeia, and when she was still a teenager how I told her you can follow the right arm of the W and it points to the north star.
Amanda has freckles on her neck in the shape of the constellation Orion: not the full Orion, just his belt: but it’s a perfect scale model.
There’s a barista at Mars Café, his name is Kyle and he makes an Americano so good you’d sell your left nostril just to smell it with your right one. Thankfully Mars Café takes EBT cards and I drink my Americanos courtesy of the Federal government. Kyle has a process that gets the froth so thick on top, when I pour in cream it pools for a moment on the surface of the drink before silking its way into the mug. Mars Café uses real cream, too, like Dunkin Donuts did back east. There isn’t a Dunkin Donuts within 200 miles of Des Moines, it’s just not a thing here. Hamilton said it was the worst thing about this place, in his thirty years residing in Iowa, Dunkin Donuts was the one thing he was consistently aware of living without. (H. was born and raised in Buffalo, NY.) Mars is half-empty this afternoon but there’s a line to the door. The crowd that’s here sitting is mostly university students wearing University hoodies. Classes were canceled this morning, I heard it earlier on Ken’s radio. I remember when classes got canceled at the University in Ames and how I’d purposely get myself snowed in at the library, or in my office, no excuse not to do work, no need to go home and watch the snow collecting in the window wells of my garden apartment like down filling up inside a pillow. In the café the seats by the woodstove are taken, but I’m here to get my drink to go, my last Americano, I’m not here to linger by the fireside. Kyle recognizes me at the back of the line and makes his fingers into the shape of a gun, points it in my direction. He’ll start
my drink ahead of the others who are in line in front of me, so it will be ready when I get to the register.

A mother carrying a child wearing an orange cap and matching knit gloves connected by a long orange string stands directly in front of me. I can feel the weight of the rolls of dimes in my coat pocket, pulling against my shoulders. The child gawks at me while the mother, with creases around her lips and her eyes, from a lifetime of smiling, no doubt, turns to me and says, “She likes your beard.”

“She and what army,” I say.

“We were supposed to see the Easter Bunny at the mall,” says the mother. “But they closed because of the weather.”

“A bunny canceling on account of snow,” I say, thinking ironic. The mother hoists her child higher in her arms and nods her head. “Tragic, right?” she says, no longer smiling, and our conversations ends with the obligatory forward movement of the line.

Kyle has my drink prepared by the time I reach the counter.

“Americano for the American,” he says while a man in line behind me waits impatiently with his sunglasses on and doesn’t try to conceal his mood. Kyle has this thing with spy movies and he loves George Clooney in a recent film called The American. I don’t know how to play the part of the spy, all suave and confident, so I change the conversation to the billboard above the bar. The sign on the billboard reads: MARS AMERICANO.

“I always meant to ask you,” I tell Kyle. “Shouldn’t there be a possessive after the S in MARS?” Kyle turns around and considers the board. “Would it be an apostrophe, then S,” he asks, “Or S, then apostrophe? Like if Jesus owned something.”

The cell phone of the guy behind me, who is more adjacent to me now, almost beside me, rings loudly and I think I see contrition in his face like
he’s been caught performing a social faux pas while in the midst of being pissed off at someone else’s.

“Who could claim ownership of something this good?” I say, tapping the corner of my Styrofoam mug with the edge of my EBT card.

“I can,” says Kyle. “And you can take it into the boulevard for 3 dollars and 50 cents.”

I hand Kyle my EBT card and he swipes it through a handheld reader with an LCD screen. An image of a numerical keypad appears on the screen and I tap my four digit code using my fingertip. Kyle hits CANCEL when prompted about a receipt. He knows my routine and I like him for it, he buys my brand of predictability. Two more customers enter arrive and queue up behind the guy with the cell phone. Before I move to the cream station, Kyle, who volunteers from time to time at the shelter, asks me, “How are the lines down in your neck of the woods?”

“Blurry,” I say.
When Kyle moves on to the other customers, when he isn’t looking, I drop a roll of dimes in the tip jar with the quarters and one dollar bills. I’m about a pound lighter now. Kyle left me about a third room in my drink, how I like it, and I fill the rest with cream. There’s a community bulletin board on the wall next to the creamer station, a local artist whose CD I hear advertised on the radio, in the office, has a concert at the arboretum courtyard in April. The rest is music lessons and roommates wanted and editing or tutoring services offered. I can see the corner of a Reggie’s SleepOut sign from when Amanda and I stopped here to hang them in late October of last year, the flier wasn’t fully torn off beneath the flat head of the metal tack. There’s a flier for a missing dog I put up for Joan, the social worker at the youth shelter, a couple of weeks ago. I don’t know if she ever found him, I don’t know her well and I try to avoid going to the Youth Shelter. There’s another Reggie’s SleepOut sign higher up on the board, intact, though half-buried beneath other more recent fliers. I can see the top of the flier where someone altered the caption so it now reads: BEGGIE’S SLEEPOUT.
I’m about to leave the Café when I notice, from the side, one of my VISTAs working with his head down hunched over his laptop. Before I have a chance to pretend like I didn’t see him, he spots me and waves, and I put a lid on my coffee and walk over to where he’s sitting.

“Nice mug,” I say.

Danny pulls his ear buds out of his ears and shakes my hand. He’s drinking from a mug that has the AmeriCorps logo on it, the mug everybody gets at the start of their service, at training. I remember when we got our mugs, someone in my cohort asked if the mug could go in the dishwasher. The training rep said yes, it was microwavable, too. “It’s everythingable,” I said. No one laughed and I thought about how Hamilton would have liked that quip: he would have tilted his head back silently: amusement on pause.

I notice on Danny’s computer screen the ESPN page showing basketball scores. He asks me who I have in the Final Four and I tell him, “DMACC” which is the Des Moines Area Community College. Danny works pretty closely with Amanda’s organization, she’s somewhat of a boss to him, and I feel my stomach muscles tighten when I recognize the look on this face – it’s a look you learn to identify, an “I’m going to ask a favor of you” look that anybody working at the shelter can spot before it appears, like ocean waves or the hackles on a dog’s back, or like the halos Ken tells me he gets before one of his migraines comes on. The lid to my mug pops off and it turns out it isn’t
Amanda or her work with the kids he wants to talk about. I refit the lid on my mug, licking around the seal where the liquid spilled over.

“I’m applying to Dental School,” Danny says while looping the cord from his ear buds around his pinky finger. “I’m hoping you could write me a recommendation.”

I sip from my Americano while two college girls in winter hats shaped like animals, one like an owl and the other a frog, eye me. I sit down across from Danny with my butt on the edge of the bench. I feel the heat of the pellet stove and smell what I think is cedar mixed into the composite brick and behind the counter Kyle’s coworker is preparing to run the stainless steel mechanical coffee roaster and if it’s dark roast she’s prepping I know it’ll burn my eyes. The pellet stove reminds me of the cast iron stove we had growing up with feet shaped like lion paws, the stove set against the stone pillar in the middle of the house that lead to the chimney. It was a true hearth, from the root word meaning “focus” – the center of the household, where my mother would fry our hats and gloves in winter and where she kept a bright yellow enameled iron tea kettle to manage household’s humidity. I remember during one long power outage our neighbors from down the road stayed over, they were new to the area and didn’t have back-up supplies of anything, and what I remember is my father cooked scrambled eggs for everyone in a cast iron skillet on top of the woodstove and we divvied out the hours of the night playing Monopoly and cards by candlelight. I don’t remember how old I was but my sister was still young, young enough that when the neighbors caught her stealing from the Monopoly bank, she got off with a warning.

“I thought about asking Amanda,” Danny admits, “but you were my supervisor first.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah as in you’ll do it?”
“I’ll do it.”
“You’ll say good things about me?
“Yeah.”
“What will you say””
“I’ll say you asked me to write good things about you.”
Kyle smiles with tight cheeks. I take a sip of my coffee and stand up.
“For real,” he says.
I think about the hundred or so times I’ve seen Danny at work, how he’s usually on his laptop surfing the internet or watching American TV shows pirated from Chinese channels. I look around at the other kids in the place, the students with their silly hats and their mid-semester deadlines and I breathe a little easier. I’m not responsible. It’s not my job anymore to better the minds of a younger generation or to teach lessons. I don’t have anything against Danny and I’ll write him a good letter, I know behind the scenes a letter from a guy like me in the position that I’m in won’t help or hurt his chances. I’m not important enough to hold any sway. So I’ll check the good boxes and sign my name and who knows, maybe he’ll be a better dentist than he is a volunteer.
“I’ll tell them you’re punctual and driven, and if they don’t accept you I’ll show up in their homes at night and break their ankles.”
Danny says, “Thanks, man,” and I say, “De nada” and he stands up.
“I’ll buy you a beer tonight.”
“Really, it’s ok.”
“A big ass pint, man. My treat.”
Danny makes a big show of shaking my hand, a long windup like he’s about to throw a side-arm pitch. His hand is soft and smooth, apart from the ear bud cords wrapped around his pinky with the texture of a worm.
“Shit, sorry,” he says and I say, “Get back to your work.”
He removes the ear buds from his finger and shakes my hand again. The girls in their hats and some other students are watching us now, two men standing in the middle of a coffee shop rehearsing hand shakes. “I’ll see you at Peeple’s Pub?” says Danny, and I say, “Sure.” “Happy hour, right?” and I say, “Give or take.” He sits down and before I can escape he asks me, “What about Amanda?” “What about her,” I say.
There’s laughter in the Café – not Danny’s – and the urgent sound of milk being steamed and the eye-watering, meaty-smelling dust of beans being darkly roasted in the big machine. I tell Danny I have a meeting to get to.

“But you’ll write me the letter,” he says.

“Consider it written.”

It feels like forever before I reach the door.
Mars Café was where Amanda and I first met. Three years ago January, beginning of my 5th semester at ISU, around Christmas time. I’d driven from Ames to Des Moines in anger. That afternoon I’d gotten a phone call from my father. It was the phone call when he told me about Zeb’s death and my sister being arrested for murder then the charges being dropped and all the drug addiction and in-again out-again jail stints that my father had kept hidden from me during the years I’d been away. It was that phone call when I found out that “she’s doing fine” and “she’s struggling to cope, but we’re working it out” really meant that she was staying out all night and dating older men and shooting heroin with the waitresses and cooks at Lost Dog Café in Binghamton, the nearest city. At the time of the phone call my sister was in jail again, this time for prostitution. The crimes were escalating in degree. (What would be next: murder?) When my father told me she was in jail, I hung up the phone and grabbed my keys and just drove.

I didn’t know where I was going – or did I – until I ended up in Des Moines. I found myself circling the same few city blocks again and again and kept winding up at the intersection on University and MLK where the Trinity Church was, and eventually I drove toward Drake University and found parking on the street and entered Mars Café. It was a Sunday late in the evening, the place was empty save for pockets of college students studying together in preparation for finals. I stepped to the counter and looked the menu over and ordered the “Mars Americano.” The barista said he had to grind new beans.
and I watched as he poured a five pound bucket from one of the dozens of burlap sacks fill with coffee that sat like an ancient port market behind the counter, and I was impressed by the size and sound of the burr grinder with its screw like jaws that crushed the beans instead of cutting them with a blade. You don’t lose the oils that way and anyone who knows a good cup of coffee knows the importance of oils. Like fat marbled into meat, it’s the source of the real flavor. When the barista handed me the Americano I took a sip and the froth on top spread over my upper lip like thick foam insulation: not all cotton-candy-like and wispy the way they served them up in Ames.

“Hot damn,” I said, and for a moment I forgot myself, forgot why I came.

“I’m in the business of creating new addicts,” said the barista and like a light I switched back to reality and I paid for my drink and hesitated.

“Tell me,” I said. “Do you know your way around the city?”

Kyle referred me to a young woman wearing a thick green scarf and sitting with her back facing us. I walked over and told the girl my name and asked if I could borrow a moment of her time. Bach was playing on the stereo, one of his cantatas, something in a minor key playing over slender wireless Bose speaks set on a faux hearth behind the crackling wood stove. The scent of cinnamon sticks and whole cloves freshly ground infused the air, the leftover spirits of Christmas. The girl’s emerald green eyes followed my movements, sharp and curious as I sat down in front of her.

“I’m Amanda,” she said and offered me her hand.
“Am-man-duh,” I said, trying the name on for size. “You’re an amphibrach. That’s rare.”

“Thank you?” she said, exposing a sharp left canine at the edge of her smile. Her hand was cold, her fingers long and thin, the nails clean and free of polish. I explained that I meant the syllables in her name – three – the stress falling on the middle syllable. A-man-duh. Amphibrach, a literary term. I was surprised by her smile, that it widened after my stupid joke.

She said, “Most people just make cracks about my parents’ being too lazy to make it past the letter A in the baby names book.” I looked down at her notebook, it had the AmeriCorps logo on its cover, the first time I saw the acronym VISTA. Amanda closed the book she was reading, something on urban development, and asked me about my own name, if it stood for something.

“I was named after a king,” I tell her.

“Which king?”

“I don’t remember. What’s AmeriCorps?”

“Prison.”

Amanda laughed at herself.

“I mean, I work with the prisons, Fort Dodge mainly.”

She explained about VISTA – how she was just a six-month volunteer with AmeriCorps but when she graduated in May she was going to go full time status. “It’s more of a commitment,” she said, “but I’m ready.” Her work at
the prison was in literacy. She’d been working with the librarian at Fort Dodge Prison collecting book donations for a prisoner education program. If she weren’t so specific in detail I’d thought maybe I’d misheard her, a word that sounds like “prison” but isn’t. As it was, I couldn’t help but picture my sister with a shaved head, and an orange jumpsuit, and I imagined all the letters that I never wrote to her over the years and those that I wouldn’t, and I imagined my father in a courtroom, in Binghamton City Hall or wherever hearing the guilty verdict: the final push of the knife: the one that had been sticking half-way into my father’s chest since the day my mother died.

I asked Amanda, “What kind of books are you looking for?” and she said, “What kind have you got?”

“All kinds,” I said. “Lots.”

“You might be my new best friend,” she said, giving me a good once over, her green eyes afire in the light of the stove. “What do you want in return?”

“Directions.”
I remember as a child watching the satellites cruise across the sky through my roof window and they seemed so near compared with the stars but unlike the stars they moved in predictable orbits like on a conveyer belt but not connected to a natural tether and it made me feel lonely to look at them. Hamilton would say there’s silver halide in my heart, no amount of ones and zeroes can keep even a good dog tied to the porch.
Amanda drove a dark purple Mercury Sable with a bench seat in front, and I rode beside her with my elbow on the passenger arm rest, sipping my thick Americano and watching this pale-skinned girl with river black hair command the wheel. She handled the long boat of a car over the iced over roads with seasoned surety, and only later would I learn about her grandparents and the farm and how she was driving by the time she was twelve years old. She grew up in Des Moines. Her Mercury was automatic and had one of those arms on the steering column for changing in and out of park and drive and reverse. She also had a red and brown dream catcher hanging from the dashboard mirror and a small tube of peppermint lip balm set where the car’s dashboard lighter should have been, and I could taste the peppermint in my nostrils that night in the warmth of the cab with Dan Fogleberg’s greatest hits playing on the tape deck.

“Heart Hotels,” I said, turning up the volume.

“Dave Foghorn,” she said, and I said, “Fogleberg. Dan Fogleberg.”

“I’m always doing that,” she said, unabashed. “Confusing names.”

Amanda’s tote bag with the AmeriCorps seal embroidered on its side sat between us on the seat, her purse inside the bag and the seatbelt buckled around them. The car vibrated wildly, poor shocks or loose fittings in the chassis, and she told me when we first got in that if I didn’t buckle up we’d end up hip to hip by the end of the ride. I tapped the dream catcher with my
finger, sending it gently twirling on its short elastic cord like a Christmas ornament.

Amanda said, "My dad gave it to me for my birthday. He was like, an eighth native American.”

"Was," I said and she told me he died.

"So you’re one sixteenth."

"Native American?"

"Yeah."

"You’re good with numbers."

"I’m a teacher."

"Mathematics?"

I reached out and touched the dream catcher to make it stop spinning.
We reached a neighborhood on the west edge of the city, north of the thruway. The small streets were full of Christmas lights, tidy little houses like something from a Christmas catalog. Like the drug store porcelain houses I’d buy for my mother to plug in around the hearth. My father called them a fire hazard. Amanda was interested in my teaching but I turned the conversation around to her, and she talked eagerly about doing a full year with AmeriCorps after graduation before applying to graduate school in either urban planning or college administration. She turned down a side street and slowed down.

"We’re close, I think."

We watched for signs of Beaker street and Amanda spotted it first and turned left. "We’re on the 300 block," she said and I told her, "The number’s 712" and she said, "It’ll be on the left side of the road."

We cruised the blocks slowly, slowing at each intersection, some of them yields and some of them stops, and Amanda stopped, really stopped, at each, long enough for an old lady or a dog pulling a sled — if there were any — to cross the street.

She looked at me and said, "You don’t have the address written down."

"I remember things," I said.

We started counting down the houses as the Mercury’s odometer added tenths of a mile like it was keeping score.
“This is fun,” Amanda said, sitting forward on her seat like an old lady, testing her high beams against the snow. “It’s like we’re detectives.”

The snow fell heavier, a sudden flurry, and it became too hard to see the numbers on the houses from inside the car. Amanda pulled over.

“Every good journey ends on foot,” I said.

I left my coffee cup in the plastic holders under the dash and I got out of the car and walked around the rear of it and slipped a little and used the trunk to brace myself and Amanda opened her door and I helped her out of the car and she slid a little on the ground, and I used my strength to keep her upright and our bodies pressed together momentarily. I could smell the peppermint on her lips and the scent of burnt coffee clinging to her hair. We climbed over a snowpack on the curb as large as a small bale of hay and stood at the edge of a large parking lot, nearly an acre in size and at the far end of the parking lot was a huge church.

“Did I get the odds and evens wrong?”

I squinted under my shielding hand through the snow across the street and said, “No. Those numbers are odd. We’re on the right side of the street.”

We each turned in succession, Amanda first, then me, and peered across the parking lot: that church in the distance.

Amanda said, “Uh oh.”
We looked at the church a while and the empty parking lot gathering snow and I thought about how the parking lot looked a lot like what I imagined the yard in a prison looks like, all empty and flat and flanked by trees and houses on all sides like the squared geography of Iowa from a plane’s view. It also dawned on me that the lot looked much like the quadrangles at the University, and the urge to ask Amanda if she’d been to Fort Dodge Prison, if she’d been inside and seen what it was like, was it scary inside or well-guarded and as a girl – as a woman – what did it feel like when the doors closed behind her. But Amanda spoke first.

“So,” she said. “Which steeple was your father’s?”

She rocked back on her heels, proud of her joke.

“I said, “My father had seven brothers and sisters.”

With the mitten on her left hand, Amanda counted the number of conical shapes: three steeples in all on the church.

“I see,” she said, touching her chin. “Bunk beds.”
It was cold and I was shivering.

"What are you waiting for?" she said, and she leapt over the curb and took a few steps forward into the parking lot, her footsteps mounding up like prairie dog dens in the loose snow with each kick of her heel.

"What about your car?" I called to her.

She’d left the keys in the ignition, I could hear Dan Fogleberg’s sweet falsetto over the vibrating engine.

"This is Des Moines," she said.
I hurried to catch up with her and we walked stride for stride across the lot until we were within throwing distance of the church. My keys were in my pockets, sharp against my leg. We stopped walking. It was a tall church, high volume, much taller and larger than my father’s house would have been, though he did tell me a story once about a time he jumped from the third story window and his mother slapped him thirty times on the butt when she found out. (When he joined the marines he was in the airborne division, he earned a yellow wing-shaped patch for jumping out of planes.) I stood on the ground beside Amanda and looked around and wondered where exactly in the parking lot my father’s childhood home had stood. I thought about our phone call, and about the townhouse he lived in now, across the river from our old home town, nearer to where he used to work at Lockheed before they closed the plant. He couldn’t live anymore inside the old house with all those memories of my mother but he had my sister to take care of and she went to school there and he didn’t want to uproot her, hadn’t she been through enough, so he kept his job for two years and then, a few years ago, he went into business for himself using the money he’d saved and some of my mother’s life insurance, the portion that wasn’t set aside to pay off my student loans and reserved for my sister’s college education, and he started buying up properties in our old home town and around Binghamton and fixing up and maintaining them and renting them himself: Victorian old homes he could buy cheap and rent high, two or three or four families renting in the same house,
depending how he split up the units. Townhouses, too, and of course: my Duplex. I’ve never been to his townhouse, the one he bought after I’d left for Iowa, but I imagine on a clear night he can look north up the hills of Vestal past the river and see where the Kopernick Observatory sits: all this from his kitchen window. And there I was looking up at the church with Amanda, tilting our heads to the sky.
There was no light on in the church, every window was dark.
The seats in the outreach van are so old and worn-up and torn-through that there are all these pockets of white batting coming through the fabric like the guts of busted stuffed animals. Over the years we’ve secured it all with duct tape, but every so often something pops out, and we stuff it back in, year after year, and if I were to teach a course at AmeriCorps training I’d draw a clear picture of the van and the seats that won’t stay stuffed, and I’d hold it up for the recruits and I’d say, “Tell me what you see.”
Amanda and I stood looking at the church a while as the snow blowing around the steeples slowly settled to the ground. The snow was moist, the air humid. There was nothing to say but the obvious: my father’s childhood home was now a house of God. A huge house, with an expansive parking lot: this was a Mega church like those advertised on the billboards on the interstate and on the radio and has kiosks in the mall. There was a playground off to the side behind the church, not far from us, with swing sets and a slide and jungle gym and a mini castle tower and a gravel moat, all surrounded by a chain link fence secured with a combination lock. Amanda broke the silence by trying to throw a snowball at the church, but the snow was too light and dry and the snowball disappeared in a bloom of white powder a foot from her face, like she’d thrown a ball of flour or her hand had turned to dust. Unfazed, Amanda put her hands in her pockets and shivered and I felt like a fool with no coat to offer her.

“Have you ever been abroad?” she asked me.

“What?”

“Abroad. Like for school. Overseas somewhere.”

“No.”

“A history teacher who’s never traveled?” she said. “Hmm.”

“I’d like to go to Norway.”

“Well,” she said. “I studied abroad in Estonia my sophomore year. There were all these churches. Old ones. One night at the end of our trip I
got really drunk with my friends and we tried to wrap our arms around this one church, St. Anne’s, it was built in the fourteenth century. We wanted to give it a group hug goodbye. Like the singing revolution, all those millions of people joining hands for freedom. We were just stupid Americans.”

Amanda leaned a little closer to me. My bare arm touched her cold, wet coat.

“You must be freezing,” she said, staring at me as if she’d suddenly awoken from a dream.

We started walking back across the parking lot.

“So did you?” I said. “Did you get your arms around the church?”

“The church was like, bigger than this one,” she said, pretending like I’d said something stupid, or maybe I had. “Short answer, no.”

“That’s a shame,” I said.

Amanda stopped walking. Her profiled straightened, and she reached out and punched me on the arm.

“You should hug it,” she said. “You should hug that church.”

She stared at me like I’d seen students stare at bad grades.

“I’ve got a terrible wingspan,” I said, displaying my arms in the cold.

“You drove all the way here,” Amanda said, unmoving. “You should do something. To mark the occasion. I mean, your father lived here!”

I glanced over my shoulder at the church. I had a lifetime of excuses, but she kept talking and I couldn’t decide on any which one. Eventually, when she could see I wasn’t going to do it, she removed one of her mittens and scratched under her chin and her eyes softened.

“My father killed himself,” she said.

I said, “Hey, look” and she said, “I was seven.” She put on her mitten again and added, “I’m just saying – you know?”
The night clung to the air around our heads like static, and the yellow streetlamps glowed dimly in their concrete beds spaced throughout the parking lot. I could hear cars on the thruway a half mile south of here and my own car was not far off, back on the street in front of Mars Café. The wind had died down but I couldn’t hear Amanda’s car engine from where we stood, though I could see the car’s headlights groping ahead in the empty street. The church rose behind me like the campanile on campus and I imagined who might be kissing there underneath it 40 miles north.
I left Amanda standing alone in the parking lot and when I reached the church I struggled through the snow heaped in a bank by the plows and I think I stepped on a small bush but I got my body close enough to spread my arms and press my chest against the stone facade. I would have liked to have thrown rocks at my father’s old house, by all rights a part of me wanted to burn that church down or worse, but there was something about the girl in the green scarf that I couldn’t put my finger on exactly, not the obvious reasons why, it wasn’t simply my wanting to impress her, there was something else: under the surface of it all I did what I did not out of attraction or empathy or fear: it was just that I did not want to look small in front of her.
When I got back to the spot where Amanda was waiting, she covered her mouth with her mittens.

“You just hugged a church,” she said

“Shit,” I said.

I tried biting my cheek but I laughed and she laughed, too. She touched me on the arm with her mitten and held it there.

“That was brilliant,” she said.

“You hugged a church,” I said in defense.

“I was 19, drunk, and in Europe,” she said, squeezing my arm.

“Fuck me,” I said, lowering my head.

On our walk back to her car, Amanda asked me if there was a name for the way my own name was pronounced.

“Like syllables,” she said.

“It’s pyrrhic,” I said. “Two syllables, each unstressed.”

She said my name aloud, monotone like a computer program. I told her about the Roman general named Pyrrhus, how he would do anything to win a battle. He defeated the Romans at Asculum, but his troops were so depleted, the Romans came back with more men the following week and ended up winning the war. Hence the adage: “To win the battle but lose the war.”

When we reached the car we sat inside warming our fingers against the heating vents. Amanda asked me what my father did for a living, and I said, “Real Estate.” She stuck her tongue behind her lower lip, pushing it out: a
gesture I’d later come to recognize as the one she makes when she thinks something is funny but can’t explain just how.

Amanda dropped me off at my car across the street from Mars Café, and we exchanged telephone numbers.

“Don’t text me,” I said and she said, “Ouch.”

“I don’t have a cell,” I explained. “That’s my landline.”

Before I got out of the car she said, “Don’t think hugging that church gets you out of giving me your books.” A spy would’ve said something back about business and pleasure, and the mixing between.

I said, “Consider them yours.”

I closed the car door and Amanda leaned across the seat, her body spread over top her buckled-in bags, and she rolled the window down.

“Hey!” she called and I bent forward, my elbows on the window frame.

“Tell me, when you were a kid and your mother would yell at you —”

Amanda furrowed her brow, saying “PHIL-IP!” loudly, sternly, pointing at me with her mitten as though I’d been caught in the act of a crime.

“Do they have a silly name for that?” she asked.

“Nostalgia,” I said.
There’s a payphone across the street from Mars Café between the Record Store and the Chinese laundry, and when I exit the Café I head toward it. Cold air cuts against the skin on my face, cold as the telescope lens against your cheek at the observatory near my old house in Vestal. (My friends and I would break in during winter when the skies were clearest.) I drop five dimes into the payphone and dial the number for the shelter once I hear the line go live. Every time I use a payphone I feel like a character in one of the detective novels my mother used to read, there’s something electric about the dial tone and the harsh metallic ring. The phone I’m using is one of a dozen left in the city. They’ve been removing the pay phones everywhere you look: empty booths, dead lines, phones with no receivers like strange gray dogs without tails. More automation, and the phones that won’t get torn down they’re rigging up with credit card machines like the automatic tellers for street parking. I don’t know if they’ll do away with coin slots entirely, if they do I’ll miss the characteristic click and pop of a hard-line readying for connection. You don’t get that with digital technology: no insertion, no metal on metal, no pure-line pulsation with its relevant distortions.
Ken answers on the third ring and I can almost feel his skin stretching into a broad smile over the airwaves.

“Go Hawkeyes,” I say, and he says, “Couldn’t hit a free throw to save their lives” and I say, “Yeah, but they won” and he says, “Barely.” He tells me Tony called and asks me if I have Tony’s number. I tell him I know it but he reads it to me anyway, and after the third time he asks me to say it back to him, I hang up.
I deposit five more dimes and Tony answers on the first ring.

"This is Tony," he says and I think what’s the use of a blackberry with caller ID if you answer your phone without looking.

"Homestead declined your credit," I tell him. "They want you to bring the card in personally so they can cut it up with a scissors."

"I guess it’s time to send the wife back to shopper’s anonymous."

I tell him, "I’m on a pay phone."

"Ok. I just wanted to say sorry for standing you up," says Tony. "I’ve got fires to put out. You know, you know. Let’s catch up in my office, say just after 5? We’ll have a cigar."

In the street behind me a delivery truck with squeaking brake pads comes to a rumbling halt at the intersection down from Mars Café, and the driver guns the truck into a right turn well after the light goes from yellow to red. Someone on the sidewalk flips the driver off but there are no other vehicles on the road. On the other side of me, a guy who works at the record store steps onto the sidewalk with a cigarette and a red bic lighter.

"I’ll be there," I tell Tony and I can hear him saying something to someone on the other end of the line, he does that whistling thing between his front teeth and hangs up without saying goodbye.
A gust of wind blows clumps of snow from the rooftops like a gnome playing with a box of packing peanuts, and the guy from the record store with tattoos on his arms and no coat says, “Cold enough for you?” and I say, “It’s a little brisk.” I get in the van and fill in my bracket with the names of the teams that I saw had won on Danny’s computer screen, and I put the van in first gear and roll slowly around the corner, down half a block to the service entrance of Drake Stadium where the gates are open. I pull into the parking lot and go to the far back behind where the locker rooms and field house is and I see Daveed’s truck and I park beside it. Daveed drives a small teal-colored Ford Ranger with so much rust around the edges it looks like the thing has been outlined in pencil. It reminds me of that Wooly Willy cartoon game for children where you can move the pencil shavings around with a little magnet pencil and give Willy crazy hairdos and beards. I wonder if I remind other people of that.

I get out of the van with it idling and buzz the intercom on the wall next to the loading dock doors and after about a minute of waiting Daveed comes to the door.

“Hombre,” he says, giving me a tight-grip handshake. He pulls my body to him, a little to the side so our shoulders bump. It’s what he calls the “prison hug.”

“How’s work?” I ask, and Daveed says, “Work is trabajo. It sucks.”

“You got five minutes to spare?”
Daveed looks past me at the outreach van parked beside his truck.

“For el perro infermo? I’ve got ten.”

Daveed hasn’t had a chance to work on the van since before Reggie’s SleepOut. I haven’t seen him around the shelter lately, either. Daveed works three jobs trying to raise his family and help his sister-in-law take care of his brother’s children. His brother, Eduardo, is in jail in Fort Dodge on meth charges, intent to distribute, and Daveed helps when he can around Los Tacos, where his sister-in-law works with Eduardo’s mother, a family business Eduardo inherited from his father, who isn’t exactly dead but who’s sick and can’t leave the house. When Daveed isn’t working as a full-time janitor at the University or part-time at the Youth Outreach center teaching shop, he drives a truck for Howie’s on the graveyard shift. He says it’s sleeping with the enemy but he needs the work and they pay double any other job he could get on the midnight shifts without having a GED. When he’s not working Daveed volunteers at the Latino community center where he helps tutor people in written English and helps translate phone calls with DHS, which is especially hard for older immigrants, illegal or not, who need benefits but don’t speak the language. He also teaches shop classes at the youth center, pro bono, and I don’t know when or if he sleeps but he’s always got a sunny disposition.

“I’ve been working on this van for longer than my daughter’s have been alive,” Daveed tells me, admiring the heap of junk in front of us. “I’ve been doing Rube Goldberg shit to this baby since you were in training wheels.” Daveed told me once about when he was young and his father was so poor they used to turn the truck engine off on downhill slopes to save on gas. He called being poor and Latino “living mile by mile.” Another time he told me about one night when it was so cold – this was when they lived in North Dakota – his father kept the work truck running all night long and he
and his brother had to take shifts checking the gasoline and adding a little at a time, siphoning from the mowers and weed whackers.

Daveed tells me to kill the engine and I open the door and reach inside.

“You change the oil lately?”

I tell him no and he says, “For a smart kid you make a lousy student.” It takes us both to pop the hood, some unseen part of it is frozen to the chassis. “Oye, mira! The oil in here is like honey in a freezer. Like churning wet sand each time the engine turns over.” The stench of burning oil and leaky fluids is worse with the hood open and I step back. Daveed joked long ago that we should have a carbon monoxide reader on the dashboard. Right now he lets out a long sigh, like a farmer who just found his prize sheep laying ill in the barn.

“Give me some juice,” he says.

I get in the van and step on the gas. When Daveed gives me the signal with his hands above the hood, I depress he pedal all the way down. I crack the window open for air and listen as the motor emits a high pitch sound like the blenders in Mars Café. I think about Ken in Vietnam with all that ground fire and overhead strikes and I think about the noise of radiators and heating vents and all night Laundromats and a run-on sentence from a Kerouac novel I read long ago in college comes to me: “The black awful roaring isolation no ordinary man could do it I’m telling you.” Ken gives me the thumbs down and I ease off the pedal and the engine slows, the sound lowering in decibel and pitch. I get out of the van and he closes the hood and he tells me the van needs oil but otherwise it’s running fine, just keep it under 40 miles an hour and the fact that it’s running on the verge of red won’t matter.

“It won’t do it good,” he says, “But it won’t kill nothing neither.”

I ask him if he can fix the radio and he looks at his wristwatch.
“Fucking Mickey mouses,” he says and slaps me on the arm. He heads into the maintenance building in pursuit of new wire.
I look across the Drake Stadium field covered in snow and for some reason the stadium game clock is on, zeros across the board like the large digital clock at my sister’s high school swim meets, before the races had begun. I picture Ken riding in the van alone, distributing socks on his own, logging his own miles and cleaning out his own fast food wrappers from under the seats. Who will sing to him when I’m gone?
Daveed comes out of the building again with a handful of colored wires wrapped around a small wooden spool that looks like a miniature hose wagon. Daveed uses the screwdriver from the glove box to jostle loose the radio which pops out easy enough, he’s done this a couple of times before and learned not to put things back too tightly, to keep it easy access, and he uses a small safety blade to cut a portion out of the old wire and to shave the rubber ends of the new wire and the remaining old wire running through the dash to the battery and in just a few minutes, he’s able to splice everything together and get the radio working again.

“As good as nothing-close-to-new,” he laughs, and I say, “You’re a wizard” and he says, “De nada.”

I help him keep the wires back as he situates the radio in its slot and we shove it in place, and I raise the volume and we sit in the van for a minute and listen to ESPN radio recap the early scores over the tinny sounding speakers: I make note of them, as a car pulls into the parking lot. I glance at Daveed’s watch and see it’s three pm. Inside the small Corolla is Daveed’s wife with his two daughters, each with a pair of ice skates draped over their shoulders with the laces tied together in front of their chests like country club kids tie their sweaters. Daveed tells me he’s going to let his daughters use the hockey rink, which on account of school being cancelled is closed for the day and they’ll have it all to themselves.

“A janitor’s perk,” he says. “Keys.”
The girls and their mother say *hola* to me and wait by the door of the building. The girls are young still, grade school. At their age I was coloring in Dukakis’ hair with a lead pencil to make him look older. I remember the fake ballots with black and white headshots that they gave us at school to teach us about the democratic process. It was 1988, my sister had just been born, I was in first grade and afraid of the Soviets. I didn’t know what I was doing. I thought Dukakis was a silly name.

Daveed asks if I want to come inside and watch the girls skate a while.

“Kids, man,” he says. “It’s a sight to see.”

I tell Daveed no, another time, which is what I’ve said to him and countless others hundreds of times, when anyone invites me to join their families out somewhere or to come into their home for dinners or parties or just to watch a ballgame.

“I’ll let you ride the zamboni,” he says and I tell him, “I would, but my zamboni license is expired.”

“I hear that’s one hell of a ticket,” he says and before he leaves he looks over his shoulder at his wife and daughter and then tells me, “*Digame.* Just because you’re done at the shelter, it doesn’t mean you don’t got people who care about you. If you need money, whatever. Don’t be too proud to ask.”

“I’m good,” I say. “I’m ok.”

“I know you are,” he says. “But life can turn on a dime. You see the world.” He points to the van. “All I’m saying is, I’ve got your back, bro.”

We prison hug.

Daveed goes inside and I climb into the van and kill the radio. I sit in silence and look across the stadium field again and I imagine myself sitting in the bleachers watching Daveed help his daughters across the tarmac and onto the ice, holding their hands on either side of him and I remember my mother telling me about the day she ice-skated in a pond near her childhood
home and she and her sisters left a note for their father but he was drunk at the bar and did not see it and when they came home he raged but that was all, never raising a hand. She told me sometimes when he was drunk he’d take off all his clothes and lay outside in the lawn, not only in the summer but in the winter, too. Tonight at the pub everyone will try and buy me a drink and they’ll ask me about Amanda. I think I should feel badly about not watching Daveed’s girls ice skate and for a moment I think about leaving the van and buzzing in – then I think about my sister and how before my mother died my sister was on the varsity swim team which was a big deal for a freshman and she had a lot of promise, she set a regional record for the 200 meter backstroke and her coach told my parents he wouldn’t be surprised if she broke a state record by her senior year but after my mother died, my sister quit the team. I remember what it was like watching her swim, all the parents and siblings sitting on bleachers on the far side of a huge glass partition while the girls swam lap after lap on the other side and my sister told me you couldn’t hear a thing when you were on the pool side, just the cheers from the other girls but the roar of the crowd behind the glass was barely there, you mostly just heard your own heart beating in your ears and the sound of water and when the race was done you’d look up at the clock first and then the referee to see who won and then toward the crowd, the silent crowd of which I was a part, with our idiotic soundless open mouths.
CAVEMAN MECHANICS
The first time I met Beth, in Ken’s office, Elton John was lying on his back on Ken’s generous lap, each with their eyes closed, and Beth looked at me and said, “Tell me those two weren’t meant to find each other.” Ken spent much of his twenties homeless, or nearly so: a drifter. He never lived in camp, but he came close. When he did live inside, with friends, with women, with people he’d meet in bars, the arrangements weren’t good ones. He married young to a woman in Miami whose substance abuse proved recreational compared to his, and when she eventually kicked him out he spent nights drinking at the bars in hopes of finding someone, anyone, to go home with. Sometimes just a man who understood where he was coming from, a man with a couch, or a woman with a queen-sized bed or larger. If she had kids it was all right, he’d watch them in the daytime if she needed it. Nothing lasted long, he moved from couch to couch, from bed to bed. Some nights he slept in Laundromats. The trick, he said, was to keep everything you owned inside one of the machines. If a manager shows up, just pretend you fell asleep and start loading clothes into a dryer. No one bothers to check if the clothes are wet.
When Ken finally found his way back to Iowa, he stayed with his mom a while but the war hadn’t left him and he couldn’t stand for her to see him like that. So he stayed with friends and worked where he could, he drove delivery or did heavy lifting or manned the doors at bars. He ended up bouncing for a few years at a joint named Whisky River in Iowa City, then for a long stint at a bar called The Holiday that was attached to a cheap hotel where hookers and drug dealers rented by the hour. He broke up fights and smoked cigarettes and drank with everyone else. One time he almost got mugged by a chick who said she’d blow him in the parking lot, she said to meet him behind the dumpster. He was heading out the back door when a guy he knew was coming in said, “There’s a dude behind the dumpsters, watch out.” It was a set-up and Ken went back to the bar and kept on drinking. Later he saw the girl come back into the bar with another guy, a large guy but not larger than Ken, and Ken raised his glass to the chick and she flicked him off. The bar stools at The Holiday were topped with fake leather so coated in grime your pants stuck if you sat too long and Ken said the drunks literally had to peel themselves away.
I remember my mother used to cover her face with lotion at night, and then Vaseline, two thick layers of beauty prevention, and when she’d tuck us in at night we’d kiss her and stick to her face. My father only ever gave us air kisses and I remember the day I came home from school and I got off the bus - my sister was still in sixth grade, she rode another bus that dropped her off twenty minutes after me - and my father was standing in front of the house, on the stoop, and what I didn’t know was that he was home from work because he’d driven my mother to the hospital to get the results of tests my sister and I didn’t know she’d gotten a week earlier, and before he told me why he was home and why my mother was on the phone inside the house making calls, he pulled me toward him and held me and kissed me on the lips. He was crying, and I was afraid, and I didn’t hug him back. What haunts me is not that I failed to embrace him: it’s that I would have given anything to have met my mother on the stoop that day, to have seen my father through the kitchen window calling relatives, telling them that he was the one with death in his lungs.
Two days after they pulled the dead man’s body from the river, Rico called the office, relaying a message through Ken to me about Rico having some thing I could help them with. Someone buzzed at the shelter entrance and Charlie came out of his office and walked down the hall. He opened the front doors of the shelter and the shelter said, “Shhhh.” Esmeralda was in the locker room already, a line for lunch was forming out front. Whoever it was at the door I heard Charlie say, “Five minutes.” Elton John rolled over on his mat with his feet stretched toward the ceiling. I could smell the mini corndogs baking in the kitchen. Ken, playing with his Regency Tr-1 radio, told me to bring him back a couple of beef tongue enchiladas from Los Tacos. He showed me what Beth had packed him for lunch.

“Cabbage smoothie,” he said, shaking a white, talcy liquid inside a mason jar fitted with a plastic lid.

“Cabbage?”

“Cabbage.”

I waited until noon when the alarm rang for lunch. All the clocks in the shelter are linked, from when this was a schoolhouse, the entire shelter rings at noon and at 11 pm for lights out and again at 7 am for wakeup call. All the clock faces in the shelter are identical, though every few months the janitor has to reset them all because a few of them get a little ahead or behind. I’ve been in the office when that happens, you see the clock face spinning around fast fast fast like Rosemary’s baby, it all happens in a
matter of seconds all of those little hands racing toward the twelve. I put a pair of socks in my coat pocket and made for the door.

“Body my house my horse my hound,” I said to Elton John. I glanced back toward my desk, at the meal logs I’d been searching through since the body turned up in the river. Ken noticed me looking back at the desk at the logs and cleared his throat.

“Don’t go banging your head against the wall because you don’t like the wallpaper,” he said and I closed the door behind me.
When I pulled the Outreach Van into the Los Tacos parking lot I saw Mayberry’s squad car pulled perpendicular to Rico’s plain car, taking up like four spaces between them. Rico is talking on a cell phone while Mayberry smokes a cigarette standing with one foot on the front of his bumper like he’s some kind of colt-holstering cowboy. The steam from the kitchen vents plumes in the distance behind him and I think of dust kicked up by horse-riding Indians in old westerns. Mayberry’s wearing that awful black Toledo U hand muff around his waist, the same one that kept his hands moist in Afghanistan. Mayberry once said, “The others guys were fucking talimuff in caves and I had a damn wife at home. Took this muff, cause a guy’s gotta have something to fuck.” Rico said M is full of shit, that he didn’t see half the things he said he saw, he tells stories because he knows it gives him capital, like with Ken, who only Mayberry can call VietKen to his face. When Rico isn’t looking Mayberry flicked the butt of his cigarette at my feet. Mayberry thinks I informed on him about an incident involving excessive force, namely: an incident with Mayberry’s boot and a cuffed man’s throat. It wasn’t me who told, it was someone else who filed the anonymous complaint, but he’s been giving me the cold shoulder without even asking if I’d done it. I haven’t told him it wasn’t me who ratted on him because I know who did, and there’s a lot more than spent cigarettes and dirty looks that Mayberry could do to her if he found out.
Inside Los Tacos, Tina is working the grill. It’s a school day, but I’m the only one who seems to notice or to care. Rico talks Spanish to her while Mayberry is busy complaining about the “new administration” and how Obama’s “tan politics” are gonna get a cop killed. Rico chimes in, telling Mayberry that the last cop that got killed in Des Moines was a decade ago, a roll-over in a high speed pursuit of a motorcycle rigged with nitrous.

“A spic-stick won’t get me killed,” says Mayberry.

Rico says, “No, but your dick will” and he turns to me and says, “This wet dick motherfucker has a direct deposit account at Planned Parenthood.”

“Liberals,” says Mayberry, “It’s why I can’t get promoted.”

Rico pantomimes jerking off and says, “Did Obama make you go all Jackie Chan on that perp in the river?”

“Perp?” says Mayberry. “ Fucking pimp.”

Tina greets me and Rico warmly and avoids looking Mayberry in the eyes. I look at Mayberry’s uniform, the police-issue items neatly arranged on his polished black belt: radio, pepper spray, flashlight, cuffs, and the handle of his gun sticking out of his holster like a mismatched Tetris piece. Mayberry orders first: cheese tacos with “American meat,” none of that “Mexican snout shit.” Tina throws ours orders on the grill, she knows what Rico and I order without having to ask.

We take a seat at a table and Rico says, “Quick-dick here is afraid a little culture will make him less appealing to the milfs at closing time.”
Mayberry has been moonlighting as a security guard at downtown bars like Mums and Peeples’s for over a year now (show him there at the party). Like cigarettes and coffee, it’s against DMPD protocol to bounce in uniform, but Mayberry does it anyway because the women love the blue pride. Mayberry hasn’t been promoted, and his wife wants a third child and a new house and he moonlights to save for a down payment.

“I’ve got more culture in my dick than you do in your whole body,” says Mayberry, looking to me for laugh and I try to smile. He shrugs me off.

“That’s a different kind of culture,” said Rico. “Like, herpes.”

“Fuck you.”

Rico says, “Not without a rubber.”

Mayberry drags a chair from one of the other tables so he can sit in the aisle, not so close to us, and he rests his long heavy elbows on the table, tipping it in his direction so the salt and tapatio jars slide across the table. Rico lifts the bottles off the table before they fall to the freshly mopped floor, setting them on a booth top adjacent to us, and he takes a small evidence bag out of his pocket and hands it to me. Inside the plastic bag I find a torn sheet of paper, a single page that appears to be ripped from a small book. The edges of the paper are brown and warped, crumply from water damage. The ink on the page is blotted and smeared, only certain portions of the text are legible.

“We found this in Harry Floater’s pocket.”

Mayberry purses his lips and spies Tina behind the grill, and I hold the paper to catch the light from the window and I look at the passage. In the back of my head I can hear Hamilton’s voice: “Nothing is ever erased, not entirely. Every event leaves a mark, if you trace the effects, the narrative will reveal itself.” Like a game of pin the tail on Aeschylus’ missing manuscript. I read what I can see aloud, like I’m back in English class:
When he observed the world it was as if he had extra sense organ.... wheels hidden beneath the surface of things... understructure associations between seemingly disparate physical phenomenon across vast differences in scale... tennis ball... invisible eddies in the air... rock-filled streams...

I look at Rico. Mayberry follows my gaze. Rico looks between the two of us. “I got sauce on my face?” he says, and he asks me, “Can you make tails of that?”


Mayberry curls his lip.

“Our dead guy’s name is Isaac?”

Rico flashes Mayberry a look like the one my father used to give my sister when she wore her jelly-soled shoes on walks in the woods. She got her heel caught in an elevator in Boscov’s and triggered the automatic shut off. My father stood by embarrassed while the janitor fished out her shoe.

“Dios fucking mio, man,” says Rico.


“I’m not retarded,” he says and Rico says, “Divorced madres fuck hard, old man. Better get your head checked for a hump concussion.”

Rico asks me if I recognize the passage, if I can tell him what book it’s from. Rico doesn’t know I went to school at ISU, or that I’m a history major, but he knows I’m smart and Ken probably told him to ask me about the passage. Only Ken and Charlie and Amanda know I’m a failed PhD student. Everyone else just thinks I read a lot.
I take a closer look at the evidence, and I notice something I didn’t see at first. In the margins next to a line in the passage is a marking, a textual annotation: a circle with a diagonal drawn through it at an angle, like a zero symbol or a partial cock-eyed zodiac sign. It had been two nights since I’d gotten any sleep and I thought maybe I was imagining things. I turned the paper over in my hands and turned it back again. The mark was there, for certain: twice – there in the margins of the page like a blight:

It was my mark; the page was torn out of one of my books.
Rico saw something in my reaction and he asked me what I was thinking.

"Have you checked Fort Dodge?" I said.

"Porque?"

"The prison," I said.

"Porque?"
Tina brought plates for me and Rico, our beef tongue burritos sizzling, nose-watering spicy and hot, mine with extra cilantro and sour cream and Rico’s with a side of mole sauce. Tina’s grandmother does the mole sauce right, slow cooked every Sunday night, 24 hours on the stovetop for the Monday night enchilada special and the leftovers kept in the fridge for special customers like me and Rico and for Tina and her cousins to eat while they work for free behind the counter. Mayberry’s eyes elevator up and down Tina’s small body while I try to give Rico a reason to look into the prison without telling him the truth about the book. There’s no good reason not to tell him but something about the paper, and the passage, and the dead man – I don’t know what it was but I felt like some kind of secret message was being passed down to me and I knew that was kind of a crazy thing to think, and I might not have really believed it myself – the bottom line is there was something I knew that no one else knew, and I wanted to see it played out.

Rico looked at me doubtfully.

“I guess where else would a vag get his hands on a book about Newton.”

Vag is cop slang in Des Moines for vagabond, for drifter: what they call the homeless men like they call college girls Tiffanies or prostitutes Tutors.

I ask Rico if I can keep the sheet of paper and he says, “No.”

“At the river you said there wouldn’t be an investigation.”
“We’re just trying to find out who he was. His possessions will go to any next of kin, supposing we ID him.”

Tina comes by again and drops Mayberry’s plate on the edge of the table and Mayberry pulls it in front of him and leans over the table with his long tight end arms and grabs the tapatio Rico had moved to the other table, and he dumps hot sauce over his soft shell tacos. Mayberry looks at me and with a mouthful of food says, “Maybe we should open a line of investigation on Mr. Jeopardy here.”

Rico takes the page from me and puts it back in the evidence bag and considers me with mock skepticism.

“What do you say in your defense?” he asks, pointing to the ends of the socks that are sticking out of my coat pocket. “Your socks do match those at the crime scene.”

I set my fork down and slowly raise my arms above my head.

“Guilty,” I say.
Mayberry takes his spoon and scoops a dollop of sour cream from off my plate, I can see from the redness in his cheeks that the tapatio has caught up with him. We finish our food and Mayberry is still hungry and he holds up a five dollar bill and calls to Tina, asking her to whip him up another couple of tacos to go.

Rico says, “Get up off your white ass and order at the counter.”

Mayberry puts the fiver on the edge of the table so half of it is hanging off and he puts the jar of tapatio on top to secure it there.

“I’m a man who appreciates good service,” he says.

Rico says, “Massey here’s been addicted to skinny girls since he got himself cave-raped by kurut-eating chicos in Af-faggot-stan.”

Mayberry swallows the last bite of his taco, chewing loudly with his front teeth as my sour cream smears on his lower lip, and he reaches over to my plate and nabs a leftover cilantro sprig and pushes it into his mouth like a goat and looks out the window while Rico snickers and pulls a few bills out of his wallet for a tip for Tina.

“Kurut’s like, a yak’s milk patty,” Rico tells me, and he takes out a five dollar bill from his wallet and slides it across the table. “Thanks for the science lesson, kid. Your beef tongue is complements of the DMPD.”

I fold the five dollar bill and put it in my pocket next to the socks.
While Mayberry waits for Tina to finish wrapping his tacos, I follow Rico out into the parking lot. I ask him if they found anything else in the dead man’s pockets.

“We did,” said Rico and he reaches into his other coat pocket. Inside a second baggie is a pack of matches, it’s also water-logged but the name on the matchbook is clear.

“Euclid Motel,” I say.

“My next stop,” says Rico, re-pocketing the evidence. “Tutor Town.”
It took Amanda a month to discover I’d moved to Des Moines, that I’d taken a job with AmeriCorps. I never called her. I donated my books like I’d promised – every last one – but I left them in the community center’s lobby, anonymously, 28 file boxes full, boxes my father had given me from Lockheed when I moved to the Midwest). Amanda ran into me by accident of circumstance – at a fundraiser for Reggie’s Sleepout my fourth week on the job. I was nervous at first for her to notice me. I stood by a table topped with a spread of donated food, looking away from her and when I looked back, she’d crossed the room and was poised in front of me. Long black hair. Green eyes.

“It’s you,” she said.
That was the first time I saw her without her scarf, the first time I saw the freckles on her neck, the connect-the-dot arc of Orion’s water belt.
Amanda wore that scarf again three weeks ago - the scarf given to her by her dead father, made of alpaca, hand-crafted by the Amish down in Colona - when she broke the news to me about our child: one week before we found Marlow’s body washed up on the shore of the cold black river. She sat across from me on her couch, cupping a mug of coffee between her palms, her knees pulled to her chest wearing one of my red sweatshirts. It was particularly cold that day and she couldn’t keep warm, I remember all afternoon, a Saturday, she kept asking me to rub her hands and to hug her. Now we were on opposite sides of the couch and she touched my foot with her toe and said, “Hey.”

I looked up from a book I was reading, just something I’d found on her shelves.

Amanda said, “Did you hear the one about tomato sauce?”

When I said no, she said, “I’m preggo.”
At the cross walk near the hospital I almost run a red light and a woman in lime colored hospital fatigues gives me a nasty look. I watch her cross the street and when the light turns green I let the van move through the intersection in neutral. I think about Daveed’s father and their old gas-needy truck and I leave the van in neutral the rest of the way down the hill and I turn into the Los Tacos parking lot at ten miles an hour. The clouds disband momentarily and sunlight spreads over the earth like rain through a canopy of leaves. I try and lower the driver’s side visor but the visor breaks off in my hands leaving a glue mark on the windshield like a squished bug. I put the visor in the backseat with the takeout containers.
A squad car whips past down University, in the direction of my neighborhood, and I watch its t-lights blazing and wonder why the siren is off and I remember the first time I was in a squad car with Mayberry. I’d never been inside a police cruiser before, Larry from DMARC set me up for a ride-along. I was in awe of Mayberry at first, and a little afraid of him like I was the policemen who’d come to our school when I was a kid with their German Shepherds and their DARE lessons. It was thrilling peeling in and out of parking spaces, powered by the Dodge Charger’s V-8 engine, even though nothing happened that first night on the job with Mayberry. We pulled someone over for expired tags near the Euclid Motel, that was it. But even that was dramatic with Mayberry, I remember him very seriously showing his teeth and sucking his lip like a soldier in a war movie and telling me “Here” as he removed his service shotgun from its overhead mount. I hadn’t even noticed the gun hanging over our heads until then. “If major shit hits the fan and you can’t get away,” said Mayberry, “Then this puppy here is your girlfriend.” He demonstrated how to turn off the safety. “You cock,” he said, aping the action of pumping the barrel, “And pull. Cock and pull. Cock and pull.” He said “Bam!” and kept jerking the gun. “Bam Bam. Bam.” He told me in an emergency just to empty the chamber and hightail out of there, find a phone, dial 911. He told me not to be a hero if I see him go down. “It’s my job to die, not yours. Take the gun, bam bam bam, then run.” Around midnight that night we passed a kid jay walking on 6th ave near the
Chinese Bakery and Mayberry flipped on the siren for a second and the kid stepped onto the curb, and as we drove past the kid spit at the wheels of the car and Mayberry said, “Fucking nigger.”
Inside Los Tacos I see Tina behind the register, her head swan-necked over a chemistry textbook, a series of notebook pages strewn across the countertop. She’s a senior at the Monsanto high school downtown, one of the few free Monsanto schools in the country. Tina’s beautiful in a way that makes you feel at once familiar with her, as though you’ve known her all your life, but also gives you the uncanny sensation that your life is a dream, that maybe you’ve died in a field during a war long ago and Tina is the reincarnation of the field nurse that saw you off into death. Amanda would say that Tina has perfect asymmetry.

I make small talk with Tina – Daveed’s niece – while she readies my food without asking for my order, two portions of beef tongue on the flat iron griddle and two corn tortillas in the warming press. She knows I like lots of cilantro and lime and she gets them on the plate when the meat is sizzling. When the food is all trayed up and steaming and ready to eat, Tina asks me if I could do her a favor. (I didn’t recognize the look, I didn’t see it wash over her face like with Danny, either I wasn’t looking for it or maybe with Tina I’m blind to certain things the way I was with Alice or my sister.) Tina asks me for a recommendation letter for a special minority scholarship at Iowa U and of course I say yes. She’s already been accepted into the University but she can’t afford it. The scholarship is about ethnicity but mainly it’s about community service, and since Tina has volunteered under me at the shelter dozens of times. I’m in a position to
write something on her behalf. I tell her of course I’ll write the letter and I think about Danny and how no one cares what a guy like me says in letters like these, and for Tina’s sake I really hope I’m wrong about that.

I find a booth and eat my food alone in the corner by the soda machines and look out the windows and look over at Tina studying her textbook and I listen to the song on the radio. Other people eating alone at other tables, Los Tacos is never empty, they don’t advertise on TV or radio or billboard because they have a reputation word of mouth. The song coming over the speakers is a Mexican cover of the song “Glass, Concrete, and Stone” by David Byrne. The last time I heard Talking Heads was in a bar in Brooklyn when I was still in college and on an overnight trip for an architecture class and some friends of mine went drinking and I remember because there was a man sitting alone at the bar, he had a bald head and he was wearing a blue dress and a dog collar. He tried to talk to me and my friends while we ordered our drinks and it turned out his dog had died recently and like a real life Bojangles he was in mourning. The collar around his neck had been his dog’s. “She was a beautiful creature,” he said, and one of my friends put Psycho Killer on the jukebox and we left the man alone at the bar and we went out onto the balcony with our drinks and I remember you could see all of Manhattan across the water but none of Brooklyn, Brooklyn was dark. I remember someone saying, “How sad.”
A customer enters Los Tacos and pounds his boots on the floor and I see Howie’s logo on the side of the truck he pulled up in. I think about Howie’s jingle, and the slogan painted high on billboards across the city: HOWIE WON’T LEAVE YOU WAITING IN THE COLD. They promise you a thirty minute guarantee like pizza delivery. The pounding of the man’s boots inside the entrance makes me think about the lunch line I missed at the shelter, and how the shelter would be empty again now save for Charlie’s clients. Esmeralda and the other men have gone off to wherever they call home or wherever they’re able to bide their time, and tomorrow Esmeralda will be back at eleven thirty sharp to pound with her bull dong cane on the shelter’s front door and about half the men from lunch will return this evening to reserve a bed, the rest of them aren’t homeless, just need a free meal, or they have beds of varying sorts secreted away in other parts of the city. On the radio I hear trumpets and an accordion in the parts where David Byrne’s version of the song has cellos and mandolin. I finish eating and walk past where the Howie’s man is standing at the register talking on a cell phone and I take a roll of dimes out of my pocket and set it on the counter and slide it toward Tina.

“Mira,” I say and she turns. “A down payment on school supplies.”

Tina is holding a metal spatula with a rubber grip and watching the Howie’s man’s chicken quesadillas on the grill while a large pot of crushed tomatoes are stewing on low flame on a burner. The lid was off when I
arrived but Tina’s removed it. The smell of the tomatoes reminds me of the homegrown green grape variety my mother used to preserve in olive oil. I liked to pull the tomatoes thick with oil from their containers and feel their cold plump skin and the sucking sound they made coming out of the jar.

It was my mother who told me how the Amish buried garbage cans to use as make-shift refrigerators, covering layers of vegetables and fruit inside the underground bins and letting nature do the cooling.

Or was it the Mennonites.
Tina laughs at the roll of dimes in their silly green wrapper, and she balances the spatula expertly on the edge of the grill and says, “Thanks again about the letter” and I say, “You’re welcome to use my names, wherever.”

I’m about to leave, when Tina’s grandmother comes in from the kitchen carrying a tray of fried yellow plantains. She looks at me and smiles and says, “Perro perdido.”

It’s the first time I’ve heard her call me that, and I have to ask Tina what perdido means.

“She calls you Lost Dog. Because of that tee-shirt you used to wear? The one with the Chihuahua on the front.”
My sister used to work for a place called Lost Dog Café in Binghamton. One year for Christmas she gave me a shirt with the brand on front and a picture of a Chihuahua on a flier you’d see nailed around the neighborhood. The things we forget we wear, what other people see and know us by. I tell Tina’s grandmother, “Yo no se no perro pero Elton John” and she sets her tray on the cool half of the griddle and plucks one of the plantains between her fingers and eats it.
I leave through the doors and face the wind and I’m almost to the van, its plume of black smoke gushing out of the exhaust like some undersea fault-line, when Tina calls my name and I turn and see her walking coatless toward me carrying a paper bag.

“Abuela said to give you this. Supper for later. Some leftover mole, too.”

She hands me the bag of food and stands gracefully leaning on one cocked hip, poised against the wind and hugging herself and I say, “Go back inside.”

“Oye,” she says. “Don’t tell Daveed about the scholarship, ok?”

I think about Daveed with his hands on his daughter’s head leading them through the empty halls of the field house into the skating rink.

“You’ve got my word,” I say, and I tell her, “Inside. Go. It’s cold.”

Like a ballerina Tina rises to her tiptoes and blows me a kiss, she pivots and disappears, the doors to Los Tacos closing slowly on hydraulic buffers as a single sweep of wind ushers a trace amount of snow onto the black rubber mats in the foyer before the door clicks shut.
Mayberry told me how he never wears his seatbelt because he doesn’t want to get stuck in the car if there’s a sudden outbreak of shooting and later, when he drove us down a cul de sac where according to him a known drug dealer lived Mayberry pulled his revolver out of its holster and stuck it between his legs handle-side up and said, “Safe or sorry, you tell me, kid.”
The day before my dinner date with Amanda at the Homestead, Ken and I sat in our office play DJ Ken. He already had a huge stack of cookies from this morning, because I kept giving him way too easy songs and he knew I was distracted by looking up names in the meal log. I’d lost on “Hotel California” and a Leonard Cohen song about the “Chelsea Hotel.” It’s when I sang “Only the Good Die Young” followed by “Rock Me on the Water” that Ken sat up in his chair and swiveled around and said:

“Enough is enough. What are you up to?”

I told Ken about the sheet of paper in the dead guy’s pocket and the books I donated to Fort Dodge prison. I didn’t tell Ken that I didn’t say anything about my owning the book to Rico. The office window was frozen over and the space heater on high. Amanda was in Sioux Falls that day doing preparedness for flood relief, near her grandparents’ old farm, where the low banks of the river threatened the poorer rural communities: the anticipated thaw of a record-setting winter. There was a small rubber ball on Ken’s desk and I stood up from my chair and took the ball and started dribbling it on the office floor. Elton John’s ears perked up but the ball was classic red and he wasn’t interested.

“I just want to know the guy’s name,” I told Ken.

I bounced the rubber ball off the window and a dusting of ice glazed over Ken’s desk, coating the top of his computer tower.
“Snowy nights and Christmas lights,” he said and I took a cookie off his plate and I put it in my mouth and I said, “Jim Croce had a better mustache than you do.”

“Real men don’t have mustache envy,” Ken said.

I shot the ball at the hoop and I missed and the ball careened off the wall and landed on Elton John who sighed but did not stir. It was nearing Esmeralda’s calling hour and I was almost through the entire meal log. I’d found nothing striking or out of the ordinary and I was afraid I never would, I only had the second half of last year to get through: I’d read through everything once already. Ken was eating from a box of pretzel rods on his desk and I could hear the popping of his jaw on the hard dry food. I sat down at my desk again and thumbed through the meal logs. The torn page in the dead man’s pocket stirred something inside of me. It could have been any book, one of two thousand books I gave to Amanda who in turn gave them to the library at Fort Dodge. The best lending library in all the central Iowa penal system. Ken chewed on his pretzel rod and said, “I can’t remember the name for a chocolate chip cookie.”

I said, “You’re thinking of TAUTOLOGY.”

“I’m certain I’m not,” Ken said.
There’s a particular series of sounds that occur before Ken flatulates, an early warning system: the creak of his chair, the squeaking of a partial swivel, the particular quality of Ken’s inhalation.

“Fertilizer,” he’d say and let fire. “For the spring crop.”

I’d lift the phone to my ear and say, “Psych ward, please.” I’d say, “500 pound delivery. Better bring a crane.”
Ken went back to playing with his radio and studying his NCAA magazine. Selection Sunday was weeks away, but he was already filling out brackets in his head. I turned my attention to the meal logs. Hamilton had trained me well in the art of archival research. You don’t look for patterns, that’s a poor methodology: because you’ll find patterns everywhere. What you do is you let the patterns wash over you, let them become your custom, your norm, that way when there are inconsistencies, flaws, subtle or obvious breaks in the patterns, you notice them. The writer of history, like the writer of fiction, traffics in the establishing of patterns and the breaking away from them. It wasn’t hard for me to settle into the pattern of the meal logs. I’d lived it, day after day, meal after meal, for three damned years. Which is how I knew, when I saw the name MARLOW for the first time, in the lunch log for this Thanksgiving last, that the name meant something. When I found the name again, this time altered, spelled with an E on the end, I knew - I felt it:

I had found my dead man.
“Hey Ken,” I said, and Ken brushed me off with a whistle: the tune to Gilligan’s Island. “Serious,” I said. “I need your eyes on something.”

Ken turned in his chair and I held tight to my desk so my chair wouldn’t spin, the plastic backs slipping out of contact like a broken film reel or the busted wheel of a roller skate. Ken stood up and leaned over my shoulder. The pretzel rod he’d stuck behind his ear fell onto my desk but didn’t break. I used the pretzel rod to point out names like a ruler.

“Thanksgiving. Last year. Look.”

Ken looked at the name: MARLOW. He took the pretzel rod out of my hand and bit the end off, chewing loudly.

“Marlow,” I said and Ken said, “I can read.”
I opened the clasps of the three ring binder and removed the day’s sheet. I locked the binder again and flipped until I found the entry for Christmas of the same year. Elton John stirred in the corner, trotting over to stand beside my desk. Like when I stare at a wall or out the window too long, the dog can sense that something is up. I put my finger under the name MARLOWE in the Christmas entry. I could feel Ken’s breath on my neck, the smell of gummy bears that he’d been eating from a bag in his desk drawer and the sawdust smell of chewed pretzel. I put the Thanksgiving day log beside the Christmas log and Ken and I looked at the names side by side, my left finger on MARLOW and my right on MARLOWE. Elton John clawed at my leg.

“Hush pup,” said Ken, and I said, “It’s the same handwriting.”

The only difference between the two names was the E on one end.

“Encyclopedia blue,” said Ken.
It was Amanda who gave me the nickname Encyclopedia Blue. She said I could detect the sour or depressing in everything, that I could ruin anything with some sad anecdote or fact from history. Ken and Adam and sometimes Charlie use the nickname when I display any kind of intellect, commissioned or – more often – unsolicited.
Ken sat back down and opened his desk drawer and flipped a blue circus peanut in Elton John’s direction. The treat bounced off his snout, leaving a small blue smudge on the pink skin between his upper lip and nose. Elton nabbed the treat off the floor and returned to his mat.

I put my palms on the two sheets of paper from the meal log like a DJ with his turntables, and I waited. When Ken didn’t say anything more about the names I asked if he thought it was evidence.

“Evidence of what?” he said.
Hamilton had all these timelines on his office wall. He was a fan of scale models and diagrams and charts. He’d say, “See things from a neutral perspective; step out of your selves and your sentiments or you’ll find yourself chasing your own goddamned tail!” I knew a guy who mapped the entire history of western civilization along the walls of his office, starting high near the ceiling where wallpaper should be and descending with each revolution down the length of the walls, where the present day ended about two feet off the ground. He said he wanted to surround his work space in a shroud of documented history, like the toilet paper game I remember playing at a schoolmate’s house during a birthday party when I was a kid, how you mummify each other with a roll and I never wanted to be mummified but I loved unspooling the paper: especially down the stairs because we didn’t have stairs in my house. The guy wanted global history wrapped like armor, surrounding him, so he wouldn’t get lost in himself like Hamilton had warned, stuck on the shard of self-interest like some Agamemnon among the shattered glass. Then the guy got married and his wife got pregnant and his study became the baby’s bed room. Bye bye history. It was plastic glow-in-the-dark ducks and stars glued on the walls and ceiling, and the poor guy had to move all his materials to a carrel reserved in the library. I had never had my own carrel. You only get that far once you’ve passed your exams. Until then, you work in the stacks like everyone else.
Ken says I can smell complexity in things that should be simple like Elton John can smell the color blue and Ken can claims he can taste the copper pipes through the walls in the bathroom. I tell him it’s piss he’s smelling, and rust, but he swears he’s this synesthetic gift like how he says the sight of the river on an autumn day brings the taste of barbecue to his tongue. I tell him on any given autumn day during football season there’s a good chance that barbecue is on his tongue. Ken has two barrel smokers in his backyard run fed by the same chimney and he’s always trying to win the DM Register’s barbecue taste-off they do at the end of the Farmer’s Market season but he’s only ever placed third. Howie wins the blue ribbon almost every year.
The phone rings with its terrible sound, vacillating in pitch and speed like an alarm clock with a low battery or a turntable playing Charles Ives music while jumping back and forth between 45 and 78 rpms. (My sister and I used to play my mother’s Richie Haven’s albums on 78 so his deep bass voice sounded treble, like a robot.) Ken answers the phone and I feel a twitch in my forearms. I think about the night with Amanda and how I left things driving off like that leaving her with the bill in that dress so striking and I haven’t slept since, three nights in a row now without sleep. I’ll drift off during the night only to wake abruptly minutes later, like a stone skipping over water: dip, dip, dip. I had ideas in my head that weren’t quite dreams and when I lay on my couch I felt like there was this hand inside of me trying to put its finger on something, a bubble under some water’s surface maybe but the bubble keeps slipping from under the finger and floating up, up, up. I look at Ken holding the phone against his ear and when Ken looks at me I slowly drag my pointer finger in front of my neck. Elton John sees me and barks, leaps to his feet, rolls over, plays dead. Ken tells the caller I’m not in the office and hangs up the phone. He reaches into his desk and drops a treat on the floor for Elton John. The pup resurrects and grabs the candy and chews it there at Ken’s feet.

“Who was it?”

“Jancy,” Ken says.

I wait for Ken to tell me what she wanted but he doesn’t.
He says, “You should call her back.”

Ken says he thinks there’s cake in the kitchen and he leaves me in the office alone so I can call Jancy. Elton John follows Ken out the door and they’re not gone a minute when Esmeralda starts tapping her cane against the front doors.

I dial Jancy’s number and think about how my father loves cake, really it was the frosting that he loved, and if you left him alone in the kitchen he’d take all the frosting off one slice of cake and spread it onto another slice, and he’d eat the double-frosting slice and leave the sad looking piece without frosting for someone else. On one of my sister’s birthdays I remember scolding him and telling him, “Look, who’s going to want to eat that ghetto piece of cake?” He took his fork and gathered all the frosting from one of the other remaining pieces of cake and he spread the frosting onto the previously barren slice that I’d called “ghetto.” He looked at me and said, “Gentrification.”
Jancy answers on the first ring with her swan’s voice. She’s a heavy young woman with a pretty face and a aunt-like demeanor. I like Jancy fine, though I only see her at regional trainings: it’s mandatory for VISTA Leaders to attend twice each year. I met Jancy at my first training, my first year as a VISTA, and I remember they fed us heartily, three fancy buffets a day, all you can eat at the Regency Hotel in downtown Indianapolis, and on the final day just before we boarded the airport shuttles, we were all issued box lunches. Someone made a joke: “AmeriCorps feeds you idealism in bulk, and then you get the tuna on white bread.” Jancy happened to be standing nearby, and she said, “You weren’t supposed to figure that out until your end of service.” She was holding the same box lunch we were.

Jancy tells me over the phone that she can’t wait around for ever, I need to accept her job offer or she’ll have to move on down her list.

“How long do I have?” I ask and she says, “Two weeks Friday.”

Jancy says, “I’m pulling for you. But I have people to answer to and we need a rep in this position sooner than later. I’m out of time outs here.”

I tell her I understand and I thank her and I’ll give her my answer in two weeks and I thank her again and hang up the phone.

The envelope for the Exit Narrative is sitting on my desk and I think about how I should be writing the damn thing: my bible on how to survive 365 days in the trenches. Something for the next guy to go off of, like a coach
passing his playbook to the assistant coach when the coach gets ejected from the game. There’s movement in the hallway and Ken comes back with his tower of cookies. I stare at the meal logs and my eyes feel dried out, like wooden oars left in the sun too long. (An image of my grandfather, sleeping on a stone wall.) I leave the office when Ken returns and I go to the bathroom and wash my face and when I come back I open the door for Esmeralda and give her a good clearance, backing into the corner where the leaves of the fern tree drape over my shoulder, and as Esmeralda drags her long cane down the hallway and the wind comes and goes with its frigid trickery and I go back into the office and sit at the desk, and I look again at the meal logs for Thanksgiving and Christmas. And bam. Bam - there. Catching my eye like a cluck of air in a glaucoma test: the name I should have seen before pops out at me, a name that appears in both entries near the bottom of each page. It’s a name I seldom see in our logs, the handwriting is easy to distinguish with its large lowercase letters written largely so they take up two double-spaced lines. I feel chills in my legs and the tendon in my knee begins to pull and I know it can’t be coincidence that this name shows up on the same two days that Marlow(e)’s name appears in the log.

The name was Nick’s. Ranger Nick. Patron Saint of The Ritz.
There was this trick of the eye Hamilton used to use as an analogy, every one of his students has seen it a dozen times. What he’d do is draw a circle on a sheet of paper and hold it up for the class and ask, “What do you see?” A circle, of course. Then he’d tilt the sheet of paper, holding it at a 45 degree angle in front of his students and ask, “What do you see now? An ellipsis, an oval, a shape with implied distance. One day Hamilton was late for a graduate seminar and in his absence I drew three periods on a sheet of paper – “…” – and asked my peers, “what do you see?” I had to explain that the word for three periods in a row, grammatically speaking, is also ellipses. Someone said, “That’s funny.”
From the parking lot of Los Tacos I can see the Motel Six and beyond the edge of the adjacent parking lot of an old industrial plant there’s a homeless camp in the woods near a bend in a small tributary of the river. I hear semi trucks on the highway south of here, probably the only vehicles on the road in this weather, out on their routes the minute the travel ban was lifted. I think about Amanda driving east tonight trying to make it in time for my party. I imagine myself flying down I-80 in the other direction, as far as the gas in my shit-bird Saab will take me if it wasn’t parked like a stone in my driveway with its flat tire. I think about Amanda trying to call me on the phone after the deal is done tomorrow at noon and I feel a pain in my stomach, like I’ve swallowed something metal that won’t pass through me, at the thought of my phone just ringing and ringing and me in my car with my few possessions boxed in the rear seat and the answering machine with all its tangled cords on the passenger seat. It’s the feeling I got the last time I saw my mother in the hospital, plugged into all those machines that were saving her in ways I could not.

Beyond the parking lot, over where the interstate bisects the city, the city itself looks empty, the buildings downtown stacked alongside one another like the lofted beds at the shelter. The snow on the ground everywhere is soft and clean looking, like the linens the janitor and his wife are laying on the cots about now, mid-afternoon, at the far southern end of the city limits. And further south, down by the river where Marlow was found, there’s
a fire going in the center of the Ritz and Nick and his crew are gathering
wood or divvying food or some maybe are still in the city looking for easy
resources, loose and free items, usable junk forgotten by the side of the
road or buried in dumpsters. The kitchen vents at Los Tacos pump hot air
horizontally out the back of the building and you can stand in front of them
and warm yourself when its cold like this. Amanda and I made out for the
first time in the alley behind Peeple’s Pub under the vents of the laundry
service and the hot dry air that engulfed us reminded me of the heaters the
Iowa State football team donated for Reggie’s SleepOut, and the smell of
fabric softener brought me back to the fresh laundry my mother used to fold
and lay on top of me when I was small enough to fit inside one of her plastic
laundry baskets. My mother liked lavender and rose and grew them in her
garden on the side of our house. Amanda’s mouth tasted like peppermint that
night, her breath like blue Curacao and her hands were so cold no matter how
hard I held them.

I sit in the van and smell the food Tina’s grandmother gave me on the
house and in the back there’s Ken’s steak and the two slices of pineapple
upside down cake, which is served hot and not as exciting cold, but cold is
all I’ve got. I don’t see any movement save for the wind in the trees and I
can’t hear the trees bare knobby elbowing above the urgency of the van’s
engine. I put the van in gear and let it take me forward slowly toward the
site of a homeless camp where I stop at the curb and put the van in park and
step out onto the unplowed lot and hang the Lose Tacos bag of food on a tree
branch where someone would see it. There’s not much activity here in the
winter, not like the Ritz burning the midnight oil all year long. We call
this camp the Barrio, on account of its being near Los Tacos. You’d never
know the camp was there, not from the street, not even from the parking lot
where I’m standing. The camp sounds empty. I don’t see any footprints other
than my own, and the van tracks behind me leading away from Los Tacos. In
the summertime inside these woods there’s a small community, with a wash area, a camp shower with a five gallon bladder hung from a tree, couches, walls made out of plywood and tent fabric, a real toilet, made of porcelain, and a door to the bathroom secured with a jump rope, broken rotting furniture. There could be a lending library and I wouldn’t be surprised. A sleeping camper, covers made of sled and tarp and old car parts, sheeting materials. In the summer miniature soaps and canned food lining shelves in the camper. A fold out table where I once saw a knife stuck into the side of an apple, like a warning. No one was home that first time Ken brought me here. No one is home today. No one has been here in a while it looks like, I don’t think anyone will come for the food today, it might go to waste or get eaten by raccoons, the mole and the smells the only scents of life around this place. I walk out of the camp and take the bag off the tree and stand by the van.

An airplane flies low overhead, avoiding the clouds, heading on a southwestern approach to the airport through the flurries, five miles south of the city. There was a day last year when Google maps led me and Amanda to the far side of a cornfield, outside the gates of the Des Moines Airport, nowhere near the entrance. I knew the way to the airport, I’d volunteered to drive people before, other VISTAs, people from the shelter, graduate students back when I was living in Ames. I know the way to the airport by heart. But Amanda – who was flying to Key West for a conference for her graduate program – she was adamant that we use the printed directions. At the end of the directions, at the place marked “arrival,” was a chain link fence that looked out across long flat fields and longer flat gray runways. The airport was there, half a mile in the distance, at the far end of an airstrip. Amanda called it a fluke, a computer glitch. I told her it was a sign that she shouldn’t fly. I never liked to fly, wheels were good enough for me and so important to people like Daveed and his family’s livelihood, or to the men in
the shelter who need to get to work, or to DHS, or to pick up their kids from
school. Maybe I should have studied the wheel, the history of it, written
term papers and exam lists all revolving around the horse and buggy, the ox
cart, the Michelin baby. Ball bearings. When I was a kid first learning
about myth at school, I remember my father looking over my shoulder at one of
my textbooks and telling me that Icarus fell so men like him would build
better wings.
I pull into the shelter parking lot around 3 pm and see a few men huddling around the bike rack smoking cigarettes in the cold, alternating hands in their pockets, one hand on the cigarette a few puffs and then they switch, almost in sync like some Broadway act, and put the other hand in the other pocket to get warm. It’s the kind of blustery cold weather where everyone looks down at their shoes. Men huddling like nomads, their grouped exhalations like the hot disappearing breath of the deer that sometimes graze across the road south of the shelter, licking rye seeds out of frozen pasture. The homeless men standing outside the shelter always seem to be smoking. I think about how in the old days people had to carry fire with them on the move. Cigarettes are little fires I suppose, like the way the hot americanos warm my stomach, like long johns for your internal organs.

The parking lot is sinking slowly, there are these small depressions here and there, you couldn’t run a marble straight across without losing it to some labyrinthine curve. One day all of this will be underground. It’s why they sold the bank across the way, though the bank got out of its contract. The shelter has nowhere to go for free and not enough manpower to argue the case. Can’t just pick up and move to a farm like a dog kennel or a band of beatniks. No going to live near a bing-bang cove the way Kerouac did in Big Sur. I kill the engine of the van in the parking lot using the screwdriver and I store the screwdriver in the glove box. I fill out the mile log and put that in the glove box on top of the screwdriver and close it
and by the time I open the door, the heat inside the van has already escaped through holes and cracks, poor insulation. It’s easier to breathe, but my knee buckles a bit when I climb out of the van and close the door with its familiar whimper.

Before I reach the shelter door, Charlie exits the building and we come face to face on the sidewalk.

“You’re coming, I’m going,” he says, motioning with his hands like he’s police directing traffic. He’s bundled from head to toe in warm weather gear. He looks like he could climb a mountain. He’s so well bundled, and at the sight of him I remember the bags I left in the van: the take-out. A hawk in the distance swoops low to the ground over a snowy field south of Clinton Ave, then veers at an angle away from the shelter toward a row of trees into which it disappears. I think I hear Elton John barking inside the shelter but it might be my imagination. Ken says the dog can smell the old shit box of a van when it pulls into the lot. I’m sure he can hear the sound of it. My father’s father had an old beagle and my father swore the hound would get up off its mat in the den and start scratching at the door a full minute before my grandfather came home from work. He said it didn’t matter what time my grandfather came home. (An insurance salesman keeps varied hours.) The dog could hear or otherwise sense the engine that belonged to its master.

I ask Charlie, “Where are you heading?”

“Youth Shelter.”

I can see that on our office window Ken has scraped GO HAWKEYES into the ice, it’s hardly visible but it’s there – it’s also spelled backward, from my perspective, Ken hadn’t thought that far ahead, or he did and he didn’t care. I could just as easily go inside and waste the rest of day playing song games with Ken, but I find myself asking Charlie for a lift.

“Tag along,” he says.
I follow Charlie to his car and my limp is showing, the stubborn gears of the van are hard on my leg, especially in this cold. From where Charlie has parked I can see around the corner of the shelter to where the abandoned playground sits. I have this memory of a boy from when my family lived on the base in New Hampshire, a boy a few years older than me who jumped off a swing set on a dare and skinned his arm so badly the medics took him away I don’t remember his name but I remember how bright his blood was, and how much of it seemed to leak out of him. My knee buckles near Charlie’s car and I lean on the trunk.

“You all right there, soldier?” he asks.
On Charlie’s fender is a bumper sticker of a cartoon figure sitting in Lotus position, the caption: BUDDHA ON BOARD. Another sticker says, "THIS VEHICLE MAKES SUDDEN STOPS FOR CHAKRA REALIGNMENT."
Ken has a bumper sticker on his car that reads:

FAT MAN WITH A LITTLE DOG.
“Collateral damage,” I tell Charlie, rubbing my knee.

“A hitch in your giddy-up,” says Charlie and I say, “Maybe I’ll lay up in bed for a year and read all of western philosophy.”


I glance at Charlie’s purple coat and his wool hat with Elmer Fudd earflaps.

“Normal being relative,” I say.
Charlie and I load ourselves into his car and he starts the engine on the first try. Pachelbel’s Canon is playing on the stereo, Charlie is a fan of George Winston, and I think about a guy from college – everyone called him Sketchy Ben, even though he was the only Ben we knew – we were in the same dorm freshman year, and I remember him telling me once that he wanted to hear Pachelbel’s Canon playing when he died. Or was it Ode to Joy.

Charlie drives passed the huddled, smoking men and comes to a stop at Clinton Ave. There are no other cars in the distance.

“Hey Charlie,” I say, and Charlie says: “I’ll take Soviet History for one thousand.”
I say, “Do you know when the mechanical pencil was invented?”

Charlie doesn’t take the right hand turn at a hard enough angle and his Dodge Omni’s blinker fails to turn off on its own.

“Yes I do,” says Charlie, making a karate chopping motion to depress the plastic mechanical arm. “After the regular pencil was invented.”
Tony bought the outreach van ten years ago at city auction. The van had been abandoned in the Jordan Creek parking lot, before the mall had been completed. The VIN number had been torched off. It’s a Plymouth Voyager, manufactured between 1980-1989, but that’s about all we know of its origins. It had Minnesota plates when the construction crew found it, but the plates were fake. Ken and Daveed have been working on the van ever since, and almost everything has been replaced at least once, every part, except the chassis, the rear sliding door, and the roof. There’s a game Ken and I play in the Outreach Van when we’re driving around. It’s like the game “I See Something” but instead of “something” what we look for are places where a homeless man might sleep outside. I see a heating vent, I see an ATM lobby without a security camera panning the foyer floor, I see an abandoned car. Ken taught me how to look for things normal people wouldn’t notice: hidden, out of the wind, spots near food and water sources, nooks and crannies and man-sized holes hidden in the city’s landscape. There’s space enough everywhere if you know what to look for and how to fit inside.
The night I met Amanda at Mars Café, the night we found the church where my father’s boyhood home had been, I drove back to Ames like normal. I stopped at a red light at the train crossing on the corner of Duff and Main Street like I’d stopped a hundred times before. There are four main crossings in the city, and each is equipped with a large metal box and a horn that amplifies the sound of a fake train whistle when real trains approach. That night I sat in my car and listened to the fake train sound and waited for the train to appear and as I was waiting I thought about the church and my father and my sister and Amanda, and after the train had passed and the mechanical arms raised above the tracks and the light turned green, I drove home and sat at my kitchen island and drafted a letter of withdrawal from the history of technology and science program. I put the letter in a drawer of my desk and waited a couple of weeks and took it out and read it and put it away again.
I spent the holidays alone.
In the new year, half-way through the spring semester, I removed the letter from my desk drawer and drove with it to campus. I parked in the parking garage and walked across the quadrangle toward the Humanities building like I’d done countless times before and took the familiar elevator to the 7th floor, knocked on Hamilton’s office, which was closed, though I knew he was in, it was his office hours that morning, he kept his doors closed to keep the “hoi polloi” away, knowing the serious or truly needy would knock, and he told me the door was open and I went inside and closed the door behind and sat down in a hardback chair across from his desk. I did not preface my remarks with anything grandiose, no prolepsis, I just said what needed to be said.

“I’m afraid I’m quitting the program.”

Hamilton did not stir in his seat, he just considered what I’d said with a slow nodding of his head as though I had asked him a question about the water wheel. His hands rested heavily on his lap in his typical pose of contemplation.

He said, “Are you planning to dump the baby out with the bathwater?”

I was on fellowship that semester, I did not have teaching responsibilities, and I did not feel like I was abandoning any duties other than those in service of my own work and my progress toward passing my qualifying examinations.
“What I mean,” Hamilton clarified, “Is are burning all your bridges here, or might you want to keep ajar the door of return?”

If he were one of my students I might comment on the mixing of his metaphors. On the last day of the last class I taught, end of the previous summer, I gave an impassioned lecture about how Vergil wrote the Georgics and the Eclogues to the rhythm of his heart. Vergil wrote while he walked – literally composing foot by foot, metrical and anatomical. He’d walk all over, circumambulating the hillsides of the Roman countryside until he’d written one perfect line of dactylic hexameter. One line a day, that was his method. Like Rome itself, Vergil’s poems weren’t built in a week. It took him twelve years to write the Aeneid.


It had become clear to me in the weeks since meeting Amanda that I could no longer deny myself the satisfaction of self-loathing that accompanied my knowledge of the fact that the grieving I had done for my mother and the love that I had for my sister was nothing but an intellectual experience. Like a dollar sign in lieu of hard cash or an IOU slip that never came due. What I needed to do was feel something, and I knew I could not do it with my head buried in the past. My heart was a stone that needed grinding, and AmeriCorps – working the trenches, devoting myself to a calling lower than my own – this was the way that I could bleed like Agamemnon. I had already applied for a position at the shelter and been granted an interview, with Tony, and I was resolved that my stint in history was behind me now and the homeless shelter in Des Moines would be the next venue, the stage, the fields in which I would build, foot by foot, a legacy toward service: forget fire, forget home.

Through the window of Hamilton’s office I watched a squirrel get chased off a high branch of a sycamore tree by a blue jay. Hamilton sat still with
his big hands over his belly and asked me how I planned to spend my time, if not in pursuit of history.

“Government work,” I said. “Nonprofit.”

The sunlight shone in behind Hamilton, through the window, so bright that the fringes of Hamilton’s beard glowed like wild fire.

“Government work,” Hamilton said, shutting his eyes and tilting his head back as if were about to nod off during seminar. “You know,” he said, “it was Descartes decision to tutor the queen” – he opened a side drawer of his desk, depositing my letter inside – “that ended up killing him.”
Nine months out of the year you’d see all these bicycles chained to the rack in front of the shelter. Most of the men ride transit, on vouchers if they have them, or they hitch or they walk. A bike is a luxury for the homeless. The VISTA leader before me road his bike to work every day. It wasn’t to prove a point, he just couldn’t afford a car on our AmeriCorps stipend. Nine thousand a year for a volunteer, and a couple thousand more if you’re a leader. When he finished his service and took a job in Minneapolis, working for a mayoral campaign, he finally bought a car. On the day before he drove to Minnesota, he left his bike on the rack at the shelter - unchained - thinking it could be a communal bike for the men share, a loaner. “Like the shopping carts at ALDI,” he said, “Only you don’t need a quarter.” He made a big announcement at lunch and put a sign on the bike like one of those NEED A PENNY TAKE A PENNY signs you see on counters in gas stations. He left feeling good about himself and when I showed up for work the very next morning, the bike was gone. The guy would call the shelter from time to time after he left to see how things were running without him. I never told him about the bike.
DEADLINES
Something happened earlier this morning on my way to work. A man started up a conversation with me on the bus. He was in a wheelchair and he had a dog with him. He was already on the bus when I got on. The man got off at the same stop as me, at Donovan and Quayle about a half mile north of the shelter. There’s no stop that goes the whole way to the shelter, which is one of the reasons Tony wants to get the new land and build near the Greyhound station, nearer to downtown where city services, and bus stops, are. Tony wants to take out ads on the buses but we can’t afford it. On the inside of the bus there’s an ad for new shops at Jordan Creek Mall. And another one for a new health clinic: an image of a black doctor shaking hands with an asian father, two small asian children and caucasian wife. There’s an ad for Howie’s with a picture of a gondola on it, and no matter how long I stare, I can’t figure out why.

The disabled man on the bus asked me to hold his dog’s leash while he lowered on the bus’s hydraulic lift. “He won’t bite. You’re ok.”

The bus driver’s name is Navahl, I’ve had him on this route for a little more than a year now. I like taking the bus, I like to sit and ride, I like to be driven. It reminds me of the bus rides when I was a kid, the long route through the hills down to school where you could just ride and let your mind drift, dreaming. Navahl is Pakistani, a business student at Drake University. His mother owns a small jewelry and fabrics shop east of the capital. The lift lowers more quickly than I’d anticipated. I’m distracted,
staring through the window to the street on the other side of the bus, where an empty storefront had a listing “Your Next Best Investment” and a phone number. The man calls to me three feet below, “Hey Brother, you’re leaving me hanging’ here.”

Navahl glares at the old man as I step down and help him wheel from the bus to the curb, careful not to get the dogs leash tangled in the wheelchair.

“Grassy-ass,” said the man and I said, “de nada.”

I hand the man his dog’s leash as the bus pulls away. The man lets the leash drop to the ground. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket.

“Nice dog,” I said.

“I own a Doberman, too. And two pit bulls.”

“Beautiful dogs.”

“They are,” said the man, tapping his palm against his breast pockets until he found his lighter. “Until the niggers get a hold of em.”

There was a time when I would have said something, when I’d believed that saying something might make a difference. But I’ve grown tired, and today I just look at the man with his wide nostrils and well-manicured mustache, a man as lean and muscular as his pit bull. I wonder what Ken would do, maybe turn around and take the man and his chinos and his stocking cap and push him into the street. I wonder what the old man’s dog would do if I took his owner by the neck. I think, Amanda would have said something. My mother would have said something.

The man lit his cigarette. He registered my silence, picking up on my silent dismissal. His chest lifted, he thumbed the underside of one of his nostrils, and as he looked away from me his eyes grew cold.

“Fuck you, too,” he said and rolled his wheelchair down Donovan Street, whistling for his dog to follow.
Around 2pm on the afternoon of the day I found Nick’s name alongside Marlow(e) in the meal log, Ken and I took the outreach van for our weekly run to the camps. Most of the camps are closed for the season like the one behind Los Tacos but we drive there anywhere, and we always know we’ll get some business at the Ritz: a year-round, all-season camp. Elton John stands crow-legged in the back seat, trying to keep his footing as Ken swerved down the road. A gust of wind threw snow from the hood onto the windshield in a clump and Ken cursed and clicked the wipers on but they were frozen.

“Damn windshield,” Ken said in the same tone of voice he uses if Elton John won’t let go of a fallen chicken bone or screw or other no-no scrap.

“I’ll get the whip,” I said, reaching into the backseat for the long blue plastic ice scraper. “Time to give this hunk of metal thirty lashings.”

Elton John got a hold of the end of the scraper and I had to shake him loose. He barked and tried to scramble over my armrest into my lap, but I kept him at bay with my right elbow and I rolled down my window and cleared off my side of the windshield, leaning out the window as Ken drove. Beth’s parents run an animal shelter down in Colona, now that they’re retired, and it was there they found Elton John. They run a dairy farm, too, with jersey cows, nonhomogenized milk, vat pasteurized, just a portion of the business of the farm they ran in their prime. You can buy raw milk from them if they trust you. Ken says raw milk can get you high, it’s got so much nutrients in it. He said he had a vision once after he drank a whole quart of raw milk
from a cow that had just given birth, he dreamed all the homeless men in the shelter dove into a vat of raw milk and caused such a ruckus the milk turned to butter. I said, “I’ve heard of government cheese before” and trailed off.

In the van, Ken said, “How’s wiping your side help me see the road?”

“Ain’t it lonely out in space.”

Ken gave me a sidelong glare and I said, “Come on, Ace. No one’s better at flying through the danger zone than you.”

“I’ll give you thirty lashings,” Ken said, adding: “Mr. Loggins.”
When we’re out on a run we call it patrol, or sometimes fishing. I think of it as searching in the archives, but I don’t tell anyone that. Amanda likes it when I call it “reconnaissance,” because it reminds her of the night we officially met when she helped me find my father’s missing house. Or rather, not find it. On outreach runs Ken and I keep our eye out for tell-tale signs of homelessness. You learn how to spot prostitutes, wanderers, teens playing a different kind of hooky, street people and the unemployed out in public pretending they’re like everyone else. Sometimes we go to the woods like we’re doing today and we always bring socks. When we can we bring food and condoms. The men are more likely to welcome you if you bring matches.
Ken wanted to stop at Culver’s first, out of our way. At a street light we stop behind a bus that has a sign on the back that reads HAVE YOU BEEN INJURED IN A PUBLIC TRANSIT ACCIDENT? and an 800 number to call for a local lawyer. Ken shook his head, raising one hand in disbelief.

“IT’S on the side of the bus,” he said.
There was a scuttling sound from inside the dash, maybe mice, and as the light turned green Ken pounded the dash above the radio so hard the cigarette lighter popped out of its socket and fell to the floor between my feet. The radio that had been busted for months came on, momentarily, and died out again seconds later. Ken looked at me.

I said, “Caveman mechanics.”

Some people think Ken’s retarded and they give him special treatment. At the Culver’s drive-thru they had a hard time understanding Ken’s thick, slow voice over the intercom and he had to pull into a parking space and wait for an attendant wearing what looked like a white lab coat and a white paper hat, like a sailor’s, to come out and take his order by hand. They brought Ken an extra French fry and a cup of soft serve for the dog. Ken handed me the extra french fry container and I put it between my legs and I set the ice cream dish on the floor of the back seat for Elton John to make a mess of. Ken took the plastic lid off of his soda – he doesn’t like straws, it’s something to do with his nerves – and he took a long sip before putting the van in gear and letting out a roaring fart. At that moment directly behind us a snow plow came flying around the corner of the restaurant and shoveled a load of snow against a large industrial-sized metal trash container, knocking the trash bin end over end with a loud crash. Ken looked at me.

“That wasn’t you,” I said.
When we were out of the city and Ken was done with his first double cheeseburger he looked over at me and the fries on my lap and he cleared his throat and said, “Eat.”

“Not hungry.”

Ken spilled some of his soda as he tried to get it out of the cup holder between us. He gave up on the cup and licked the soda off his fingers.

“There’s a word for what you are,” he said and I said, “A slow burner?”

Ken took his second double cheeseburger out of the bag and took an enormous bite, chewing for a few seconds before responding.

“A non-opportunist,” he said.

Ken reached over grabbing a handful of French fries from my lap, putting them halfway into his mouth and biting down then reaching over his shoulder to offer Elton John the severed ends. Elton John snatched them out of Ken’s hands and wolfed them down. The snow was too high on the path along the dyke to leap the curb and bring the van all the way to the camp, to The Ritz, so about a quarter mile down the access road, near Esmeralda’s dwelling, Ken put the van in park and we hoofed it on foot while Elton John guarded the van from inside. I saw footprints in the snow leading to Esmeralda’s hut, and I knew it was her tracks because of the dotted line on her right side where she places her bull dong cane. It’s her private punctuation, a tell-tale sign:
Foot foot dot. Foot foot dot. Foot foot dot.

Ken and I trekked in the other direction away from Esmeralda’s tracks up a short hill to the river dyke. There were other sets of footprints in the snow and I did my best to step in them. Ken just lumbered forward, he wasn’t wearing gloves or a coat, just his Reggie’s SleepOut baseball cap and holding his drink in his hands. I hung a few steps back and started putting my feet where Ken’s feet had been, the holes were wider, longer, and it made for easier walking. To my left from the dyke were the woods, and in the distance, beyond an escarpment of evergreen trees, was the river rolling north toward the city. Ahead was where they found Marlow’s body. There was no sign anymore of there ever having been a crime there - or an accident. In the middle of the river the water was dark and brown and on the far bank a pebbled shore, then some trees, and past that fifty yards or so, a fence, and beyond the fence a stretch of land that in the summer is light brown, yellow mustard grass, weeds, and beyond that stretch, which was all white then in the late-clutches of winter, was the Cross City Highway. No one was out on the dyke that day save for us. I made my way down to the riverside and Ken hung back, sipping from his soda and looking into the distance toward the city.

Birds stirred in the sky like the magnet Scrabble letters Amanda gave me for my refrigerator and a wicked wind swirled over the water and reached into my beard and collar and cuffs. Cold. I squinted at the water gently lapping over the edge of the ice and I remembered the day Mayberry kicked the black man in the river over near my neighborhood. I was on a ride-along with him that day, a year ago, before he and I started drifting apart. We got the call about a perp on the loose, potentially armed, and then we spotted him running between two houses. Mayberry told me to stay like a dog and I did, sitting in the squad car watching him sprint and cut like he was on a post route pattern. Commotion by the river drew me from the car and I made it to
the river’s edge in time to see Mayberry leaps in the air as if going for a pass and he tackled the poor black man right into the frigid water. Mayberry wrangled him up and cuffed him, and then in front of everybody when he had him back on the shore he said, “Fucker makes me swim in February” and he reeled back and kicked the guy in the chest. The man fell on Mayberry who was on top of the man now and when they pulled the two men up steam was flying off their hot bodies and mixing in the air over the group’s shoulders like a common shroud. Mayberry saw me watching and later when he was turned in for excessive force – his third, the one that got him suspended without pay and held back a full year for promotion – I knew he figured it was me and my “liberal brainwash bullshit.” I let him think it was me because there was another witness that day, a girl who was with the black man, no one saw her but me as she stood in the bushes behind one of the houses watching what went down.

The girl was Alice.
I waited a minute more down by the water thinking maybe something will come to me, an idea or an answer, but nothing does. There was Newton, sure, and his apple, and the crab-apple trees that lined the road across our old house in Vestal. And everything I didn’t know and all that I did. I looked across the river and saw no rising hump of a mysterious whale, no whiteness other than my memory of Marlow’s backside lying in the dirty snow at the river’s edge, waiting to be analyzed, boxed in plywood-thin pine, and burned on the city’s dime. I looked across the water and saw only the wind’s hand raking the water in my direction, and behind me I heard the sound of Ken cracking ice chips between his front teeth. You learn to sense the length of a man’s patience like a timing belt in a car. I knew Ken was getting close to enough and I didn’t want to hear his voice calling me away before I was ready. So I went on my own, like Marlow did: only difference was I chose to step away from the river.
I thumbed the pack of matches in my pockets and Ken said, “Head back?” and I said, “Nothing’s biting” and we headed toward the car. About half way along the dyke I saw movement ahead of us. A dark figure was on the dyke about football field away. The figure was moving away from us, toward where the van was parked. Ken and I kept walking, me behind him, and from time to time at the edge of the woods I’d see a squirrel or a bird, no deer, though there were tracks nearby. Somewhere in those woods was the homeless camp we call The Ritz, where the die-hard homeless men live, men who would rather brave death in the cold facing the elements than rely on other men for more than just an occasional meal or a pair of new socks. The guy we nicknamed Ranger Nick — he was a Ranger, for real, in the Army, so the story goes — he’s the boss of the camp, the honcho, the guy who started living out here in the first place, the guy the others follow. Ranger Nick is a vet, of the first Gulf War. Nick has a shotgun that he uses to hunt, and an axe he uses for firewood. No one I know has ever seen the shotgun or ax, not even Ken, whose the only guy ever to be allowed in the camp, but we believe he’s got the gun and ax because how else could a man survive out here alone, and for so long? Ranger Nick has been around since Tony took over the shelter. He’ll come around from time to time to eat, but rarely, which is why I know it wasn’t just a fluke that his name appeared on the logs with Marlow(e)’s. Nick has been arrested a number of times but every time he gets released from prison, he returns to the woods.
When we reached the van we saw a man standing at the rear of it, looking through the little bubble window on the bottom of the rear door inside which Elton John was yap yap yapping away. Daveed installed that door upside down, it just took some make-shifting, so Elton John would have a little eye-level look-out. When the man heard us approaching he turned his back on Elton John and stepped away from the van.

“I’m not fucking with your dog or nothing,” he said.

“Didn’t think you were,” said Ken.

The man scratched at his nose and his shoulders twitched. He was concealing something in the pocket of a dirty and faded jean coat, with a black hoodie underneath.

“You cops?” he asked, and looked us over with aluminum eyes.
He said his name was Jimmy. He accepted a pair of socks from Ken, a pack of matches from me, and when he was satisfied we weren’t police he pulled a tall boy out of his coat pocket and proceeded to nurse it as we stood there getting acquainted. Jimmy’s story involved the war and a mother who couldn’t take his sadness anymore and some time in the clink, and I knew Ken would feel for him and when Ken talked to other vets I just stayed quiet, listened, putting my hands in and out of my pockets. Jimmy showed us his war tattoo and the one he got in prison, a crude rendering of Disney’s Goofy character done by a guitar string and ink from a blue Bic pen. Jimmy’s eyes didn’t match up exactly with his gaze, it was hard to tell where he was looking, like he was following a target that kept moving around six inches in front of his face.
“What prison were you in?” I asked Jimmy, trying not to sound too eager in front of Ken, which was unnecessary, since I hadn’t told Ken about the book from Fort Dodge. Still I felt Ken would know something was up, you don’t spend three years pinned together in an office the size of a shoebox without knowing something about the mood and intentions of the other shoe.


I looked into the distance toward the woods while Jimmy worried the pair of socks between his hands until the one sock had pulled loose from the other. Seeing what he’d done, Jimmy draped one sock over his shoulder and put his hand inside the other. A woodpecker sounded in the treetops somewhere. Knock knock knocking on hard hollow wood. I thought Jimmy might give us a puppet show but he just pushed the sock back right side out and removed his hand and draped it over his shoulder on top of the other sock.

Ken took the last slug from his soda cup and spat out the ice.

“I give you a second pair,” Ken said. “You make sure it gets to someone?”

I said, “A lot of guys out here got feet need taking care of.”

“I hear you, Skipper,” said Jimmy. He looked at Ken’s neck, his scar, the tattoo from the Corps on his bare upper arm.

“You see much action?” Jimmy asked.

“Not lately,” Ken said.
Jimmy told us he was discharged from the war in Iraq, but that was all. Ken went into the van and got a second pair of socks and the extra container of french fries and gave them to Jimmy, then Ken got in the van again and pulled the door shut. Elton John kept yapping at us through the little window in back, but his bark was drowned out by the sound of the accelerating engine. Jimmy put his hand inside one of the second pair of socks.

“You make puppets when you were a kid?” I say. “Like in school?”

Jimmy thought about it. “Of course I did. Sure I did.”

“What kind of puppet did you make?”

Jimmy gazed indifferently at something deep within the fabric of the sock, or maybe he looked deeply at something that wasn’t there.

“A rabbit?” he said.
I asked Jimmy if he played ball back in school and he said, “O-line.”

We stepped to the side of the road and we watched as Ken slipped and spun and maneuvered the van into a 7 point turn. A strong wind blew through a sycamore tree overhead and a branch broke free in the upper crown but failed to fall off completely. I turned to Jimmy and asked him what he knew about the guy they found in the river. Jimmy had a good six inches on me, a thick chest that pushed against his undershirt between the zippers of his coat like the stuffing of the van’s seats. I asked him if he’d heard anything through the grapevine, or in the woods, or on the streets or in the camp. I asked him flat out if he’d heard any chatter about a murder. I watched his eyes move about in their sockets like goldfish in paper cups.

“Shit,” said Jimmy. “Come with me to Afghanistan. I’ll show you.”
When the van was past us and Elton John was throwing silent barks at the little rear window, I reached into my pocket and gave Jimmy the five dollar bill Rico gave me yesterday at Los Tacos. “My man,” said Jimmy, closing his fist on the money and bumping my own fist in appreciation, rock against rock. I climbed inside the van and closed the door and Ken pulled away, the rear wheels slipping side to side and the rear end orbiting slightly in a ten degree arc, back and forth, and when the rear swung close to Jimmy he gave us a good lower-body push like a lineman hitting the pads. In the rear view mirror I watched him watching us drive off, his second pair of socks undone now and draped over the shoulder so he looked like some kind of Nike sponsored Rabbi. As we drove away I thought about what Elton John must have looked like to him, like a dream of a thing: a tiny spaceman pantomiming bark after bark behind the small round window of the van’s receding rear door.
For years I’d wake up with my mother’s voice in my head. Later, that voice became my sister’s. Then Hamilton’s. Amanda’s. Marlow(e)’s if he had one. This time the voice belongs to Charlie.

“Hey, Quiz Show,” he’s saying. “We’re here.”

I open my eyes and find that the car is stopped, Charlie has pulled into a space on the street in front of the Youth Shelter. I must have drifted off.

“Damn,” I say.

“You went out like a light,” says Charlie.

“Did I snore?”

“No.”

“I’ve been told that I snore.”

“You did sing Paul Anka’s greatest hits. But no snoring.”

“Good,” I say, opening the car door. “I wouldn’t want to have embarrassed myself.”

Charlie calls me quiz show because of Charles Van Doren. I read an article in which Van Doren said he’d retired to a small country house on his parents’ property in rural New England. In college I kept a copy of A History of Knowledge by my bedside table. Charlie keeps a copy of Shunryo Suzuki’s Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind in his car. On our way up the shelter’s outside staircase, Charlie asks me if I’m planning to shave my beard or my hair anytime soon. I ask him if he’s planning to stop shaving the part of
his head where other people have male pattern baldness. He pats me on the back, then pretends to try and shove me off the walkway into the snow in the yard. I imagine what other people might see passing by, or someone from a window of a house on the street. A clean-shaven older man and his younger, twiggish companion with a head of weeds. They might presume we’re father and son.
I don’t like visiting the youth shelter. If the downtown shelter is a circus – and it is – the youth shelter is a side act, a carnival, a private tent unpublicized but well frequented. For obvious purposes, like with the women’s shelters, the addresses are not on public record. But that’s not why I don’t like coming here. There are fewer, and younger, residents. The stakes are raised, like in a game of poker when the less chips you have the more valuable they become. With teaching I felt the same way, in a class of 20 everything seemed more essential, but in the lecture halls of 300 students, I felt less pressure. I was less of a recognizable face the more of a crowd there was. I couldn’t blend in but I did not have to lead so close: I could lead at a distance like a politician or train engine or a sign on a highway. There are always posters and fliers on the community board in the youth center, something is always being promoted. At Mars Café there are fliers for concerts and free xylophone lessons and pictures of missing dogs. At the youth center the bulletin board is filled with job opportunities and DHS services information sessions and community college and degree certificates. And the occasional signs for missing persons.

Charlie rings the bell outside the entrance I wait beside him.

“Let’s say I know someone,” says Charlie. “From my old days at the Register. Maybe there’s a staff position opening soon. Would you be interested?”

“Staffing what?”
“Editorials.”

I lean tentatively against the loose metal handrail on the porch.

“From flails to the thresher,” I say.

No one is coming to the door, so Charlie presses the ringer again. He inhales audibly and hums a measure from the Pirates of Penzance. Charlie and I alternate between blowing on our hands and rubbing them together in front of our chests. A loose trash bag blows down the center of the abandoned street.

“All good things,” I say, “ought flow into the boulevard, yeah?”

“You’re being smart again.”

“Pericles,” I say, and Charlie nods, saying, “Ah, the mayor of Athens.”

“Long time ago.”

“You’re telling me.”

We climb back down the steps and go to the lower entrance where I know, if we pound hard enough, my VISTAs will hear us from inside their basement office. I pound my fist ten times against the door and stand back.

“Do you know who Pyrrhus was?” I ask Charlie.

I can see someone coming inside, and I ask Charlie if he thinks it’s possible to lose every battle but still win a war.

“If you’re fighting the good fight,” says Charlie.
Hamilton warned his students each semester on the first day of class:

"Nostalgia is the death of invention."
Ken once told me being in a foxhole in the dead of night feels like salt. I didn’t understand, but I got what he was saying. Amanda’s wet hair in the mornings in the shower smells like rain on red brick.
A couple of weeks ago Charlie and I got in an argument. He was getting on my case about what my plan was for after I was done with AmeriCorps and I hadn’t slept in five days and I had Marlowe and Alice and my sister on my mind and I lost my head.

“You know,” I said angrily. “It took Vietnam to happen for a Buddhist monk to get up off his ass and do something.”


“Yeah. 400 years of begging for food and sitting and breathing and waiting. Then bombs went off and women and children died and somebody said, This wall is no longer interesting.”

“I don’t think that’s exactly how it happened.”

“Zen Buddhism, the ketchup of American Spiritualism,” I said. “Tell me, where’s the war? Here, in Des Moines. Why should I get up off the floor and take a job at the newspaper, or in corporate recruitment, or at the Democratic regional office? Why shouldn’t I just stay home?”

“Because of the end goal,” says Charlie.

“And what’s that? What’s the end goal? What’s it all supposed to amount to?”

Charlie says, “To become a citizen of the world.”

My response was cruel and rotten.

“I’d rather kill myself.”
I would’ve forgiven Charlie had he punched me in the face. All he did was tell me a joke:

“A guy goes to a therapist, says, Hey doc, two nights ago I had a dream I was a teepee, then last night I dreamed I was a wigwam. Therapist says, You need to relax. You’re too tense.”

Charlie’s wife killed herself ten years ago, after decades of manic depression finally wore her out. I should not have said what I said to him. I hadn’t felt that poorly since I blew up at my sister in the hospital within earshot of my mother’s room – when instead of hugging my sister, instead of holding on to her, pulling her close, I threw my coffee at the ground at her feet and burned her legs and I yelled, “Get your fucking act together.” I only went once more to the hospital after that, on my own, the night my mother told me to take care of my sister. I could never lie to my mother without her seeing the lie in my face, so I said nothing. She took my hand and she touched my cheek and said, “It’ll be harder on you.” It would take me seven years to understand and even then – now – only partially. Like a parable you roll over your tongue again and again and again but the words are too smooth, too carefully chosen, to discern any shape.
It’s Jessica who answers the basement door at the youth shelter. She’s a first year – first month – VISTA and she tells us the buzzer upstairs is broken and she asks us why we didn’t knock upstairs to get someone’s attention. Charlie looks at me with a grin on his face, and he tells Jessica, “We were rapt in good conversation.”

Charlie leaves me in the basement and goes upstairs to make his rounds. I follow Jessica into a side room in the basement to check on the rest of my VISTAS. These are my people: 4 poor souls relegated to the sub-floor offices of a rotting house. The Youth Shelter is a regular old house on a normal side street in a north west neighborhood of Des Moines, about a half mile east of the Hospital. There are about a dozen teenagers who live their, either runaways or foster kids or kids on the verge of being homeless. Each of them reminds me in some way of my sister and I do my best to avoid them. Alice was the exception.

In the basement office I find three of my subordinates huddled over desks, wearing their winter coats. My Vistas, my wards. Like K.’s assistants in The Castle only there’s three of them. There’s noise from music upstairs, the kids are playing Beastie Boys CDs. My VISTAs are working on computers built in the era of DOS. The VISTAs do a lot of what I do, subordinate work filling out expense reports. They’re supposed to be working on grants and finding new avenues of funding and outreach for the shelters, but there’s just not enough of those opportunities around. So if you’re a
VISTA you wind up, sooner or later, doing the grunt work of a normal employee. Technically that’s breach of contract, it’s not what AmeriCorps was designed and funded for. But the whole damn fleet of “volunteers” costs so little in the long run, no one bothers running checks and balances. And 250,000 paid volunteers helps reduce the unemployment rate for ages 20-25.

Jessica, with short hair dyed pink and lots of hair clips that served no literal function – turned to me imploringly, wearing her boots and her winter coat and hat.

"The heat froze," she says. She’s new, she thinks I have influence. “Welcome to the sinking ship,” I say, and I ask her: "You get your EBT card in the mail?"

"Not yet."

"Well."
The basement office walls are lined with three-drawer filing cabinets stacked double high. The only window is a well window like the one I had in my bedroom back in Ames, and it’s covered in moss or black mold, or mud. I can see through the open doorway into the conference room where the cooperative meets, and where all the meetings about Reggie’s sleep out take place. It reminds me of the seminar tables in the History building only far less expensive and of far more practical use. Jessica is angry because I haven’t responded to her e-mails. She’s a bigger girl, the only of the three not wearing her coat. I don’t not like her because of how she looks, I don’t like her because she’s eager and pushy, and because she doesn’t like me.

“I don’t use e-mail,” I tell her and I can tell by the look on her face that she thinks I’m being coy.

“It’s the next guy’s problem,” I say. “Make a note of it.”

Jessica tenses up.

“I already made a note of it,” she says, and she brings up on her computer screen all the e-mails she sent to the address they gave me when I started working here. I suck on my lower lip and look concerned, pretend like I’m mulling it over.

“You hear the one about a guy who dreams he’s a wigwam?,” I ask her, and before she can scowl at me I turn and walk out of the room.

In the corner of the basement, under the stairs, I pass a teenager folding his laundry by the washing machines. He sees the slogan on my shirt.
“Bad ass,” he says. “Where can I get one?”

I see the shirt he’s folding is an AC/DC tour shirt from before he was born.

“I’ll trade you,” I say.

The basement door is always kept locked from the upstairs side but the kid has blocked it with a box of dryer sheets so he won’t have to stand there holding his clothes while he buzzes for entrance and waits for somebody to let him in. I walk through the door and I’m sure to replace the tissue box for the kid. Upstairs, the kids have the TV tuned to an old black and white episode of Hitchcock’ presents, the episode where a woman escapes from prison by bribing the groundskeeper to hide her in the coffin of a dead inmate. The plan is to have the grounds keeper – “groans keeper,” Charlie once said – dig her up the same night she’s buried. The episode ends with the woman in total darkness inside the coffin, six feet under, and she lights a match to see the face of the person who she’s buried with: it turns out the corpse is the groundskeeper. She’s been buried with her exit plan, her coconspirator, her only way out. Watching the show with the teens is Larry, an ex cop who runs the food pantry for Des Moines Area Relief Charities, up on Euclid a few miles west of the Euclid Hotel. Whenever I see Larry he gives me a bag of non perishables, which, combined with the 200 dollars of food stamps I spend each month on cans of corn and green beans and baked beans and grits, makes for a pretty large storage over three years. It’s amazing how much food there is, just given away for free, if you know where to look for it and how to procure it. If I was in the fallout shelter business I could sell mine fully stocked.
Upstairs, one of the teenagers offers me a muffin. It’s blueberry.

“No thanks,” I say. “What’s that?”

She’s emptying three packets of Swiss Miss into a large mug. She’s got a container of half and half and she fills the mug with it.

“Reindeer sludge,” she says, mixing the drink with a spoon.

“My father,” I tell her, “he used to mix scotch and milk for the holidays.”

“Gross,” she says.

Charlie rounds the corner and gestures disapprovingly to my new attire. “No more Cheech and Chong,” he says, covering his “Got Homeless?” shirt with his coat and zipping it up. We exit the Youth Shelter together and he asks me where I want to go. There’s nowhere I want to go, no where I can think of, so I say, “Home, I guess.”

If that isn’t Whig history, what is.
My days in graduate school were filled with coffee and books and conversation about coffee and books. They had these Wolfgang Puck brand vending machines in the basements of the buildings and the coffees cost over two dollars. I remember my father telling me stories about how he’d pitch quarters at work, see who could get their quarter closest to the wall, the furthest out had to foot the bill for everyone else. Coffees cost twenty five cents back then at Lockheed in a machine and I remember my father telling me his own father used to pitch pennies. I never really knew my grandfather. On the few occasions he came to visit, I remember he spent most of his time in the guest bedroom – which was my sister’s bedroom, when people visited she took up residence on the sofa in the living room – he kept packing and re-packing his suitcase, as though he were some kind of spy, ready to leave at a moment’s notice. I only remember spending one good weekend with him, at his lake house in the hills of New Hampshire - though it ended poorly. My grandfather owned the top of a mountain that my father still has in his name. Sometimes I think about Van Doren living on in a small house on his parents land. I would still be my father’s tenant, I would not be as far removed as I think I want to be. It was thanksgiving in New Hampshire, and my mother was inside helping my grandmother prepare supper while my father slept on a stone wall at the edge of his mother’s garden. I’d never seen him sleep so peacefully, so still. My sister was a toddler, inside her crib with its cheap wooden bars. My father took me out on his
rowboat, humming Frank Sinatra tunes while smoking a Garcia y Vega dimestore cigar: the cheap kind my father would never be caught smoking. The oar cuffs of the rowboat were rusted and creaked with every one of my grandfather’s lazy rows. I didn’t realize he was drunk until years later when I learned to identify my father’s drunk behavior. My grandfather handed me the oars and told me to “keep her steady” while he stood on the bow and pissed into the water. His back was to me so he could not see that I did not move, and when he fell in the water he blamed me. I remember helping him clamor back into the boat, his cigar bobbing in the water like the dead muskrat we saw the previous night floating in the moonlight in the dark beyond the dock. In the distance a few blue sails from other boats, the other families who owned real estate on the lake. My grandfather was still fuming when we reached shore, and I remember my mother coming and holding me, and I hid under the hem of her dress, and I remember peering out to see my grandfather, dripping with water, and the oars of the boat wet and slightly moss-covered, like the slick backs of otters I’d seen at the zoo. My grandfather recounted the story and called me a “clever little shit.” He never hit me, but there must have been other incidents, other sudden changes of mood or temper, because I don’t remember visiting my grandparents any more after that. It must have been one of many decisions made behind my back, a parental choice, a conversation held behind closed doors, like my mother’s life: so seemingly there, a body, a face, yet under the surface everything had been slipping away through unseen holes like grain emptying from a silo.
A middle aged woman across the street from the youth shelter, wearing oversized boots and a yellow robe wrapped around bare legs, is struggling to open her frozen mailbox. She puts her magazines and letters and local fliers under her arm and high steps it back through her own footsteps down her walkway and into her house. The nose of a dog watches her – or us – through a part in the curtains in a picture window.

Charlie and I get in his car and he starts the engine and adjusts the knobs for the heat, I reach in the backseat and take his Shunryo Suzuki book in my hands.

"It’s not that I don’t have a plan," I tell him

"Let’s simplify. What are you doing tomorrow?"
Amanda: high noon: the mother of all dead-lines.
I think of Hamilton addressing his first year doctoral students, telling them that students in the United States are a special class of citizen, like the military or the incarcerated or the disabled.

"Civilians," I say to Charlie and I gauge his reaction. "What do normal people do during the week?"

Charlie slides his hands around the wheel, like he’s turning but he’s not.

"Go to the movies. Walk your dog. Go grocery shopping."

"I don’t have a dog."

Charlie puts the car in gear but doesn’t drive. "Then let me take you to lunch."

I tell him I’ve got plans, and he says, "Rain check," and I say, "It won’t rain" and we both look down the street at the snow and the ice.

Charlie smiles but he’s shaking his head.

"One of these days the witiness-well will run dry."

I say, "I keep a pair of sandals for emergencies, to wear on my head."

"Exempli gratia," says Charlie, and I don’t tell him he means ipso facto.
The wind blusters and momentarily the street is populated by white
ghosts. When the wind settles the air is clear, Charlie pulls the car into
the empty street. At the corner of University he hangs a left. A mile down
the road we pass in front of Los Tacos. A few squad cars are parked at odd
angles in the lot, taking up space, I can’t tell if one of them is
Mayberry’s. Charlie takes a right after 2\textsuperscript{nd} Ave and then hangs a left and a
few blocks later, another right where he drops me off at the corner of sixth
and Hackett Street. People have been dropping me off here for years, they
think I live in the high rise low income apartments, the section eights.
People tell me, “That’s not such a good neighborhood” and I tell them, “Yeah,
but it’s cheap.”

“I was serious before,” says Charlie, “about that job with the paper.”

“You think I’m the next Robert Noyse?”

“If I knew who that was, maybe.”

“He invented Silicon Valley,” I tell Charlie. “He grew up in Des
Moines. He was a paperboy here.”

“Good then,” says Charlie. “It appears the sky is the limit.”

I turn the Zen book over in my hands. It’s well bound and heavy. A
handsome edition for a paperback. In the middle of the book on a random
blank page there’s a drawing of a fly and nothing else. I close the book and
hold it upside down. I say, “Noyse worked under a man who won the Nobel
prize. The guy invented whatever it is that makes radios work. I forget his name.”

“You mean transistors,” says Charlie.

“Yeah. Anyway. I’m just talking.”

“I’ve made my living on people just talking,” says Charlie and I say, “You got the meter running?” and pretend to look under the dash for a hidden clock.

Charlie says, “Get out of here.”

“I won’t find a bill in the mail next week?”

“I’m just talking here, too.”

This is the moment I should tell Charlie that I’ll miss him, that I appreciate all the stock he’s put in me, that one of my favorite things about the middle of this nowhere is that he’s been here, too. Just to tell him. Tell him anything. Instead I tell him about the phone call with Jancy, how Jancy offered me a job in corporate, how I’d be based in Des Moines but travel around to regional fairs, recruiting on college campuses. I tell him I could pump gas instead, though then I’d have to wash windows, too, and maybe check air pressure. And I don’t know off the top of my head what states still have full service stations. It’s something lost to the past like payphones and railroads and baking your own bread. Charlie hears me out and when I’m through, he says, “They have the worst public transit in Shanghai,” and I can’t think of anything to say in response so I don’t.

Charlie reaches out to shake my hand and I hand him the book by mistake.

“Fair trade,” he laughs, and he sets the book on his lap and I shake his hand for real. “If you change your mind about the job,” he says.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and exit the car. Charlie calls from behind me.

“You never did tell me why Stalin changed his name.”
I stand on the curb and talk down to Charlie through the open door. I’ve rehearsed this bit a hundred times, a lecture that I knew would appeal to my students’ inherent sense of Whig determination.

“Stalin means Man of Steel,” I say. “When he left the seminary, Josef Dzhugashvili worked for the Communist party, distributing propaganda on the railroads. He was a nobody then, he followed orders. A pawn. But he had plans - in the end, he gave himself a steel name so he could do steel things.”

Charlie adjusts his mirrors and I lean against the door.

“Thick Naht Hahn,” he tells me, “changed the name of his religion to suit the needs of the community. Engaged Buddhism, he called it. Dogen stared at a wall. Hahn looked passed it.”

I close the car door.

“Here’s to prophets and saints,” I say.

The Omni pulls away with a single honk of the horn and I watch the car disappear in the snowfall, that awful bumper sticker of the man with his chakras getting smaller as I’m left standing alone in the cold on the curb in front of a place where I do not live.
After I left home with my mother in the hospital to return to school to finish my final exams before deadline, my father called to tell me she’d passed. At first I thought he meant a test, something the doctor’s had run, blood counts maybe, “passing” sounded like a good thing. My father clarified before I had to ask.

“We lost her,” he says, “She’s gone.”
"It happened in the night," he said. "Peaceful like."
“She was sleeping,” he said. “We all were.”
But I hadn’t been sleeping, not when it happened. My mother died at five in the morning, give or take. At five that morning, I was in the school library proofreading the bibliography for a paper I’d written about the Roman statesman named Seneca. Had I stayed home, had I been there in the hospital, I could have been with her at the end. There lay the seeds of my escapism, my private iceberg: hiding from my life behind a wall of ancient history.
It’s a ten minute walk from the section 8 housing on 4th street to the cul-de-sac where my Duplex is. The sidewalks are covered in snow and I walk in the street like anyone else. A few months ago the sun would have set by now, a few weeks ago just: now the days are longer and the nights growing shorter. Sometimes when I walk to my home at night I imagine in place of my duplex I’ll find a cardboard box, and inside that box, another box, and another, and another. Or maybe I’ll find a church erected on my property and the windows and doors will be locked. But the duplex is there, one half of it mine, the other half empty. Always so.
Rico calls the neighborhood where I live the Simulation Zone. It’s a play on the Combat Zone in China Town in Boston, with its notorious seedy, violent history. I haven’t locked my front door in the three years I’ve lived here and no one robbed me yet. Then again, I don’t own very much so maybe I’ve been broken into many times but no one has taken anything. How would I know? In the distance the press box of Drake Stadium is visible above the neighborhood tree line, sycamore and elms, their bare interlocking limbs like fingers covering the face of the stadium. It was atop that press box where I spent the night with Amanda staying up to film a time-lapse video. The video came out all wrong. The director of the youth shelter was upset with me. I had taken on the responsibility of filming the promotional video, but instead of monitoring the camera I was making out with Amanda against the cold rails in the upper dark unseen from the shanty playground with its serried tents and boxes pill-boxed on the turf below. It had been a week since Esmeralda cracked my knee and I was taking more vicodin than prescribed, chasing the tail-end of my month’s supply in less than a full week. I hadn’t been with Amanda since she’d broken up with me that summer, on account of the fact she found out I was lying about where I lived, I’d never invited her over, always an excuse, and finally she was fed up and showed up and my name wasn’t on any of the call boxes and she confronted me and I told her I couldn’t talk about it and she pressed me and I pushed back and I lost. But that night at Reggie’s SleepOut, high in the air and high on
painkillers, and we kissed and in the morning when the site was cleared and the event was over I brought her back to my duplex and let her inside and we made love on the couch. “Do you mind that I’m high” I asked her and she said “surprisingly, no, not this time” and her long black hair she raised with her hand off her pale, translucent neck marbled with deep blue veins and she kissed me. What I didn’t know is she bit me, too, I could not feel it that night and I only realized the next morning when I saw blood on my pillowcase.

That was the night she got pregnant. That was the night I know because it was the only night we played our game of house together. In the morning she told me it would take time for her to trust me again so we dated but we did not make love, starting over and it was slow and good and we were building something. Or so I thought. It was around Valentine’s day that I got the call from my father about my sister being missing and then Amanda told me she was pregnant and Jancy offered me the job and I felt cornered, I felt pinned, I felt caged. I felt tired and then those kids found Marlowe in the river and the next day Tony printed off that fucking envelope for my Exit Narrative and two nights later I told Amanda I wanted her to kill the child inside her.

And God help me I still didn’t feel it like I should have.
Fire, no ash; water, no throat.
Attic: no Oprah.
In my driveway my ‘88 blue Saab 900 Turbo sits with its dead battery and flat tire, sitting in the same spot it’s been since the night I drove over a nail on my way back from Ames the night I walked out on Amanda at the Homestead. I bought the car off a guy Hamilton set me up with in Ames, a mechanic who works on his own out of his old farmhouse north of the city. He had all these cars up in a silo, and a mechanical lift to get them down. The motion and sound of the hydraulics in the silo reminded me of the ventilation machines in the hospital. The Saab was cheap and the engine was good, though the guy admitted to me I’d need to keep up with the peripherals. I bought the car for 500 bucks and the mechanic said, “She’s your problem now.”
I go inside and use the phone to call a tow truck. I dial the operator and she connects me with the first company on her list. The phone rings twice before a man picks up:

“Howie’s.”

I think, Karma.
I sit on my stoop and I wait. My body feels heavy against the stone step under my thighs. A guy at the shelter once told me if he had as many pockets as he did burdens, he could carry the world inside his pants. Everyone I want back is lost or dead forever and the one’s I keep pushing away keep returning. I took a history of physics class as an elective in college, and I remember reading that some physicists – not just theoretical, I’m talking real science here – found that certain atoms in micro colliders pair with other atoms: a twin connection that exists across space and time – like a station that’s always on-air, broadcasting, no matter how far away the transistors or antennae. The magic of it is, the twins never lose their shared connection. Send one a million light years away, turn it left – and the twin will turn right; turn one white – the other turns black. Up – down; da – niet. My mother used to wake up in the middle of the night if she sensed one of her sisters was in trouble, she called it her intuition: the same intuition my father abhorred, as if anything even slightly mystical was a threat to his science. Sitting on my Duplex stoop I get nothing on my sister, no transmission, no distress signal, not the slightest of pings or the briefest of waves. I got more of a pull on Marlow(e) than I ever did with her. A dead man. My father. Alice. Amanda, my sister, my mother. Name upon name the heaping lost are piled on my shoulders, their weight like static on a radio that keeps getting louder and louder and I can’t turn it off.
And if I could: stop these names, these words, this noise: if I could stop it and just listen - it's my father, there, at the end of a silent but electric line.
ACT TWO
CITIZEN
I remember the view from the plane the day I arrived in Iowa, swooping low where everything appeared in grid coordinates, the farms and towns and malls, and suburbs, like the state had been sliced into squares readied to be rolled into giant croissants. Blue, green, sky, field, the occasional crop plane bisecting the sky in predictable angles, the smear of clouds like tears in the canvas. In winter, Iowa was at its most bleak, the walls of blue cold and looming, like a desolate, forgotten iceberg, with air that could freeze your nostrils: your lungs inside your chest as cold as aluminum siding. It was that kind of bitter cold the first time Ken brought me out to the woods, the day I met Esmeralda and handed out my first pair of socks – to a dirty, small-shouldered man wandering the dyke, drunk at 2 pm – Ken told me the two rules I absolutely had to follow. The rules were simple:

1. never invite a homeless into your house

2. never — Ken made me swear on it — never go to The Ritz alone
Five o’clock comes and goes and I’m officially a person like anyone else. I don’t know how long I’ve been waiting on my stoop before I open my eyes again. I hear a voice calling to me as if from a well. It’s nearly dark, five o’clock has come and gone. I think I hear something, but there’s nothing there. As if on mechanical cue, a light comes on across the street above my neighbor’s garage, flickering momentarily before illuminating the garage door as it slowly opens. A figure appears under the light. It’s an old man, who reveals himself under the orange glow of the streetlamp at the end of his driveway. I hear his voice. “Please,” says the voice, calling, and the bent old man walks toward me, stepping fretfully across the icy pavement of the street. Soon his gloveless hands are trying to gain purchase on the slick ice-coated surface of my car, and I meet him in the driveway, afraid that he might lose his footing. I feel like some warrior in a fairy tale and this small townsman has traveled a great distance to make a formal request.

“Please,” he says, and he points to the light above my porch. “Please.”
With foreign gestures, the old man indicates that he wants me to follow him across the street, to his home. I think about the time. Amanda is on the roads, slowly driving west, her flashers on, making her way behind plows and dump trucks filled with snow. The VISTAs are drinking and eating my cake, they won’t miss me even if they recognize I’m not among them. I have no good reason not to follow the man. With my own gestures I mime, “Why not?” or something like it and the old bent over man loops his arm into my mine and grabs firmly on my elbow, and we guide each other over the ice: what to an onlooker might appear like a son helping his grandfather cross the road. (My mother never asked for help until the very end. I was not around by then to help her walk or to feed or bathe her.) The old man keeps saying, “Please” and smiling anxiously, patting me on the arm every so often and a memory comes to me – Amanda’s memory, not mine – of being in a small town in Lithuania and a sweet young waitress saying “please” for everything. I think he might be Serbian, or from Eastern Europe. He doesn’t sound Russian like Alice with the wetness of her tongue and the growling vowels with their hint of animal. The man’s hands patting mine were certainly not as soft as Alice’s. Alice did not ask me when she wrapped her arms around me, she did not say please like this man. Amanda told me in Estonian they say please for everything, it’s a word that does not translate into English, not without the nuance of pitch and vowel length in the native tongue. Please as please, please as yes, please as thank you. So say Estonians to Englishmen.
The man and I make it safely across the street and he lets go of my arm. I notice no one has taken care of his walkway or driveway in quite a while, everything is crusted over with thick snow and ice. I follow him into his garage. In the garage there’s an old Volvo with the driver’s door open and the cab light on. The keys are in the ignition, I can see a large red medallion dangling below the steering column, but the engine is not on. I think about Ken’s garage, his football barbecues: the junkyard with its jars filled with screws and nails and nuts and bolts and bits of broken glass. In the corner, a poster board we’d made for one of our campaigns: “Got Homeless?” Ken keeps jars with different kinds of leaves: maple, eucalypti, tea leaves and tobacco. He has a paper leaf made out of blue construction paper with the label: Jesus Leaf. Ken’s also got this huge chain of keys on an old rusty iron ring, like something out of Dickens. For Halloween he’ll wear it around his hip like an orphanage keeper. Each Halloween we play a game trying to remove one of the keys. If you do Ken has to crush a walnut for you or do one of his other party tricks. Amanda got a key off once and Ken crushed a can of cherry soda on his forehead for her. Ken’s garage is a wonderland compared to the old man’s garage which is well organized with boxes stacked on steel shelves and the car is 20 years old but looks brand new. The old man’s garage smells like the inside of a washed-out paint can.

He points to the steering wheel and says, “Please.”

I hesitate, I’m not sure why. This man would be the unlikeliest of terrorists, but I can imagine Mayberry’s satisfaction in answering the call to find my blown-up body scattered across my neighbor’s yard. I imagine Mayberry spitting into my yard as the forensics team bag me, piece by piece. Nonsense. I lower myself into the driver’s seat but I don’t know what he wants from me, nothing seems unusual inside the car. He keeps saying please and I try the keys and they won’t turn. The man has a helpless expression on his face. Just because I’m young and available and living nearby doesn’t
mean I have something to offer. I look around the interior of the car. Nothing. Spotless. Not so much as a fast food wrapper or loose change. A part of me feels like I live in this car, like I will never get out of this car, I’ll spend eternity here and the world around me will spin and spin until everything and everyone that is lost or found comes funneling into the garage, and I’ll play usher, opening the car door and saying, “Welcome.”

I try putting the car in and out of park, nothing happens. I’m no warrior and this is no elaborate quest. I muscle the steering wheel hard to one side and the wheel releases, turning freely. Simple mechanics. Vapor lock. I turn the keys in the ignition and the car starts.

The look on the man’s face is how I imagine people look when someone saves their life or better. He takes my hands in his, like he’s passing me a secret mouse.

“You,” he says, and with one word the currency between us has doubled.
The man pulls a chair away from a small wooden table and I sit while he opens a cupboard and removes a glass and fills it with water from the tap. He sets the glass of water in front of me and sits across from me at the table while his nervous, shaggy dog licks my hands under the table. The licking turns to biting, which hurts, but not enough for me to say anything. I say “Thank you” to the old man for the water that I did not ask for, and as I sip it I feel the dog’s teeth gnawing on the knuckles of the hand I try to pet him with. The man has a stereo on in the background. A digital tuner. The stereo has a screen that shows you the name of the song and the composer:

Carnival of the Animals. Camille Saint Saenz.

The man gestures toward the speakers.

“For dog,” he says as the dog is busy licking and biting my hands. The old man gets up from the table and gets a pill bottle from the counter. He shows me the prescription and I recognize it. It’s something the doctors gave my mother to ward off seizures. The old man’s dog is either epileptic, or has dementia. Or both. Under the table the dog grinds on my knuckles and I flinch to avoid the sharp canines, and the old man sees me in pain and bends down under the table and says something foreign to the dog. I can feel the man’s foot gently nudge me, groping for the dog in the darkness beneath us.

“It’s ok,” I tell him. “I like dogs.” The old man smiles, with his eyes, and shows me his crooked brown teeth.
We sit there in silence at the table for a while and I take sips of the water from the glass in front of me. The song on the radio is Tchaikovsky now, something blustery and fast with staccato horns and raucous percussion. Sitting here, of course, I think about my father, and I wonder if he spends his nights alone at a table much like this one reading or drinking his scotch or working on his spreadsheets on his laptop in the dim light of a single banker’s lamp like the one on the old man’s counter. I wonder what my mother would think about all of this, if she could look down from some imaginary place and see us with imaginary eyes, would she find the whole thing comical, or tragic, would she think what Hamilton does about a man’s personal history: that in the end it’s all a very lengthy lead-up to a punch-line we’ll be too dead too appreciate.

Eventually I pat the dog on the head and let him bite me one more time and I thank the man again for the glass of water and he shows me out into the garage and through the open garage door. The fumes are strong from the Volvo’s running engine and I think about Charlie’s wife and how she chose pills to end her life and how Amanda’s father hung himself which is not a friendly thing to do to the people who discover your body. The old man says “Please” one more time but his tone is different than before, it’s familiar now that we’ve become friends. He stands in the doorway of his garage watching me as I cross the slippery street and climb around my car and reach my stoop again, and I turn around and see him watching me and I wave. He waves and I wave again and then he gets in his car. I watch him back slowly out of the snowy driveway and turn and drive away. I wave again but he’s watching the road and does not see me. His garage door lowers automatically and as I watch it close it dawns on me that other than Amanda’s apartment, and Ken’s garage - that there, across the street, with that old man: it was the first time in three years that I’ve been inside another person’s home.
I looked for Alice on the streets but could not find her. I needed her to tell me what she knew about the happenings at the Euclid Motel: if she knew about Marlow(e), if he’d crossed her path or what she’d heard about him — or heard about murder — through the grapevine or first-hand. I lost an entire day trolling the neighborhood between MLK and Drake, and the dirty side streets west other Drake Dine and down to the underpass. Eventually I went to the youth shelter and asked Joan, the social worker, if she knew where Alice was living. Joan works in a green-toned office, like a painting of an ocean island you’d see in a cheap motel or bus station. I see the space heater under her desk and she tells me the heat had been out since last night.

“I thought space heaters were fire hazards,” I said.

She said, “This whole place is a fire hazard.”
Joan helps me find the information on Alice. “I shouldn’t be pulling files for you,” she said. “Technically you don’t work here.” She pulled the file anyway, the updates on Alice. Last known address. Employer. A phone number that belonged to someone else. She called the Hy-Vee grocery store but they hadn’t employed Alice in over six months. “I doubt she lives here,” said the social worker. While she wrote down the address number from the computer screen, I thought about Beth’s pale white legs beneath her black leather or brown suede skirt. Most of the tutors looked younger from farther away, but Alice looked like an adult until you got close enough. She was just a girl’s frame under heavy sweaters and too-sizes too-large tee shirts from the community closet. She wore too little makeup and too much eyeliner. Alice was the kind of girl you could never really see for who she was. She could go in and out of a Russian accent, switching back and forth quicker than smoke through a screen. It seemed she had slipped out of her social work file, too.
“You get around town, right?’ Joan said before I left. “Can you distribute these for me?” She handed me a stack of fliers. “Take a dozen.”

It’s a flier about a missing dog.

“I saw a dog in the street outside,” I tell her. “On my way in.”

“Was it black?”

I thought about Ken and Elton John and how I should be in the office checking lists and overseeing volunteers and working on my Exit Narrative.

“Yeah, black,” I said, and she said, “Not mine then. Alfred’s white.”
Hamilton would sleep during seminar. He looked like a gorilla with his white hair and his soft meaty hands gently folded over his round stomach. He slipped seamlessly between sleep and consciousness, at the moment you were sure he was out like a light he’d lean forward and open his eyes and enter the conversation on cue. But we did notice that the third doze each class period was Hamilton’s longest, and one time me and six others in a PhD seminar left the room quietly when Hamilton was asleep. We went downstairs into the basement and bought eight cups of coffee from the Wolfgang Puck vending machine, and returned to our places in the seminar room. I was the one who placed a hot cup of coffee in front of Hamilton, beside his yellow legal pad which he never wrote a single word on during class. We resumed our conversation like normal, about the Whig approach to history, and after a few minutes debate Hamilton opened his eyes and leaned forward, asked us, “So, then, which of you are Whigs and which of you are Tories?” and he took a long sip from his Styrofoam cup.

“I’m an American,” I said.

“God help you,” said Hamilton.
I used the payphone in the Mobil State parking lot near the Big Lots and Hoffman’s Used Furniture Outlet but the number Joan had on file for Alice has been disconnected. The home address for Alice was a dead end, too, an apartment complex way out east on Euclid far from anything, a community in which a lot of refugee families are housed. A tall black man wearing an Indiana Pacers jersey answered the door. He was holding a small child in his hands. The child was naked and wrapped in a scarf, or what looked like a scarf. It might have been a small blanket or shirt. He had no idea who Alice was. Behind him I saw several children of various ages spying me from the living room. I showed the man my card.

“I work at the shelter,” I said. “We have community meals twice a day.”

He said something to one of the children inside in a language I do not speak and he shut the door on me and I put my card back in my wallet and I looked around the complex. The Reading Rainbow bus could circle the parking lot and leave as gray and lifeless as rotten milk. This is the kind of place Mayberry had warned me away from that first night I rode with him in his cruiser. We’d answered a domestic disturbance call near here that amounted to nothing. People were hanging around outside. It was early summer then, just a few months into my job. Mayberry said there were all these “alien communities” around the edges of the city. He likened the communities to packs of wolves.
“Circling the tribe,” he’d said.

I went back to the Van and sat inside to get warm. The parking lot of the complex was empty today, empty of people, not cars. I knew of a few places around the city where Alice might hang out. I hoped I wouldn’t find her on the streets, but then again, I knew where to look on the streets. If she had found a place to say for the winter, a bed with a man, or perhaps a ride out of town — if that happened I might never find her, she’d be lost to me like a rock in a stream. I was counting on Alice being Alice, on her nature, on her surfacing the way a lost dog does, like a stone skipped over the water, little ripples here and there. The usual haunts, I know where to look the way Danny the dentist knows everywhere to find wi-fi signals in the city. But if Alice had slipped beneath the surface, if she’d gone underground, then I wouldn’t be able to follow her there. I wouldn’t know where to enter.

It had been five days since I’d slept.
I did more driving around and then I happened across Sue 500, and when she recognized the van she stopped her strutting. Sue’s one of the only hookers in the city that isn’t afraid of being seen as such, and where the other girls lay low and try to blend unlike everyone else, Sue doesn’t care if she gets hauled away by a john or a cop. She has a reputation for giving the fastest blowjob in the Midwest, and I figure a lot of the cops get her services for free. They call her Sue 500 because a story goes she gave 50 ten dollar blow jobs in one night, some kind of world record among ladies of the night. Sue’s no Audrey Hepburn but she’s no Esmeralda either and I hear she gets a lot of business. When I stopped the van Sue climbed in and she didn’t mind me getting to the point pretty quick, she was glad to warm herself for a few minutes inside the cab. I asked about Alice and Sue told me last she’d heard, Alice had a gig at the gentleman’s club off exit 35, far north of the city near the mall where only car dealerships and chemical supply firms and abandoned factories and the fast food joints off the west I-80 exit exist.

I asked Sue if she had the number to the place and she said, “I look like a phonebook to you?” I dropped her off at the 7-11 on 10th St with some quarters that I broke off a roll from the meter stash in the glove box.

“I ain’t worth a donut, too?” she said.

I broke off another 50 cents.
I drove to the Euclid Hotel and went inside and asked the desk man if I could use his phone. When I asked for a phone book he pulled an old Bell Atlantic from under the desk and dropped it on the counter. On the small television set he was watching a pay per view channel scrambled into blue and pink and squiggly lines. He had the volume off but I could make out a breast and half a pair of women’s lips. The lobby smelled like carpet and stale deodorant: so strong I could taste it. I found the number for the strip club and dialed. A man answered and I asked him if Alice was working. The man put me on hold. No music, just air. The line came alive again and the man asked for my name and number. There was a pack of matches on the counter with the motel’s address and phone number. I spelled it out for him.

“She’ll call you back,” he said and hung up.
A minute later and Alice did in fact return my call. We made arrangements to meet later that night at the Drake Diner. I left the Euclid Motel and took the afternoon off of work, driving the Outreach Van around the city aimlessly. I drove to the mall. I drove downtown. I drove to the airport and watched planes lifting off. I watched other planes landing. At 8pm I drove back toward my neighborhood where I met Alice at the Drake Diner on the side streets just south of Drake University. She sat across from me at a booth with her back against the window, cradling her knees the way I’ve seen Amanda sit studying for the GRE’s or reading a book. The street outside was cold and white and desolate. Alice didn’t look bad but she didn’t look as good as I’ve seen her. It was the fact that she was on dope again, it was easy to see, but I said nothing about it because she wouldn’t lie to me and I had nothing to offer her anyway. Thursday night is Greek night, tonight I can smell the leftover aromas of stuffed cabbages, the sweet juicy raisin sauce and the stalky, nearly offensive smell of fresh dried dill. Sometimes the kids at the youth shelter make their own food, pot luck style, it’s part of their responsibilities for living in the house. I remember Alice cooking stroganoff, the authentic sour, tomato-based recipe, not the overly creamy stuff we have in the states. She made it for the other kids one night and I was there and one of them said, “there’s something... off” about the flavor, and Alice said, “It’s an acquired taste.”
In the lobby of the diner there’s a crane game filled with stuffed animals and plastic watches in clear-plastic boxes, among classic arcade games like Golden Axe and Tecmo Bowl and Rampage where you choose a monster and destroy skyscrapers by eating them story by story. The Qubert game is busted, a piece of duct tape over the red quarter slot. Next to the arcade games is an old cigarette machine – one with foosball-like metal rods for handles – with no cigarettes inside.
My father standing over me while I played Galaga in the arcade when I was a child: "Slow down! Control your movements."
My father playing mini golf: "It’s all physics."
Alice lifted and relocated the pepper and salt and sugar containers on the booth top, like a crane game of her own.

"If you kick a midget in that Golden Axe game," I said, "You get to keep his treasure."

Alice flashes me a look and said, "It’s a gnome, man. Not a midget."

"Treasure is treasure, right?"

I remember when Alice came into the basement office at the youth center a couple of years ago when I was hanging around waiting for a Reggie’s meeting, and she showed me her teeth. "I got my braces off today," she said, licking the sharp dentine edges. "Wanna feel my teeth?" The earrings dangling from her small white lobes tangle, she prominently sticks her tongue ring out from time to time and plays with it against her teeth. She used to expose the skin of her stomach to reveal the piercing there when she was trying to get my attention at the shelter. There in the diner, she had my attention, all of it, but it still wasn’t the kind of attention she’d been looking for.

"You call me up," she said. "I’m thinking, we’re on a date."

"I call you up, I’m thinking I want to know how you’re doing."

"You’re checking up on me?"

"It’s my job."

"Durok," she said, playing with her hair. "Not anymore."

"No."
“There’s something else you want to know.”
It wouldn’t be worth my time to sugarcoat Alice.
“I told you on the phone,” I said, stirring my black coffee.
Alice bit the corner off of a creamer, and did the same to a second one, and she squeezed them, alternatingly, into her coffee in two forceful streams.

“Udders,” she said. “I’m a milk maid.”

Alice emptied the creamers into her mug and set the spent plastic packages on the coaster and lifted her coffee to her mouth and drank in long, pensive sips.

“I know the guy you’re talking about but that wasn’t his name.”

“Wasn’t,” I said, and her demeanor darkened.

“Is he dead, or in the clink?”

“Dead.”

“How?”

“Drowned.”

I watch Alice’s eyes, but they were watching me.

“Heavy,” she said.
A waitress headed our way and Alice took her menu and snapped her fingers at me and I gave her my menu and she stacked them together on the edge of the table.

“What’s to know anyhow?” she said.

She ordered two eggs sunny side up and a side of blueberry pancakes and a single slice of rye toast, dark. I told the waitress I was fine with coffee and Alice said to the waitress, “My boyfriend here will have a side of homefries, with onions.”

“Onions?” I said when the waitress left us.

“They ward off illness,” she said.
Alice brushed my knee with the toe of her boot and I winced. If you catch me just right it still hurts where Esmeralda clipped me. Alice noticed.

“You like to play with me,” I said.

Alice removed her foot from my leg.

“We have a history,” she said. “I don’t get much of that these days.”
For what’s it worth: we do. Have history. It was at the youth shelter where I first met Alice, the half-Russian teenager with the cheek piercing and tattoos who walked into my office one afternoon like she owned the place. She had a lean, hungry look about her, even then when she was seventeen years old with baby fat around her face and her hips. She was an orphan, and I remember the first time I met her she sat right on top of my desktop like some Lolita and she put a cigarette in her mouth and said, “They won’t let me smoke inside.” She came to visit me often on the days I worked out of the basement office, once or twice a week those days when I was more involved with Reggie’s SleepOut. She’d try to flirt her way into my giving her money, like my former students would try and charm their way into extension on papers and forgiveness on too many absences. I’d help Alice with her history homework instead. Alice had been in and out of foster care since she was 11 years old and came to the youth shelter six months before she turned 18. She had a Russian emigrant father who’s serving a life sentence in another state and a junkie mother who turned her over to social services and the next day overdosed snorting heroin. I amused her with useless historical facts that she didn’t really listen to anyway, and she taught me the proper way to pronounce the word “durok.” which means stupid in Russian, a word I remember my sister using after her school trip to Moscow – I didn’t know the meaning back then but now I get it.
Alice put her hand on the table, palm down, and I took her by the hand and turned her palm up and held her by the wrist. I looked down at the infinity tattoo on her forearm and farther up the arm the marks and bruising.

"The man," I said. "Tell me."
They tell you natural gas turns solid in outer space, even oxygen gets hard as a brick: our lungs becoming stone in that deep fargone.
Alice gives me the scoop, how she and this girl Kayla were working out of the same room at the Euclid. They were being run by a pimp named Wardell, a tall skinny black man with thick black beard and thicker, blacker glasses that he never took off, not even in the shower. Kayla had a john one night and she let him stay past the hour and Alice came home and the three of them drank and got high and got to talking. The john was Marlow(e). Marlow(e) told them he did time and Alice talked about her father and Kayla showed the scars from her birth where they cut her open and that’s why she can’t charge the same as the other girls and Marlow asked where Kayla’s daughter was and she told him in California with her mother and she’s not allowed to see her unless she’s clean but she hasn’t been clean in five years and her baby is 6 years old. Marlow(e) asked Kayla how old she, Kayla, was and Kayla said 20 years old. Marlow(e) did the math and Alice said he got a real sad look on his, the look of a guy who wasn’t all that bad, he had a heart. He stayed the night with them but couldn’t pay and Wardell came in the morning and chased him off. Before he left Alice asked where he was staying and Marlow(e) said he had a place in the country and she asked what country and he said it’s a place a girl like her shouldn’t go to, a place outside the city in the woods.

Alice chewed her lip and looked at our hands and I realized I was squeezing her hard, I don’t know when I started to exert the pressure but when I let go I could see the imprint of my fingers in pink outline, briefly,
on the skin of her wrist. Alice left her hand on the table palm up and slid it forward until her fingers grazed my elbow. She took hold of my forearm before letting go.

She removed her hoodie and adjusted her hair and before I could ask her what name Marlow(e) went by, she slapped her fingers on the booth top and twisted in her seat.

"I forgot to show you," she said.

She turned almost all the way around and reached over her shoulder and pulled down the spaghetti string of her tank top and revealed her bare left shoulder blade. On her back there on the left side was the birthmark in the shape of a W, my Cassiopeia. On an angle straight northeast of the W’s right arm someone had tattooed a small red star on the back of Alice’s neck.

"See?" she said, lifting her hair. "Now I’ll never be lost."
Whig history, Hamilton warned us, quoting Herbert Butterfield, is the favoring of "certain principles of progress in the past... to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present."

Toryism, according to Professor Blaise, is akin to Neanderthalism. Charlie would say we hold our own leash.
Alice came back from the bathroom with clean hands and a sinister smile.

“Smell me,” she said.

She put her hands to my face and I inhaled, it’s something pomegranate, harsh, flowery, overly tart.

“You smell like a sorority girls’ vomit,” I said and Alice said, “Oh thanks.”
I have a business card printed by Vistaprint. The card reads: VISTA VOLUNTEER.

Vistaprint has nothing to do with VISTA, it’s just the name of a company that prints discount business cards.

The word VOLUNTEER is redundant. It was Vistaprint’s error, not mine.
We’d finished eating. The leftovers on the booth top remained like a crime scene. Alice’s eggs and side of bacon half-eaten on separate plates, the yolks broke open and sopped up by toast she’d mostly just chewed on. Alice salts everything, and I thought about how when Amanda eats potato chips she sticks her tongue out all the way and sets the chip on the back where the bitterness sensors are and she closes her mouth over the entire chip like a deposit drawer at a bank in a vault.

I carried the check to the counter and paid with my EBT card and Alice followed me into the lobby. She stopped in front of the crane game, looking in at the toys.

I said, “You want me to win you something?”

“Cliché much?” she said, poking me in the ribs.

Outside, in the cold, Alice said, “Walk with me.”

Her nails dug into my skin as she gripped my arm. I pretended to be as sure-footed as she thought I was, when really I felt as unsteady as she looked in that hoodie and those ridiculous four inch boot heels. When the sidewalk got too snowy we walked in the street. I put my arm around Alice and she felt small, thin, not like the baby-fat 17 year old I wasted afternoons with in the basement of the shelter, not the sly but girlish creature I’d find all over the city in places she shouldn’t be, when I was out patrolling in the outreach van. She was losing weight, like my mother did, and I figured Alice had Hep C or worse. We walked by a mailbox and
Alice opened the little door and looked inside. She rifled through the envelopes and fliers and she took a *Redbook* magazine and rolled it up and stuffed it in the pocket of her hoodie. She put the rest of the mail back in the box and shut the door.

“Sinner,” I said, and she said, “I only took what they don’t need.”

“How charitable of you,” I said.

I asked Alice where she was sleeping these days and she said, “Aww.” She told me, “I’m hooked up for now” like she was some utility.
We walked a bit and Alice turned to me under a streetlamp and gave me a sudden kiss on the cheek. A dog was barking somewhere behind one of the houses. Every other porch light on the block was lit. I looked at Alice’s distant eyes and thought of Russia. We could have been in a neighborhood in Minsk. Or Norway: a neighborhood in Oslo where the sun would still be far, far away from owning the majority of our daily paycheck. There’s a car parked at an off angle in a driveway, its rear sticking out into the street, and Alice kicked it. She turned to me, resting her heel on the fender.

“You look tired,” she said.
We circled back to the outreach van in the diner parking lot and I offered to give her a ride. Alice said thanks but she’ll walk and I didn’t ask because I don’t want to hear what I already knew: Sue 500 and all the girls Mayberry will tell you just try to blend in, the jeans and tee-shirt whores on University between here and MLK Church. I thought about Mayberry my first ride-along telling me, “We got hookers, but they don’t look the way they do in movies or in LA. They just look like girls, is all, or busted old broads. You can tell em by the way they look at you. A tutor is always looking for someone who’s looking back.”

Alice gave me a lingering hug and I pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her hair and down over her eyes and she stood there looking like the emperor in Star Wars, all small and frail, then she pulled the hood off and exposed her tongue ring, biting it between her front teeth. She backed away from me, girlishly kicking her heels side to side with her hands stuffed in the pocket of her sweatshirt.

“I work weekends at The Glass Slipper,” she said, studying my reaction like she never studied her books, step after slow step she backed away from me. “One of these sleepless nights,” she said, “maybe you come find me. Maybe I give you a taste of what you’re looking for.”
My mother was always reading detective stories. My mother would have figured out how all this was going to end. She was good at piecing together clues. She had books on her bedside table in the hospital when she died. Raymond Chandler, detective dime store copies. That’s what she went out reading. She was about to enter death the big no the eternal question mark, and she was still curious about the case of the missing whatever. Facing death, and she still wanted to know how her novel ended. She probably knew already, she just had to spend the time in some fashion or other, and she was too sick by then to work in the garden or knead bread or bake a cake.
Not long after she died my father donated her clothes. All the colorful bins she’d bought to store our winter clothes in during the summer, our summer clothes during the winter, all of those tubs were filled with her things, her garments, her possessions. All of it hauled away by volunteers from the Salvation Army. The rest of her possessions followed, and I had to grab what I could when I could before my father gave it all away. I wonder if my father thought about the irony of his job working as a cargo specialist, and yet he couldn’t make room for a single one of my mother’s possessions. He just couldn’t make it fit. Or he couldn’t bear to.
Hamilton kept a small functioning water-clock in his office that Professor Blaise referred to as “the urinal.” Professor Blaise was the one who nicknamed Hamilton, “Beta,” which is what the Greek Philosophers called Eratosthenes because they thought he was simple. “Tron” is what Hamilton called Professor Blaise Donovan, chair of philosophy whose office was one floor above the history department. That’s the place of Philosophy, he’d say, we reside in the 8th chakra, the God-head; history is just the 7th chakra, all the “stories” historians make up about ourselves and the world: history is nothing but the stepping stone for the true knowing of thyself.

In reality the two departments were one, they shared the same funding. Professor Blaise called Hamilton a “luddite.” Where’d you park your horse? was the usual greeting Donovan gave Hamilton in the office. If Blaise was late for a meeting, Hamilton, the chair, might turn to him and say, “Traffic on the information superhighway?” The fourth chakra is the heart chakra, and by Blaise’s structural analogy the 4th floor of the Humanities building should be something special: social sciences or anthropology, linguistics perhaps which shared its space in the building with English, appropriate, the chakra of the mouth – or maybe even psychology would be found on the 4th, in its own backhandedly loving way. This is all to say that no, none of these reside on the fourth floor of the Humanities building: the computer labs do.
One of the graduate students once asked Hamilton what the H. in his name stood for and Professor Blaise said, “Helot. Because he can’t stay out of other men’s shit.” Blaise was referring to the Spartans leaving unwanted, impure babies on the side of Mt. Taygetos and the Helots – the commoners, the country folk – would take them and raise them as their own, like adopted pups. Blaise’s students called him “No A’s Blaise,” but not to his face.
I sit on my stoop in front of my door and I wait for the jump truck. Sometimes I come home from work and find Jehovah Witness pamphlets stuck in the wedge of my door, Chinese or pizza takeout menus, once a year I get a telephone book in a plastic bag tied in a knot to keep the weather out and hung from the doorknob. I don’t have a storm door and I don’t get the newspaper and I don’t remember a time when I was home to hear the doorbell ring. I wait in the cold for I don’t know how long and finally the Howie’s guy pulls his tow truck adjacent to my driveway, blocking me in. He patches the flat, easy, but the car won’t start.

“When was the last time you started it?”

I think about my long drive to North Dakota.

“Couple of weeks,” I say.

Howie’s man shakes his head.

“In this cold,” he says, “You gotta start em once a day.”

The tow man asks if I mind if he smokes and I say no. He pulls a pack out of his pockets and offers me one. I figure why not so I take a cigarette and use his plastic lighter and he lights his cigarette and we stand there for a minute smoking. I think about the way the men outside the shelter light their cigarettes, using the heat of one cigarette to suck into the other. I remember wanting to tell Tony he was lighting his cigars wrong. My father smoked cigars. You’re not supposed to touch the flame to the cigar. You pull with your breath and the fire drags – it’s more like a jump – the
distance between the flame and the tip of the cigar. Otherwise you risk burning the wrapper. I didn’t tell Tony. I figured he had better things to do with his 24 hour check than get schooled in the etiquette of cigar smoking.

The Howie’s man smokes down half the cigarette while messing around with pipes and connections under my hood.

“Your spark plugs are shot, too,” he says.
While the man is getting me plugs from his truck, a gray squirrel scampers onto the icy sidewalk, gives us a look and tries for a tree, but misjudges, nearly missed entirely and bangs his head, then scrambles up the trunk to a mid-level branch and looks down, making terrible noises. When he comes back from his truck, Howie’s man tells me, “Lose the tie” and makes a knot gesture, twisting his fist in front of his neck. “I seen people get their ties stuck in a belt. Boy you don’t want that to happen, hear me?” He laughs, shaking his head like he’s recalled an old joke told to him by a long lost friend. “Head’ll pop off like a dandelion.” He makes a popping sound with his mouth that reminds me of the whistling sound Tony makes when he’s done with a conversation. I remove Ken’s tie from around my neck and fold it and put it inside the pocket of my coat pocket next to my bracket. I help the guy from Howie’s attach his cables and my car crabs and bitches, finally booting up as slow and inconsiderate as the old DOS programs my father used to run at home when I was a child. I’d left my stereo on, I’d forgotten, and the CD that’s in there – Jeff Buckley, the song “Lilac Wine” – buzzes through the small tin speaker. It reminds me of a story Charlie told me about a cross country hitchhiking trip he took in the 60’s, and how this one Lincoln low-rider picked him up, the car full of smoke and seven black men with Afros and Charlie squeezed between the men in the back seat and they were playing an LP of Bob Marley they’d rigged on the console beneath the rear window and wired through the trunk to the wires that should have run the taillights.
They rode with no brake lights but they had good tunes, the LP kept spinning and the hash kept being passed and Charlie swears they made it from Omaha to Denver in the time it took to play a single Marley track. That’s how it felt to him anyway, is what he told me. The Howie’s man makes a face at the terrible sound, there’s only one working speaker: back seat, passenger side. All the other speakers are blown or the connections have failed. The guy gives me his card and tells me he also works part-time at Hastings and he can get me a really good deal on a new stereo.

I get my father’s triple A card from the glove box and sign some paperwork and the tow guy tears off a yellow copy for me and he keeps the pink and white slips and I fold my copy and put it in my pocket. While he’s packing up his portable jumper kit, I ask the Howie’s man about his jingle, about my getting left in the cold for more than 30 minutes, which is a guarantee, I know because of all the commercials on the radio and the billboards and fliers posted all around the city. I ask him aren’t I supposed to get some kind of discount or tee shirt or free pizza or something.

“In this cold?” he says, closing his trunk. “All bets are off.”
Now there’s a slogan for a teeshirt. ALL BETS ARE OFF. They could
hang it on a stake in the front lawn where the new shelter won’t get built on
the land Tony won’t procure because – you know how the story goes.
“Marlow and Marlowe,” said Ken. “Sounds like a detective agency.”

“Or insurance,” I said.
Charlie will tell you, “If you want to know where your head is at, follow your feet.”
Tony will say, "We're all given the same 24 hour check each morning."
My father always said, “Do your homework.”
My sister said, "I'm already grounded."
After Amanda and I watched Citizen Kane, Amanda said, “Well, duh.”
"Keep warm," says the man from Howie’s, and I say, "There ain’t a prune big enough to help a sasquatch shit." It’s one of Ken’s jokes, and the town man says, "Alrighty then" and gets in his truck and I watch the vehicle pull away. It’s after eight, I’m late for my party. I get down into my Saab and turn the radio up louder with its awful, thin sound and I back out of the driveway, my wheels spinning like plates for a few seconds before finding purchase on the ice and I put the car in gear and I head downtown to Peeple’s Pub where all the king’s VISTAs are getting drunk in my honor.
I went to the library at Drake University in search of the source of the passage about Newton. I found the book on an Internet search pretty quickly, among the other scholarly works on Newton. When I saw an image of the cover I recognized the book immediately, it had been on a bibliography for one of Hamilton’s undergraduate courses that I TA’d for my first year at ISU. The library didn’t have a copy. It was evening, the library was mostly empty save for a few students. The reference librarian found me a copy I could reserve through Inter library loan, if I had a University ID, which I did not. It turned out the nearest library that had a copy of the book was, of course, Iowa State.

The following morning I called in to work and asked Tony for the morning off, something I’d yet to do in my three years working for the shelter. I told Tony I could come in on a weekend to make up the hours. Tony did that whistle thing through his teeth.

“Take the day,” he said. “Hell, take a week. You’re overdue.”

I drove to Ames to the University library where I ordered a cheap, poorly brewed Americano from the Caribou Coffee on campus and I found the book on the library shelves and I sat in the stacks and read it cover to cover. I made a Xerox of the page Marlow had torn out and stuffed in his sock. I had to wait in line for the copy machine, behind an Asian woman who was photocopying what seemed to be an entire text on mathematics. I’d have
wondered why she didn’t buy the book if I weren’t busy reading and re-reading the first page of the chapter “In the Midst of a Whirlwind.”

The text was there, all of it, all the missing pieces put into place.

When he observed the world it was as if he had an extra sense organ for peering into the frame or skeleton or wheels hidden beneath the surface of things. He sensed the understructure. His sight was enhanced, that is, by the geometry and calculus he had internalized. He made associations between seemingly disparate physical phenomena and across vast differences in scale. When he saw a tennis ball veer across the court at Cambridge, he also glimpsed invisible eddies of air and linked them to eddies he had watched as a child in the rock-filled stream at Woolsthorpe. When one day he observed an air-pump at Christ’s College, creating a near vacuum in a jar of glass, he also saw what could not be seen, an invisible negative: that the reflection on the inside of the glass did not appear to change in any way. No one’s eyes are that sharp. Lonely and dissocial as his world was, it was not altogether uninhabited; he communed night and day with forms, forces, and spirits, some real and some imagined.

The Asian student finished copying and it was my turn. I realized I’d forgotten to bring change. The student had forgotten to sign out of copy account. I used her account to make two photocopies, front and back of Marlow’s page, 90 and 91, five cents each. I thought about the teakeapennyneedapenny dish at Mars Café. I owed the world a dime.
I left the library and paused on the steps, looking down the small quad at the students crossing the sidewalks with their hats and hoods and gloves and backpacks in tow like one long, looping reel of film depicting strange, deliberate nomads. I could have gone to my car and gone home, but instead I walked the familiar path that led under the campanile, over the long quad, and led to Humanities Hall, where my office used to be. I thought maybe I’d run into someone I knew. They’d all passed on, I’m sure, gone on to jobs or back to their home countries, back to their husbands and wives and children. I went straight to Hamilton’s office. I knocked and he wasn’t there. I pictured Tony’s empty office. (Does my father ever check to see if the little Lenin is still inside his Matryoshka doll?) I looked at the name on the door and it wasn’t Hamilton’s. I had the right floor, the right office, I know the layout by heart. His office must have moved. I walked down the hall and I peeked in the main office and the secretary was someone I didn’t recognize. A student, probably: a work study or intern. I stood in the doorway.

“Dr. Cravens retired,” she told me.

“Oh,” I said.

“Last year.”

“Yeah. Ok.”

“Did you want me to get him a message?”
I pictured Hamilton in his Hawaiian shirts, striding step by Heroic step on a beach somewhere, combing the sand for shells and dreaming of Vergil with each of his heavy, measured strides while his wife floats buoyed by rum on a rubber inflated flotilla on the blue pristine waters of a resort hotel pool.

“No message,” I said. “I was just curious.”

She stopped me. “You look familiar.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t.”
In the parking garage I got waylaid behind a line of cars. The long plastic arm at the exit wasn’t working. An attendant was trying to figure out why. There were two cars ahead of me, neither driver looked happy. I sat in the car and thought about all the times I’d parked in that garage, as a student, on metered parking like today: I’d never paid for a permit when I was at school, I mostly took the bus or walked when the weather was good. I could smell the exhaust building up in the air in the line of cars in the garage and I closed my eyes.

Marlow.

Marlowe.

Marlow(e).

Eventually the attendant got the arm up and it stays there, and the cars in front of me finally moved forward and when I got to the machine I rolled down my window, expecting to run my parking slip through the meter machine, and to pay in cash, but the attendant waved me through, saying, “It’s your lucky day,” and I exited the garage free of charge, my ticket validated by technical malfunction.
A couple weeks back – in the space between when I found out Amanda was pregnant and before any body washed up in the river – I was in the outreach van driving one of Charlie’s clients to DHS. She had long brown hair and brown eyes, she was twitchy and a little animal-like, the familiar look of a drug addict recently sober. I told her she couldn’t smoke in the van, so she talked and talked and talked. You get used to people talking.

“It’s been a bad day, bad week. Rough, ya know? Kids, man. They take it out of you. You got kids? I got a baby girl. She’s ten. I call her my baby girl. Look at me, you know how old I am? Shit. I’m the only junky you’ll meet who’s older than she looks. Shouldn’t a had a baby girl, they say you got to do that by the time you’re 35 or something. Defects, ya know? My girl’s alight. She’s in school. I only put on 20 pounds when I had her. I wasn’t high then, no, I ain’t that bad a person. God, I used to lead a life! You believe me? Now it’s grocery store, drug store, doctor’s office, school. I go to parent fucking teacher meetings.”

“Parents fucking teachers?” I said and she said, “Hey hey,” she said, “Good one.”

She kept playing with the radio, fiddling with the dials, pushing what buttons would push and pulling what knobs would pull. I hadn’t been paying too close attention to her and it dawned on me that I knew the name of the groundhog from New Hampshire who sees or does not see his shadow.
“Puxatawny,” I said, and the woman said, “That some new kind of stereo?”

I don’t tell her no, I just say, “The radio’s broke.”

She slumped back in her seat, putting her feet on the dash and lipping her cigarette.

“Just perfect.”

When I dropped her off in front of DHS she spied the change on the floorboard of the van and asked me, “Can a girl get a dollar for the bus?” I told her to take what she needs and she bent down and starting putting quarters into her hands until she had a fistful, her long painted nails scraping against the carpet like a cat scratching a post. There’s about two dollars left on the floor when she’s through collecting.

“Gotta leave you with a little something,” she said, holding her pile of change against her body with both hands. “I’m talking karma, man, say right?”
I heard a story about a guy who got mugged on a street near the section 8 apartments not far from my duplex. The guy – the one who got mugged – he followed his mugger to the mugger’s home, just a few blocks away, and he called the cops and they came to the address and they got him his wallet back. In this city, lost or stolen objects tend to turn up by their own logic. Like the golf balls my father would lose in autumn under the resplendent hoods of yellow maple leaves, only to find them again in springtime when the cowls had blown away.
THE CARNIVAL OF ANIMALS
I find parking downtown near the alley on a side street in a tow zone a block away from Peeple’s Pub. I leave my car idling with the lights off and I round the corner and walk past the wood-fired pizza joint and the Help Hotel with its yellow interior and red brick floor and I wait for a car to pass before I cross the otherwise empty Thursday night street and descend the dozen stone steps covered in ice melt that crunches under my boots as I walk beneath the green awning that leads into the bar.

Adam is the first one to recognize me from across the bar where he’s standing at the jukebox. I go straight to the counter where he meets me and orders me a pint of tap special: Schlitz.

“The people’s brew,” he says, slapping me on the back.

Adam is infamous among the VISTAs for dressing like Danny Tanner from Full House, with his collared shirts tucked neatly under argyle sweaters. Full House is another nickname, and apt. Adam was always risking too much during poker games, he’d chase down a flush and couldn’t get off it, like a hound dog on a deer scent. Tonight Adam’s wearing a tee shirt, casual, under an unbuttoned collared shirt. The tee-shirt says “Gnome Chomsky” on the front with a picture of Luigi from Mario Bros. leaping over a mushroom. An attractive woman bumps into me while turning from the bar with a couple of pints for her girlfriends, and she says, “I’m sorry,” and I say, “De nada” and she catches my eye and she stops and says, “Hi, I’m Lauren.”

I look at her and I’m supposed to introduce myself but I don’t.
After she leaves, Adam says, “You’ve got a sixth sense for alienating people.”

“What, am I gonna take her home?”

Adam grimaces. “Amanda wouldn’t be too keen on that.”

“I’m saying.”

Adam buys himself a pint of dark expensive ale and says *Nostrovia!* and I say *Please* and clink his glass. I set my glass down on a cardboard coaster.

“Please?” says Adam, making a face, and I say, “You’re welcome.”
When I was a kid I used to sit at the table at night drinking milk and pretending it was whiskey, like a jaded private eye at a bar in some noir film. I assume that posture now, my hands wrapped around my pint glass, elbows on the bar, and after a few minutes of recounting his day and telling me about the “coed cadets” that they’ve got volunteering at the DNC, Adam notices the moisture collecting around my fingers and says, “You teetotaling tonight?” I remove my hands from the pint and the moisture drips down the glass and puddles around the edges of the cardboard coaster. The coaster has a picture of ST Pauli Girl with her barmaid braids and Barbie figure, greens and blues. Adam puts his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t tell me you’re pregnant,” he says and I scan his face quick and see it was just a joke, he doesn’t know. He feigns punching me in the gut with his fist.

“Push yourself down some stairs and lets get this part going.”

“Not tonight,” I say, sliding the beer and its coaster his way.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Adam says and tilts his head back until the pint is half empty, a soul patch of amber foam left on his chin. “Where’s your lady love tonight?”

“She’s in Iowa City,” I say. “At a Robert Noyse convention.”

“Never heard of him,” says Adam. “Was he in politics?”

“He invented the paper route.”

The UCONN Huskies are winning big at halftime. I watch the television sets over the bar and I remember something else about Noyse.

“He designed silicon chips for the Minuteman space program.”

Adam changes the subject to basketball. He’s got Duke and Kentucky in the final.

“Kentucky’s weak in the paint,” I say.

Adam finishes my pint and orders both of us another one, and I let that one sit on the counter too. Eventually he gets around to asking me the question I’m prepared to answers a dozen times tonight. I should have made cue cards.

“So,” says Adam, leaning backward against the bar with his elbows. “What’s your plan?”

“I’ll make the rounds,” I say, “and split as soon as possible. I’m thinking pizza: pepperoni and onions from Italiano’s. Maybe rent a movie from Redbox.”

“I’ve never liked onions,” says Adam and I tell him, “I hear they ward off illness.”

I spot a VISTA name Leah who I know has an off and on again thing with Adam, she’s coming toward the bar and I don’t like a crowd but I’m glad for the buffer. Before she reaches us, Adam asks the question again, what’s my plan, starting tomorrow. I think about the old man and his hand-biting dog.
I adjust Ken’s RSO cap on my head and think of a good tee-shirt slogan: I’D RATHER BE DOG-SITTING.

“My plan is,” I say, looking up at the TV screen – they switched the game to Kansas, with a 30 point lead under five minutes left. “I guess you could say I’m waiting out the clock.”

I’m saved by Leah, who squeezes in between me and Adam, her shoulders pressing against both of ours and her elbows on the bar like mine. There’s a hint of lilac in her perfume. Or is it my imagination.

“It’s Thursday night and I’m drunk,” she says.

“Not drunk enough,” says Adam, leaning over the bar to flag the attention of the bartender while simultaneously snagging my pint glass and handing it to Leah, who drinks from it without question.

“Where’s Amanda?” she asks me.

“Paris,” I say.

Leah looks into my face, blinks a couple of times.


“Iowa City,” I say and Leah says, “Oh, cool” and I say, “She’ll be back in the morning.” Leah says, “I don’t need her for anything, I was just asking.” Adam says, “Amanda’s at some tech conference,” and he turns to me, “Doing what again?”

“She’s lobbying for the Luddite Society.”

Leah says, “You guys are so plugged into things. I feel stupid.”

While Adam consoles Leah by smoothing her hair and offering encouraging words of support for Leah’s position – 60 hours a week in the copy room of an environmental legal firm – I think about James Joyce and what a professor in college told our class, an anecdote where Joyce examined his blue-eyed baby boy on the coroner’s table the night of his wife’s still-birth. He wanted to look death in the face and not turn away. Joyce would also get himself into trouble at bars, with his sharp tongue and small stature, and he’d stand
behind Hemingway, the pugilist – Joyce’s drinking buddy – and Joyce would point with his cane and demand, “Deal with that man, Ernest!” I picture myself standing behind Ken in the alley while Mayberry cracks, then kisses, each of his callused knuckles before raising his knee in a karate stance.

Adam watches while Leah chugs the rest of my pint and Adam says, “Someone’s gonna need a ride home tonight.” Adam plays guitar in a band and they sometimes play at the pub, mostly they play in people’s houses or backyards, bluegrass and folk, with some 80’s hard rock medleys mixed in for crowd pleasers. There’s an open mic night at Mars Café once a week and Adam likes to play Damien Rice songs, high falsetto, to woo the college girls. The band isn’t bad, he’s better alone, but he tells me he scores more often with the band, not so much a wingman thing but he’s the front man and the role of the backmen is to prop him up, to make him the show. I asked once what his trick was with the ladies and he said, “I sit at the bar and look handsome.”
Adam’s telling a story about how he once saw the devil in a public square in Barcelona. “He saw right into me,” Adam says. “I drank bleach just to clean my insides.”

“You didn’t drink bleach,” says Leah.

Adam looks at me. “Oh yeah,” he says. “All the time. It wards off illness.”

Eventually Leah gets around to remembering to ask me what my plan is for the future.

“It’s been three hours since my end of service,” I say, and she says, “I figured you’d have something lined up. Don’t guys like you get offered jobs at corporate?”

“Guys like me.”


I ask Leah if they gave her the box lunch at training. She thinks about it – her training was less than six months ago.

“They did,” she says.

“Three years a VISTA,” I say, “and all I got was this lousy pair of socks.” Adam chuckles when I take a yellow-banded pair of athletic socks from my pocket and lay them on the bar top. Leah looks confused, and as the socks begin to sock up the moisture left from my pints, Adam asks me, “Generic, or name brand?”

“Generic,” I said. “But they were signed by Obama.”
Leah leans over to get a better look at the socks and Adam pushes her head against the bar top. If it weren’t for the socks she’d have clocked her forehead good.

Adam says, “Was there, like, an anti-MENSA where you grew up?”

“You guys are bucking with me?” asks Leah, though I think she means fucking. Adam says, “Oh, babe,” and I say, “Obama doesn’t sign socks, Leah. He has his assistant do it for him.”

“Har har,” says Leah and Adam raises his glass.

“The assistant is probably a VISTA,” he says. Leah considers it, and raises her glass too. I don’t have a glass, so I raise the pair of socks.

“To bureaucracy,” I say and Adam says, “Juking the unemployment stats one paid volunteer at a time.”

“Welcome to the Jungle” comes on the jukebox and Adam starts rocking out. Leah uses the opportunity to wedge closer to me and catch my ear.

“I wanted to ask you a favor.”

I kiss her on the cheek when Adam is looking, and I tell her, “Of course I’ll write you a recommendation.”

Leah hugs me and tells me I’m awesome. Adam is pantomiming hard to the song now, looking to Leah for an audience she doesn’t give him. I tell Leah, “Ben Franklin invented the glass harmonica. It uses friction to make sound, like rubbing your finger around the rim of a glass made of crystal.”

Leah holds her half-empty beer in the air and rubs her finger around the rim of the pint glass. I tell her to listen to a song called Carnival of Animals and she’ll hear what I mean. She tries rubbing harder on her pint and I tell her, “Stop that.”

“You should talk more often,” she says. “I like it when you talk. I don’t remember you being a talker, but I like it.” She hesitates, swallowing a hiccup, and says, “If Amanda breaks up with you again, you should call me.”
“I don’t have your number,” I say, and when she tells me to get out my phone I tell her, “Give the number to Adam for me.”

“Adam has it,” she says, and as if on cue Adam reaches over her shoulder holding three shot glasses in his hands. Leah takes a shot and tells Adam, “Ben Franklin here is gonna write me that recommendation.”

Adam says to me, “Since when do you have pull at The Glass Slipper?”

Leah punches him on the arm. Adam hands me a shot and we raise a toast but no one says to what and when they drink I set my shot glass on the counter. Leah says she’ll catch up to us later, she points to the corner where there’s a sub-basement part of the bar with a couple of rooms, one of which the VISTAs are holed up in. Before she goes Adam hands her my shot from the bartop and tells her, “Get drunker.”

Leah downs the shot and kisses me on the cheek and grabs Adam’s shirt by the waist and yanks on it, sticking her tongue out, “nah nah,” and I see she’s got a tongue ring like Alice. One of Adam’s unbuttoned buttons pops off and falls to the ground, and he doesn’t notice as he watches Leah walk off.

“God damn,” he says. “I’m not saying I’m taking her home. But it’s nice to know if there ain’t a better honey coming my way, at least I got a sure thing in my back pocket.”

Adam licks his lower lip. There’s been dried beer there since he downed my pint earlier. He feels it with his tongue and wipes it away with the back of his hand. Someone puts Springsteen on the stereo. Used Cars.

“Downer,” says Adam.
Adam and I sit at the bar, shoulder to shoulder, listening to the song and I turn around and watch the feet of the people smoking on the sidewalk through the cellar windows, dropping their lit butts from time to time like tiny comets crashing to the pavement in small eruptions of flame. Adam’s shots arrive and he lifts them off the table like a waiter, five in his hands in a star-like pattern. Adam spent summers in high school and college working the country clubs in Omaha. He’s leaving me for the crowd in the cellar.

I tell him to play it safe with Leah, meaning she’s a nice girl and he should watch out how he leads her along, but Adam thinks I mean sex.

“Wrap it up before you ship it,” he says, patting his left jeans pocket. “Thanks, but I’ve got myself covered.”

Adam carries his shot glasses raised in front of him like some participant carrying candles in a Catholic ritual, all he needs is a hood and a censer. He stops in front of the juke box and says something to a woman looking through the on-screen options. She looks down at his waist and then over at me, where he’s gesturing with his head, and I realize it’s the woman from before who I snubbed. She looks back at Adam and reaches toward his pants and removes a dollar bill from his pocket. Without spilling his drinks he leans over and says something to her, nodding toward the jukebox. He leaves, disappearing down a flight of stairs in the far corner of the bar. The woman enters her choices into the jukebox, glancing my way again and
gives me a smile, and as she returns to sit with her group of girlfriends at a table by the window, Queen’s “Can’t Stop Me Now” comes blaring over the speakers.

I watch the TV but it’s just talking heads, there’s a time-out or something. I sit at the bar and ask for a glass of water and a few minutes pass before Danny the dentist bumps up against my shoulder and loudly declares his intention to buy me a drink. Freddy Mercury’s silver voice is cutting through the air like butter and I tell Danny, “I’ll only take a shot of Dimple Pinch.” They have it at the bar, I’ve seen it in front of the huge rectangular mirror all these years that I’ve been coming here, showing my face, meeting and greeting and making the rounds. Boosting confidence. Cracking jokes. Playing the role of leader.

“That shit looks expensive,” says Danny, admiring the concave three-sided bottle of Dimple Pinch with some hesitation. One of the major differences I found between grad school and AmeriCorps is that academics drink, and activists get drunk – the price of your beer or alcohol meant one thing to the scholars at ISU, but VISTAs know that cheaper is always better.

“It’s all swagger,” I tell Danny. “It has to look high class, because it isn’t.” “Let’s do this shit,” says Danny, snapping his credit card onto the bar. The bartender pours our drinks and Danny asks me where Amanda’s at, if she’s back from the big city. I ask him if I look like her twin atom and he says, “What?” I try to explain to him about twin atoms, and as I do, Danny rocks his head forward and back like we’re in a time out, he’s the player I’m the coach, and when I’m finishing lecturing, he says, “This isn’t some kind of incest thing, is it?” Our drinks arrive and I raise my glass.

“Spasibo,” I say as Queen fades out and a modern pop star begins to sing her confession about kissing a girl. Danny downs his scotch in a single swallow while I sip mine.

“I like this song,” he says.
I misrepresented something earlier. When I said I’d heard about Amanda’s appointment through the grapevine, that wasn’t true. She called me, at my house, the morning of the day I spent the night with Alice at the club. The message said she’d made the decision, she’d made an appointment, she didn’t expect that I’d come with her but she wanted me to know the details. I was home when she called. I heard her leaving the machine in real time. I sat on the couch alone and looked at the phone and listened to her leaving a message like I’d sat there and listened to my father leaving messages, until he got the message – he just hangs up now when the machine kicks on.

I spent the rest of that day alone in my duplex mulling things over. I had a bottle of scotch that Rico had left for me at the shelter, a departing gift. It wasn’t a cheap bottle, he told Ken he had a guy that owed him a favor. It’s Johnny Walker Blue and I popped the cork and it smelled of good aged cheese and I drank straight from the bottle. I spent the day drinking and packing, which didn’t take long since I don’t own much. By 8 pm I was half way through the bottle and I decided to walk to Los Tacos and get a beef tongue burrito to go and pick up a tank of kerosene. I take two twenty dollar bills from the fire box on my counter where I keep all my money, and I put on my coat and leave my house. I pay for my burritos with my EBT card and on my way back from the Los Tacos – it was abuela, who only charged me for one burrito even though I ordered two, and she gave me five dollars in change and insisted on giving me chips and salsa for free, tambien – I
stopped at the corner store and bought a five pound tank of kerosene from an outside cage, raised off the ground like a kennel, that the attendant had to open with a key and on my way back to my duplex I was stopped by a squad car on fifth street not far from the section eights where I tell people I live. I was walking down the middle of the street and I figured maybe the officer saw that I was drunk, and it didn’t help that I was lugging flammables around.

It was Mayberry’s cruiser.

He stopped the cruiser in the road beside me and rolled down his window. I stood where the yellow dividing lines had been cleared by a plow and Mayberry told me to get in. I walked around the front of the cruiser but a girl was in the front passenger seat, a black girl in a sleeveless, strapless top. “Get in back” said Mayberry and I opened the rear door and climbed inside. I found myself sitting across from another black girl, younger, dressed in pajama bottoms and a men’s long john shirt with the sleeves rolled up to ridiculous thickness. She was so skinny they’d otherwise fall down her arms, and it looked like she was wearing blood pressure cuffs on her biceps.
The last time I saw Mayberry was at Los Taco with Rico, when they showed me the paper they found in Marlow(e)’s pocket. Prior to that I hadn’t seen him since November or so, when I sat in on a cops’ poker game with Larry from DMARC, he hosted from time to time inside the food pantry warehouse. The buy-in was higher for the cops than the VISTAs – the VISTAs had a five dollar buy in, the cops 100 – and the game was tighter, tougher. The cops could always get a read on me, and I couldn’t read them, except Mayberry. With the VISTAs I could just play good hands, keep things tight to the chest, calculate the odds and wait. But with the cops you had to be aggressive and smart, or you’d get run out of every hand. You had to make decisions on the fly with partial information. I remember Mayberry wanting to know how I could afford 100 bucks on a volunteer wage? I remember telling him I’ve got a box of cash in a drawer back home and the other guys laughing, but not Mayberry. This was around the time of the river charge, the excessive force, and he was in a foul mood and looking for weakness, looking for lies. I’m just kidding, I told him, but even Mayberry can read a perp, and the truth must have been written on my face for anyone looking. Mayberry sensed something, at least, I’m sure he did.

I called Mayberry a night or two before he stopped me on the street – how long had it been since I slept? – and I wanted to know if he’d heard anything more about the river suicide. He was angry, it was late. “My wife
is going to think you’re someone else,” he said, “kapeesh? Don’t call me at home.”
It’s hot inside the squad car and I unzip my coat. I can’t see what kind of pants the girl up front is wearing but I see now that her top is a basketball jersey.

“They’re from Ghana,” says Mayberry, turning the rear view mirror onto my lap. “You planning to blow up the capitol?”

The kerosene container is riding on the floor between my knees. The bag of chips and salsa is on the seat between me and the younger girl from Ghana. I don’t know she’s younger, she just looks it. I’m druncker than I intended to be and as Mayberry drives north on 6th away from the city I wonder why I got inside the vehicle so willingly. I’ve never been on this side of the cage before. The pump action rifle is nestled in its brace behind Mayberry’s head. The girl in back looks bored, or tired, or both. I notice Mayberry’s scanner is off and I think about how cabs have a light for IN SERVICE and when the light is off you don’t bother trying to flag them down. Legally speaking I don’t know if a cop is ever truly off duty but we’re not very far up 6th and already I know that Mayberry is acting on his own tonight, he’s not on shift. I imagine the shelter bright with fluorescent lights and the heater I left on at home beside the open bottle of scotch and something tells me I won’t be home in time before the fuel runs out.
The first time I rode in this car with Mayberry he told me about Mr. Lee’s, the best Chinese barbecue in city. He said if you want to know where the good eating’s at, ask a cop.
“I’m afraid of fire,” I say in the car, and to be funny I add, “Officer” but my tongue feels heavy and it comes out sounding wrong, sounding derisive. I see Mayberry’s face in the rear view mirror and his nostrils flare like he’s caught a whiff of rotten milk.
The car is moving fast and the ticking of the sleet against the I-bar lights sounds like tokens being dumped into a sorting machine. I think about the pop-shots Mayberry says the black kids take at cop cars in my neighborhood. In the front seat now the black girl puts her hand on Mayberry’s shoulder and then removes a cigarette from the pack in Mayberry’s breast pocket, easy-like. Familiar.

We pass a fucked truck – what Rico calls an ambulance – with its headlights off and Mayberry hits the I-bars and flashes his lights and the ambulance’s lights come on and the EMT flashes Mayberry his high beams and Mayberry clicks the overheads off. The girl has the cigarette lit and is smoking and Mayberry reaches over and takes the cigarette out of her hands and takes a drag off it. I don’t say anything. The girl in the back says something to the girl in front in a language I don’t speak and they start conversing rapidly. It’s almost comforting, to hear the sounds and rhythms of their speech, but to be left out of the conversation, no responsibility – until it’s clear that they’re arguing. The girl in the back is agitated and speaking with her hands and she keeps crunching against the back of chips between us. The girl up from apparently wins and the other girl falls silent.

“There’s food in there,” I tell her and she stares at me.
Smoke fills the cab and Mayberry cracks his window. The girl in back leans forward and curls her fingers through the mesh of the cage, placing her head on the back of her hands.

“Mister officer,” she says with her accent. “I borrow a smoke?”

Mayberry reaches over his shoulder to pass the cigarette, ash side first, through the mesh of the cage to the small back girl in pajamas in the back seat. The girl takes the cigarette between her fingernails, careful not to burn herself, and leans back in the seat and smokes it, crossing her legs like she’s in a waiting room. She looks at me but does not offer me a pull off the cigarette. The girls take turns passing the cigarette between them and Mayberry lights another one for himself. There’s no talking for a while. Mayberry just drives.
When we reach Euclid Street Mayberry turns left, and as the Euclid Motel comes into view I ask Mayberry where we’re going. He drives past the Euclid motel and guns the car through a light that turns red ten yards ahead of us. No one is at the intersection. I’ve seen people honk or raise a fist when Mayberry pulls that stunt, the man or woman in the car immediately afterward waving in exaggerating postures of apology, once they’ve seen it’s a cop car that cut them off.

“Impunity,” Mayberry’d say, his favorite ten dollar word.
At an intersection a block before the west commercial strip, the long road that would take you south all the way down to Jordan Creek Mall, north into cornfields, Mayberry hangs a right like he’s Steve McQueen and the black girl slides against my hip in the back seat. The bag of chips gets crushed between us. One of her sleeves unfurls down passed her wrist. She slides herself back across the seat, against the window. The kerosene tank bangs against my knee, it hurts but there’s nowhere else to put it.
We drive nearly all the way to the 290 on ramps before pulling onto the old industrial road and then into the parking lot of The Glass Slipper where Mayberry moonlights on occasion as a bouncer. The Friday night crowd is ample for 8 pm, about half the spaces in the parking lot are filled. There’s another strip club across the parking lot, owned by the same group of men, the far one tucked against the trees and I heard from Mayberry and others that that’s the one where you can get a blowjob. The Glass Slipper is fully nude, but they don’t serve alcohol. The other place serves alcohol but the girls can only take their tops off.

Mayberry stops the car with the engine in gear.

"Get out," he tells me, and I don’t know what I’d say to change his mind. I get out of the car and grab my tank of kerosene and Mayberry peels away before I have a chance to grab my bag of tortilla chips. The door to the cruiser swings shut and the girl in the back of the squad car flicks me off through the rear window as the cruiser slips and slides over the snowy parking lot and into the street.

I stand there in the cold in the parking lot for a minute and then lift the kerosene tank in both arms and carry it to the front of the strip club.

I ask the bouncer at the door if there’s a payphone inside.

He says, “Who uses a payphone anymore?”

I ask him, “Is Alice working?”
The guy doesn’t know anyone by the name of Alice. I describe her to him, and the accent, and he tells me a lot of girls have accents, a lot of girls are blonde. It’s only when I describe the tattoo on her back that he knows her.

“Skinny bitch, sure,” he says. “The cover’s five bucks.”
In poker they call bluffing “firing blanks.”
Before I can enter the club, the bouncer makes me take care of my kerosene. I carry it across the parking lot and hide the canister in a bush buried in the snow on the other side of the guardrail. When I’m inside the club – my hand marked with an invisible X that shines under the light of the bouncer’s special flashlight – I head straight to the fruit bar and I ask for Alice and a few minutes later someone touches me on the shoulder and I turn around and hardly recognize her.

“You look good,” I say, and Alice squints and says, “Do I know you?”
Alice laughs and gives me a hug and a man near me at the bar grunts jealously, dismissively. Alice stands back and lets me get a good look at her, doing the Vanna White gesture with her hands, up and down her own body and saying, “Is your little pup grown up?” I picture the black girl in the back seat of the car, asking “Mr. Officer” for a smoke.

Alice flashes a grin to the dismissive man at the bar and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek, slipping her cold white hand in mine.

“Let’s get out of the limelight,” she says.

She leads me down the length of the bar with the stage to our right across a room full of chairs and tiny tables. It’s lit up like Christmas in here, and every so often the lights fade out and a blacklight shines on the stage and across the audience. The aisles are clogged with men and there are tables with beers and plates of food and napkins on them. None of the men are looking at me and Alice, not even the bartender, all of their eyes are on the other women – those circling the room looking for tips or dances, without a man on their arm, and the two girls dancing on stage to the tune of AC/DC. I’m pulled by Alice through a purple beaded door and into a quieter space sectioned into six cubicles each with its own couch, blacklight, and concealment drapes. She sits me on the couch in the back left booth and tells me to wait. Her smile is so genuine-looking it feels matronly, and I’m happy to wait as if I’ve been told to do so by a nurse, or some other mothering figure. The song on the stereo changes, and Tom Petty’s “Mary
Jane” fills the club – there are no speakers in the back room, but the volume is loud enough to hear through the beaded doorway. There are a couple of men in booths surrounding mine, I know because the drapes were closed, but the volume of the song is loud enough that I can’t hear their conversations – assuming it’s talking they’re doing.
Alice returns a minute later and closes the drapes behind her. We’re alone in the small room in the dark with only a soft lava lamp illuminating the scene. The drape is purple and I can see the mark on my hand glowing teal-blue. Alice’s lingerie is yellow and it shines like the sun in the backlight. There’s some sort of chalk or powder on her skin that makes it appear phosphorescent, like the matte coating on Adam’s acoustic guitar or like space dust. I look at the mark on the back of my hand and it’s raised in the light like something from an optician’s exam. Alice sits beside me with her hip against mine. Her hand finds my bad knee and rests there.

“I’m supposed to ask you if you’re a cop,” she says, amused with herself.

“And if I were?”

“Discount,” she says, rubbing her fingertips next to her lips.

“Don’t do that,” I say to her and she tells me, “Relax.”

“That’s the one thing I can’t do.”

Alice reaches into her purse and removes a pill container.

“Let me nurse you back to health,” she says.
Alice feels so light beside me I imagine her walking across a field of snow without leaving any footprints. She touches my temple, my chin.

She twists open the bottle cap and taps a few white pills onto her palm.

“I’m tired,” I say.

“I know, baby.”

“And I’m drunk.”

“Good,” says Alice. “Me too. Drunk helps the medicine go down.”

“I thought they don’t let liquor in this place.”

“Not for the johnnies,” she says. “There’s a full bar in the dressing room.”

“I see.”

“Girls only.”

“Mm.”

She straddles me.

“Down the hatch now,” she says.
Later she asks me, “You want me to fix you a drink?”

“The hell I do.”

“I mix a killer margarita.”

“Ok.”

“I use cherry wine instead of mixer.”

“That’s fine.”

“It’s tasty,” she says in the dark.

A little later I tell her, “I think I need that drink.”
A couple of years ago on a midnight ridealong with Mayberry, this asian guy couldn’t pronounce Mayberry’s name and Mayberry kept repeating it: “Office Massey.” “Mass-eeh.” “Mass,” he said, “Eeh.” Finally he told the guy, “It’s a southern name,” like that explained it.
Alice is standing in front of me like a luminescent seraphim or devil. Her hair is everywhere. her eyes are hemmed in by thick black eyeliner. She takes one of the pills and bites on it, holding it between her front teeth and she tilts her head back, her long white neck exposed.

“You can swallow it dry?” I ask, and she says, “Watch me.”
I’m watching the game on the TV at Peeples and in the final seconds, Kansas holds the ball, the point guard resisting the urge to shoot up a three point shot at the end like I’ve seen ecstatic players do in the thrill of victory. It’s a blowout and the kid has poise, there’s no need to go crazy. Respectable. Well coached. Ken is probably watching the game at home with Beth, thinking, Arrogant. Thinking, Entitled. The TV programmers jump to a split screen, with three other games going on. All of them ending. My mother used to wait until the very end of games to come into the living room and join us. She said it was the only exciting part, everything leading up to the end was just “filler.”

I sit at the bar and nurse my scotch until it’s gone. Danny left for the basement long ago. I get up off my stool and see some VISTAs coming out of the basement and I head for the back of the bar, toward the rear entrance. Near the bathrooms I cross paths with the woman Adam paid to play Queen for me. She’s attractive, now that I look at her. I can smell her perfume and it’s nice, soft, and I know she told me her name but I don’t remember it.

There’s something about the bar or the girl, the color or the smell, and at that moment I remember Alicia’s package sitting on my desk at the shelter.

“You just don’t like me,” says the woman, stopping in front of me.

“No sugarcoating,” I say. “Really, I hate you.”

She smiles.
“Your friend says you graduated or something today.”
“My friend has a way of misrepresenting the facts.”
“Well, congratulations anyway.”
“Please, don’t offer to buy me a drink.”
She cocks her hips a little to the side. She’s drunk.
“What’s your name again,” I say and she tells me and I tell her she’s lovely and I’d be lucky sit down and have a drink with her, but I’m attached at the moment.
“All the good ones are,” she says, and I say, “I haven’t even been nice to you” and she tells me, “Go figure.”
She writes her number on a napkin, using the wall for a surface, and I put it in my pocket and when she’s out of sight I take it out again and throw it in the garbage bin beside the rear door.
In the alley I try to make off but I hear my name being called behind me and I turn around and I see Arriana, a VISTA I know, she works under Amanda at the Community Center. Arriana is sharing a cigarette under cover of the gutter overhang with Jessica, my VISTA from the Youth Center. They’re both draped under the same large coat. A mild sleet is coming down from the sky and the air is light.

When I’m spotted, Arriana tells me everyone is getting ready to go across the street for Pu Pu platters. She says I should go with and I tell her sorry, no, and she says “Pu pu platter, man, what could be better than that?”

I look at Jessica who looks away, and I say: “The sun has set on me forever.”

“What?” says Arriana.

“I have a meeting to get to,” I say.

Jessica, looking unimpressed, says, “You have a meeting now?”

“At the shelter.”

“It’s like, eleven at night,” says Arriana.

“Haven’t you heard?” I say, retreating down the alley. “I live there now.”

It’s a good exiting line but Jessica won’t let me off that easy, she doesn’t answer to me anymore now that I’m no longer VISTA Leader, she’s drunk and she gives me a piece of her mind.
“I know guys like you,” she says. “You’ve got all the answers. But you better watch out, or you’ll become one of those dudes with his tongue hanging out pushing a shopping cart filled with porn around the mall parking lot.”

I say, “That’s the most detailed unsolicited advice I’ve ever received.”

Jessica takes a drag off the cigarette and passes the butt to Arriana for the final pull.

“Anyway,” I tell her. “You still work for those dudes.”

“I’m going to be the principal of a school one day,” she says loudly.

The girls head back into the bar and I’m alone in the alley and stop walking backyard and just stand there a minute. It was in this alley where Amanda and I kissed, our first kiss, and it was in my duplex, at the door, where I kissed her last before she left the morning of our date at the Homestead. I feel like an idiot for quoting Dickens’s father to those girls, even though they won’t remember and they’d never know where I was quoting from, or that it was a quote in the first place. I think I read that line in an Edmund Wilson essay, it’s what Dickens’s father said the day they hauled him off to prison. Tax evasion, I think, or fraud. I start walking through the alley again, feet forward, and I try to imagine myself pushing a grocery cart full of tennis balls around the high school parking lot where Jessica will be principal one day. I wonder if Danny will give me free dental when I need it, or will he turn me away like all the rest of the untouchables.

At the end of the alley I come around on a side street to the front of the bar and cross quickly so no one coming out for Pu Pu platters will see me, and I pass the gaudy motel again and Young’s Chinese restaurant in front of which a small mixed breed dog, a good looking mutt of shepherd or collie blood, sits tied by his leash to a parking meter covered in a blue plastic hood. The dog looks up at me imploringly.

“You too?” I say and I give him my recommendation.
12pm tomorrow, 2nd floor, 81 E. Main Street, payment due upon arrival.
When Alice comes back with two cherry wine margaritas I tell her I want to know the real names of the pills I swallowed. She tells me it’s a vicodin and I tell her I don’t recognize the way it looks and she tells me its name brand, not the generic crap. When I’ve got two more pills in me and Alice five, she tells me the pills are Percocet, not hydrocodone.

“What does that mean?”

“It means buckle up,” she says.
The night I left Amanda at the Homestead I got in my car and hit the freeway and I drove north on Route 35 and kept going, past Ames and signs for the Ball jar factory and the smell of garlic powder near the spice plant and Storey City where Amanda once took me for German food in a small restaurant she used to eat at with her parents when she a child, and while I was driving I passed two pididdles, and remembered my mother telling me if you spot a pididdle you get a kiss from whatever girl you’re with, and it dawned on me I never had the opportunity to try that on Amanda, or maybe I was so focused on her all the time – she had a way of catching my attention – that I never noticed the headlights in front of us. Near the South Dakota border I passed a truck with its high beams on and I flashed my lights and the other car turned their high beams off and flashed me back to thank me for letting them know. I remember a series of events my mother told me about where gangs drove around rural areas with their lights off and if a driver flashed their own lights to warn them, the gang followed them and drove them off the road and murdered them. My childhood dreaming was filled with mythic, random acts of violence culled from urban legend and the nightly news. People poisoning ATM envelopes, injecting poison in Pepto Bismol in drug stores, leaving baby seats in the middle of the road at night so people ran over them and thought they’d killed an infant. My friend Tim was the one who told me in second grade about Vietnam women who put crushed glass and razor blades in their vaginas to mangle the penises of the American soldiers who raped them.
When I neared South Dakota I realized I had gone from leaving nowhere to heading nowhere else. I turn the car around. Driving home, after I pull off 35 on 80 west I take the northern exit into Des Moines, coming down past the Glass Slipper and the Euclid Motel, like a Price is Right Plinko chip click click clicking into a prize box. I spot something out of the corner of my eye. There’s an RSO sign stuck in the ground. I only see the top of it, on the edge of a gas station, under an awning so the snow hadn’t fully covered it. I could recognize the sign anywhere, all red with the white moon and stars logo just like on Ken’s baseball cap. There’s another sign next to it advertising BROWN FOR MAYOR. I pull up the stakes on the RSO sign, which is difficult because of the frozen ground, and I have to slide the sign off its metal posts, which I leave in the ground. I bend them over on the top so there’s no sharp edge, in case someone falls. I put the sign in the trunk of my car, then look back at the BROWN FOR MAYOR sign and take it out of its posts, too. If I had spray paint I’d have written TONY FOR MAYOR and left it there the way whoever it was left the sign on the 80 underpass about Spring. I put the mayoral sign in my trunk and close the trunk and drive home.
The next morning I saw the wheel, deflated, and the smooth head of a nail in the tread. I must have picked it up somewhere between South Dakota and here, and since I didn’t notice it on the drive I’ll bet I got it in the parking lot of that old gas station. That or I got it a hundred miles away from here and it was a slow leak. Slow or not, the tire was flat and on Monday I called Ken and asked if he could pick me up for work. He told me to take the bus, but fifteen minutes later I met him at the corner in front of the tenement houses and he said, “Battery?” and I said, “Flat.”
There’s an all you can eat bar inside the Glass Slipper and the men go back and forth with full and empty plates like they’re in their living room, eating chili and buffalo dip out of crock pots arranged by their wives. I sit at the bar and drink virgin bloody maries on the house. Alice works the room and sometimes disappears into the back room with a customer. She comes over every so often and gives me a squeeze on the hand or the leg and leans with her elbows on the bar and her sparkly chest out exposed to the room and men are looking at us and Alice slips me a pill and I swallow it. The pill is different than the hydrocodone was, and the way it feels on my tongue is different, and the effect is in the same category, weightless but heavy at the same time, grounded but expansive, like a hot air balloon. But the pills she gives me cut through the decompression period - pharmaceutically speaking - and go straight into flight. There’s no gradual build-up or runway, just this broad chemical wash and I feel like I’m without a horizon: rocket, blast-off.
The bar has filled with vapor – I don’t know with what. In the mall they pump in O2 through the vents, so Beth tells me. Now I can see the very air inside the club and everything looks coated in dust like how Alice’s skin looks in the black light. Alice goes on stage and I leave and find the bathroom. The bathroom in the strip club smells like the back of my father’s garage, the old one, behind our old house in Albany, before my mother died and my father sold his older tools and bought new shiny rust-free equipment to use on other people’s sinks and toilets and pipes. There’s a sulfuric, tarnished quality to the air, created from a toilet that keeps running. The tiles on the floor are black with rotten grout and the molding around the walls is stained in crystalline patterns like little murals of brown stars and asterisks. When I’m out of the bathroom Alice catches me by the door and takes me into the back room again and we sit with another girl, a black girl, a girl with wild wired hair that sticks straight away from her like she’s going mach 5. The girl is breaking white tablets in half between her fingernails and laying them out on the table. “In half is easier to crush,” she says, “Whole pills have a habit of shooting out from under you.” She takes out a credit card and uses the flat edge to press down on the pills, then a sliding motion like a mortar grinding in a pestle to make it powder. The black girl is being called to the stage and she asks Alice to draw on her belly with a black-glow marker and Alice hands me the marker and I draw a heart on the black girls’ belly and the girl sees the heart, pulling her
boobs aside, and she lets go of her boobs again and looks at Alice and says, “Oh, he’s sweet.” She leaves the room and Alice takes me outside. We stand in the parking lot behind the club and I can see the other club across the way but I can’t see to the front to where I hid my kerosene and I hope it’s still there I hope no one took it. I wonder if it did get stolen and someone used it for arson or something worse would I be responsible? I don’t know how they’d trace it back to me, it isn’t dynamite or something you have to show ID for like Sudafed or at the DMV or to spend the night at the shelter. Alice pulls me behind a dumpster so we’re out of the wind and she keeps finding ways to drape her body around me, her legs and her arms, like I’m some dancing pole except we’re only smoking cigarettes. I look out across the empty parking lots behind the club where old businesses used to be and in the distance you can see the old rail yards where a few train cars still stand against the backdrop of the thruway over-pass like ancient stepping stones scaled long ago by some giant. There’s a dirty sofa behind the club covered in snow and Alice kicks some of the snow off with the heel of her boot, balancing on one leg like a bird and resting her boot on the armrest like a cowgirl looking out over the tundra of abandoned industry.

“Didn’t you have a girl?” she says. “Last I remember, a nice one. Pretty, too.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have her no more?”

I picture Amanda at home reading textbooks on urban renewal projects for her night class at Drake.

“What makes you say that.”

“You’re here with me,” she says, tapping her cigarette against the club’s brick wall to release the ash.

I tell her, “It’s complicated.”
Alice looks up at the moon in the sky and I see her long white neck glowing chemically in the moonshine. She lowers her head and her cold hand hooks my wrist and she pulls me toward her. She gives me a kiss on the cheek, lingering, and maybe it’s not unlike a kiss between siblings, innocent and nothing more, but it feels – or it is – drawn out, slowed down, and time or our bodies or both unfold more slowly in this universe out back of the club where the snow melts onto the blacktop and turns to ice.
For a long while Alice is in front of me considering my face, and then she tells me with sweet dark breath that she doesn’t have a place to stay. My stomach is an empty drum and the tequila and wine and pills are scouring my gut like a homemade chemical cocktail my father used to make to clean his engine parts.

“Are you still staying at the Euclid Motel?” I ask her.

She tells me no.

“What happened?”

“Got evicted.”

“How come?”

“Landlord’s a pervert.”
Alice goes inside to call us a cab and to get her things and I walk around the club and meet her in front. I wait with Alice under the club’s awning while the bouncer sends texts on his phone in the alcove beside us. Some men come and go while we’re waiting. I stopped hearing things a while ago and when I do hear sounds from the parking lot or from inside the club when the door swings open everything is strange to me but I like it, I don’t want the sounds to end but then I stop hearing again, and I just keep looking around at everything. Alice lays her head on my shoulder and I think about how I once had a script for hydrocodone because Esmeralda hit me with her cane. I told Tony and the doctor that I slipped on the ice. This was not too long before Reggie’s SleepOut. The vicodin helped with the pain but I got used to the pain, and I didn’t want to push the pills, either, because of my sister. I’d do anything to avoid ending up that way, not me, the good son, never find me in an emergency room or jail. It reminds me of a joke among the VISTAs, how you need to get yourself hit by a car because AmeriCorps insurance pays for prescriptions and emergencies, but not for visits to a regular doctor. The joke goes: “Hey doc, thanks for the transfusion, and for setting my broken bones and stopping that arterial bleed and all: but say, could you give me something to help with this toenail fungus? It really itches.”
I ask Alice, “What have I been saying?”

“Boy-oh, I just don’t know.”

I say, “Hell.”
Alice and I hug each other and wait in the cold for the cab and the bouncer doesn’t pay us any mind. I see a limousine come and go in front of the club across the lot. Alice shivers and says it’s “cold cold cold” and she isn’t wearing anything but her dancing get-up under her long microfiber coat that feels like fur.

“The Buddhists believe in two hells,” I tell her. “One hot and one cold. One made of fire and one made of ice.”

“What kind of bad does a girl have to do to make it to the hot side.”
The taxi arrives and Alice and I slip into a sleeve of leathery backseat. Her long and slender legs pale white against the torn leather fabric of the cab’s backseat. When I was young my cousin who I did not see often got bit by ants in the woods, I was there in the woods with her, and she was bleeding bright red and screaming and the women all took her inside and acted strangely, cloak and dagger kind of keeping her away, behind closed doors. I remember not understanding why what happened had to be hidden, what there was to be ashamed of, and the mothers got it sorted out and it wasn’t what they thought it was and years would go by before I understood what that was about. Alice’s eyes are blue in the darkness I swallow them like marbles but I can’t see her body without the aid of any light.

“Fuck me,” I say, and Alice says, “Now you’re speaking my language.”

I mean the kerosene, and I get out of the cab and close the door and cross the parking lot and I get my canister of kerosene and haul it back across the parking lot and the cabdriver pops the trunk without question and I put the tank inside and close the trunk and the handle of the car door is thick and soft like gummy candy between my fingers and I float down inside the cab beside Alice and she drapes her legs over mine and rests her head against the window. The driver asks me where I live and I tell him.
When I can’t sleep I lie awake calculating myself endlessly like Giuseppe Ferrari tabulating his “arithmetic of history.” Every 31 years, he said, constituted a generation, and four generations made up one great cycle of history. But Ferrari couldn’t make the numbers fit, his equations were unsound: history’s checkbook could not be so easily balanced.

Or was it Thiboudet.
The door to my duplex is always unlocked and it opens easily with Alice on my arm, and I leave the light off inside and help Alice to the couch where I lay her soft white body down on the worn cushions and cover her with my mother’s old afghan blanket. I kiss the top of her forehead like a button I could push and push and it would never end. Her tattoos and silver throat. Her face is an endless cotton box, a chute with no bin, a never-ending coin just falling through space. Soft sweet Alice with sharp snaggle teeth and needle eyes. I leave her sleeping on my couch like a graven image, like a tin doll I can pretend has nothing dark inside of it. Just doing my job, a service to the lost and needy. Just one more animal brought in from the wild, smelling of lilac perfume and cheap booze.
I lock the door behind me. The moon is out and the cab is waiting. Nearly one full week since I’d slept. I tell the cabbie to take me to the homeless shelter and when he drops me off I don’t go in, the building just sits there like a lump of coal with little glowing eyelets and I climb inside the outreach van and open the glove box and remove the screwdriver. It takes me a few times before I get the head lined up and then I turn the ignition and press the gas and I’m moving, my own loud terrible odorous bubble and it’s a few minutes of gliding before I’m off the main roads and driving on ice-encrusted unplowed access roads. The conditions are about the same as the afternoon Ken and I met Jimmy near the dyke near Esmeralda’s place and I leave the van idling in the snow on the access road and I take a full bag of athletic socks from the back of the van, unopened, a dozen pair, and hoof it the rest of the way up the slope toward the dyke, loping through the woods with a body soft and warm and floating and my head is filled with intention but I’m moving slowly, warmly, and I don’t feel my feet breaking through the bracken or hear my footsteps or my heavy breathing, it’s all just smooth to me like I’m being pulled along by a string or on a sled over ice.
I can hear the movement of the river, just off in the near dark. Orion is turning it’s slow cartwheel in the southern sky and halfway along the dyke I leave the trail and head into the woods, toward Orion’s belt, my southern compass and I’m struggling through snags and bushes buried deep under the snow and when I’m in the woods I stop so often to listen and I look and I see smoke in the sky and I follow it. Eventually I hear voices coming out of the dark and I see the flickering flames between the trees like the other one of Ken’s party tricks where he lights a match and puts the burning end inside his mouth and bites down and the gaps between his front teeth make it look like a jackolantern, a Jack-Ken-lantern, yeah. I close in on the fire and when I’m near enough I begin to see the outline of the shapes of people and I call out to them.
"Hey hey," I say, and the voices stop, and I stop, not even the sound of my boots in the snow, and I say, "Hey there, hello," and someone says, "Come along now, will you?"
There are three men and a woman sitting around the campfire roasting marshmallows, Nick not among them. I’m invited to sit by the fire and I do on the end of a log and I recognize Jimmy is there, but he doesn’t seem to know who I am, he doesn’t recognize me from before. I hear a sound from one of the tents and a man steps out and it’s Nick. Nick is taller when you see him in the shelter, he looks short in the woods but he’s got a knife strapped to his hip and I can’t see the blade inside the leather sheath but I’ll bet he keeps it sharp. His heavy boots and Ranger jacket. I always thought him a baleful man, but here he seems almost familiar. He’s holding a metal skewer with a marshmallow on the end and he extends the tip close to the lips of flames so that the marshmallow browns but does not burn. Nick, the lean, the unshaven, the small but ligatured body. Nick pulls the skewer from above the fire and points it in my direction, offers me the marshmallow and I remove my glove and take the hot brown mass between my fingers, pulling it off the stick and leaving a snail-like residue of melted sugar behind it. Nick puts the skewer back in the blue crown of fire, close to the ash, to blacken the leftover smear of marshmallow. He lets the poker cool and then scrapes off the charred bits of marshmallow with the blade of his hunting knife. An owl calls desolately from its icy post high in the cold trees.
Nick looks to the sky and tells me, “Yeti. Now them are thieves.”

“Lock up your children.”

“Bigfoots all over these woods.”
The camp is protected from the wind by its place among the trees. There are logs stacked under one of the tarps. I think about the meal log in my office and the ledger with all the names of the men sleeping tonight in the shelter. I think of all the roster roll calls I’ve been a part of and those I administered while I was teaching at ISU. I think about Ken’s matches on his desk and the logs my father split and stacked across our old property, as squared and orderly as barracks. Nick offers me a cigarette. He lights it using the tip of his own lit cigarette, blowing through his until the back draft lights mine, and I think about the cigars in Tony’s Humidor and the matches from the Euclid Hotel left in Marlowe’s dead pockets. I wonder if Nick would care to hear a lesson on smoking etiquette.
There’s jewel weed everywhere in these woods and I remember Amanda on a recon trip in the van with me and Ken and we walked the dyke – this was summer – and I slipped my hand around hers and I showed her what jewel weed was, told her to pluck a pod and she did and it exploded in her hand as jewelweed does, wired for spreading its seeds, and Amanda jumped, startled, squeezed my hand hard as the pod spun like helicopter blades and Amanda’s wide green eyes.
“Get warm, brother,” says Nick, closing the circle around the fire.

“You look cold as a drum.”
“What you need is a good touque,” Jimmy tells me. “Something to cover the ears.”

“What’s a touque?” asks the third man.

“It’s like a fucking - Scrabble word,” says the woman who sits close to Jimmy with one of her hands in the pocket of his coat. Her laugh grinds into the night and snow falls from an evergreen tree, dusting the overhead air.
"I brought socks," I tell them.
"You ever seen a zipper?" I ask the campfire crowd. It’s something my father showed me around the camp fire, we used to burn them at night when my cousins came to visit, the same cousin who bled behind closed doors and it was just the fire ants. I think about Alice sleeping behind my duplex door and it’s the first time the door’s been locked, it wasn’t even locked when the real estate agent drove me to the property and handed me the keys. I get a clear picture in my head of my great grandfather’s firebox and all my cashed pay checks, all three years of them, sitting inside and Alice there alone in the house: and it dawns on me that Mayberry knew where he was going when he took me to the club. A second image comes to mind, this one of the black girl reaching into Mayberry’s pocket for his smokes and the girl in my head becomes Alice, and I see her giving her devilish squint-eyed look to Mayberry and lighting up and touching him. The eyes of the men and woman around the camp fire are on me, I’m center stage, and I tie the plastic around the edge of the stick and put the plastic end in the fire, lecturing on temperature and vibration, and when it’s lit I take it out and hold it up but nothing happens.

"It’s the wrong kind of plastic," I say.

"I got Wonder Bread," said Jimmy’s girl and she went into their tent and came out with the bag. I did the trick with the bread bag and it worked. The fire melts the plastic and the plastic gets so hot it melts itself after the flame is gone, and when the chemicals start to separate they make a
zipping sound like a dripping faucet, you can see the hot melting plastic like candle wax falling to the ground and when you hear the zip zip zip it’s like something out of a space movie, like a laser gun or a shooting star.

“That’s pretty neat,” says the third man.
I say the name Marlow(e) and Nick doesn’t react.

I say the name again.

Nick says, “What of it?”

“Was he living here? Did you know him?”

Nick spat into the fire.

“You some kind of cop?”

The others looked at me and laughed.

“I’m a concerned citizen.”

The third man asks, “You got any matches on you, friend?”
I empty my pockets. A roll of dimes I toss Nick’s way and he catches it. A book of matches from the Euclid Hotel and the sheet of paper with the photocopy of the text on Newton. I lean forward and hand the man the matchbook. I take out my keys and my wallet and I show Nick my business card.

“I work at the shelter.”

Nick looks up at the moon and back down at me.

“You ain’t here on the company dollar.”

“No.”

“Don’t they warn you away from coming here at night?”

“No,” I say, “They don’t.”

“They should.”
I look around at the other men’s faces, the girl’s head is resting on Jimmy’s big shoulder.

“None of you knew Marlow?”

“They ain’t,” says Nick.

I look at the third man. The woman won’t meet my gaze.

“What about you two?”

Nick stands up. “I said they ain’t,” he says.

Nick takes a step around the fire and he’s moving slowly toward me. The drugs are in me good and deep but I still feel the fear – I thought I wouldn’t but I do, I’m quivering and even though I’m high, I know I’m high: even though I am I’m also scared. I’m about to stand up when I see that from the other direction Jimmy is on his feet, and I was wrong: it was Jimmy who was coming toward me, fast and locomotive.
"Down," says Nick and I sit.
A squirrel or something scurries in the lower gloom of the black treetops. Jimmy is over me now, leaning, big and brick and tall as a church.

“Sanchez,” he says, “Is that you?”
Nick is closing in cautiously from the side and he tells me to sit still and I do. I can’t make out where Jimmy’s are looking, it’s like he’s fixing them on me but he isn’t, and I think about the way he looked all off target with his gaze the afternoon Ken and I found him staring at Elton John through the silly round porthole. Jimmy keeps shaking his head, not from side to side but as if to dust something off or fuss away flies.

“God damn you, Sanchez,” he says, blinking and hugging himself, then reaching out in my direction. “I saw you in that fucking trailer. I saw inside your head. I saw inside your head, man!”
It happened fast and all I know is Jimmy wasn’t coming at me any more, he was lying on his side on the ground and holding near his groin, writhing on the ground and vociferating madly like a wounded dog. Nick stood over him like a wrestler, with his back to me, looking down upon Jimmy’s body.

“Hey now, Jimmy,” said Nick. “Let’s stop this, hear?”

Nick helped Jimmy to his feet and arranged him sitting on the edge of a log where the others stared into the fire.
Jimmy didn’t look at me again but Nick came over and knelt in front of me and crossed his arms so they rested on the tip of his skewer that he stuck in the ground first.

“Don’t come here no more,” he said to me. “I can’t have no one getting hurt. Not nobody like you, kapeesh?”

I didn’t say yes but I didn’t have to.

“Bad press,” Nick said. “Publicity ain’t on our side. You work at the shelter, you know, you get what I mean.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Get up.”
Jimmy was back at the fire with his girl resting her head on his shoulder and the third man started humming loudly, an old Carole King song and I followed Nick to the edge of where the fire’s light cast away the shadows of the woods, and I let him lead me further out into the darkness until we were among the tall trees and the stars shone overhead and the next brightest light was the beckoning glow of the snow-blanketed field that lead to the dyke beyond the trees to the north. I see Cassiopeia low in the sky.

“Head that way,” said Nick.

“I will.”

Nick walked a few steps back in the direction of the camp. I heard him pause, the sound of his footsteps coming nearer again.

“Nothing you can do for us out here but fuck our shit up, hear me?”

I felt something hit me in the chest. I looked down and saw a pair of socks lying at my feet. I turned around and Nick was gone.
I feel like I’m in a closed dark room or closet and I feel my way around by the hardness of trees, the texture of their bark. I look for bends or bumps in the forest the way my hand used to trace Amanda’s body, trying to map her freckles in the dark, Orion’s belt there in miniature along her jugular. I don’t know how many steps it was before I reached the edge of the woods and crossed the field and fell over myself again and again trudging along the dyke stepping in old frozen footsteps until I reached the outreach van. I squeezed the pair of socks in my pocket. I could not feel my knee, no pain no ache no stiffness, but I could not feel the rest of me either, and even though I was tired, tired, tired, it worried me. I fell or I didn’t, I felt warm in the head and I climbed up into the van and laid my face against the steering wheel and closed my eyes, feeling the vibration of the van’s engine rocking my forehead, the knocking about of the exhaust pipes below me like logs in a jam, and I sat with my hands on my lap and drifted into a deep infantile sleep.
When we were very young my sister and I would ride hubcaps down the hill in back of our house when the snow froze over. We’d slide right across the pond, too, and not tell our parents, and one day I slid out into the pond but failed to make it across and when I tried to stand up, a ring of ice broke around me and I fell in up to my neck. My sister came out onto the ice, on her feet at first and I hollered, Go back! She dropped to her knees and shimmied toward me and I said, Go back! Go back! and she laid out on her stomach and gave me her hand, and I was able to pull myself out.
When we were older and I’d hear my sister recount the story, she would tell how her older brother had told her “Go back,” how he didn’t want her to risk herself in saving him. What she didn’t know was that I did not have her safety in mind. I was afraid she would break through the ice, that is true – but my real fear was that if she fell through the ice, who would be left to run and get help, to tell what had happened, to show them where to find me?
It’s around 11 pm – lights out – when I abscond from the bar and drive through downtown, on Walker Street where in the summertime during the Farmer’s Market cherubic boys and girls carry zinnias over the small arch bridge on 10th street that leads over the blue river. Every Saturday you’d see the girls in skirts holding corndogs and great Danes and outdoor music. My father was allergic to dogs but my mother loved them, she couldn’t have one in the house so she’d volunteer at the shelters in town and walk them and groom them and play with them for free. She would have loved the great Danes at the market, the way my father would have hated the folk trios with their lifeless covers of Jim Croce and Joni Mitchell songs. I’d go here with Amanda, first as friends, later as a couple. Off and on and always uncertain, but on Saturdays we’d find each other here. Last November she volunteered to distribute fliers for Reggie’s SleepOut, and I was in charge of overseeing this big flotilla-like house students that a School in Des Moines built out of cardboard in advertisement for RSO. Someone passing by said, Isn’t making it fun defeating the purpose and I said, It depends on your purpose. I could see Amanda through the other side of the cardboard house and she looked lovely, her hair blowing in the November wind and her struggling to give individual fliers from the stack because of the mittens on her hands. My knee was aching and that was the first night I put a vicodin in my mouth. I remember staring at a lamppost that someone had knitted a scarf around. This was near the cardboard house, the Reggie’s tent. Amanda
said, “Tune in Des Moines,” and she asked me where I’d gone and I said, “Nowhere.” I could tell she was a little concerned so I said, “Elton John dressed as a pumpkin” and she said, “That’ll put anyone into shock.” I’m just a little tired, I said, and she said, I could go for a pumpkin latte about now and we drove to Mars Café. I remember that evening because before the sun set the clouds pooled in the middle of the sky and purple and orange rings of evening wrapped around the cloud head like scarves.
I see the Capital building in the distance and I think about driving to it. I have this idea that the dome would keep pulling away, like some vertigo shot in a Hitchcock film, closer and farther at the same time, enlargening but getting farther away. Like watching a stone or a coin dropped in a swimming pool. The feeling one gets when reading Kafka. The description some people use for falling in love. Or out of it.
I turn south instead and I’m maneuvering the Saab through city streets until I’m out past everything, south of city proper, and on the edge of the city limits I turn down Clinton Ave and see the shelter glowing like an inn at the end of the road. I pull into the shelter parking lot and I see in the old TrustCo Bank lot adjacent to the shelter’s lot a group of teenage boys are pulling U-ees in the parking lot. The boys’ car is turning figure eights, out and back and around again like a whip. I park the car next to the Outreach van. I get out of the car and retrieve the take-out containers from where I’d left them in the outreach van and I walk down the icy, people-less sidewalk and ring the buzzer at the front door and I stare into the bright windows where the fern leaves hang in the corner like a school of fish, until the security guard looks back at me and recognizes my face and let’s me in.

“Nice hat,” he says, and I ask him, “Full house?”

“Kings,” he says, “No queens tonight.”
It’s warm inside the shelter with the central heat on, I can hear it blowing in the vents overhead. All the lights are on, there’s not a shadow in the place. The security guard leaves me and I have to use my key to let myself in Ken’s office. Everyone essential staff in the shelter has a key for every room in the building except for the women’s residence. I’m not supposed to have keys, but Ken got annoyed pretty quick always having to let me into places so he took me to Home Depot one day and made me my own set. I take my bracket out of my coat pocket. On the back side of the bracket I write, MASS-HIS-DOOR-IA and I fold the bracket in half like a simple tent and leave it on Ken’s desk. The kerosene heater is off and cold in the corner behind Elton John’s phone-book throne. I leave the Styrofoam container with the steak inside from the Homestead, setting it on the ledge close to the iced-over window pain to keep it preserved overnight.
I read about Amish people replenishing grain and water supplies on a weekly basis, preparation and survival instincts. My father had two generators in the garage and I remember once every few months pouring the extra gallons of gas into the cars and driving with him in his truck to the gas station to refill them. My mother had a store of candles. On birthdays of dead relatives and holidays she’d light candles in remembrance. My father called it a fire hazard, to leave the candles burning all night long and my mother would say, “All that gas in the garage and you think a stupid votive candle’s gonna burn the house down?”
I walk across the hall and let myself inside Tony’s office. Behind his desk is a poster Charlie’d given him, a picture of a man standing in Tadasana pose, and its segmented inside a circle and a square like Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, and instead of double-limbs there are 7 small bubbles centered on the spine each with their own color: Root, Sacral, Solar Plexus, Heart, Throat, Third Eye, Crown. I think how Blaise would feel slighted, the poster doesn’t account for the controversial God-head, the mysterious 8th chakra. Those who believe in it say it sits above, and beyond, the human form: it’s the seat of pure being, the Divine Space, the upper correlative to the root chakra in the perineum, between the groin and the anus which is all about verve. Supposedly, the God Chakra pings tingly wonderful feelings down your spine when everything within you is properly aligned. Someone drew a penis lightly outlined in pencil on the figure in the poster and Tony would have removed it, surely, had he more time to give than just a passing notice to the poster, or anything else collecting dust around the office where you’ll never find him.
On the edge of Tony’s desk next to a box of tissues is a humidor and I open the heavy cherry wood lid and take a cigar. The humidor’s cedar lining gives off a pleasant sawdust odor. I choose a fat maduro cigar with a dark chocolaty wrapper. It smells muddy and thick like coffee or roasted chestnuts. I slip it into the breast pocket. I remove a second cigar, a candela wrapper the color of the lime walls in Ken’s office. I put the candela next to the maduro in my pocket and I close the office door behind me.
I go back into Ken’s office and when I open the door the plastic hoop catches on the door frame and falls to the ground. I think it’s a shame Ken and I have never kept score with DJ Ken, no running tally. My mother told me her parents used to play rummy and they’d keep a running tally, but they’d lose the tally sheet and would always have to keep starting over—zero, zero—beginning from scratch again the way my mother did if her sourbread starters failed to activate. I suppose in a way the rolls of dimes on my desk are a sort of tally, but only of my victories, and maybe the calories in Ken’s belly, all those dozens of cookies over the year, if you could track his weight gain and weight loss and subtract it by the number of dimes on my desk, maybe there’s some kind of total there. A mathematician or economist or engineer might be able to do the math, if only we’d kept better records.
Down the hallway the security guard stands outside the men’s residence. The women separated from the men, under lock and key. I ask the guard if anyone is in there yet and he says no, no one has signed up for the night and that’s not uncommon for the winter. If even one woman was in there the guard would be outside her door, shelter policy. The guard lets me inside the empty women’s dormitory and I sit on one of the benches and stare at the lockers. I imagine Esmeralda standing here, as she’ll stand tomorrow, and when I try and think about where I’ll be and what I’ll be doing tomorrow, I draw a blank. I think about Amanda and her appointment. I think about Jancy and her job offer. I think about the kinds of headlines I could edit at the Register: “Presidential motorcade blocks access to DMV.” Or “Leash Laws in the City, Good or Bad?”

I look up at the ceiling and feel nothing. I clench my fists and feel nothing. I try prayer, but feel nothing.

I get up off the dormitory bench and try to leave the room, but I forget that the door is locked from the outside, too. It’s not a prison but it feels like one. I knock and nothing happens, so I rap hard and louder with the knuckles of my fist and I hear the guard’s lacquered footsteps coming down the hall and he opens the door. I follow him down the hall to where the men sleep. The men lying prone in the serried upper bunks. Their breaths clear, not like the clouds of condensation they would exhale if sleeping outside.
Behind the guard’s station behind a closed door all the men are asleep or just resting. It’s a right of passage to spend a night in the shelter each year - I’ve never done it and it’s too late to establish new routines. The sleeping quarters used to be the school gymnasium, with a ceiling twice the height as the rest and polished hard-wood floors. Metal bunk beds stacked like serving carts. Bed sheets so tightly made and heavily starched they snap in place like rubber bands. I listen for the sound of the men sleeping and the guard asks me if I want to take a look inside.

"I can make you a bed," he says.

"For an insomniac like me? It’d be a waste of laundry."

"I’m supposed to see you out," he says. "When you leave, they like me to double-check the doors."

"If you need to," I say and he says, "Nah."
I think about all the lines of people that have funneled in and out of this place and how many names I never knew, how many I learned and forgot or said aloud but never memorized. All the men I stood in line behind and never knew. It seems half my experience has been helping strangers get to the back of the line the fastest. Maybe that’s my exit narrative, my parting advice to the next guy who’ll sit at my desk: If there’s a kingdom in Heaven like Calvin assured us, rest assured there will be lines there, too.
One of the last memories of my old house in Vestal was of my father kneeling in the garden, bent over, trying to care for my mother’s herbs, his hands buried in dirt and his back bowed against the light of the evening sun.
I leave the guard at his post and I walk past Charlie’s office and I let myself into Ken’s office again and I put Beth’s package in my coat pocket. It’s heavier than I imagined. I take the shelter keys off my keychain and I leave them on my desk. I think about the locked drawers and if I were feeling dramatic I’d find a way to pry them open. I crumple a blank volunteer form into a ball and shoot it through the plastic hoop above the door and the corners of the paper ball catch in the nylon net and stays hanging there. I exit the office, securing the door, shut tight, behind me. In the hallway I approach the green fern. The leaves are yellowing more and more, the color seeping into the green like oil into paper. I open the door to the shelter and the wind isn’t so bad, and I almost let the door close behind me but I stick my foot in the jam last second, and I take Beth’s package out of my pocket and use it to prop open the door. I make sure the guard isn’t coming down the hallway, and then I grab the fern by the base of the trunk and I drag it inside of its big heavy pot, through the open front door and onto the icy sidewalk and I drag the thing all the way to my car. It won’t fit in the trunk so I open the passenger door and I wrestle the fern inside and shut the door behind it. I walk back to the shelter and get Beth’s package and the heavy metal door swings shut.
In the southern sky Orion is leaning back on his heels, I see the red giant Betelgeuse and the white dwarf Bellatrix. I could paint you a portrait of Amanda’s smile, every angle, every crease.
On my way to the Saab I notice the boys in the parking lot across the street are stuck in a snow bank. The fender is off and lying in the snow like an amputated limb. I load everything into my car and I climb the snowbank to where the boys are in the other parking lot. One of the boys slams his fist on the hood. “I just totaled my parents’ car,” he cries out like an idiot and another boy consoles him. I realize I have nothing to offer these boys but advice. I suggest they call Howie’s and one of the boys says, “Duh.”
The dome of the capital building glows in the distance, and I think if you had a hand large enough you could rub the thing like a genie’s lamp. Maybe a tsar might pop out, do a little paid for song and dance. Probably, there are three or four smaller capitals inside it. I’ve never been inside the place, I wouldn’t know. Maybe there’s a button hidden in the city and if pushed a 30 foot Lenin would emerge from the capital like a missile, like in some kind of James Bond movie.
Before I walk away I tell the boys, “This parking lot used to be a bank” and one of the kids says, “Fuck off, you Commie Pinko.” I don’t bother finishing my history lesson, I don’t tell them there used to be this tall pole with a revolving sign, digital, it gave the latest APR’s and outside temperatures. I don’t tell them that before they tore it down, the guys in the shelter would bet on the weather like a basketball or baby pool. If the temperature dropped lower than the mortgage rates, Tony bought everyone beers.
What happened was: I woke up in the hospital dressed loosely in a light blue gown that wasn’t mine, laying under crisp white sheets with a yellow curtain wrapped around the bed. My hand was cuffed to the railing, but not. The tug I felt was the tape of an IV line in my arm. My mouth was dry and there was a button on the IV stand and I pushed it. A little digital alarm on a dresser on the other side of the room read 3 am. I closed my eyes again.
Elton John is hovering above me, staring into my face. Behind him is Ken, who drops the dog onto my lap.

“It’s Christmas morning, pup” says Ken as Elton John licks my face and starts into biting the strings and collar of the blue hospital gown. A nurse hands me a glass of water and I wash the briny taste of partial dreams from my mouth. There are other dreams fermenting in the corner of a locked room that isn’t the one I’m in. Ken was wearing a tight-fitting tee shirt with an Oreo, peanut-butter, and chocolate chip cookie on front, each playing an instrument: the Oreo on the drums, the peanut butter with a guitar, and the chocolate chip in front of a crudely drawn keyboard. The caption read: “Motley Crue-kies.” He had on checkered pajama pants and brown loafers. Somewhere in this hospital I imagined a patient biding their time in an iron lung. Ken the size of a tanker. You could fit two nurses inside and still have room enough for them to play a small game of table tennis.

The nurse shows Ken my possessions, what was in my pockets when they found me. The photocopy of the textbook on Newton and a pair of white athletic socks My wallet. No mention of the photocopy of the passage on Newton, the duplicate of what they pulled from the dead man’s pocket. I must have lost it somewhere in the woods, or at the fire.

“At least you brought protection,” Ken says, holding up Nick’s socks.
The doctor comes into the room and holds my chart at an angle so only he and Ken can see it, and I think about Hamilton’s ellipsis. I think about old cartoons my sister and I used to watch where you can draw a circle and fill it in and it becomes a hole you can hide inside. The doctor is talking more to Ken than to me. I don’t close my eyes but I look away, at the yellow light in the corner.

I hear the doctor say, “Painkillers.”
The nurse brings me a small handheld looking glass so I can see myself.

"It’s a nasty cut you have there," she says and the doctor says, "It’s not so bad, the wound will heal a lot faster than your hair will grow back."

In the mirror I see a patch of shorn skin and a line of black stitches like a little railroad on the side of my head. I think about a tee-shirt slogan: "I spent a night in The Ritz and all I got was this lousy haircut."
The doctor asks me how I was feeling and then he asks me about the bruising around my knee. I tell him I had a prescription, hydrocodone. I tell him I fell on the ice outside my home and he says I should be more cautious. He said, “Hydrocodone?” He asks me when the last time I got any sleep was and I tell him I couldn’t remember and he asks me if I know how many drugs were in my system and I tell him, “A lot, I guess,” and he says, “If that dog there had drank your blood, he’d be dead.”

The nurse removes my IV. The doctor writes his findings on my chart. Ken asks the doctor what his official diagnosis is.

The doctor says, “Accidental overdose.”

“I’m not made of steel after all,” I say, and the doctor tells me I shouldn’t be so flippant with my health. He looks at Ken and back at me. “You’re lucky the police officers didn’t ask to see your labs.” It dawns on me why Ken is here, it’s obvious: my business cards, the guard at the shelter who’d have looked up my file, seen Ken listed as my emergency contact, and Ken would have gotten the call in the middle of the night, Ken who knows everyone, Ken who has capital I’ll never have. I wonder how many briskets he traded for me. How many gallons of raw milk from Beth’s family’s farm.
The doctor says, “My advice? Lay off the ecstasy. Based on tonight, I think it’s safe to say you’re no Keith Richards.”

I look at Ken and he gives me a look like, Don’t make a joke.
One sure bet is singing Nick Drake songs to Ken, he never guesses right. Something from the Pink Moon album. Perhaps a verse from "River Man."

Sing me something.

Whig me up a man named Marlow(e); Tory me banana.
I ask the doctor who called the police and he says it was an anonymous caller. He looks over his charts again and signs something and asked me, “Do you remember what you told the police? About where you got the drugs?”

I picture Alice on my couch. The fire box. Flashing Plexiglas lights.

“I don’t remember,” I say.

“You told them to look for a man named” – he flipped to a page in the chart: “You said they need to find a man named Bernie Taupin.”

Ken’s can’t disguise his laughter, no matter how hard he coughs.

The doctor leaves us. The nurse removes my IV and brings me my clothes and closes the curtain. I feel wobbly and like a melon scraped of its pulp. I manage to put my clothes on and the nurse tells me it’s ok after a couple of days if I want to start wearing a hat. Until the hair around my cut grows in. She helps me to my feet, and Ken takes his RSO hat off his head and sets it askew on mine, so it covers my head but not the scar.

“The van?” I say.

“Towed,” says Ken and I say, “Fuck me” and Ken says, “Fuck Howie’s.”

Ken says, “Pardon our France” to the nurse.
I hold on to the nurse’s arm, and I have this image in my head: the snow around where they found me in the outreach van, and a set of footsteps leading to the van, then away again into the woods:

Foot foot dot. Foot foot dot.
I feel ok on my feet now and the nurse lets me walk on my own. She tries feeding Elton John a spoonful of jello from a tray in the hall but he won’t eat it. Ken lifts the dog off the ground and we walk down the hall toward the entrance. If there were another VISTA present I might make a joke about asking the nurse for an antibacterial cream. For my big toe. But if I said that aloud they might think I’d really done damage to my head.

What I say is, “I’m starving.”

“You’re running a pretty high fever,” the nurse says. “You should go straight to bed.”

We reach the doors and they open, triggered by a sensor.

“Hear that?” I say, stepping outside. “She called me Mr. Fahrenheit.”

Ken says, “Let’s get you home, Mr. Queen.”
In poker, they call a player who cheats by manipulating the deck—by handling cards—a "mechanic." A man can get his hands broke that way, stacking the deck in a cash game. If a mechanic gets caught dealing off the bottom of the deck, it's usually because the bottom card suspends in the air, like it rode a slight breeze, like a kite that noses the wind but does not soar with it, just enough of a lift for a suspicious eye to notice. When this happens they say the mechanic "caught a hanger."
When you live underground water is your enemy. My mother joked to my father, you can keep air out but when it comes to water. In the early years, buckets everywhere. Over time my father learned to circumvent the underground flow like a guard rushing between two forwards for a dunk. He designed pipes and overflows like a kind of water-dynamics, the principles of gravity and volume. If only I had someone do up my Saab like that, the roof of which is always leaking and the rubber seals letting in air and moisture like open pores, like their job was the opposite of keeping out. During rainstorms my head would get leaked on through the closed sunroof, and in the winter the water turned to ice that coated the inside of the roof - while miles and miles away my father’s head is buried in science like some robot or a priest.
My father taught me how to drive on an F-150 stick shift truck with a faulty wire that even my father couldn’t fix, the CHECK ENGINE light kept coming on, not matter what he did. It plagued him, he was always out in the garage in his free time, under the hood, fiddling around, until one day my mother went into the garage and stuck a piece of duct tape over the CHECK ENGINE light and that did it.
At night when I can’t sleep I imagine myself playing a game of three card Monty at the shelter with a group of men. Tony is always the man with the cups, and I’m always choosing right, where the ball is, I keep on winning, except each time Tony flips over the cup there’s not a ball inside, there’s just another smaller set of cups and this goes on, ad infinitum, replica after replica until the cups are so small I can’t see them, but I keep playing.
The last good conversation I had with my mother was over the phone. I called her and she said, It’s late. It’s morning in Norway, I said. So that’s where you’ve been. No. Well. Hi hi anyway, she said. Hi hi means goodbye, I said. It’s just hi for hello. I wrapped the phone cord tight around my fingers. My mother is silent awhile. I say, Hello? I’m here, she said: Sorry, I was just looking. Looking at what? At everything, she said.
Astronomers will tell you that a neutron star’s gravity is so powerful that anything landing on its surface would get crushed into nothing, literally pulled into the star’s mass like water into water. Charlie would say that’s one hell of a hug. What or whose embrace was Marlow so keen on escaping? I think about my sister’s history. Jail, addiction, homelessness, death. And yet none of those are nearly as dangerous as love, which can saturate the best or worst among us: like cold water soaking into your clothes, weighing you down, drowning you in a person’s gravity.
I leave the shelter and drive my car with the slices of upside down pineapple cake and the 50 dollar steak riding shotgun and the fern tree stuffed in the backseat filling up space like an opened frayed umbrella. I pass an Aldi’s grocery store on the way home like I always do, but this time I decide to stop in. I leave my car idling in the parking lot and tenderfoot my way across the icy pavement. I can’t get a shopping cart because all I have are rolls of dimes and you need a quarter to play. I follow a few immigrants around the aisles. I haven’t bought groceries in years, if I need coffee or beer or milk I get it from the 7-11 and the rest I eat at the shelter or I’m given from Larry at DMARC. A lot of people recognize me around the city, they know the work that I do. I get a lot of free coffee and donuts, like a cop but I’m not. I could probably siphon gas from people’s cars and if I showed them my AmeriCorps card they’d let me off with a smile. It’d be a kind of charity, they might think, giving to those who give of themselves to others.
There is no bulk section in Aldi. I read about their being horse meat in their ground beef. All the brands are different, unfamiliar, like you’ve stepped into a foreign country or an alternate universe. In the co-op where Amanda shops, you can scoop your own oats or rice or flour. Amanda is gluten intolerant. Gluten free flour has the consistency of ash. It clings just a little bit long, a nanosecond more, to the surface of objects. It’s like Amanda’s hair, or Elton John’s tongue. You can feel the weight of it as it slips between your fingers.
We spread my mother’s ashes in her garden and seven years later my sister is scattered like ashes in the wind, into the wind, against the wind into a cold unknown. When my father bought me my Duplex, we did all the paperwork via fax. When he agreed to rent an apartment to my sister, my father drafted a nonbinding agreement, with 12 articles, bylaws, a constitution written by an emperor with no clothes. My mother had no such constitution. She let love in and out of herself as easily as she did sickness. Welcome, welcome, make yourself at home. My mother read with us for school and taught us how to bake bread while my father bought tools and saved money for college and showed us things that required his back be turned to us. Our mother was always by our side, our father always calling over his shoulder, “Come watch.”
Dan Fogleberg's "Heart Hotels" comes on the radio inside the Aldi's and I smile. It's so inappropriate, so Whig. I buy some food and a box of pink zinfandel wine and when I reach the counter with everything lumped in my arms the checkout girl asks me what's funny. I tell her, "It's a joke I'm remembering. A joke about a Roman chicken."

She ratchets her neck back and her eyes are like, What?

"I'm kidding," I say. "It's just this song."

"I hear you," she says, relaxing her neck and scanning my items. A quart of milk. A five pound bag of potatoes. A spiral-cut ham. A plastic pepper grinder. A postcard from a fifty cent rack that says, "Someone in Iowa loves you." The counter girls says, "I hate this old man music too."

She tells me if it's not on 98.5, she isn't interested.

"What about songs that were on 98.5 last year, but not this year."

"Times change," she says.

"If you're not part of the new wave, get out of the way."

"I guess," she says, and I pay with my EBT card. "You can't pay for the postcard with food stamps," she says, and I pay her in dimes.

"Sorry," I say, counting out fifty cents, and the counter girl says, "Hey man, I live in a glass house like everyone else."
My qualifying exam for the History of Technology and Science program involved land surveying equipment and changing perspectives of “wilderness” the newer cartographic technologies influenced over time. I borrowed on my literary background and used a 16th century play called Arden of Faversham to write about changing social and economic customs during the early rise of European capitalism. The play was filled with color: reds, greens, blues, and blacks – and a whole lot of grays, too: for example, who the author was. Arden of Faversham was published by “Anonymous.”
My mother used to labor over puzzles laid out on the kitchen table, with my father yelling from the living room:

"Use the scientific method. Intuition didn’t build the damn pyramids."
The bell above the exit at Aldi's dings when I leave, sliding open and shutting by motion sensor.
The first time Amanda visited me in the office she called me on the phone first and when I answered she said, “I’m outside.” I asked her why she didn’t buzz in like everyone else and she said, “Because I’m not like everyone else.” Ken sat reading the sports page of the Register and eating goldfish crackers. She’d brought a cupcake for Ken, with blue frosting. I got a package of mechanical pencils. Welcome to AmeriCorps, she said. She also left an apple on my desk when I wasn’t looking. I showed the apple to Ken who shook his head.

“She’s too good for you,” he said, dabbing the frosting with his thumb.

“You just met me,” I said, we’d only known each other a few months then.

“You’ll find I’m a good judge of character,” Ken said.

A song came on the radio and I said, “My mother likes Van Morrison,” and he said, “You knew that was Van Morrison, just from the intro?” and I said, “Morrison used a lot of two-finger chords. It’s easy to hear when you know what to listen for.”

Ken considered me for a spell.

“My parents had a lot of LPS,” I said. “I didn’t have a lot of friends growing up.”

Ken bet me a cookie that I couldn’t stump him on music trivia - he gave one rule, it had to be from the 70’s or 80’s and it couldn’t be trash.

“Classics,” Ken said. “Don’t even think about Puppy Love.”
I carry my brown bag of groceries across the parking lot to my car like a person. Pillows of exhaust rise from the pipes of cars. The groceries, the bag with the cake inside, the RSO sign in the trunk. Across the parking lot I watch as a young woman tries to make it to the grocery store but keeps falling down. I count seven times, slipping on the ice. I could get out and help but I think I’m no longer in service to America, or to anyone for that matter. I watch the woman with a vested interest. Eventually she stops trying to get to her feet and she crawls back to her car and gets inside and drives off.
I can’t find a station I like on the car radio, and I’m tired of Jeff Buckley. I settle for 98.5 and feel the rhythms through the Saab’s one shitty working speaker. A commercial comes on airing a local travel agency ad. I think about Amanda driving home on the thruway. The snow has let up and it’s warmer outside. I think about how if I take this job with corporate, I’ll be the kind of person who accumulates frequent flier miles and who knows about the logistics of it and who shares trade secrets with other frequent fliers.
It was nearing sunrise when I reached my duplex after walking home from 6th ave the morning Ken got me from the hospital, and I let myself in and saw that Alice was gone, she’d left a hair tie on my pillow. I checked my tin of money and it was there, all of it, enough for a new car or a new life, a down payment on a house or a plane ticket to anywhere around the world. There’s nothing else. No bra or purse or note. No criminal activities. Just my thread bare apartment and my mother’s blanket and the pillowcase with my dried blood on it from the night I let Amanda into my home. I felt saturated, all that saline, and the sting on my arm where the IV had pricked me. My stomach was crammed full of cheap fast food and I lay down on the couch where Alice had slept and I fell asleep with the smell of lilac and wine in the air.
There was more to that phone call with Jancy, the one I took a couple of weeks ago, when she told me the deadline for letting her know about the job was tomorrow. Hamilton would say, “Coincidence, coincidence, it’s all just the facts.” What I’d told Jancy over the phone was: “I’ve gotten pretty comfortable being a cog in the political machine.” She said, “Three years and you still think what we do is political?” “No,” I told her, “After three years I’ve learned to stop asking.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Philly. But I’d rather find out you’re bad at the job I’m offering you than know for sure you’re good at cog work.”

“I’m just don’t know if I’m ready to upgrade from coach.”

Jancy made a noise between a sigh and a hum. I’d set her up for the pun, all she had to do was drive it home. There was sweetness in her voice, despite her diction.

“Let them eat boxed lunch,” she said. “You belong at the wheel.”
My very first week on the job, the day Ken drove me around town showing me the different locations of the camps, Ken had me introduce myself to Esmeralda. When we drove south, out toward the Ritz, he showed me Esmeralda’s house. I had to pass through briars and tangled bracken to get up the short slope to where she’d secured her dwelling. He sent me to her door alone. I’m carrying a pair of white athletic socks, three parallel blue rings on either heel, trudging up the short hill to where Esmeralda built an entrance out of a flat piece of 3 by 3 foot plywood and a moss-covered Welcome mat. The mat depicts a cartoon dog and cat holding paws. The foyer to her home is open, a thick flannel bed sheet pulled to one side, rolled and tucked behind the stub of a broken tree limb, the oak itself serving as one side of the entrance, a birch tree as the other. Nailed into the birch, at eye level, is a plastic sign, rectangular, a red background with white lettering: “I love you. Is that OK?” In black script, a signature: Jesus Christ.
Ken wanted to call Elton John Jesus but Beth wouldn’t let him. Ken liked the idea of asking people around the neighbor, if Elton John had gotten off leash: “Have you seen Jesus? He’s all black and the size of a football.” When Elton John pops back to his feet after playing dead, Ken will say, “Resurrection!” or sing a line from Cohen’s Hallelujah.
(My father had the Cohen album and my mother had the Buckley, she said she preferred Buckley’s version because it had more feeling and my father said Cohen’s was “more precise.”)
Esmeralda’s dwelling. The seer’s abode. The doorway, then a
vestibule, dark, lit only by the angle of the mid-morning sun, over my left
shoulder, enough to notice the stamped earth floor, the moldy plywood walls,
the roof fashioned from black plastic. There is a white plastic bucket in
the corner and a smell. I hold my breath and call into the darkness.

“Esmeralda?”

I listen but I hear no sound. Through the vestibule I see further
darkness, deeper darkness, and I can’t make out the rooms beyond. There is
one, maybe two, more doorways, another set of plywood walls, another stretch
of black tarp ceiling, and at the far end of the house, a plywood enclosure.

I called her name again into the dark.
"I brought socks," I say, not daring to come closer, my feet glued to the welcome mat. I did not move. As my eyes adjusted slowly to the black within, I saw that Esmeralda hadn’t fully secured the roof of the main compartment, the joints between the corners of the roofs and walls were not as tightly sealed as with the black tarp in the entrance and the middle passage, and the longer I looked into the emptiness I noticed small but definite shafts of light probing blackness in minutia like the smallest openings of hand-held lanterns, temple-like, austere. The light grew stronger, though I could not see what it illuminated, only knew that it had penetrated the dark interior of Esmeralda’s cold, black establishment, and I half closed my eyes and squinted, following the shafts of light as they reached toward one another like two glowworms in a dark, cold soil. Half a minute passed and I saw something, not a person, not a form, but a reflection, a reflecting of the light in two small circles, and as the light collected further in the glass, and as my eyes adjusted, coupling with the darkness and allowing what little light was there to shine upon the dark objects like fresh bloom on an aged cigar, or white fuzz on a plumb. It was then I realized what I was looking at.

"Hello Esmeralda," I said.

Esmeralda did not speak, she only watched. I could not see her body, could not see her face in the shaft of darkness, could not see her eyes. I
only saw the white reflection of her thick-rim glasses and I stepped away, one foot on the Welcome mat, one foot on the dirt.

“I’ll just leave your socks out here.”

Her eyeglasses caught what little light there was inside her hut. She had been sitting in the darkness at the end of her cardboard house, her hands resting one over the other atop her cane and her eyes, somewhere behind her thick spectacles that caught the light from the entrance like the eyes of an owl or raccoon. I looked away and saw a nub sticking out from the birch tree, beneath the Jesus sign. I looped the socks over nub and left them dangling from the tree, like the pair of dog ears. Before I left I dared to second a final look inside the hut, but my eyes had readjusted to the light, and I could no longer see Esmeralda’s glasses in the darkness. I did not wait around to readjust, I did not say goodbye. I stumbled down the escarpment, fumbling my way over the bracken, until the slope leveled and I was able to jog, though I might have sprinted, back to the end of the service road where Ken was waiting in his Chevy Caprice.

A smile flirted with the corners of Ken’s moustache, and his bright blue eyes found the rearview mirror as he put the car in gear, backed away from the access road, down which Esmeralda’s home was hidden, up the hill, behind the autumn maze of colored trees and the thick, woven undergrowth. My window down, I could hear not far away the deep bend of the river running heavy, flush with early meltwater. I reached my shaky hand and turned on the heater.

“Did she nail you to the wall with her bull dong cane?”

“Her what?”

“She’s got a cane she claims is made from the dick of a bull. She calls it her bull dong cane.”

“Her bull dong cane?”

“Her bull dong cane.”
Ken put the van in gear.

“So how was Miss Esmeralda’s mood today?”

“Inviting,” I said as the van pulled away.
Another time, before they closed the TrustCo Bank and tore down the revolving sign, the sign read 1 and Ken said, “One degrees,” and I said, “Degree,” and he said “Degree?” and I said yeah and he said, that doesn’t sound right. I said it aloud, “One degree,” and he was right, it didn’t sound right. “I know it’s right,” I said, but Ken said it aloud again, “One degree?” and I said “One degree. One degrees? One degree.” Ken said, “Grenade on deck” and he farted.
Another time, I asked Ken how Beth’s millet raisin bread tasted. “Like bear shit,” he said and me: “You’ve eaten bear shit before?” and he: “Not bear, no.”
And then there was the time Ken drove me home from the hospital after I went into the woods alone. Elton John was sitting in the back seat with his blue tennis ball pinned between his front paws. Ken drove us through McDonalds. He bought two breakfast combos, pancakes sausage bacon and eggs. I’m into my half of the food before he pulls out of the parking lot. I try to pass him a sandwich and he says, “All yours.” It’s more food than I’ve eaten in a single sitting in months.

Ken stops the car on 6th in front of the section eights, and the greenlit street was alive around us. The sun was rising over the dome of the capital building like a shot in a Kubrick film. They did effects the good old fashioned way back then with scale models and dyes and chemical reactions. There was still theater to it then. I know Ken saw my release form, but we sit there with the engine idling in front of an address we both knew was fake. That was Ken’s grace: to not expose me in my poorest hour.

“Must be the IV,” I said to Ken, rubbing my eyes, and the soft spot behind my elbow where the needle had been. “They marinated me good.”

Ken adjusted the thermostat, giving me a moment to compose myself. I got out of the car and closed the door behind me. An inch of snow clung to the bottom of the car’s side mirrors. Ken rolled the window down behind me.

“Delivery,” he said, from inside the car. “Fifty pounds of veal.”
I remember there was this guy who used to come around the shelter, he carried a backpack and he was always trying to show you something but he could never find the pocket or pouch where he’d put it. He’d sit there unzipping and zipping, untying and tying. Ask him for a cigarette or a pocket knife or an ID card and you’d end up waiting for a lifetime watching him open and close, open and close.
DUPLEX
The snow has stopped by the time I get back to my duplex and get my bag of groceries inside. It’s the first time I’ve bought fresh produce in years. I leave the fruits and vegetables on the counter. Everything’s ugly and gray inside the duplex. The paint is the original contractor paint, and I suppose it’s true that engineers don’t have the more broad-ranging palette. Amanda’s been telling me for months: I need more color in here.

I light a match and start the kerosene heater in my living room. It’s my uncle’s old kerosene heater. My uncle went to Vietnam in 72, flew in on a CH-47 Chinook helicopter that delivered him to Khe Sanh – no return postage. My father enlisted in 75 but the war was over. West Point on the GI bill, Army corp. of engineers. Said no to his father’s family business and you know the rest. He took his brother’s heater because it was a good unit and when I went off to college he made me take it with me. I said, “I think it’s against fire code,” and he said, “Then keep it hidden.”

I’m looking out the window and not paying enough attention to the fire. In the summer mostly children riding bicycles drive by, I’m on a cul-de-sac, we don’t get much traffic. Late at night I can hear people in the park, sometimes the calls and cries of a basketball game or the whoops and taunts of a fight. It’s worse when it’s hot outside, and humid. Sometimes I see what I think is Mayberry’s squad car cruising slowly past my place at night. Or not. It’s been quiet all week. In the morning I’ll hear the bells from the Basilica on the corner of MLK and University. There was a real person
who climbed the campanile at ISU for the evening service, I saw them coming and going on occasion. The Basilica’s church bells are automated.

I leave the window and I go to lift the water bowl on the heater and the plate is hot and I burn my hand. I drop the bowl and it breaks. It’s just a dollar store bowl I took from the shelter. It’s replaceable. I go over to the tap and run cold water over it. I put the plugger in the sink and dump a tray of ice into the water and when the level is high enough I shut off the tap. I submerge my hand in the ice water and wait for the throbbing to stop. When my hand feels numb enough I empty the sink and dry my hand on a towel and wrap it in gauze from one of the emergency medical kits I’ve been given for free over the years.

At the counter I lay out the photocopied pages from Marlow’s book – it was his, after all, I’d donated it, I’d given it away, all this time I’ve been acting like a child wanting it back. I take up the photocopied pages and I put them in the envelope Tony made for me and I seal them inside with a lick of my tongue, a small metal clasp. Call it meta-history. Call it the punch line to a very long joke.

On the counter is the firebox with all my money stored inside. The top of the box says: INSURANCE - REAL ESTATE - LOANS. I have roughly 10,000 dollars inside. 9000 a year for three years, that’s 52 paychecks of 173.0769. Half on whatever, half in the box. The rest of what I needed I got from the shelter or people gave me or I bought with my EBT cards. Americanos, Americanos, Americanos. Each of my paychecks was actually for 173.07, so really if you think about it I got short-changed. It’s simple mathematics: .019 a week over three years: I figure the government owes me one dollar and fifty four cents, give or take the cost of a couple of photocopies.

I look at what I’ve laid out on the counter:

The sealed envelope.
The pyramid of leftover dime rolls.

The package Beth gave me all wrapped in orange.

I take envelope in hand and I walk past the fern tree that I’ve placed behind where my front door opens, in its large green ceramic pot, and I walk down the cold steps and down the driveway to the mailbox where I put the envelope inside and raise the little red flag. Across the street I see the porch light of my neighbor’s house, and I think about him sitting up late at night drinking water from a glass at the table and listening to his radio while the dog chews at his ankles. It’s garbage night and every one has their bins out at the curb but me. My father handles the mortgage, it’s forwarded to his address in New York, and since I get my paychecks at the shelter and nobody else sends me anything the only mail I get at my house is junk mail and when it piles up the mailman wraps it in a giant rubber band or puts it in a plastic bag and leaves it on my doorstep. It’s mostly catalogs for clothing stores and Howie’s fliers and coupons for stores at the Jordan Creek Mall. Every so often there’s an invitation to be part of the neighborhood watch or donate to the fire station. I’m saying, I don’t build up that much trash. I put the big bins out once a month or so.

I go back inside my duplex and brush past the fern tree and I go to the refrigerator and take out some ice cubes and put them in a glass and I pour myself scotch from the half-drunk bottle Rico gave me. I rub one of the ice cubes around my finger, the burn is on my pinky near the knuckle. It isn’t a bad burn, I probably won’t feel it in the morning. I refill the ice tray and put it in the freezer and I see the quotation from Seneca, the stoic philosopher and statesmen, the quotation I’d written out on a sheet of paper up in Ames when I had made up my mind to quit the program and do something good for a change:
So, my dead Lucilius, start following these men’s practice and appoint certain days on which to give up everything and make yourself at home with next to nothing. Start cultivating a relationship with poverty.

I raise my glass in the air and say, “Here here” and I drink, arranging the refrigerator Scrabble magnets into nonsense. I stare out over the counter at my living room and I see the threadbare furniture and the bare walls and I take Beth’s gift to the couch where I sit with my drink. I open the package.

I was right about there being soap inside the package. But there’s something else, under the soap, something wrapped in bubble plastic. I undo the wrapping and I see that it’s a radio. It’s a vintage Sony and I recognize it at once. It used to hang in Ken’s garage, it was Ken’s father’s radio – the one Ken and his father used to listen to the Cubs games on when Ken was a child, the same radio Ken’s mother used to listen to news reports when Ken was in Vietnam. The radio had been busted for decades, Ken said he was never able to fix it. It just sat on a shelf in his garage with all the other junk. He must have had it outsourced because when I turn it on, it works.

I spin the dial and find a station playing the late night games. I sit on the couch while my glass of scotch collects moisture. I adjust the volume on the radio so it’s audible but low and I walk over to the telephone and dial Amanda’s number.

It rings a bit before she picks up. I hear noise in the background. People. She must be at the Pub with other VISTAs. Maybe eating leftover Pu platter. Drinking a Seven up. She doesn’t say anything to me at first, she’s just there on the other end of the line. I wait and wait and wait and then I say, “Hey.”

“Hey hey,” she says back.

“You’re back,” I say and she says, “Duh.”
I tell her, “I’m at my house.” I tell her, “Come over.”

“You’re an asshole,” she says. “You know you are.”

“Yeah. Look. Just come, ok?”

All my life I’ve wanted to be alone, to be excluded, to be left alone outside the circle. My instincts flow away from the boulevard, and yet I find myself time and again pushed - or pushing myself - toward the courtyard and the sun. Amanda is silent on the other end of the phone and I look over at Ken’s radio next to Alicia’s green bar of soap, and one word comes to mind.

I say, “Please.”

After a moment or two, Amanda says, softly, “Ok.”

I hang up the phone before she finds out I don’t have anything else to say, no planned lecture or historical anecdotes or anything smart like that. I know we need to talk and I want to talk, but I have no idea what I’ll say. I look around the room and think about what Amanda will see when she comes inside, and I look over at that dying ugly old out-of-place fern and I cringe.

“Fuck me,” I say.

I get up and I open the front door and I drag the fern by the base of its trunk out through the door and out down the stairs and over the driveway and I set it at the curb. I look around and see the other bins on the street and I go to end of the driveway near to the house and I drag my empty plastic garbage bin to the curb and I wrestle the fern up into the air and get it inside the bin and I try to close the lid but the fern is too large, to unruly, and its brittle crusty leaves are falling all over the place and I want to laugh or scream but I just leave the bin there with the lid open and anyone driving by in the morning on their way to work might get a laugh at the site of the fern in the garbage can like a broken or failed Halloween costume. I walk back to the house and close the door and pick up the fallen
leaves scattered around the entryway and I open the door again and throw them into the night where they spread across the snow beside the stoop like giant birdfeed. In the light of the streetlamp I see the little red flag raised on my mailbox. It’s stop snowing outside, the street is calm and empty. I leave the door open behind me and I walk down the driveway again to the mailbox and I depress the little flag and remove the envelope from the box and tuck it under my arm and I shut the mailbox door and I go back inside the house and close the door behind me and lock it. I want Amanda to have to knock, or to ring the doorbell: so I’ll know what sound it makes: chime, buzzer, or bell.

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In the dead of winter in my childhood home I would raise the window on my roof and look out into the white world, shielded from the falling snow by the lid of the raised window, itself covered in a foot of snow. It was like raising the roof of a hide, or peering out - so it felt to me then, a dreamer child - through the eyeholes of a battle tank like something out of an Atari video game. There was an old hawk that for years made our backyard and the fields beyond the woods its hunting ground, and I remember peering out the window at the woods and watching for the bird, with its expansive brown wings and soft white belly. I could sit for hours watching the bird fly from tree to tree, posting here and there and watching the ground for color or movement. I remember watching the bird one fading evening when the light was pure and my family sat by the fire in the living room at the hearth and I watched the bird and the bird watched the fields. We used to get snowed in those days, in the house under the ground. My father would wake me early like he did the day we drove to the hardware store and started construction on the window in my bedroom - and one in my sister’s bedroom, identical,
although I remember wanting a larger window than hers, and my father telling me it was all about cost – that in construction and military and medical industry, buying in bulk was the rule. Looking back I’m sure he only got half off the second window, at most, you’d need to buy a dozen or more to get a contractor’s rate, but I didn’t know then and it didn’t matter, I helped him build the twin windows he had in mind. When the snow fell very heavy over night my father would wake me early and I’d bundle up and he’d lift me out the kitchen window, passing me a shovel, so I could walk around to the stone path leading from the front door to the driveway and I’d clear the snow that had fallen flush against the door so when my father opened the door the snow wouldn’t blow inside. When I’d cleared the walk I’d knock on the door and my father, dressed from head to toe in wool, with a mask covering all but his lips and his eyes, and he’d step out with a shovel of his own and we worked side by side in the driveway, hot cocoa and fire and women waiting for us inside, when work was done, the promise of bacon and buttered eggs and when I was inside and warm and eating there was the sound of my mother’s Cat Stevens albums playing low on the stereo, or was it Joni Mitchell, and outside the shattering sound of ice being cracked as my father raised his shovel to knock like dominoes the icicles that had formed in a row on the gutters in the front of the house overnight, something he took delight in the way my mother loved to crack the crust on top of crème Brule. My sister found me one day laying out the broken icicles in a pattern in the bed of my father’s truck, and she asked me what I was doing and I said, “Mastodon bones.”

I leave the radio playing and with Amanda on her way over, I exit my side of the duplex through the rear sliding door and trudge in my old frozen
footsteps to the rear door of the neighboring apartment on the other side of
the duplex – like I’ve done on countless nights before. I let myself in
through the rear sliding door. The door slides beautifully on its lubricated
rollers, like Daveed’s girls must look spinning so easy and pure on the ice
rink, gliding along on stolen time. I stand in the open doorway and look at
the cold white yard behind me, everything covered in snow. I close the
sliding door behind me and stand in the dark. My half of the duplex is
identical to this one save for the few possessions I have placed in my
apartment. I keep the thermostat at 55 in my apartment and supplement with
the kerosene heater. In this empty, unlived-in side of the house I leave the
thermometer off and the water pipes shut and it gets cold in here, colder
than the shelter during the day but still its inside, so it’s not as cold as
the night outside. I remember my father telling me about wind chill, how it
only effects warm blooded creatures, not objects or vehicles or trees.

My father thought that maybe the Midwest, the middle of nowhere, would
do my sister good, like he’d thought it had done for me. She was supposed to
get better, she was supposed to move here, on this side of the wall, and I
would play her landlord like in a game of dress up from when we were kids and
we’d wear our parents suits and dresses. I like being in the empty
apartment, it’s quiet, it’s dark. I like walking up the empty stairs and
standing in the empty bedroom. I like to imagine how my sister would have
furnished the rooms. The only thing inside this space are all the cans of
food that I’ve bought or been given over my years here, can after can stacked
six high along the walls and wrapping toward the staircase where the wall of
cans flows all the way upstairs into the master bedroom. I look out the
curtainless window of the bedroom into the backyard. The ice on the chain
link fence at the edge of the property is glistening and candy-like in the
quarter moonlight, like decorations on a wedding cake. I think about the red
and green and blue candles people in the neighborhood and all around the city

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leave on in their windows around Christmas, not these windows, not here. I stand in the dark room and look at the cans. I don’t know how many cans there are, I haven’t counted by hand. But I do know how many I bought for myself: one can a day on EBT, for three years. That’s about a thousand cans, give or take.

One can for every mile between here and New York.

This place like a dollhouse with no dolls, no furniture, no setting for no tea parties that will never happen inside. There’s enough food in these cans to feed a varsity team. I stand there in the darkness and imagine my father standing in my sister’s old bedroom in his townhouse, drinking scotch and doing what else? My father who used to set orange plastic ramps at crazy angles in our trailer near the army base, and we’d watch as my matchbox cars sped down. We did it tournament style, single elimination. The same car always one: a long bed truck with wheels much larger than the rest, it always reminded me of my father’s truck, his real truck parked those days under an elm tree in the dirt beside the trailer, because there was no driveway. We lost those ramps in the move, I’m sure, and besides, I had the outside world to play in once we’d moved to Vestal, no longer limited by the concrete gridlock of the base’s panopticon-like layout. I remember teaching my students about the panopticon for the first time at ISU, and they seemed more invested when I told them about Bentham’s relationship with his father, how Bentham had a breakdown at the age of 12 because he was too prescient, pushed too hard, he wasn’t allowed a real childhood. My students wanted real life Faustuses and Mephistopheles and myths they could touch and taste and hit with a bat. I don’t blame them – who could?

I make my slow way down the staircase in the dark, careful not to knock over any cans, and I slip silently out the rear sliding door and cross the yard past a little fence divider six feet high but no more than 4 feet long, not much of a privacy fence but I’m the only one here. I pause for a minute
outside and listen to the night, still and porcelain and yet it has a distinct vibration, and I think Nikola Tesla might have been right: I’m glad he never figured out the frequency of the earth, he swore if he could that he could match it: and the earth, he said, would split down the middle.

In the yard a fox or a possum bolts quick-like from one far end to the other of the chain fence that separates my yard from the neighbors, and I watch it as it slips through an opening I can’t see and it’s gone. I remember this Tibetan monk was on staff at my college, to teach Mandala classes in the art department, and I once saw him strolling down the sidewalk parallel to a field where the men’s soccer team was practicing. Without warning, the monk burst into a sprint during a set piece and stole the ball from one of the strikers, dribbled around one or two defenders, and shot the ball into the back of the net. He then resumed his pacing, found the sidewalk again, and walked away disappearing behind the library. I’d always wondered if the goalkeeper had let the ball go into the net on purpose, or had he been distracted by the suddenness of the monk’s red and yellow robes.

Back in my apartment I walk over to the counter near the phone and I pour water into a kettle and put it in the flame for a pot of tea. Amanda likes tea, I know she likes earl gray, the tart smell of bergamot like the lavender my mother used to mix in with rice in the bags. Amanda orders tea at Mars Café, she’s always looking for new kinds and asking for suggestions from Kyle or whoever is working that day, she’s always looking to expand her horizons and to try new flavors. I take the slices of pineapple cake out of the fridge and set them on the counter to thaw. I sit on the couch and wait beside the radio.

There’s not much time left on the game being broadcast but it’s close, down to the wire, I’m tuning in right at the good part. There’s a commercial break and they cut to a weather forecast, local, it calls for warmer weather tomorrow and over the weekend. Flood warnings will be in effect soon as the
river swells with snowmelt. Amanda will have her work cut out for her, it’s been such a heavy winter. I could always volunteer to help. Sign up on a form like everyone else. Choose a name for myself like Adam or Beth, like Cody or Dennis or Juan.

The game resumes and I listen, final minutes.

I look at the phone.

Do I picture him sitting in front of his television set, sipping his scotch with one knee crossed over the other? Maybe he’s got the game on mute, and one of his old albums is playing low in the background. He and I used to argue about Foreigner, when we were packing up the house before we moved — before we both moved — I couldn’t find his Foreigner album and he said he never had one, he said I must have been thinking of my mother’s Cat Stevens album, Foreigner Suite, but I swore he had the Foreigner album, I could picture it and I described it to him. We looked it up on the Internet and I was right, I’d described it perfectly, but my father swore he never owned it. It’s just one of those things, he said: like a plane’s wings bending at impossible angles.

I take a sip from my scotch glass and think about what time it is now for my father, he’s an hour ahead, Eastern standard time. He always wanted to “beat the crowd,” it’s why we left baseball games in the 8th inning and parked at the far end of parking lots. My father was always prepared. My mother baked bread. My mother fed unwanted dogs and my father drank black coffee. My mother brought us shopping for clothes and school supplies and my father took me on walks in the woods and taught me the names of the trees. My father calculated and observed and built machines while my mother sang us to sleep at night with “Puppy Love” and “Silent Night” and all the simple things.

The game ends with missed free throws, and I turn the radio off and think about calling my father. I think about what I might say to him. I’d
ask about the game, how he felt about those missed free throws at the end, how Iowa is weak in the paint and they probably won’t make it far in the tourney. It’s been a while since we’ve talked, and a longer while since we’ve really talked, and maybe I don’t want to talk: maybe I just want to hear his voice, but I wonder if I were to call, at this hour, would recognize my number, all the times he’s tried to reach me - did he dial it by memory, all nine digits one after another, or does he have me saved on speed dial? and might he think, given the hour, that it could be my sister calling, would he hope that’s her and not me? and will he take it the wrong way when I’ll have him on the line, and Amanda’s headlights will sweep across the duplex, I’ll hear her car door in the driveway and I’ll bring the cordless phone to the door and listen for her footsteps coming up the stoop, and I’ll tell my father, “Hang on, dad,” I’ll tell him, very casual, like we’ve had this conversation a million times before, I’ll tell him that I’ll have to call him in the morning.

I’ve got company, I’ll say.