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A Tent for the Sun

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Preface

Many bad years of practice taught me that the role of the writer is to document the world, to recreate it for another to see. In the earliest attempts, my fiction had a political or religious agenda—treatises veiled by a plot to sway opinions—but I gradually learned that writers are called to something higher. We are photographers with words, and the five stories presented here are my best attempts to chronicle the emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences I have had or witnessed in my short life. These stories attempt to achieve nothing more than truth, the world as it honestly exists, and I believe truth in fiction is accomplished through accuracy. Heroes and villains are rarely true people; physical and spiritual resolutions only occasionally come to pass. Life is crumpled and sprawling, not folded into a Chinese swan, and a true fictional recreation must display that. The events and characters of this collection do not exist, but I hope that they could, because through realism does truth appear.

I understand that the world is a dark place. I'm a Christian, not a nihilist, and I still acknowledge that there are deep absences of joy and hope in life. My grandmother has cried weekly since her husband died nineteen years ago; my best friends' sister has seizures and a mental retardation that has dismantled their family; I'm gay and was raised in a family that considers my orientation an abomination. I still believe in God. I write because I don't believe faith and pain contradict each other, and these stories examine characters whose lives, passively or dramatically, must reconcile the two.

The title of my collection comes from a line in the final story, which I found in the first five verses of Psalm 19, a passage that describes the clarity of God in the world.

The heavens declare the glory of God;

the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;

night after night they display knowledge.

There is no speech or language

where their voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out into all the earth,

their words to the ends of the world.

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,

which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion,

like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

I was raised in a home and church that taught God like an argument, not an experience, not a living presence visible in the universe. As a gay teenager, I couldn't reconcile my sexuality with a god that seemed so opposed to my being. I didn't see anything supernatural in the culture of my parents' wealthy church. The sun was a burning orb, not a testament to an omnipotent creator. I contemplated suicide throughout high school, and it was only when I nearly killed myself that I encountered a voice—a presence of something larger than myself, than even the world. After years of struggling with my faith, I evolved in my approach to God and came to believe these verses in Psalms; I really began to see divine evidence throughout the world. A tent enshrouded those earlier dark years. I didn't know God because His presence was hidden by my fear and the contempt of others; it almost took a young death for the sun to rise in my life, to more magnificently illuminate the skies that did proclaim His existence.

This collection examines that tent: the things in life that seem to contradict the notion of a loving God. Each story deals with a character or situation in anguish and suffering. I have found great joy in the world but know it is also a place of sadness, of families that cannot love each

other, of cults that coerce a thousand people into suicide. Different factors and tragedies have driven my characters to question God, if they ever claimed to know Him, or a more secular worldview, like Ada's Darwinism in "Tonopah." The God in my stories is not a doting grandfather; He isn't an easy God. He is loving, and healing, but also terrifying and in many ways unknowable. This complexity is counter to the traditional view of God, and it is not an easy characteristic to accept. Doubt, most Christian writers ignore, is a fact of faith; anything else would be simple knowledge. Every person with a semblance of belief undergoes trials that will rattle or strengthen it. My personal faith endured, and if I have any angle in my writing, it is only to show that survival is possible, that despite the many hardships of this world, a faith in God is not an unreasonable thing.

Most of my characters are practicing Christians, and those who are not were at least raised by or around religious people. The fact that they believe in God, however, does not make these stories Christian literature. None of them contains a conversion narrative, nor does one address its reader like a pastor's altar call. They attempt to present sincerely faithful people as they undergo the common trials and disruptions of life. The characters question God; some abandon Him. They are all striving to survive, to grow, and like many people in the world, not every one of them can maintain faith in the aftermath of hardship. A reappearing stumbling block in my stories is the conflict between religious devotion and sexuality—a confrontation I have very personally experienced.

While it is true that everyone who practices faith must reconcile the reality of pain with belief in a higher being, as a gay man I come from specific minority in that struggle. With so much religiously endorsed bigotry, most homosexuals I know have completely abandoned

religion for an atheistic life. Verses are quoted all throughout America that decry homosexuality as an egregious sin. For years, I believed my mere attraction to men made me inherently evil—not because the Bible characterizes homosexuals as untouchables, but because other Christians demonized anyone with same-sex attraction. My sexuality is not the most defining characteristic of my life, and so for a long time I never included it in my writing. As I have grown more comfortable with my identity, though, and as I've witnessed the pain that "followers of Christ" inflict on the gay community, I have felt a calling to document the struggle and the lives of people who have been marginalized by American Christianity.

My two stories that most directly deal with homosexuality are "Some Season" and "So Long, Darby. We Already Miss You." The drama in both stories centers around relationships between parents and children, because this is where much of the pain originates. In "So Long Darby," the protagonist Mark returns to a home where his mother embodies the emotional exhaustion that an unloving parent can cause. Martha, the central character of "Some Season," deals with the surprise of her son's sexuality, and while her feelings on the subject are not entirely clear, she loves her son, which is enough to maintain a trusting relationship. Living in the twenty-first century, it is easier than ever to be open with one's sexuality, but the journey towards tolerance is not complete. My own parents continue to revile homosexuality, and other children, raised in similar households, still encounter scorn and self-loathing. If my parents had always known that their son was gay, I hope that their treatment of the subject would have been softer, and so I believe that ignorance remains the greatest obstacle in overcoming this adversity.

Especially in the Bible Belt, few people intimately know homosexuals. It is easier to denounce them from a street corner or editorial when these people are not close friends, not relatives. My stories depict gay characters not as flamboyant archetypes but as common

passersby or old college friends. Mark maintains perhaps the strongest faith of any character I have written; Martha's son Lar is a loving but damaged young man. If Christians read my stories, I am making neither a condemnation nor glowing approval of the gay lifestyle; I write to portray it as factually as possible, to express what a reality these attractions are for human beings. I don't consciously write to convert more proponents of civil rights. My aim is much more humble, simply desiring that love encompass the Christian view of gay men and women. If readers see these characters and understand them, I hope they will begin to personify the issue and garner a new empathy for the minority that has been long disdained in our world.

I structured my collection by perspective and the continuum of my central theme of reconciling faith and suffering. The middle and bookend stories, "It Was Good in the Beginning," "Tonopah," and "So Long Darby," are in first person; "Some Season" and "A Very Distant Direction," which are most intimately related, use close third. Though none of them is particularly uplifting, "Tonopah" begins the series most bleakly. An aging widow trying to care for her estranged grandson, Ada is a hopeless narrator, observing great loss as she examines her own impending mortality. Unlike her neighbors, she doesn't ascribe to any faith: her world is a logical one—an outlook gradually disrupted as the narrative progresses. "So Long Darby" is still very much fiction but the most autobiographical of my pieces, and though Mark's family situation is a hard one, his resolution with God is the most peaceful I have written. The three stories in between have fluctuating responses to suffering, centered around marriages disrupted by pain and doubt. The progression among the whole collection is a movement toward silence: sex scandals and Kool-Aid suicides fade into quiet familial drama, with tension eventually placed on personalities, not deaths and psychosis.

Themes aside, there is continuity to all of my stories through plots and characters. Mark appears first as a coworker in “Some Season;” though still married to the Martha of “Some Season,” Gary lives an isolated life with his sister-in-law Brenda and brother Bragg in Colorado in “A Very Distant Direction;” that brother is referenced as a friend from church in “It Was Good in the Beginning;” and Brenda alludes to the events in “Tonopah” as they unfold, months later, on the news. Despite their geographical disparity, all of my characters live within the same world and have connections, some close, some obscure, to each other. This was both intentional and organic. Since Gary had left his wife for Alamosa, it felt natural to have his brother there know Bram, the narrator of “It Was Good in the Beginning;” I suppose Bram found Gary work at the local college. I wrote Mark’s story before “Some Season,” but he was an important character to me, and I needed him to reappear as Martha’s close friend in the Eugene flower shop. I don’t plan on replicating Hemingway, inventing my own Nick Adams, but the world is a connected place. Humans are all grafted together in some way; I wanted to mirror that in the fictional world I formed. It helped validate my characters, assuring me they were in some way real, that they lived beyond the few pages I had first written for them.

As they did reappear, wrestling with similar problems, I began to see commonalities among my characters, traits I hadn’t forged but appeared subconsciously. Growth is something that concerns them all, especially in observation of the natural world. As his daughter fades into some unknown disease, about his sons Bram says, “I remembered them both as little seeds,” because their youthful newness juxtaposes the impaired life of his daughter. He wants them to grow full and undamaged, but realizes the world is dangerous—Eden no longer exists except as the name on a Wyoming map. Living in a town where all the groundwater is poisoned, Ada of

"Tonopah" often references the few weeds that can survive there and the trees that can't. She might have a similar concern as Bram for her grandson, but everything in her environment swears that growth is impossible, that death will overwhelm all but the hardy few. With a gardener's outlook, Martha sees plants as knowable in "Some Season," things she can control and heal, unlike her disillusioned husband, hedonistic son, disturbed brother. These characters directly or unknowingly want to grow: out of their static lives, into a thicker bark that can withstand the weathering world. It is a Darwinist goal, but one attained through faith, not simply a personal skill or strength.

These characters seek survival through faith, because in my own experiences with depression, there exists a tangible limit to personal strength or the support of others. I don't subscribe to any particular branch of Christianity, and my characters attend many denominations—different services in their different needs. I was raised in a non-denominational church, and after attending various congregations since entering college, I can only classify my affiliation as probably Protestant. Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Southern Baptists all receive special attention in these stories, usually stemming from my own experiences with those churches. The Methodists I knew in high school incorporated faith into their lives most casually, referencing God often, like the neighbor Linda in "Tonopah," but rarely shaping their habits and behaviors around church. Lutherans tend to have a stronger cultural connection to their faith, which explains certain characters' approaches to God. In "So Long Darby," Mark voices anxiety about his mother's change in denominations, because I have had Southern Baptist friends proudly announce that their church forbid any known homosexuals from sitting in their pews. I am making no commendations for or criticisms of any denomination; for all of their

differences, I try to reveal these people's sincerity, if nothing else, and use distinct churches to illuminate my characters' personalities and upbringing.

Nomenclature is used as a similar means of characterization. Though many of my characters have biblical names, these are not of allegorical significance—with an exception (perhaps) in Martha and her son Lar/Lazarus. "Bragg," "Jules," and "Mara" are not commonly heard, but they reveal a glimpse into these characters' childhoods. "Mara" originates from the book of Ruth, the name Naomi gave herself to convey her bitter life. It is hard and ancient, reflecting parents who adhered to a very rigid structure of faith, probably mirroring Mara's upbringing in "It Was Good in the Beginning." I don't assign a name first pondering its historical significance; I use it to broaden my characters, wondering what kind of father would call his daughter "Ada," and how that name might have affected her development.

Sexual orientations aside, almost all of my characters conform to a traditional majority: middle class, white, and Protestant. There is no political motive behind this; it simply reflects the bulk of my life experiences and those of the people I have most intimately encountered. I believe art and beauty can stem even from the commonplace, and so I seek to recreate the lives and voices of Americans whose lives would not usually appear as the focus of much attention. Though some may be placed in abnormal circumstances, I hope my characters appear to be men and women who could easily be church receptionists or owners of steaming minivans beside the highway.

"A Very Distant Direction" probably best exemplifies this focus on the ordinary. None of the three characters comes from a notable home, and their adult lives mirror the traditional trajectory of Americans. I wrote them into a ten-hour scene, because very little conflict occurs in

their lives. All of the drama is in failed dreams, in the stasis they cannot escape. For millions of people across the country, this dull life is an oppressive reality. They are not afflicted by poverty, disease, or some tremendous heartbreak; their suffering originates from unfulfilling situations—a life of neither hardship nor joy. The other stories, to some degrees, follow this same pattern. Even if they have been thrown into a public scandal or a battle with bizarre diseases, their ordinary lives and backgrounds reflect the kind of people rarely filmed in Hollywood.

Because these people are not poets or kings, I most often use details to enliven my fictional world. Metaphors and similes appear regularly, but not to the same degree, because a mechanic who practices taxidermy does not speak or think in such language. Descriptions should be unremarkable, not flowery or with clever wordplay, because these people aren't elegant; only in the specificity and originality of language should sentences find their charm. "He is sitting in the kitchen, eating my cereal from a gas station cup" uses a common structure of bland words, but the details the narrator notices provide a tremendous amount of insight into her life. The sentence comes from "Tonopah," as Ada describes finding her grandson in the morning. She observes his actions rather than appearance, calls the cereal "mine," revealing possessiveness, and notes that the cup came from a gas station, something she has horded, possibly to save money. The importance she attributes to these details provides subtle characterization. Ada's personality gradually and more bluntly unfolds with the narrative, but the details throughout the piece foreshadow all of these traits and eccentricities.

This attention to details includes points of historical and geographical accuracy. I never wrote a story without a map of the town close at hand; dates were consulted often, to make sure these characters' lives and pasts intersected at appropriate times. Every direction and road mentioned is a real one. I knew each house's floor plans in my head, because consistency in

stories is apparent, even if the reader isn't told about a guest room or a storm cellar built by the previous owner. I take my role seriously. If I am to document the world, it must be accurate, with highways, family anecdotes, and frozen chicken brands established. Emotional and spiritual honesty is critical, but without vivid, realistic settings, nothing true can be conveyed.

An attempt to convey truth remains my principal goal in this collection. A true world is not necessarily beautiful or easy, nor does it always possess glamour or adventure. Life has pain and uncertainty, and an accurate depiction of life will display these things. I write because I am a Christian, because I want to present the tragic and beautiful world that I believe God has made. That doesn't make me a Christian writer. My characters aren't impending saints or martyrs; my plots aren't manipulated into a proselytizing device. If God exists, as I believe He does, His presence should appear organically in my work, which I hope is a true reflection on the world. I believe through details, through the endurance of faith, through the connectivity of disparate people, God's presence is proclaimed. We face suffering, misery, and failure, but those are just the tents for the sun. In my life, it has still risen out of those bleak tarps. It shines triumphantly, declaring that God exists in spite of the darkness.

Tonopah

On a cloudy day in Tonopah, which is about two out of seven, lightning rolls off the mountains and seems to amass up in the valley. We like to watch it down here. It's hardly dangerous—at worse, taunting, since the clouds withhold even spits of rain. I imagine, though, for Mary or her brother, it's fire from God, a localized apocalypse. Some citizens still contend that Tonopah is cursed, that its ground went barren after Mr. Carlile burned up his whorehouse in the forties. I don't know if Mary believes in the Lord's judgment, but she has to wonder, when the valley blazes with lightning; she has to reckon her debts for the things she's done.

My Methodist neighbor Linda has never met Mary, though she and I were opponents on the school's hiring board after our world history teacher moved away to a retirement home. Linda wanted someone young and passionate, and through reading her application believed Mary was amoral. Tonopah is evenly split between Methodist and Don't Give a Shit; Linda was the only religious chairperson who seemed concerned about Mary's soul. The rest were timid about her brother that no one's ever met, and is apparently retarded. Mary promised he wasn't dangerous, which was enough for me. I fought to hire her because I knew any recent graduate from Las Vegas would leave the town in a year. They can't handle the gray earth, stacked in crags all around us. They miss their lawns, their flowers, and find another place. But women like Mary settle. They long for permanence.

This July Mary moved into Sam Barrister's old cabin, the only structure still up in the valley, and empty since Sam got arrested for murder three years ago. He had done it in the seventies: half drunk accident, half meanness. Sam didn't have any of the meanness left in him when he lived in the valley. Everyone who crossed him in town said he was cordial but maybe not altogether lucid. He had retired from the earth up there in the valley, had found a hollow

place to let his mind decompose until the sheriff found out about him. I don't believe in curses, or the soul. I don't believe there's evil up in the valley, just emptiness and isolation. It takes people like Sam to move there: someone with a vague notion of guilt and shame. We agree on nothing, but I understand Linda's intuition. Mary is an empty woman. She doesn't live—she hides.

On Fridays I wake up early to volunteer at the school library. This morning is cloudy. I watch the sky from my bed and wonder if something about the old books makes the sky grayer, though it doesn't affect me at all. I pull on a dim yellow dress. My grandson rides with me on these days, to avoid walking to school. On other days I don't think he minds. I don't think he has many friends.

"Good morning, Marcus," I tell him. He is sitting in the kitchen, eating my cereal from a gas station cup.

"Good morning, Ada," he says back to me. His voice reminds me of my husband.

For the past six months he has lived in my home—or my little guesthouse out back, rather. His parents died in March in a car crash, driving to file for a divorce, but Marcus doesn't know that. My other son is somewhere out east, alcoholic, marajuanaholic, something. Marcus is sixteen and had nowhere else to go.

"When will you be ready?" I ask him. Already the days are shorter. Outside is light, but the sun hasn't appeared yet. It's still rising, over the valley now, probably.

Marcus drinks the remaining milk and puts the cup in the sink. "Now," he says. "Whenever."

It took Marcus a long while to speak to me. Once school started he went mute again, went three weeks without a word. Then he said, “She’s nice,” when I asked him how he liked Mary. He said she was a good teacher a minute later, and the next day got to answering questions again.

I ask him when he thinks he’ll come home. “Late,” he says. “I have a big test on Monday—have to stay after school to study.”

“With friends?” I ask.

“No,” he says.

I don’t know if he’s actually studying. Marcus takes to wandering on days when I don’t drive him: downtown, past the shacks dotting the town limits. Once, when it was ancient dark, I drove after him in the truck. Sandy from Blue’s Service Station had phoned me, had seen Marcus walk by, out to the desert. I found Marcus three miles out on the 6 to Reno and asked him what he was doing. “Drifting,” he said.

This morning Marcus looks grateful for the ride. “How’d you sleep?” I ask once we’re both in the truck. He nods. “Good,” I say.

The road to the school is a meandering one. Every road in Tonopah stretches, curves to try and touch any major building or house. From the air I’ve heard they look like the ashy remains of snakes.

“Should I make us dinner tonight, Marcus? Will you be hungry?”

Marcus says no, he can find something. We ride the rest of the short way without talking. I think of telling him that he didn’t get this silence from his father, or his grandfather, but I remain quiet.

Tonopah High School is a tall, new building. I retired from the school board this summer, but occasionally walk through the halls, when the library is slow. I pull up to the front and let Marcus out. He nods to say goodbye and leaves. There is a sudden brick wall between the road and the school, and darker students lean against it to smoke. Marcus walks by them, his head low, clutching his satchel. I am thankful he doesn't use cigarettes.

I pull around the building and park in the faculty lot. The library is at the back of the school; I see someone already waiting for me to open the door. It's Mary, her hair gusty in the wind, her arms wrapped in a knitted blue sweater.

"Did you make that sweater, Mary?" I ask her. She steps back as I take out my keys and then looks down at herself.

"Oh, my grandmother did," she says, following me inside. My neighbor Linda would ask if her grandmother is still alive.

"It's pretty," I say.

Mary smiles. "How are you, Ada?"

Before I switch on the light I look back at Mary. "Always fine," I say. She smiles again. In the dim room her pale hair and skin look fluorescent. I turn on the light and notice the red paperback in her hands. She puts it on the desk.

"A Christian romance," she says, almost apologizing. "It wasn't very good." I take the book and she follows me to where it belongs on the shelf. Half of the series is missing or checked out.

"Are you a Christian?" I ask her.

"I don't think so," she says.

“That means Episcopalian,” I say. “What would you like to check out now?” Mary saunters around a bit. It is 8:15 AM. She has a few minutes to decide before teaching. “How about *Origin of the Species*?” I suggest. Next to McCracken’s *A History of Tonopah, Nevada*, I always suggest this book. Not enough people here have read it.

“That’s all right,” Mary says. She nears the shelf where I replaced her first book. She takes the third of the series and walks back to the desk. I record it; she slips it into her bag and leaves. I see two brunettes near the Spanish section.

“Buenos días,” I call to them.

Mary is a central theme in my neighbor’s conversation. Most nights, when I return from the Jim Butler or library, Linda comes over to watch Wheel of Fortune and the news. Tonight she tells me that my screen is cracked. It has been cracked for a year; she mentions this often.

“What did she check out?” asks Linda.

“Shit fiction,” I say.

Linda shakes her head. One of the contestants solves the puzzle: What comes around the bend.

“Why do you carry trash in the school library?” she asks. I don’t answer because she doesn’t really care to know. She is watching a commercial, a Coke bottle skewered by the gash in my picture. I am thirsty. I want to read something. Linda doesn’t notice me get up.

“Sal composed a jingle for Coke, in ’81,” she says. Her husband Sal died two years ago. “Did you know that?”

“I remember something about that,” I say and walk into the kitchen. From there I can hear Linda humming a jarring melody.

“Do you think Mary is a pretty woman?” I hear from the other room. I return and put my hand on the brown recliner. Linda turns to the screen again. Pat Sajak is back on stage.

“I think Mary was supposed to be,” I say. “I think life wilted her into something plain.”

“Because of her brother?” Linda asks.

“And maybe other things.” Outside it looks as though it might rain. It never does, but it might: a few drops of darker gray in the dirt. Across the road an angry little weed is alive and growing beside a trashcan.

“What do you think Mary does up there, in the valley?” Linda asks. She wonders this a lot; many people do. I say I assume she cooks and cleans and tries to avoid getting struck by lightning. Linda nods. “There’s going to be lightning tonight,” she says.

Since Sal died Linda has not missed a sunset at my house. She never watched it with Sal, but as soon as he was gone, she came over, insisted we stare at the red glow over the western mountains. Tonight is cloudy. We will get our folding chairs and watch the flashes from my porch.

When I open the cellar door, Linda asks if I should bring up three chairs—one for Marcus. I think about the lightning and him wandering and hungry. “No,” I say. “He’ll be elsewhere.”

I set up our seats and Linda joins me on the porch. She tells me she’ll be right back and crosses the street, to her house. I notice how slow she is, how her stride is still forceful but now more haggard. She has lived across from me for forty years. She knew my husband and sons.

A few minutes later she returns, carrying a Coke. “I didn’t think you’d want one,” she says. We don’t talk much for the rest of the night. We just listen to the cracks, watch the darkness rupture in the sky.

* * * * *

In the morning I find Marcus asleep on the porch. I try to drape a blanket over him, but he wakes up. He is skittish at first, and then remembers where he is and relaxes. “I lost my key,” he says. “I’m sorry, Ada. It could be anywhere.”

Tonopah is not a crimeless town, but people don’t put lost keys into random locks. “It’s all right, Marcus,” I say. “We’ll get you another one.”

He follows me inside and watches me take out the Folgers can. “Would you like some coffee?” I ask him. “When did you get in last night? I stayed up till midnight.”

“No coffee, please,” he says. “A little later. I didn’t wear a watch.”

Marcus assembles his own breakfast. I watch him as I drink my Folgers. He still pulls out the wrong drawer to find a spoon; he still deliberates over which bran cereal he hates the least. “I could make you eggs,” I say. He glances at me.

“No, I don’t like them,” he says.

I watched my sons as they grew up. I knew how they functioned, what they enjoyed and believed, and when they left I charged them with independence. I thought it was a proper time for abandonment, and now a stranger is living with me. He wanders. He is still alive somehow.

I rinse my cup in the sink and look back at Marcus. He is staring out the window. The view is of a gray slope with a line of blue sky at the top. “Do you miss the trees?” I ask him.

“Oh no,” he says, not changing his gaze. “They’re still there.”

I leave to find my Reader’s Digest and glasses. On Saturdays I used to walk—now my hip burns. Linda says it’s laziness but she’s never experienced the genetics of arthritis. I can’t find my glasses. I sit in my recliner and watch Linda’s house.

Two boys pass on the street with a dog. They are sitting on skateboards and he is pulling them both, and though I have never liked dogs it seems cruel to me. I rap on the window and shake my finger. The boys roll off their skateboards and stand in the street, raising their arms, looking falsely innocent. Linda's door opens and she barges out, yelling. Across the street and through the glass it sounds like a murmur: *What are you doing to that dog? You boys are lazy. Get off my street.*

My sons were always grateful they didn't have Linda as a mother. She and I hardly talked when our children were younger; we disagreed too much on discipline and freedoms. With age, when mortality becomes realer, self-righteousness fades. We are growing brittle together, Linda and I. We are less important than we used to be.

After the boys run off, carrying their skateboards, Linda remains in the street to see them disappear. She has spotted me in the window but slumps back to her porch and fades inside her house. I hear my back screen slam. Marcus is gone. He walks around the side and notices me. He holds up a textbook, history, and walks toward the school. He is smiling. He hasn't smiled in weeks.

When Mary first moved to Tonopah, no one could guess her age. Some said twenty-seven. I figured early forties. She is thirty-three, her brother something younger.

One of the board members visited Mary in the valley, to welcome her to our town. He reported to me later that she had pansies planted around the cabin porch, and they were already dying. The old mines pumped too much cyanide into the ground, so that none of the wells are drinkable; our water kills even plants. I asked if he told Mary this, and he nodded. He said she just stared at the flaccid stems and thanked him for stopping by.

I knew Tonopah is not an easy place. The second week of school, when he wasn't talking again, I took Marcus into Mary's classroom and made him give her a jug of soup. The walls were covered in world maps and medieval timelines. They smiled and watched each other but didn't speak. I told her that I helped hire most of the teachers in the school, and I hoped she'd enjoy the soup. She thanked Marcus and I both, and we left.

Mary was my last hire before retiring. At her interview, I thought I knew her; I thought she was something enduring for Tonopah. She had the silky eyes that accepted tragedy and pain, durable orbs that could withstand the gray, find life in deep crags, and survive. She is thin and private and constant. Like the town, she has another kind of strength.

On Sunday Linda is at my porch, wearing a dress she bought fifteen years ago. She tells me how Pastor Rennard thanked her in his sermon for organizing a church painting project; she says that Resa Baymen got transferred to Vegas for cancer treatment; she sees that I am hardly listening and asks where Marcus is.

"I don't know," I say. Linda just nods. A year ago she would've asked more.

"Have you had lunch?" she asks.

We eat a casserole she had frozen over the summer. She talks. I think about my grandson in the desert. It is October, and not dangerously warm.

"Do you think he's dead?" I ask. The question startles us both. Linda says no, no, and I finish the meal.

Sunday afternoons I rarely work, but I sometimes call the Jim Butler Inn and Suites and ask if they need me. Trudy manages the desk. She is older than me and knew my parents. She always gives me her shift if I call.

I drive downtown and park alongside the road. Trudy is watching a General Hospital in her VCR—an episode from the nineties. “I thought VCRs all stopped working,” I tell her as I walk in. She grins and nods. After smoking all her life, it is difficult for Trudy to speak; she conserves her energy for the phone and customers.

I sit behind the desk and count the occupied rooms: less than half. Tonopah survives off of visiting relatives and the Sierra Club. We want casinos, or a film festival, but not enough willing people own the land. This is why our students smoke, move to Las Vegas to damage their brains. I think about the future, about Marcus returning to the house, thirsty, or hitchhiking with a fat man who is summoning enough courage to touch him. I watch the traffic ebb past the Jim Butler.

In an hour I see Mary’s truck pull into the grocery across the street. She gets out, wearing a church dress. A big man remains in the passenger seat and hardly moves. When Mary returns with a plastic bag, he waves at her until she waves back, smiles at him, and sits at the curb. She is drinking from a bottle and watching the sky. A car passes and churns up the wind, flaring her hair all around her, but she doesn’t brush it away. She keeps looking up at the endless blue, like a woman pondering the ocean.

I call Linda and ask her if Mary was in her church that morning.

“No,” she says. “No one new.” I look up to see Mary climb back into her truck. “Mary went to church?” Linda asks. “Where did she go to church?”

I tell her I don’t know; maybe her Christian novels made her believe in God.

“It doesn’t take novels,” says Linda; “it just takes seeing the world.” I know she is quoting Pastor Rennard but it doesn’t bother me.

I get off the phone with Linda and call Sandy at Blue’s Service Station, the secretary at the school, and everyone I know who lives almost out of town. They might’ve seen Marcus

yesterday, not today. They are confused by his roving ways; that he might be missing seems appropriate. I thank them all and hang up. Trudy is asleep in her room above the office. I wake her and tell her I have to leave.

I am awake at four in the morning. The sky is clear and the moon is a shade: all things under it look blue and dying. I don't know when to call the police. I don't know if I drove far enough along the 6 and 95, or if Marcus would choose a Saturday to explore the other direction of the highway. I have thought about him leaving, his textbook in hand, how I hadn't known he hated eggs.

I pick up the phone and tell the secretary what I know. I don't recognize her name or her voice; I have never called the police in Tonopah. She asks if it's an emergency and I say I'm not sure; that's why I called. Has he been seeing anyone, she asks. Could he have run away? I say I don't think so; I don't remember him with any girl. She tells me she's filed it, that officers will start looking for him in the morning, and that I should think about who he saw last.

It isn't much, but I fall asleep.

The next morning I wake up to the phone ringing. It's Trudy, asking if I'm coming in and if everything's all right.

After coffee I drive to the Jim Butler and settle in there. It is a motionless morning. The school doesn't know if Marcus is in class; they are too busy looking for a substitute—Mary just didn't show up to teach. I try the television. It isn't news; I am drawn to the talk shows about teenage mothers and obese children. There are people like that in Tonopah.

At noon the phone rings. I pick up to hear the voice of a woman crying.

“Is Ada there?” she asks.

“Speaking,” I say.

“Ada, I have to see you. It’s Mary—I have to see you.”

By the time Trudy has replaced me and I am in my truck, I know Marcus is dead and he had been fucking Mary. I follow the roads to the edge of town and begin to ascend the coiling gravel path up to the valley. It has been years since I’ve driven here. At the top, I remember how small it is: a mile across at its widest, more barren crater than valley. Mary is standing by her cabin, still crying when I drive up.

“I’m sorry, Ada,” she says. “I’m sorry, Ada.”

“What happened?” I ask. The wind is heavier here in the valley. It churns the dirt, pulls at my jacket. Mary looks weathered and frail enough to evaporate with the gusts. She points east, toward Tonopah, toward a black cyclone of vultures in the sky. She is choking on her tears, now, still pointing, and as I walk near her she collapses onto the porch.

I see her brother at the window, but he vanishes into a deep room when I open the door. I find a glass, fill it with a jug from the fridge, and take it back to Mary. I don’t want to help her. I want something like justice to happen, for her to die too, and I don’t know why.

“Did you kill him?” I ask after she revives. “Did you kill Marcus?”

She is shaking her head and wheezing. No, no, no, she tells me in gasps. She says he fell. She says he was climbing over the ridge and fell into a closed mine shaft. “He never showed up. I didn’t think he was coming,” she says. “I thought he had decided not to come back.”

I make her walk with me, show me where he is. I don’t care that she is wavering on the stony ground. My hip burns as we ascend the hill. There aren’t even weeds to grow out here. The valley is a place out of the Bible: abandoned by God. We reach the crest, and thirty feet below I

see a hole surrounded by huge birds. It is perhaps five feet deep. A boy in a red shirt is lying in it, his neck twisted sideways against a sharp rock.

"Oh god oh god oh god," says Mary. She crumples to her knees but remains conscious. My arms start shaking.

"When did you find him?" I ask her. She is choking again and moves her hands across her face.

"Yesterday evening," she stammers. "I was gone all morning. I didn't see the birds until we came back."

I pick up a stone and chunk it at the vultures. They shuffle around a bit. Some wobble out of the hole; others go in. I throw another stone, and a handful of stones. My eyes burn. I want to scream but tell Mary we need to leave.

Back at the cabin I phone the police. Mary's brother stays hidden in a back room. I know he will have to go to jail too, or get moved to the hospital in Carson City. When they promise they are coming, I go out to the porch and wait for them with Mary. She has stopped crying but still breathes heavily and stares at the opposite ridge.

"It's like a poem here," she says. "You can't see the mine shaft from town. Even the vultures are too far away. If no one lived here you could die in the valley, and no one would find you for a million years. It's like something you would write in a poem."

I stare at her. The sky is endless. The sun is endless and scorching my eyes. I hear the sirens climb the gravel road and the beating of the wind against the cabin, even the slap of Mary's dress as it hits the wooden porch.

* * * * *

Linda comes over for the sunset and says she will stay with me for the night. She talks to the police when they call, tells them she's my very best friend. When she hangs up she comes to me on the porch and asks if I want to hear Mary's confession. I am watching the stars arrive in the darkness. I nod.

They had been intimate for a month, Marcus and Mary. It hadn't crossed Mary's mind to stop it until Marcus didn't appear on Saturday. She thought he felt guilty, or bored. She swore she had never slept with a student before. She swore she didn't kill him. She said she loved him.

Linda doesn't say anything else; she doesn't ask me questions. We are independently thinking about death and the universe and how not even towns are immortal. Tonopah's lights shut off earlier than they used to. Almost every star is visible by midnight, like we are watching them from a shantytown on the moon.

I remember Tonopah when it was young, when it seemed consequential. It still is, to some of us, but we are sagging; our youth are migrating. Darwin would say something about this town, that nature had selected it to end. I don't know that nature ever selected it to begin. I don't know why my grandson died.

Some Season

The sky was dark over the garden. All around the yellow plumeria rested the dead, waxy leaves that dropped when the fall rains began to freeze. Martha plucked them up as the air faded blacker with the sun long disappeared behind the mountains. She tossed them into a pile and whistled "Moon Over Burma" by Dorothy Lamour. It was November. In another week, she would need to move them to the garage for winter, and already she had the pots and garden spade on the patio, ready to be used.

Martha kept her garden beside her house: three rows of dirt she tilled annually of cucumbers, tomatoes, and whatever flowers could survive in Oregon, all tucked beside the wooden fence her husband had built eleven years ago. Where the boards touched the dirt were holes and soft, rotten wood, but he had left this summer, and Martha knew the earth, not nails and hacksaws. She wasn't keeping dogs in or rabbits out, so the boards sagged into pulp, gradually and undisturbed.

The air had chilled since nightfall, and it burned her fingers with cold. She looked at her home, where the only emanating light was from the den where her brother was studying the newspaper. Her brother's name was Timothy. He was thirty-four and couldn't read. She pulled off her gloves and walked inside to wash her hands. They were a swarm of pink worms steaming under the warm water. A hallway apart, Timothy made no sign of hearing her, but his sounds of crackling paper drifted throughout the house.

It was a Wednesday in November. She shut off the water and said these are the days of resurrection. A month before, she believed her brother had been among the dead for thirty years, but he had returned with a few rotted teeth and deep brown skin. She wasn't rich but could feed a skinny man, and Timothy needed anything she could give. In the dark kitchen, she knew he

would need dinner and all the lights turned on soon. She stood over the sink feeling all the heat for a minute longer.

For thirty years Martha dreamt about loneliness and the house in California where her parents used to pray. She never cried in front of others, but sometimes woke up sobbing and with a headache. In all the years they had lived together, her husband never noticed. She would slip out of their bed and drink green tea in the kitchen, watching the sky change from black to a cold blue until the aching of her brain abated with the darkness.

Martha woke this morning untroubled and spent her dawn journaling in the den. Outside, a raccoon fingered through garbage and teetered off to the woods further up the hill. A neighbor emerged from her garage across the street, carrying a rake. She moved with a hunched left shoulder, straightening out her robe in the wind and arranging brown leaves into a line beside the road. In her notebook, Martha described the woman's movements as a frond before snowfall: green and courageous. She stopped writing after her neighbor disappeared but didn't immediately stand. She watched more leaves twist across the road, and then walked to the kitchen to wait for her brother and the sun to rise—from his bed, over the florist where she worked.

She always tried to wake before Timothy, but sometimes he never slept, and she would enter the kitchen to find him on the tile, his eyes open to the ceiling like a rabbit in a wire trap, motionless but never dead. Even after he got up, those were autumn days, and they exhausted her. By night, if he was crying near a dark window, she could barely sit beside him until he fell asleep. When he first came to live with her, she tried singing about the world, but now rested with him in silence, or spoke carefully, like she was speaking to God.

Timothy walked into the kitchen after the sunrise. His dark hair hung in greasy cords over his eyes, which were brown like their Spanish grandmother's. "Good morning," he said and sat down.

She smiled and touched his shoulder. "Good morning, Tim. Breakfast?"

Timothy wanted oatmeal every morning and told her that's all they had in Guyana. He was tall, but should've been taller. Martha fixed his bowl while he spun her notebook in circles on the table, examining her penmanship from all angles. She set the food in front of him and watched his shoulder blades slice back and forth beneath his t-shirt.

"Let's go buy you a jacket after work," she said.

He rubbed his forearms and said brrrr.

Timothy's eating was precise: pinching his spoon and dabbing it into the mush for small, careful bites. After he finished, Martha rinsed out the bowl and told him to go gather his papers. He left, returning soon with a knapsack. It was a crystal bomb in his hands.

"Okay," she said. "Let's go."

He accompanied her almost daily. He loved the smells and moisture of the greenhouse and nestled between ficus bushes to study his newspapers—or the books of architecture the owner, Bob McMeans, kept in his office. Bob didn't mind so long as he didn't speak to customers or touch the plants. Bob had a ponytail that he braided, and even so it was longer but no thicker than a garter snake down his back. He was a kind man whose wife had similar problems: disturbed, manic, something, after their only son drowned in a culvert. Martha had worked for him since moving to Oregon, around the time he bought The Orchid Florist from its founder.

The drive was eleven blocks. Martha played a recording of the London Philharmonic Orchestra while Timothy stared up at the sky, blotchy with clouds. Lines of blue and fractions of sun were visible through the front window. He glanced around them when Martha stopped at a red light and watched a pretty woman in a neck brace walk by. She was black. Timothy asked what her name was.

"Oh I don't know, Tim," she said, glancing over. The light turned green. "She looks like a 'Sandra.'"

Another man, Mark, worked part-time at The Orchid. He was thirty and gay but terrible at arrangements. He spent his afternoons and evenings at a shelter for street kids; he treated Timothy as a reunited friend from high school, teasing but careful. Timothy loved Mark, and Martha enjoyed their interactions. She talked to him sometimes about her son.

Mark was behind the counter and asked Tim, how's it going when they walked in.

"It won't rain today," said Timothy, moving to the backroom.

Mark laughed and handed Martha a form of orders.

"Two funerals tomorrow," he said, moving past her toward a shelf of ferns. "Everyone is dying. Work, work, work."

Timothy had tried to kill himself before: in the hospital, when he first returned to America. Alongside malnutrition, her brother brought back a damaged mind, and Martha classified his health by seasons. His springs were eager and curious, days when he drew the winnebago outside the greenhouse and asked if jaguars lived in Oregon. He had summers most often, with a smile about soup, dressing himself as though capable in the world. But he wilted in autumns—paralyzed on the floor, or frail and weepy in a chair for hours. Martha had been raised

with flowers, but she didn't know how to revive him like her foxgloves. She feared his winter and imagined him at night, breaking large splinters off his bed or drinking Clorox in the bathroom.

At night, she could sometimes hear him talking or crying in his sleep. No one knew if he had escaped wherever he had been living or just wandered away. A man from New York heard about Timothy while he was still in the hospital. He was a hypnotist and flew to Oregon and told Martha her brother had been sexually abused as a young child. Timothy was afraid of animals and always the darkness.

Her brother wasn't dangerous; the doctors he visited every week assured her of that. They just couldn't heal him and didn't know if recovery was possible. Martha believed in God but didn't always know how to trust Him. Timothy wasn't like her failed marriage or her gay son, natural hardships. What happened to Timothy, like her parents' death, was a mistake. God existed somewhere in Martha's world, on a mountain called Absolution, in the spider lily petals her mother used to say were perfect. She just wasn't a Calvinist. She thought the future was a low cloud, always descending.

After work, Martha bought a rotisserie chicken from Safeway and rented *Some Like It Hot*. If they left The Orchid early enough, she occasionally took Timothy hiking up Spencer Butte. He liked the fir trees under the rain, how they withheld water except for occasional globes, reeking of sap and an earthly clean; but tonight Bob's wife was in the hospital, and Martha had to close. On the drive back, Timothy hummed along with the classical music and didn't talk.

"Summer," Martha said.

He looked at her and then forward again.

Once home, she cut the chicken breast into cubes for her brother, and they ate with the television trays from her wedding. She had watched this movie with her parents, in their days after reading *The Deer Park*, but not since that childhood. Timothy laughed when Spats tried to kill Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon. Martha studied his reactions and saw him put his hand down his pants as Marilyn Monroe started singing.

She touched his arm. “That’s impolite, Tim.”

He laughed again and finished eating. Martha sat quietly for the rest of the film and thought about medication, state hospitals.

When it ended, his eyes drooped heavy and languid. She turned on the hall lights and led him on the pilgrimage to his room. Timothy switched on his lamp and let her dress him for bed.

“Do you want me to pray with you?” she asked.

He lumbered onto the bed and under the sheets. He was wearing her son’s pajamas, and even with the drawstring tight, they were a loose tarp over his bones. “No,” he said, closing his eyes. “I don’t want to pray.”

He had high school stubble around his chin, scattered threads of black against his brown face. Martha watched him breathe thickly before leaving with the lamp still on. She wanted to call her husband. She wanted her son home.

She had fought with her husband to name their son Lazarus, but as a toddler Martha understood he wasn’t mysterious enough to hold that name. She called him Lar, and he phoned from UCLA on Saturdays. He left before Timothy came back to life and still didn’t know his uncle existed. Martha wouldn’t find the time to mention it. They only spoke weekly unless Lar was too hung over after Friday nights, nights he didn’t mention when they talked. He withheld

many details about his life—the boys in the dark rooms of clubs, how he had stopped believing in God—but Martha appreciated just the roll of his voice.

It was Saturday, and she was with Timothy on the patio, waiting in lawn chairs to hear from her son. There had been rain in the morning but only clouds after noon. She ran away from her brother when her phone vibrated and tried to catch her breath before saying hello.

"Mom, Dad e-mailed me again," said Lar.

"Did you write him back?"

Her son's voice trembled under his breath when he spoke about his father; Martha sometimes regretted marrying Gary. He never hit Lar but couldn't understand things that didn't grow in Southern Colorado. He had stared at the floor and his twitching hands when Lar told them he was gay after graduation. He went a long drive east, past the mountains and into the farmland that reminded him of home. Hours later, he returned to ask Martha how this happened and to say he had to leave.

The sounds of California moved through the phone as Lar walked around his room. He shuffled the papers on his desk. "He wants me to come to Alamosa for Thanksgiving. He said he was sorry."

Martha sat on a wooden bench tucked near the back of their yard. It was under a fig tree full of abandoned nests. From his chair, Timothy watched her and then glanced up at the flocks of buntings migrating across the sky. She asked Lar what he wanted to do.

"Patricide," he said. He laughed. "I don't know. What do you think?"

Martha made little calculations in her mind: the cost of plane tickets, which bills she hadn't paid. Thanksgiving was in twelve days. She imagined eating turkey in an empty house.

"Have you talked to him?" she asked.

“Dad doesn’t love me.”

She nodded to the gray branches above her. “He loves comfort,” she said.

“I don’t want to go.”

Martha pulled at her dress and told him she didn’t have the money for a plane ticket.

Lar was quiet and then said okay. He was breathing into the phone. “It’ll be okay,” he said. “I’ll be fine.”

A gust tussled her hair and Timothy’s papers on the patio. She watched her brother up, lunging around to collect them. He was a lizard on fire. He was a blind child on cobblestones.

Lar asked what’s new in Eugene.

The papers collected, Timothy slunk back to his chair. More gusts pulled at his bangs, scratched them against his eyes, but he didn’t brush them away.

“Not much,” Martha said. “We got a box of pens for The Orchid.”

Lar told her they needed an invasion there, maybe the Chinese.

She said the Chinese would be thrilling.

Martha had learned to delete Internet history before her son. She knew he was gay years before he told them; she had years to accept it. Her love for Lar had grown from maternal instinct to sympathy, for his fear, for his wavering identity. The week of his graduation, when he told them, she wrapped her arms around him. When Gary spoke to her in June with red eyes, he said she knew why he couldn’t stay.

Gary’s parents used to live in Alamosa—his brother still did. They had raised their sons to believe in Richard Nixon and cars and Martin Luther. Gary wanted to be a mechanic but settled for managerial work after college. In a life where her parents hadn’t killed themselves,

Martha would have never married him, but Gary was a tall, simple man who could fix things and didn't question her life. He didn't know her family died in a cult. It didn't occur to him to ask.

They met at Adams State, the place Martha fled to when the magazines circulated, when every news report mentioned Jonestown. Martha had an aunt in Alamosa, and on the bus across Nevada, she told a woman she had been orphaned at five—a plane crash. Gary had a class with her. On their first date, he said he had built a sailboat once, and she knew she would marry him.

When he left, Martha told him she wouldn't find someone else.

"Not Bob," Gary said. "He's always loved you."

Martha said not Bob.

Gary sent her checks in the mail, or small bills. He included little note cards with them that said, "How are you?" but he wouldn't answer his phone when she called. Martha stopped attending Grace Lutheran, and if she went to church it was with Mark. He knew about the separation, like her neighbors, but she didn't tell Bob. She believed her husband that he had always been attracted to her.

When they attended church together, she took Mark to It's Green afterward. They would drink chai tea and discuss vegetarianism or film or theology. She asked him why God made people gay. He said God made people a lot of things—depressed, poor, handicapped; homosexuality wasn't the sharpest thorn He handed out.

If Gary ever called, Martha wondered what she would say to him. She imagined him living above his brother's garage, reading Robin Cook novels at night and driving to the shooting range on weekends. In November Alamosa was freezing after sundown. He had found work at their Alma Mater, Lar told her that, and she thought of him walking to campus, alongside Ross

Avenue, his hands tucked into a blue jacket. She didn't know if she missed him. Those were just her thoughts when she closed her eyes.

On Sunday Timothy locked himself in the bathroom. Martha woke up to hear the shower running. After fifteen minutes she rapped on the door but didn't hear anything. The night before had been an autumn; Martha ran into her closet because the doors in the house were old and without keyholes. She found a wire hanger, bent it into a V, and fished it around the bolt. The door clicked open.

Timothy was naked and curled around the toilet. She saw blood around him and thought he was dead but saw his chest lifting as she drew nearer. The cuts were shallow lines on the tops of his arms, drawn with the razor she used to shave her legs. He was still gripping it, but she twisted it out of his hand as she unwrapped his body from the toilet.

"Come on, Tim," she said.

His arms were rubber sticks, smearing blood on her shirt as she pulled him over to the bathtub. She kept begging him to get up. Her breaths heaved, and her eyes burned but remained dry. She maneuvered him over the lid of the tub and dabbed at his wounds with a towel. The showerhead sprayed on his chest. His eyes were clenched until she shut off the water.

"You're awake," she said. "You're alive, Tim. Let's get up."

He wouldn't. She pulled him out and splayed his limbs out on the rug to dry them off, trying not to notice his pointed body or hairy groin. Her robe hung on the door, and she turned his arms into it. After tying the belt around his waist, she slumped against the cabinet to catch her breath.

"Is this a winter, Tim?" she said to the floor. It was brown and cold. "Is this a frost?"

It was seven in the morning. The sun was still behind the hills—even the horizon beyond them. Martha folded her head and shoulders between her knees, pulling them down with her hands like a kindergartner in the Cold War. She could hear Timothy breathing. If she held her breath she could hear the whine of the fluorescent lights above them.

Timothy was a baby and just learning to say Martha's name when her parents took him to Guyana. She spent her senior year of high school living with a family friend, another person who feared Jim Jones and his authority over the Peoples Temple. Martha believed in God, and social justice, but not that man. She wrote letters to her family those months following their exodus—and her first year in college—without any response. After all the deaths were reported, and all the details about the compound, brainwashing, surfaced, she wondered if they had even received the news of her.

Jonestown was only ever mentioned as a joke about drinking poisoned Kool-Aid, but Martha knew the details: almost one thousand people dying from cyanide and red flavor packets, pouring it down their children's throats if they were too young to kill themselves. Documentation of Jonestown's residents was poor, so that when accounting for relatives, investigators presumed her brother was among the hundreds of young bodies. They didn't look for survivors, deep in the jungle, because they couldn't imagine anyone leaving before the suicide, taking others to another compound, another place to practice Jim Jones's way of life.

Martha never really believed she had been orphaned at five, but her life before Jonestown was a blue land she only visited in dreams. They were soft images, replayed like a silent film: she as a little girl wearing prayer beads in San Francisco; she as a camper in Death Valley where her parents discussed the magnificence of wind; she as a blonde teenager in the hospital room

where Timothy had been born. If there wasn't God, she didn't know where joy and love came from. Jonestown, she wrote in her journal, wasn't proof against Him—it was proof of His absence in some people's hearts.

Timothy was emaciated when he wandered into Port Kaituma, and no one knew where this white man had come from. He came with dysentery and parasites. Without Gary or Lar, Martha had time and a place for him. If her heart was a home, it could hold her brother. It could try.

Timothy didn't stir for the rest of the day. Martha told Mark she couldn't come to church and that she didn't need anything. The hazy sky made the house dim, but once an hour she would go into her brother's room to sit beside him under the ceiling lamp.

She brewed three cups of tea, stood in front of the back window, contemplated unearthing her plumeria while the clouds filled the air with a misty rain. There wasn't noise. She hovered through the house and held her arms for the sensation of feeling. She noticed the Bible on her coffee table and the vases above the fireplace, blue and coiling like they had never stopped melting.

By sundown Timothy had rolled over, facing the door with his eyes wide and staring into the chasm of the hall. Martha asked if he wanted anything to drink, but he didn't move. She brought him a plastic cup of water and returned to the dark kitchen for a glass of wine. She drank it quickly. After a second glass she opened her turntable and played *Speaking in Tongues* by the Talking Heads. "This Must Be the Place" droned throughout the house, and Martha put away the wine before wanting more.

Every room in her home was still dark. She clicked on the lamp over her husband's desk in the den and opened its drawers. There were receipts from the spring and post-it notes that said "get milk" and "oil change." Beneath one stack was an unopened envelope addressed to her. The wine had bonded to her blood like tiny iron weights, pulling her down. She lay on the carpet and tore the yellowing seal.

It was a letter Gary had written during their first year in Eugene for some holiday, her birthday, maybe their anniversary. It described her with superlatives and said she helped him understand life; it said he had always needed her. Martha rolled onto her back and pressed her arm against her eyes as David Byrne sang about home. She lay motionless until the record clicked off and the needle drifted back to its resting crook, and in the silence she lifted her arms to see blotches from the pressure drifting across her vision.

"I can't lift them, God," she said. The clouds dissipated, and her eyes fixed on a shadow against the ceiling. She couldn't hear Timothy breathing from his room and didn't want to. She wanted to scream, to let him die, to disappear so that Lar could never call her again and no one could see her, remembering she was still married to a man with strong arms and a mind that believed he could grasp the world. The brown carpet and the receipts and the fluorescent light bulb were all pieces of a new life she wanted to abandon. Two walls away lay a five-year old man who had been told that Guyana was the whole world, that everyone else had killed themselves with Capitalism and a belief in God.

On Monday Martha received a seventy-dollar check from Gary. In the memo he scribbled *will miss cranberry salad.* She tucked the check into her purse and e-mailed him the recipe.

Timothy was curled in his bed, facing away from the white lamp. She asked her neighbor

Glenna to look in on him while she was at work, promising she would come back for her lunch break. Glenna passed her house every morning with a walking stick that she carried along trails, in case of encountering wild dogs or the bearded men who wandered the Oregon woods. She said of course. Getting into her car Martha said she had the heart of a silver mine. Glenna waved when she drove past her house, heading toward The Orchid. Martha smiled back.

The Orchid was a white building from 1953, and she had never noticed its age before: brown strips of chipped paint, the angle of the portico, gradually sagging toward the ground. She saw Bob behind the shoe polished glass, a geranium out of the greenhouse jostling in his hands, his ponytail swinging with his steps. Mark was bent over the old beverage cooler for corsages. There were no customers; it was still closed.

Bob looked up when she walked in. “No Timmy today?” he asked.

She remembered the way her brother cried as a baby. It was colic, and now his pain had hardly changed but no longer evoked a whimper, just paralysis. Standing beside the doorframe, she choked and put her arm against it. Mark ran to steady her while Bob stood back, the flower trembling in his hands.

She leaned into Mark’s chest and looked up at him. “I think my brother’s dying,” she said. “Timothy’s dying.” She tucked her head under his neck and held onto him.

Mark told her it was okay, that he was already praying. She squeezed against him, and he led her into the back where there was a stool and all the green plants. He helped her sit up and stared at her, his hands holding her shoulders.

“Martha,” he said. “You’re a good woman.”

She looked up at him.

“I don’t care if you cry but understand if you can’t. There isn’t anything more you can do,” he said.

There were smells around them, scents released to attract pollinators. Everything alive was a careful machine.

“Tim might be dying and he might be healing,” Mark said. “You don’t know how the world works. No one does.”

Martha nodded and looked past him—at the spider lilies in pots along the wall. Her mother used to grow them, and together they would twist their stems into tiny wreaths, leaving them on the porches of families with drafted boys. Her mother had black hands from the soil; even cut and drying the flowers looked white and alive and likely to crawl from the steps out into the wild yard. They would hold hands walking home together, in the dark; her mother would say what they did was a good thing. Martha didn’t understand it, but that was Vietnam, decades ago.

“Okay,” she said to Mark. “I’m okay.”

He studied her eyes without dropping her shoulders. “Stay in here a minute, all right?” he said.

She nodded. He stood up and walked back into the front, leaving the door between them slightly cracked so that the little sounds of humanity ebbed into her jungle. She heard movement, the small clinks of ceramic on glass, Bob’s whispers that asked about her. Mark whispered something back, and then the sounds disappeared. Even with the clouds overhead, the room was bright, green, full of things growing somewhere new.

It Was Good in the Beginning

We bought the house two summers before Mara died. Behind it was a wood and Styrofoam dock, and the road that went down to it was half-owned by Mara. She never used it. She never left her porch except to get bills and Publishers Clearing House envelopes. “Agoraphobia,” my wife Jules said to our sons. “It means she’s afraid to leave her home.” That wasn’t quite right, but Luke and James were five and six and didn’t need to know little gossip about our neighbor. They talked about their sick sister to cashiers; I wasn’t worried they’d repeat anything to Mara. Her home was brown and lonely. The boys were afraid of her hands when she tried to pet them.

There were no other neighbors there. Mara’s home stood between a dirt road and the stony lake; our plot was beside hers, and everything across the street was a bramble forest owned by the state. She had lived on the Kansas lake for forty years, her home longer. It was older than ours, but not by much—flat little yards, a similar floor plan, two houses built together, maybe by friends or a large family. Mara didn’t know anything about that. She only knew Kansas for the time she had spent there: a decade for each finger on her right hand, a little measurement that documented every family that had spent a summer or five as her neighbor.

Mara didn’t know many other things about the world, and the new things we learned that first summer, about epilepsy, and comas, and meningitis, meant little to her. Our daughter Carlie transformed in Kansas, and everyone except Mara changed with her. Carlie lost her health and most of her mind; the boys dulled a little to the world; Jules found her taste for wine again. While Carlie was in her coma, we used to drink a bottle together on the dock, watching the black waves and the plaster moon. If Jules drank more than half, I noticed she would trace the curves of her high school tattoos. They were blue and green, like eyes, and encircled her wrist to symbolize the power of earth.

It took a month for Carlie to wake up. In the waiting days, I pulled Luke and James behind a friend's pontoon boat, teaching them to ski. Their hair bleached into a blinding white and they tanned deeply. In town, most people mistook them for twins. I bought them old comics because it seemed like a time for reading. They both appreciated the pictures, but only Luke was interested in the words. He asked me to read them aloud while James dug for moles in our yard and dirt driveway.

I taught History at Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado. I got the summerhouse because Jules had been raised near a forest and always missed the richness of green. I had family in Alamosa. It was home, but it was also the wrong side of the state. We saw mountains from the desert: a hazy and impossible wall that held back the trees. Jules taught the kids to love the world where we lived, but I knew she never could. After a decade of saving, I bought the renovated lake house eleven hours east without visiting it. We drove a U-Haul across Kansas full of clothes and bed frames. I set up the kids' rooms, and Jules and I spent the first night together on the dock. She kissed me there and said I was a king, said I knew how all the world moved.

Mara knew the realtor who sold us the house. When I first stepped out of the truck, she waved to me and said hello, Bram. Jules went to greet her. I heard them talking about the realtor, about a little boy who brought her groceries. Mara apologized and said he wasn't coming until tomorrow with a welcome cake. I walked over with Luke to say hello and introduce my son. She was large and restive and had three fingers on her left hand. She said to bring her any injured sparrows we found; she said she could heal them.

The morning after Mara died I went into her home and let the birds go. She had seven cages of them; in the morning dim I couldn't see forms, just sharp movements behind the wires. I

carried them individually to her porch and opened the little doors. Many of them were missing legs; others had a red socket where an eye should've been. Somehow they all could fly and aimed for the openings quickly.

I went back into Mara's house. It would be torn down; she had been cooking a sheet of diabetic candy when her heart stopped. We found her because of the smoke, and now the whole place smelled like an aviary built in a fake sugar plant. The saccharin almost burned my eyes. I looked at the books she couldn't read, her bed set in the den, the stairs that led to three empty rooms. There was no light to switch off and the curtains were already closed. I took a key from a little hook and stepped outside.

The sparrows were still there, out of their cages, nervous and shuffling around the porch railing. They moved when I shut and locked the door, but not to the trees. I saw James and Luke sitting near our house, watching me and the birds. I waved them over. Luke came and stood next to me, but James wouldn't climb the steps.

"Are they going to die in the wild?" James asked. He was always growing and his arms were like two small ropes. Luke held onto my waist and looked up at me.

"I don't think so," I said. "Look." A few of the healthier birds, raised since Mara had found them as babies, began to ascend to the safer foliage.

"They already know," said Luke.

The rest were shaking on the porch. I didn't know how many would survive the day.

That first Kansas summer was a time of new words: Phenytoin, Lamictal, Neurontin. In June, when she first came down with a fever, Carlie was nine; when she woke up she was five

and couldn't read, dance, or play the piano. The seizures continued after the coma, and in the beginning, the little drug regiment reduced our daughter to saliva and crystal eyes.

Jules was five foot four. Her arms and legs were a little thicker than when we first met, but the rest was small and I never thought strong. When Carlie went down she became a stone girl. Jules could lift her onto a couch and return to kitchen baking without a sign of exertion.

I began journaling that summer. As a child I had little interest in recording things, but humans have some instinct to document the end of a world. I didn't tell Jules because she would find it macabre. Carlie wasn't dying; she was transforming, and though we might never want to remember it, I needed the memories stored in a safer place than my mind.

In the mornings of that first summer, I woke up before anyone else. I sat on the dock with coffee, sometimes praying, sometimes listening. Across the lake was a two-story house. It had a tiered dock with a speedboat and floating trampoline lashed to the sides. James and Luke watched it whenever we drove by: never used, always empty. At five thirty every morning the house's lower lights came on, and by five forty-five a black truck left the driveway. Around then I would migrate back up the road.

The rest of my family would be asleep for another hour, but Mara seemed to always be awake. Long before dawn she moved to her porch and soon learned to expect me. Good morning, Bram, she would say. How is the water today? For all the decades she had lived there, I knew she didn't understand the world or dams or the predictability of rainfall. I wondered what it was like to wake up every morning, unsure if the lake had evaporated or swelled up to the foot of your house.

Unchanged, I would answer, and sit with her a while. We could talk about a multitude of things: her father, the trail of tears, how I met Jules and Jesus in a Bible study after grad school. She was nearly seventy but new to the world. We both respected each other's knowledge and desire to learn.

I trusted Jules, but told Mara more about my concerns, about the pregnant friend I didn't marry in college, and how I never flew up to see my father before he died. She couldn't read but had a library in her mind, stored in lieu of song names and people's faces. "John nine, verse three," she said to me often. "'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.'" I cried sometimes in the mornings with Mara. She would just crease her brow and lay her hand on my knee. She would say it's okay to be sad.

Three of Mara's cousins came to her funeral. She had seeds of family all over the country, but these were the only nearby ones who had ever visited. I opened the service with a prayer. Jules was wearing a green sleeveless dress with a white cord around her hip. Beside her sat the boys and then Carlie, who looked confused and afraid. I sat back down beside Carlie and wrapped my arm around her waist. She shirked away and screamed, "No!"

Mara's cousins looked over at me, but they had hardly known our neighbor. Jules had her eyes closed and was rocking back and forth. Her lips mouthed something. I was embarrassed and thought my wife looked like a young tree, breathless in the wind.

When Carlie first went into her coma, Jules and I lived for two weeks in Kansas City, at the Ronald McDonald House. My parents had flown in and stayed at the lake with the boys, who

only knew their sister wasn't well, a ripple in the still waters of their life. There were other families at the House, but we didn't like to be around the anxiety. We stayed out late, in restaurants and soft bars, buildings we escaped to after hours at the hospital.

Carlie didn't move naturally in her sleep. It was hard to see her so inanimate, or so possessed when the tremors quivered over her skin and legs. "What is that doing to her?" Jules asked the doctors. They said they didn't always know what caused them, or why our daughter had so suddenly disappeared from us.

On the fifth day of the coma, Carlie didn't stop convulsing for six hours. Piggyback Seizures, they called it: an onslaught on the mind. No one knew if she would wake up, only that if she did, she would be changed. Jules wouldn't cry. She gripped my hand and thanked the doctors for helping our daughter.

She and I tried to watch *Out of Africa* on television that night but shut it off and had to leave. We drove to a Starbucks and sat outside. With the warm coffee, even our fingers were sweating; young people were huddled inside with the air conditioning.

Like me, Jules hadn't slept much. She hardly wore makeup, and I could see the lines deepening around her mouth and eyes. I looked away, to the highway and the headlights that orbited past us.

"Would you ever consider divorcing me?" Jules asked. She had taken the lid off her cup and was watching the heat. Her hair was amber and cropped just above her little shoulders.

"You mean if something bad ever happened?" I asked.

Jules tried to laugh and looked up at me. "Good. Me neither."

I reached over and felt the muscles of her back. She put down her cup and stared up at the handful of stars.

“I can still read them,” she said. “Bram.”

I looked at her. She pointed at a cluster of three dots. I followed her gaze.

“Do you know what they’re saying?” she asked.

In May, the Alamosa wind was the harshest, and while I graded term papers I had heard it creaking through my office. In another month it would be raining over the lake and Carlie would lie unconscious beside a leaking window. Jules’ stars were just burning, unless it was true they had died out ten million years ago.

At our wedding, Jules’ maid of honor had come up to me and said you never stop worshiping the moon. Her name was Gaia. She had been Jules’ neighbor until college, and the day she turned eighteen they got tattoos together. “You never stop,” Gaia repeated. “It draws us up like the ocean, and you can’t pull her stronger than gravity.”

Jules had quit her job when we came back from Kansas. She stayed at home. The meds were nearly as debilitating, but they got Carlie’s epilepsy on a routine: four to seven days well, one to two of seizures. At the end of a good series, Carlie could read and print again, and all the time Jules followed her across the tile and hardwood floors.

The first winter after the lake, James caught a fever. The kindergarten teacher called us simultaneously, but Jules was the one who drove in and took him home. “He’s sleeping,” she said when I called. She spoke with the voice of a fresh corpse. “I’m making him Jell-O.”

I asked if I should cancel my afternoon class, but she told me no, emptily like an echo.

That afternoon, I got home late, almost dusk, and found Luke asleep near the aquarium in our foyer. Jules was a statue in the kitchen: both hands on the counter, staring down at the bowl of solidifying liquid. She hadn’t moved since I had called. I dropped my briefcase and ran to

steady her. She crumpled against me, and I carried her into our bedroom. The house was full of immobility, as though carbon monoxide had crept in to paralyze my wife and children.

Luke woke up on his own and sat with me in the kitchen. I heated canned soup and carried the television to James' room when he woke up. Luke asked if he could sit with his brother. I told him maybe not. We played checkers for three hours until Jules walked into the kitchen.

"He's better," I said. "The fever is down."

"Okay," she said, moving past me.

I heard the attic stairs clank down in the garage. Jules walked back through a few minutes later. She was carrying a box I had never seen before. She stayed up nearly all night reading *Spiritual Healing*: *Spells and Talismans*. We never talked about it. I found a book of astrology beside her Bible.

Mara had told me she spent her first thirty years in the Wyoming Mountains. Her father believed that sometimes you have to start at the beginning. He believed very much in Eden, not as a paradise near the Tigris and Euphrates, but as a perfect balance between wilderness and God and a small portion of humanity. He took his wife and daughters up there and wouldn't let them leave until he died. I don't think there was anything sexual about it. He was an idealist—a mystic who farmed and traded distilled liquor for seeds, cloth, and occasionally young livestock.

Mara didn't have any maps of the area. She didn't even know Kansas and Wyoming were in very different places. She had a newspaper article with a grainy picture: her, young and not much thinner, standing beside a highway with a pony and talking to a forest ranger. The story estimated she had lived northeast of Big Piney, a few miles up the first fork on the Green River.

Her sisters had died earlier, two from infections, the last in a blizzard. When her parents were dead, Mara walked in the direction her father always went for trading and found the 189.

I wanted to see it. In forty years something would still be preserved, maybe everything but the roof. I calculated the journey from Alamosa: twenty minutes shorter than to our lake house; up to I-80, then the 191 to Big Piney. It is known as the ice box of the nation, the coldest average temperature in the continental states. Mara told me they had all lost fingers or toes.

It snowed in Alamosa the week of James' sickness. He recovered from his fever within a few days. It had been the flu, but Jules didn't change. She tied strands of her hair into sharp braids; she began to smile like an animal, like it was just a shape of her mouth. We all still went to church, but Jules began telling people she adhered to supplemental Christianity—that the soul needs more than Jesus. Bragg was a friend at church who had always lived in Colorado. I told him I was worried about my wife. He believed women were resilient in ways you could never expect. He agreed with Gaia: you couldn't change them.

In March, over Spring Break, I rented a camper to visit Great San Dunes National Park. Jules hung red string around the ceiling and stored Carlie's meds in a cabinet that the boys couldn't reach. Her hair swam down her back to the shoulder blades. James asked how long we would be gone.

"As long as we need," said Jules.

"Three days," I said.

It wasn't much of a trip, half an hour northeast, but our daughter was no longer stable. The first night in the dunes, I was grilling hot dogs with propane and Carlie went down, out of

her seat, quivering up at the black sky. I shut off the grill and ran over, but Jules was already with her.

I didn't journal about it later. There was wind, and dull needles of sand against my eyes. Jules knelt next to Carlie and was tracing lines over her arms. She kept whispering something I couldn't hear. I touched Jules' shoulder, but she didn't stop. She whispered louder: *spirits come into me; spirits come into me; spirits come into me*.

Behind us was the light from the camper. My shadow crossed Carlie's face, but I could tell she was only shaking harder.

"Jules, stop it," I said.

She didn't, and I was afraid to touch her again.

I turned around and saw Luke crying. James was inside the camper, staring through the window but not moving; he looked encased in plastic skin. I walked back to pick up Luke. I stepped up to the door and told James to get away from the window. Even with the camper's light Jules seemed covered by a shade. I slumped against the wall with Luke still crying in my arms; even James crawled over to me. I asked God what He was doing to my family.

The next day, Carlie didn't wake up until one, and even then she only moved with her roving eyes. I told Jules we had to leave.

"We haven't felt all the dunes yet," she said.

I packed up our chairs and porch and we drove home. It was a quiet journey; Jules sat in the back, stroking Carlie's hair. The boys didn't talk to their mother until dinner, when she cooked them rice and said they were dragons, little ice dragons from a mountain.

I returned the camper the next morning. The boys rode with me; afterwards I took them to Colorado Gators for the afternoon. It was a tilapia fishery near a geothermal well, seventeen miles north of Alamosa. A couple of decades ago they brought in alligators to dispose of the dead fish, and quickly they opened the farm to the public. In the winter the alligators crawl up onto the snow, and all year round people drive in to see them: two hundred giant reptiles in yellow Colorado.

James and Luke each held a baby and laughed when it tried to squirm away. I paid to have their picture taken near a large one and told my boys they were courageous. On the way home, they couldn't stop holding and staring at the photo. I stopped at Wal-mart to buy them a frame.

"Do you want to go back to Kansas this summer?" I asked as we neared our neighborhood. "Do you want to go back to the lake?"

"With Mara?" James asked from the back

I said yes, she'd still be there.

"Are there alligators in the lake?" asked Luke. He was holding the frame, had made me put the picture in as soon as we bought it.

"I think just turtles," I said. In the mirror I saw them both looking at me. "It's too cold for them there," I said. "The water freezes over and they have nowhere to go; they can't swim up to the surface to breathe."

The summer we returned to the lake house, I knew Mara was no longer well. Her furnace had died for a week in December, and without a phone she had to wait for her grocery boy to

bring his bag of food. When he finally came, her skin was a winter blue, and she only told him she was cold.

After recovering, I thought it just affected the speed of her movements—I saw her making splintered gasps if she had to stand up and walk suddenly. She stayed on her porch for longer times, and from it she watched Carlie in the grass, Jules roping together green vines, the boys always behind me with a hammer and measuring tape. I still talked with her in the mornings, but I could tell her mind was paling, that her monuments of interest and memory were weathered and eroding.

"What do you think of Solomon?" Mara asked me once.

"The third king of Israel?" I said.

She nodded.

"He had tragic potential," I said. I was watching a grove of black trees, thick and calloused in the morning darkness.

"Even great things can fall," she said. "Maybe they have to."

I wondered what it was like to have been raised in no part of civilization. She never moralized the world, never told God He was wicked for the lightning storm that killed her sheep, or for the rot of frostbite. I couldn't fathom a mind so open. I wondered if Mara was crazy, or if her father was right: that the purest state of man is in isolation.

After her funeral in July, we left Kansas. I told Jules I wanted to visit Wyoming and she said that was good of me, it was important. I spent the night in Colorado and woke up early to load my truck. Luke heard my sounds and wandered into the kitchen.

“How long will you be gone?” he asked. He was as tall as his brother. I remembered them both as little seeds.

I stepped over to him and knelt down. “I don’t know,” I said. “Not too long.”

He nodded with his eyes locked on mine.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.” I packed another bag and scribbled a note to Jules. Luke woke his brother, but by the time we were on the 17, they were tucked against each other asleep.

I had made this drive before, longer, up to Yellowstone, but in college and without sons. In the mountain curves James vomited on the side of the road. The air was empty and cool, and he climbed back into the truck, smiling. I called Jules once we reached Leadville.

“Thank you for taking them,” she said. “They needed to be close to her again.”

We spent the night in Rock Springs. I drove the boys around the town and read them a plaque describing the Rock Springs Massacre, a race riot in 1885. I had planned to sleep in the cab when I imagined the trip without my sons. I felt like all hotels were synthetic, so after dinner I bought us a room at the Miners Repose Bed & Breakfast. In the morning I found a contoured map of the region, and we began to climb the 191 toward Big Piney.

Halfway up, we passed through an empty stretch of road. The map marked it as Eden, a census-designated place to account for the sprinkling of cabins in the region.

“It’s like in the beginning,” I said to the boys. They had their faces close to the window, looking through the trees for a sign of humanity. It was all green and yellow now. I figured in three more months this world would be white and motionless.

Near the peak of 191 we turned off into a gravel road for campgrounds along the Green River. It was noon, and the view was full of pines and gray stones. The map showed a dip in elevation, probably three hours away without a trail. I had told the boys about Mara, growing up

here, how it might have changed her. They were desperate to see her family cabin, something older than they could imagine.

The hike wasn't hard. Brambles and thorn bushes didn't weave through the trees. It was all pine trunks and faded grass, an endless league of them, but I had a little GPS; I knew we were going south.

We ate sandwiches near a creek and could hear the Green River's slow hum of movement—maybe a hundred yards away, maybe half a mile along the endless slope of mountain. Luke didn't drag his feet; James ran ahead of us to find clearings and stand in the sun until we reached him. After two hours, James asked if Mara had come this way. There was shade and under the pine needles a thousand beetle grubs.

"Probably somewhere close," I said. "She came out along a different highway, but it's nearby too." I almost told them that nature didn't often change, that the trees were nearly so old when Mara had passed through them.

We reached the little valley I had marked, and I knew it wasn't right. There were no flat pastures, no evidence of farm work or colonization. It had to have been something similar, but I couldn't see anything else on the map, not unless Mara had gotten lost and wandered some hundred miles. The river flowed through this place, like it must have near Mara's home. James and Luke crawled down to it and sat along the bank.

"Is this the place, Dad?" James asked. Luke wanted to know where the cabin was.

"I don't know," I said. "It was something like this."

Luke stood up and kicked gravel into the water. I looked around and saw a piece of wood, high up, deposited from the river flooding. It had a nail in it.

I called the boys and they crowded around it. Yes, it could've been from her farm, I told them. They felt the rust and already imagined the hands that must have shaped this thing. They looked up the river, to where it vanished around another climb, heading to some higher peak.

"Why didn't Mom come with us?" Luke asked. He had a hand on the plank, but James was holding almost all of it. The sky was clear with at least another four hours of light. Clouds glimmered and metallicized along the surface of the water.

"Your sister is too sick," I said.

"Do you still love Mom?" James asked. His hair was thick and curled above his eyes.

I sat down on the crest of the bank. "Lives change a lot," I said. "Sometimes suddenly."

James kept looking at me. There was a breeze and he looked strong against it.

"I think I do," I said.

James sat beside me and Luke crawled into my lap. We stared at the river and cragged valley for another hour. There were birds in the grasses. Higher in the hills came the chirping of a marmot, and James tucked his arm around me. Everything was alive.

A Very Distant Direction

Colorado was quiet in December. Family journeys between home and church, the distribution of the *Valley Courier*, these were the only Sunday movements down Ross Avenue. The man across the street who beaded jewelry and carved walking sticks sometimes toured the block with his Labrador. Today he was inside. His shades were drawn. Brenda thought it was an afternoon for isolation; even his dog was quiet somewhere.

As the Broncos secured their victory in the living room, Brenda opened her refrigerator drawers to decide their supper. She found corn and Sitz Chicken Breasts in the freezer and set them beside the sink. The sun began to brush the tips of the mountains; the kitchen clock beeped four times. She heard the television switch off in the other room and the shuffle of her husband's waking feet.

"We won," he said, stepping onto the tile. His furry arms held each other because it was thirty degrees outside and Brenda didn't like the house too warm. "Thank you for the blanket."

Bragg had the body of a mill worker: broad shouldered to compensate for his average height. Size was an attractive quality in his youth; as a twenty-something bachelor, he fathered a child—now a thirty-nine year old woman living with a potato farmer in New Mexico. He worked with engines and practiced taxidermy as a hobby in their garage. Brenda smiled at him, the most affection she gave, and asked how he felt about cabbage with their meal.

"Gary likes it," Bragg said. He deferred to his brother often. "I wouldn't mind."

Brenda nodded and reopened the refrigerator. It was empty of beer; she asked if he could bring more from the basement.

Alamosa sat within the world's largest alpine valley. Between the mountains were pockets of civilization, the Great San Dunes National Park, and a horizon of barley fields—

grown for the Coors Brewery in Golden. Brenda's father had been a whiskey man, her mother an LDS apostate who still abstained from alcohol and caffeine. Bragg said she had to drink beer, for the economy if nothing else. She did, but wrote to her mother describing it like water with a teaspoon of stomach acid. Bragg said it had an American flavor.

Little puddles of condensation formed around the chicken breasts. Brenda looked out the window to their garage apartment behind the house where her brother-in-law Gary now lived. It had been a week since his son Lar had visited for Thanksgiving, and he hadn't spoken much.

"Is he going to eat with us?" She turned on the hot faucet and set the meat under the stream of water. Bragg was stacking silver cans in the refrigerator. His eyes glazed like they were remembering Vietnam.

"I think so," he said. "Do you want me to ask?"

Brenda said yes please, and Bragg walked outside to climb the apartment's staircase.

Bragg and his brother Gary hadn't seen each other but twice in the past thirty years. Gary had met a girl at Adams State, and after graduating they married and moved to Oregon. He brought her down one summer with their son to spend a month in the mountains; they didn't return until five years ago, for the wedding. Now he had left his wife and come home, he said. Gary was quiet like his brother, but Brenda believed more thoughtful. When her husband wasn't talking about elk season or new waders from Cabela's, she knew his mind still thought about those things, not the dynamics of their marriage, not God.

"He'll be down soon," Bragg said, coming back inside. "It's a pretty day."

He sat at the kitchen table and asked about the game. Brenda had watched pieces of it while dusting the house. She glanced over from shredding cabbage.

"I didn't notice much excitement," she said. "It looked like a murder from the points."

Bragg nodded. “News came on. They’re holding a trial for that teacher in Nevada.”

“It’s sad. I don’t think she killed the boy.” Brenda rinsed off her knife. “Has Gary heard from Lar?” she asked. “Have they talked?”

Bragg stood up to take a warm beer from the fridge. “I don’t know anything about that,” he said.

Brenda distrusted Lar when she first met him at the airport. He had grown half a foot since her wedding and retained none of the girlish timidity she had noted those years before. Over dinner he talked about the green lawns of UCLA and how his roommate was arrested in front of the Powell Library for smoking marijuana from a hookah. He didn’t discuss sex or boys, as Gary had warned them, but Bragg’s discomfort was clear. Her husband was a man who loved military order and the notion of normalcy; after five years with him, Brenda began to share his vision for the world.

Lar stayed in Alamosa for five days. He helped organize her cupboards and drew a sparrow that she taped above her bathroom mirror. It was poised for flight; he even got the bark right—cracked and gnarled like the limbs of their ash tree in the backyard. He slept on a trundle bed in the guest room, and on the first night, after they had switched off all the lights, Bragg sighed next to her and said there is a gay atheist in our house. Brenda didn’t know how much she believed in God, but she was wife to an elder of Trinity Lutheran Church; she never brought it up.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “He seems harmless.”

Bragg sighed again and turned away from her. “I don’t know what to make of him.”

* * * * *

Eating his corn, Bragg made predictions about the next week's Colts game. Gary didn't talk except to thank Brenda for the meal. He was wearing the same flannel shirt from the night before and had slept through church. She asked him if anything was wrong.

"Martha called me today," he said. Dark hammocks drooped beneath his eyes. "She has a brother. He was in some cult but is living with her now." He opened his Coors. "She never talked about her family with me."

"Some families like secrets," Brenda said.

Bragg grew quiet, and Gary drank from his can. Brenda envisioned him staring upward at night, climbing out of his bed to write a letter to his wife, throwing away the paper after his attempt. She called her mother often. They talked about Virginia and the landscape she missed. Bragg only called his father on holidays to ask about his health and fishing trips. "I guess love comes in different ways," Brenda said suddenly, and both men looked to their plates.

When Lar had joined them for meals, he told her about Los Angeles beaches—to avoid Santa Monica, how stunning Topanga could be. She asked about Death Valley, but he said, "We don't go there." Bragg asked if he had ever slept in a blind.

"It's harder in Oregon," Gary had said.

Now with these two quiet men, Brenda remembered the silence of meals. Though Bragg was ten years older, they had spent all of their time together before Gary left Alamosa. Afternoons they worked at their father's hardware store; weekends and summers were always in the mountains, hunting, fishing, or guiding trails for the Platoro Lodge. The only time Brenda met Gary's wife, Martha, they talked about the similarities of their husbands. Martha recounted the hunting trips the two men went on throughout college—trips she called the days without speaking. They seemed to agree that voices under the sky were a breach of nature, that

conversation was pointless for men of the same mind. Martha swore they would skin the animals in silence but recounted the kill in town as though they had practiced the story for days.

Finishing his beer, Gary looked out into the black yard, only the wooden fence visible by the house's light. Bragg stood to clear the table.

"I'd like to see the reservoir again," Gary said: "when it's frozen, covered in the snow drifts."

Bragg took his plate. Brenda got up to retrieve her jacket from the counter. Outside was the steady growl of wind.

"We're too old," Bragg said. He tried to lift his knee and then walked over to the sink. "We'd freeze before reaching Jasper."

Bragg was sixty-two, the same age as Brenda's mother. He did one tour in Saigon after high school and never left Colorado but once since returning—to Texas, when his mother died of leukemia. He talked about her the first time he met Brenda at his shop. She had needed an oil change and something to do. Alamosa wasn't a place you moved to as a thirty-five year old. She had a job but sometimes forgot how she arrived there.

The wedding was at a small church. Her relatives from Virginia filled half of it; Gary's family and Bragg's acquaintances from town sat in the other pews. His father didn't come up from Texas; he believed it was wrong that Bragg never married Gloria's mother. Before the ceremony, Brenda pulled him aside and reminded him it was her second marriage. "I think that's fine," Bragg had said.

Some nights she still wanted to leave. She smoked marijuana in high school and wanted to be a flight attendant on international planes to Italy or Peru. But Gary was living with them

now. If he could abandon a place like Oregon, Brenda didn't know where you could be happy. She figured a house, sex once a month was enough. On Saturdays, when Bragg was at the shooting range or tanning skins in the garage, she drove her Datsun out toward Fort Garland, near the dunes. There were dirt roads along the 160 that no one ever used. Brenda would turn down them, shut off her engine, and sit in the car for half an hour. Between the mountains and buttes, the sky looked shallow, like even up wasn't a very distant direction.

After dinners, Gary usually wandered back up to his room while Bragg read Louis L'Amour novels. Tonight, they moved to the living room, together but with the unity of old animals: in herds of habit. Brenda followed them and sat beside her husband on the couch.

"School's almost out," said Bragg. He had gotten a job for his brother at Adams State, easy managerial work with the History and Government Department. Gary walked to the campus every day.

"The faculty has a shorter break," Gary said—"two weeks."

The windows and walls and floorboards all creaked or splintered, aged from decades of wind, dust, and the slow movement of people. Everything under the ceiling lamps looked hazy, like under a secret fog. Brenda wanted a skylight. The house felt exhausted and never clean.

"When are you going home?" she asked.

Bragg said he was home, and Gary bent his face into his hands. The wind still moved outside, twitching the shutters against the house. Gary started trembling; she knew he was crying because her husband looked away.

Brenda had been raised in a Catholic home. The last time she went to confession was after her brother died. They had never been close, and she didn't feel sad, and she asked the

priest if that made her evil: thinking family was just something that happened by accident. He told her God had a plan for every family, and that He loved her. Brenda thanked him and walked away. She didn't return for many years until moving to Alamosa, when she was baptized again into the Lutheran Church.

Bragg stood up from the couch and walked around his brother. She heard a heave of wind enter the house as he opened the kitchen door. Gary still shuddered on the couch, and Brenda just watched him.

Gary didn't speak to his son much when Lar was visiting. He drove him to all of the places they had visited five years earlier. The rest of their time was spent in quiet hours at the house. After five months of separation, Brenda realized that some natural reconnection was expected, but Gary's mind was still a box that couldn't hold his son.

After he finished crying on the couch, she made two cups of instant decaf Folger's. He drank his and apologized.

"I don't mind," Brenda said.

"I don't know if I should have left," he said.

When he moved back to Alamosa in June, Gary told them that too many things in Oregon had changed. He didn't understand what had happened, what made their son gay, why Martha didn't seem to mind.

"I don't know if we were ever meant to be together," he said. If there were tears left in his eyes, he would've again. He believed in things like that: romantic destiny. Brenda didn't have that kind of assurance. If the world was a scripted one, her role was incidental and life was a slow tragedy.

She sipped her coffee and listened. He talked about the class where they met: Economics. Martha was wearing a belt roped with some plant that probably grew in India. He said he thought he needed a girl like her, that differences were supposed to make people better.

"Isn't that everything?" he asked. "Isn't that the best we can have?"

Brenda felt very cold and looked out the frosty window. "I don't know," she said.

Gary set his cup down and followed her gaze. "Alamosa hasn't changed," he said. "It just feels different, which I guess happens when you get older."

Brenda looked at him. She knew he was thinking of his high school summers, building trails, guiding New York families up to Kerr Lake. It rarely snowed in Alamosa but fell in houses just an hour west. He didn't have anywhere to go.

By eleven, Gary had gone to bed and Bragg returned from the garage, his hands stained with some dark animal grease. She lay on their bed and watched him in the bathroom. He had precise movements in taking off his shirt and scrubbing his forearms with a bar of Lava soap. For all his years, the hairs across his chest and thick stomach weren't white, just a deep gray, a slight shift from the brown she had seen in photographs of him as a young man. He switched off the light and knelt beside the bed to pray before sliding into the sheets.

Brenda reached over and rubbed his bushy chest. It was a block; she liked the strength he possessed.

"I don't know about tonight," he said. His voice was old and tired.

The lamp on his nightstand was still on, sending shadows across his face and arms. She glanced at the wall with a picture from their honeymoon in Platoro.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

He turned his head to face her. “I’ve never seen Gary like that.”

Bragg used to go hiking every month and still talked about it with the men he knew from church. He had a one-man tent, blanket, water filter, knife, and three days of food in his red pack; sometimes he was gone for five and came back grimy and irritable from hunger. He liked cars and loved taxidermy—they just weren’t enough. The first time he drove up into the mountains after meeting her, Bragg told Brenda that sometimes you have to leave. For her husband, the mountains were the rest of the world, access to some greater significance he couldn’t understand in his town life. Now he moved with a limp and had to stay in a cabin when he visited there during the summer.

“I think he’s okay now,” Brenda said, and Bragg rolled away from her.

He switched off the lamp, and Brenda thought about the morning, next weekend: the rest of her life. She had sat watching Gary for an hour, because she knew he wasn’t just crying for Lar or the bad crops that summer. Bragg’s knee had gone out the year after their marriage. Their hot water heater was leaking, old like the rest of the house. Everything announced that the world wasn’t a progression toward better things. “It’s overwhelming,” she said in the darkness.

So Long, Darby. We Already Miss You.

Kenneth is the new man in my mother's life. I have never met him, but she's given me descriptions in phone calls and a photograph: six foot something, balding, and wearing a shirt full of Aerosmith. They have lived together since April and been intimate for at least five years, when they met at church. "It's like an affair," my mother told me, "except he's not married."

My mother is fifty and reads cowboy romance novels. We talk once a month, always on Sunday afternoons, the most she can afford with long distance. She tells me to come visit, for Christmas, her birthday, even the Fourth of July, and I always say maybe—work at the shelter is hectic. She asks me about the things in my life she can bear to hear. I tell her about the street kids, what books I'm reading, how Ralph my cat has killed five squirrels and a cardinal. After an hour, she tells me again to come visit, and we both say we love each other. "Send me a picture," she added last month, and I finally told her okay, that I'd come for Christmas.

Though I haven't made it in twelve years, the trip isn't hard to manage: Eugene to Salt Lake to DFW. I talk to the woman beside me on the plane. She is Hispanic but without an accent, and will be dividing her holiday between Dallas and Plano. I don't ask why, even though they are essentially the same cities. I mention Oregon only as we land, and she asks me if I ever miss Texas. "It's bluer here," I say, looking out the window. She doesn't want to know what a gray winter is like: five months of clouds. I tell her we take solace in the green of the pines, and she tries to empathize, this woman of the desert.

"Are you excited to see your mother?" she asks as we gather our luggage. "Is she coming to pick you up?"

"I think so," I say. "She might have brought her boyfriend."

The woman nods and tells me to have a Merry Christmas. I tell her the same, and we leave the plane in separate directions. Outside, I see her with a swarm of grandchildren. I find a jacket from my knapsack and remain waiting beside the road. There is a river of taxis, and after a long time my mother's red Toyota. I lift my bags and wave to her, already imagining her eyes, her grayer hair, the laugh, she said, that made her popular. The air is colder than I expected. I look up to see all the planes departing.

A month before I left her home, my mother asked if I remembered Darby. Darby was a man who had lived four streets over from us and coached a swim team in Denton. One night, he fell asleep driving with his arm out the window, and a road sign clipped it off at the bicep; he almost bled to death. After recovering, he remained a handicapped coach for a couple of years before moving away—I thought up to Kansas.

"Yes," I told her. It was the night of my graduation. We were sitting alone in the kitchen, only one light on to illuminate her brow and suede hands.

"He was probably your father," she said.

Okay, I told her, like it didn't matter, because it didn't. I was eighteen and tired with my life: the racists at school and my mother's eyes when they grew sleepy and probing, examining my mind, skin, to see the roots of my failings. Knowing my father's name meant nothing to me.

"I've done a lot for you, Mark," she said.

I told her thank you, as I got up to walk outside. I found the screen door with my hands and pressed it open; gnats and moths resting against it burst out into the yard.

The nights in Aubrey were dark and loud. I could hear the rumbling cars of other graduates; some, passing, had thrown bottles on our lawn. I kicked at one. It cracked and spun

out into the street. There was a pasture across from our house; in the full moon you could see the black mill against the stars. I had enough hate to fill the darkness, and I couldn't move or think about my father for many years.

Kenneth doesn't talk much. He said hello when I walked in but didn't stand; he kept watching *ESPN*. My mother led me to my old room and told me to take a shower, that dinner would be ready soon.

We are both sitting at the table before Kenneth clicks off the television. He comes to join us wearing Wrangler jeans and a black t-shirt, advertising ACME Brick.

"Cowboys," he tells me and then frowns. He stares at my plaid shirt, the revolver tattooed on my forearm. "Football," he says.

It is six o'clock and dark outside. Nothing in my mother's home has changed: birdhouse wallpaper, a rusted stove, wood shelves the brown of dried tea. I noticed that even bindweeds still dot the lawn, pink and not yet frozen for winter. Seasons are less drastic here.

"I'm sorry, Ken," I say. "I only keep up with soccer."

"Beckham?" he offers.

I nod and say he's a champ. My mother pats Kenneth's hand.

After dinner, she asks if we would like to go for a walk. Kenneth says no, but wouldn't mind if we left him. I get my jacket to join her at the front door. She holds it open then follows me outside.

We bought the house when I was eight and her parents died, leaving her enough for the down payment. It was old even then, but grounded and with a yard. My mother sold her car to

buy more furniture, since we could walk to church, Diamond Foods, and Betty's where she worked. I liked the house. My mother told me it had a good heart.

Walking from it tonight, she puts her arm around me. "It's good to see you," she says.

I ask if she wants to marry Kenneth.

"Maybe," she says. She grips me tighter. "What's it like to be home?"

A pack of miniature dogs moves across the road in front of us. I can see the apparition of their breath in the air. My mother looks up at me.

"It's a different place," I say.

She nods and looks forward again. "I guess people can change."

I didn't swim in middle school, which was when Darby still coached. I ran, for track, cross-country, any sport without a real team. My mother attended most of my meets. She told me I looked good in a tank top, though I was always skinny and shy about my body. She assumed that was why I didn't have a girlfriend. I heard her on the phone once, talking to her sister about boosting self-confidence. She shooed me away after I appeared at the door and never brought it up to me.

Our house was not an empty or calloused one. She took the shifts that would get her home in time, sacrificing better tips to be with me. We watched movies together. I helped her with dinner after my homework. She told me she loved me, and every new season asked if I wanted to play football, basketball, baseball. I always said that's all right, and she would nod, studying me.

She invited Darby over for dinner when I was in eighth grade, a few months before his accident. His skin was hard and brown, but his hands moved like careful birds, carrying dishes

and tucking my mother's chair into the table. They talked with each other easily. I just listened and hardly looked him in the eye. She introduced me as her track star; he called me Bud and had the laugh of a Viking king. I watched him drink beer, reference Johnny Cash, and I understood he was a man I wanted to be like, someone my mother admired. I didn't know him, though; I didn't know how to be him, and already then, I was afraid I never could.

He left—honked his horn as his truck pulled out of our driveway. My mother smiled and wanted to know if I had liked him. I said yes. I imagined him as a father and asked if they were dating. She looked disappointed. She said no, that he had a girlfriend. We watched his taillights disappear before walking back inside. My mother began cleaning the dishes and told me not to help when I tried. I went to bed thinking about Darby.

It is Christmas Eve when I wake up. I find a note in the kitchen, from my mother, saying she will be home around three. I see Kenneth asleep in a recliner and decide to go for a run. He still hasn't moved after I brush my teeth and change, and I set the screen door back carefully, not to wake him.

Across the railroad is still a gold field of dead grass—motionless cows stand around a stock tank. I run along the gravel shoulder, toward downtown. Off the highways, hundreds of houses have appeared, but out here there is no new development. I remember some of the neighbors, but they wouldn't know me. I grew taller even after eighteen; in the ride from the airport, I noticed my mother glancing at me, understanding that her son had changed.

Downtown, a few of the buildings are businesses, but most of it is abandoned brick. I keep running and pass over the railroad. On the other side of the street, a large woman is pushing a stroller and wearing a small coat. Hair swirls around her cantaloupe face; I wave to her, and she

nods back. Even counting the Hispanics, it is a white town. I went to school with fourth generation residents. Aubrey has a Japanese gene pool: except for commuters and immigrants like my mother, everyone looks uniform.

After maybe a mile I turn back. Kenneth has stirred since I left and stands when I open the door.

"Morning, Ken," I tell him.

He says good morning and moves into the kitchen. A back injury made him retire early. He is almost sixty, though, and looks older after waking up; his shoulders click when he moves them quickly.

I rinse off in the shower and return to find him back in his chair. He is not a native. I sit on the couch and ask if he's lived in Aubrey long.

"Pilot Point for eight years," he says with his eyes out the window. "I was born in Lubbock."

He hasn't shaved in probably a week. I haven't either, but my whiskers are slow, and my stubble is still a shadow. I stare at the bookshelves and notice Kenneth clenching his hands.

"My mom said you guys met in church," I say.

He won't look at me. "I didn't know you were coming until yesterday," he says.

I apologize. I wonder if he's ever hit my mother, and I don't think so; he looks prejudiced, not wrathful.

"Susan told me about you," he says, "about finding you with that boy."

The open window fills the room with sun. This house makes me remember everything, but like I am watching it on a television from the sixties. I see two grainy boys shirtless on the

couch. I had known him since middle school; he was my first. My mother probably knew beforehand but cried like she didn't.

"That was hard on her," I say and look at my hands.

Darby was injured and gone by then. My mother kept crying and said she should've put more men in my life. I was too scared to say anything, but even now wonder if she was right.

Kenneth stands up and goes outside. Through the window I can see him walking up to a neighbor's porch, knocking, and stepping inside. I glance to the television, the walls, the carpet and its lakes of stains. In this house, I understand there are places in the world that never move. They're so stationary you forget they're real.

After the candlelight service, we walk Kenneth back to the house, and my mother asks if I'd like to go grab coffee.

"I doubt anywhere is open," I say.

She tells me Sonic is always open, and we drive to it.

The service was at First Baptist, two blocks from her house. We used to be Methodist, and once we get our coffees I ask her about it.

"It's good for me," she says. "I don't even cook with wine anymore." I don't think she ever did but don't mention it. Ours is the only car in the lot. She holds her cup in both hands and sips from it, looking forward.

"How do they like you and Kenneth living together?" I ask.

She glances at me and frowns. She is silver and small. "He told me what y'all talked about today."

I tell her yeah, it's been twelve years.

"A Zodiac cycle," she says, lifting the lid from her cup. "Everything repeated."

I want to tell her that I still read my Bible, that I haven't been with someone in five years. "I've never studied the Zodiac," I say.

She presses the lid back on and sets her cup between her legs. "Apparently it's real."

I met my last boyfriend when I was twenty-two, the only year I went to college. His name was Saul. He was twenty and had just broken up with his high school girlfriend. I liked his taste in music and how he wore a beanie even in the July days that passed ninety. We were together for two empty years, in my apartment where he cheated on me with half a dozen freshman boys. I was getting tired even before he told me. I didn't know what I wanted.

We broke up, he moved out, and I gave myself a month to understand life. My Rastafarian friend told me it was a healthy stage of grieving. I read the Koran, tried to be a pluralist with Buddha, Vishnu, and JZ Knight. I got a joint from a neighbor and smoked to the news, watching it carefully for some enlightenment. They had a story about a one-armed swim coach, taking his girls to state in Kansas. I was twenty-four and hadn't seen Darby in a decade. He was older, with a mechanical arm. He didn't stop smiling the whole interview.

The reporter asked him how he overcame his tragedy.

"God is good," he said.

When Darby had moved away, three of Aubrey's churches changed their marquees to wish him farewell. He taught a Sunday school class at one of them and told people he was going to miss his children. Everyone said he was a good man, that his accident had improved him—more serious but somehow more joyful. They wanted him to stay. They said he could've made this town better.

I thought about my father and prayed that night. There was a Bob Marley poster on my wall, and everything in the air smelled of pot. It was dark. It was warm and dark, and I could feel God there.

My mother has a little fake Christmas tree on her card table. I wake up late and find Kenneth watching *Star Wars* while my mother cooks.

"I bought him the boxed set," she says, looking into the oven. She turns to me. "Do you eat turkey?"

"Oh, sure," I say. My feet are cold on the linoleum. I ask if I can help with anything.

Her head disappears into the refrigerator. She says no.

I return to my room and find a little package in my suitcase. I bring it back to the kitchen where my mother is drying her hands on her apron. She pushes them through her hair as she looks at me. "Merry Christmas," she says.

I hand her the package, and she unwraps it. "It's a frame," she says, peeling off the back layer. She turns it over and studies the image: me, reading to a girl named Charlotte, who is fifteen and an alcoholic. A friend took it at the shelter, developed it in black and white.

"Your hair is longer," my mother says. "Who is she?"

I tell her. "She's about as close to a grandchild as you'll get," I say.

"That isn't funny," says Kenneth from his chair. He has paused his movie and is watching me.

My mother looks at him. "It's okay, Kenny. Thank you, Mark." She sets the frame facedown on the counter and returns to her baking.

I go to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I dress and come back to the kitchen. The television is churning again. I ask my mother when we're eating, if I have time to go for a run.

"Of course," she says, measuring flour. "That's fine."

I turn left off the driveway, away from town. Two boys are swerving a new bicycle in the road, an older man watching from the porch. I run past them and the other houses. There is a bridge for the railroad, and only fields until the highway, which will be empty for Christmas, or maybe full of migratory families, connecting to relatives and little reunions all over the state.

Darby died four years ago, a heart attack at forty-eight. I found out after a long night at the shelter, when a black man came in, his face and hands burned—he said he had been set on fire. I was angry, and googled Darby's name. A local FOX station had the story: "Inspiring Coach Dies." I read it several times, part obituary, part interview with his fiancé, already a widow with two girls. The reporter listed Darby's accomplishments and surviving family. His fiancé said he was the best man she ever knew.

My mother and I were talking once a month by then, so I told her about it, and she just said I'm sorry, Mark. I told her it's okay, he was like a stranger—and though that was true, I still thought about him in the evenings, about whether or not he knew me, and if I would ever see him on a plane, at a gas station across the country. I had lived without a father and survived, but maybe it is envy that considers other worlds, where Darby had raised me, where my mother wasn't a waitress and could still smile after sunsets, lying on the couch.

She changed the subject, and I never brought up Darby again. "Tell me about Kenneth," I said to her, and she did. She said he was a strong man who bought her presents: carnations and ceramic bears. I told her I was happy for her, but I didn't listen to the other words she said. I was

tired and wanting things I had given up long ago: tears, marijuana, casual sex. My mind was traveling a road, to Kansas City, to Aubrey, and all along the blacktop, like a tent for the sun, were a hundred million pine trees, wet and smelling of home.