

BEASTS OF THE FIELD
STORIES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories. It is a work of fiction.

Readers: Jean McGarry and David Yezzi

CONTENTS

The Hardest Part	1
Beasts of the Field	21
Whitaker Street	39
The Everlasting Arms	48
Where We Are Going	60

The Hardest Part

Between sixth and seventh periods on Tuesday Jackie Greiner sidled up to Will's locker and told him to go to the principal's office. Jackie was the student office assistant. She spent third period sorting mail and gossiping with the two secretaries, and every day during the first few minutes of ninth period she read announcements over the PA system. She told Will he wasn't in trouble or anything but that he really ought to go. She mouthed the word *Marion*.

In Ms. Renshaw's geometry class Will asked to use the bathroom and walked to the principal's office. Not for the first time, he was glad that he and Jackie had parted on amicable terms freshman year. He wondered what excuse he would give to the two secretaries for arriving unannounced in the middle of seventh period, but that ended up

not being a problem. Mrs. Jacobsen didn't act at all surprised to see him. She said, "Your dad is in with Principal Daniels right now."

"My step-dad, you mean?" Will said.

She checked the visitor sign-in sheet.

"Jeff Mickley," she said.

"That's my step-father." The word still sounded unfamiliar. "Is he here about Marion?"

Mrs. Jacobsen blushed and said yes.

"I'd like to wait for them, if that's all right."

Mrs. Jacobsen said that was all right. Will sat down to wait next to a kid he didn't know. The kid looked scared. Principal Daniels could be a real hard-ass when he wanted to be one, which unfortunately was most of the time. Even as captain of the football team Will wasn't immune from Daniels' little vendettas against tardiness, cheating, & etc. He had a feeling something serious was happening with Marion; Jeff had made it clear that he would not take kindly to being summoned from work. Maybe Marion had burned herself in chemistry class.

The door to Principal Daniels' office opened and out filed Marion, Jeff, and the principal himself. Jeff had his hand on Marion's shoulder and barely even looked at Will. Daniels surveyed the office suite with his hands on his hips. Then he went back into his private office with the kid who'd been sitting beside Will. Jeff filled out the piece of paper that would allow Marion to leave school early.

"What's going on?" Will said.

Marion didn't answer. He was getting tired of this martyr thing she had going on.

“Are you hurt?” he said.

“Marion has decided to dump about as much shame and embarrassment on this family as she could manage,” Jeff said quietly, ignoring the two secretaries. “She’s trying to torment your mother, is what she’s doing.” The two of them left through the door that led outside. Marion didn’t even have her backpack.

“What’s this all about?” Will asked Mrs. Jacobsen, but the secretary wouldn’t answer him. He walked back to geometry class, where Ms. Renshaw detained him after class and gave him hell for being gone so long.

“I ran into Coach Beagle in the hallway. He needed help with something,” Will said.

“Help with what?”

“He had some gear in his truck that he needed unloaded before practice. You can ask him yourself.”

“Football, football, football,” Ms. Renshaw said. “Do you really expect me to believe that? If this were a real school, you’d have to show a little respect to your teachers.”

“I’m not expecting you to believe anything you don’t want to believe,” he said. “I’m saying ask Coach Beagle.”

Ms. Renshaw gave him detention, meaning he’d be late for practice. In the hallway between seventh and eighth periods a bunch of kids stared at Will—not in the usual way but in a different way he didn’t like. He wondered about Marion all through eighth period but it wasn’t until ninth period, a study hall, that Brian Fischer passed him a

note that explained what had happened: Marion had been caught in the cafeteria bathroom with a boy named David Arnold.

Coach Beagle also gave Will hell for being late to practice. A long season of futility was winding down, but they had the chance to redeem themselves that Friday, against Millvale. Beagle made Will do grass drills for a full fifteen minutes before allowing him to run plays with the offense. The guys were all amped for the game against Millvale. During an end-around Kyle Bumgarner ignored Coach Alford's whistle and blindsided Will, who landed awkwardly on his hip and came up limping.

"Are you *trying* to hurt my fullback, Bumgarner?" Beagle shouted. "Do you have a spare fullback I'm not aware of?" To Will he said, "I need more effort from you. I need for you to focus. Unless your mother's dying, one hundred percent of your thoughts need to be directed on this football field."

Will hobbled through the next two plays before Beagle told him to sit out the rest of practice. At home Will lay on the couch and iced his hip. Marion was shut up in her room. Jeff cooked shrimp scampi. No one had called Will's mother at work to tell her about Marion. When she came home Jeff forced Marion to divulge the news, at which point Will's mother began to cry.

"Where do you get off, acting like this?" Jeff said. "Your mother has enough to worry about without worrying that you're putting out in a public bathroom."

"Maybe I don't care what you think," Marion said. She looked like she wanted to cry, too. For the time being she didn't.

"Where do you think you're going?" Jeff said.

Will had gotten up from his seat and was walking toward his bedroom.

“I didn’t think this was about me,” he said.

“What’s about your sister is for goddamn sure about you too. It’s about all of us. Unfortunately.”

“Are you saying this is in some way my fault?” Will said. “I’m not the one who’s being suspended.”

“Don’t be mean to your sister,” Will’s mother said.

Will slept badly that night and the next day he showed up late again for school. Mr. Hershey gave him detention, but then after class Mr. Hershey let Will talk him out of it. Mr. Hershey was careful not to show any pity, though, since pity was anathema to kids like Will Dickerson. Mr. Hershey had been the teacher who found Marion Dickerson and David Arnold cavorting in the men’s handicapped stall during fifth period lunch. He was inclined to be sympathetic toward Will. Last night he’d told his wife about what had happened and she’d asked all kinds of lurid questions. He found the whole conversation troubling.

“What are you implying?” Mr. Hershey had asked her.

But Mrs. Hershey wouldn’t say.

Twice a week, on Wednesday evenings and Saturday afternoons, Will went to work at a small cinderblock building on Vine Street where Vine Street turned into Route 3 and headed out of town. The parking lot, which the building shared with a Methodist church that met in the old farmhouse next door, was made of gravel. On the other side of the building, with its own, paved parking lot, was a propane tank dealership. The laser-

printed aluminum sign bolted beside the door of the cinderblock building said,
BILLINGCO CLIENT SERVICES.

That evening, Will parked his car and went inside. In the principal room there were a dozen cubicles, half of them empty, the other half occupied by people wearing headsets and reading wearily from the scripts on their computer screens. In one corner was an extra-large desk without cubicle walls. The man sitting at this larger desk, Lawrence Vandermeer, set aside his sports magazine and followed Will into the smaller, back room marked PRIVATE. One desk and a sawed-off part of another were crammed into the tiny space. Will's friend Brian was already at one of the computers, reading from prompts different than those of the salesmen out front.

"What is it tonight?" Will said. He set down his backpack and settled into the armchair with the broken wheel.

"Ink cartridges," Lawrence said. "Replacement ink cartridges."

"I didn't think very many old people have printers," Will said.

"That's the beauty of it. It doesn't have to be ink cartridges for computers. It can be ink for pens, or fax machines, or even typewriters. You figure out what kind of ink they're in the market for, and you go with it."

"Typewriters don't use ink."

"Hell, Will. They use *something*. And the point isn't the ink cartridges. The point is you making the most of the situation. The ink cartridges are a pretext."

Brian clicked off a call and flung his headset on the desk. He was the nose tackle on the football team. Between Will, Brian, and the desks, there was little floor space for

Lawrence to stand. Brian spun his chair around to face Lawrence and bumped him onto the half-desk, which wobbled dangerously on its two legs.

“Watch it, Brian,” Lawrence said.

“This is some thin shit,” Brian said. “You know what area code this is? I looked it up. It’s Eastern Mississippi. You know what kind of demand there is in Eastern Mississippi for ink? We’d be better off selling Swedish newspaper subscriptions.”

“No more subscriptions,” Lawrence said, shaking his head slowly, lest he upset the balance of the desk. “People are wary of subscriptions. It’s been done too many times.”

“Well I have troubling believing that this is much better,” Brian said.

“You don’t like it, you’re welcome to a spot out front. You know what we’re researching right now, Brian? Consumer preferences for aluminum foil brands. Does that interest you? Do you think you would enjoy that? No? Then work with what you’ve got.”

Lawrence regained his feet and edged out of the room. Will read once through the recommended script and put on his headset. His computer dialed a number and a woman answered on the third ring.

“Is this Mrs. Stillwater?” Will said. “Mrs. Mary Stillwater?”

Mary Stillwater assured him it was and asked if she might inquire about *his* identity.

“This is Harold Moss at Ink Supply, Inc. in Birmingham, Alabama.” Midway through, Will decided a southern accent would sound more authentic. If Mary Stillwater found this sudden shift odd, she didn’t say anything.

“Our records indicate that it’s about time to renew your supply of ink cartridges. We’d like to send you replacements before you run out.”

“You mean for the printer?” said Mary Stillwater.

“Yes ma’am, exactly. The printer. If you want to confirm the model of your printer, Mrs. Stillwater, I can go ahead and prepare the shipment.”

“Oh, I don’t think we need any more ink. My son handles all that. I don’t know the first thing about computers. In fact, I rather dislike them. They’re so noisy.”

“Noisy?”

“Yes. All the whirring and clicking. I much prefer pencil and paper.”

“It would be a favor to your son, wouldn’t it? Save him the trouble of getting all that ink himself?” Will said.

Mary Stillwater assured Will that her son didn’t mind it in the least. She said her son had turned into the kind of man she’d always hoped. His wife was a little froufrou, but she was from New Orleans, and what could Will expect? Will tried one more time to return the conversation to ink; once more, Mary Stillwater slipped away. Kindly as he could he told her to have a nice day and ended the call.

“That was a terrible accent,” Brian said. He had listened to Will’s call. “That was more Florida Panhandle than Birmingham. You sounded like a hick.”

That day at school Will had heard some kid with a broken nose tell a joke about Marion. It had already gotten around that she was being required to talk to a shrink before she could come back to school. Will knew the scandal would only reflect on him tangentially, but that didn’t really help. Only that morning his homeroom teacher had cut him some slack out of pity. Even worse, Coach Beagle let him out of contact drills.

Marion had done nothing wrong, technically. It was all timing. It was all, all, all about timing. Cheating, blocking, fucking, lying, marrying, dying. All of it.

“I hate this,” Will said sullenly. “I hate this so much.”

He stood and hoisted his backpack onto his shoulders.

“Tell your cousin Lawrence he can go fuck himself,” he said. “Tell him that if he wants to steal from old people, he should just go rob a nursing home.”

“I have, several times. Look, if you’re upset, you should just take the night off. Lawrence talks a big game, but I know for a fact he’s desperate for people. You have a good voice—people trust you. You know how hard it is to find someone with a good, trustworthy voice? Most people attracted to this kind of work sound like mouth-breathing sociopaths over the phone.”

“I’m sorry,” Will said. “I’ll see you at practice.”

He gave Lawrence the finger on his way out.

Millvale was an oversized team whose middle and left outside linebackers were twin brothers with offer letters to play football at the University of Pittsburgh. As the fullback, Will was responsible most plays for blocking one or the other of the Vincent twins, but they were the fastest guys he’d ever played against. During the game his injured hip hampered him, and he muffed most of his blocks, sometimes lowering his head and missing entirely. When he did manage to square himself properly and intercept one of the Vincents, the collision was so violent that by the fourth quarter Will was playing scared. Coach Beagle berated him and called him a coward and worse.

After the game, Will stood in the shower, his large shoulders numbly beaten by the jet of hot, excessively sulfuric water. East Grant had been embarrassed. They had lost by 20. On some Fridays Will and his teammates could accept sound defeats with an equanimity that bordered on lightheartedness: there was something absurd about getting beat by three touchdowns, something farcical. But that night Will became angrier and angrier. He thought of the Vincent brothers bearing down on him, the shuddering impact of their shoulder pads against his chest.

“Cocksuckers,” he said aloud in the shower. “Fucking cocksuckers.”

His teammates were already slipping into indifference, but Will furiously dressed and snapped at Scott Munroe, the halfback, who had done an impression of the cheerleaders that got several guys sniggering.

“You think it’s funny, to get your ass handed to you like that? To get beat so badly on your own field?” Will said.

Will had seen his mom and Jeff, watching from behind the fence along one end zone. They’d been sharing a bucket of popcorn, which Will thought was a stupid and flippant thing to do. He didn’t like Jeff and felt convinced that Jeff didn’t like him—that Jeff was glad the Vincent twins sent Will to the ground over and over.

Scott told Will to chill out. Will punched his locker twice and went home with Brian, whose parents were agnostic on the subject of Brian and his buddies smoking in Brian’s room.

“I’m shaking,” Will said, unable to relax. Brian put on some music but Will couldn’t get his hands to be still. The Vincent twins had reinjured his hip. It maintained a steady drumbeat of pain.

“Those sheep fuckers were twice our size. Parents probably gave them cattle steroids or some shit,” Brian said.

A little later Will said, “I found out where this kid David Arnold lives. He’s on Greenfield Road in Orchard Park, right on the lakefront.”

Brian nodded sagely. He had had to have a long talk with Lawrence, explaining why Will should get another chance at work. Now he could see Will working himself up again.

“Man, you know freshmen. They have no clue,” Brian said.

Will had gone completely cold. Brian melted further into the futon, hoping to lead by example.

“Do you want to come?” Will said. It was a disingenuous question: Brian had driven them from the high school. Will couldn’t go anywhere without him.

“And do what?”

“I’m not sure. Something will come to me.”

“I’d rather,” Brian said, “have an idea on this end.” He was larger than Will, his bigness and slowness a kind of diplomacy.

“I just want to *see* his house,” Will said.

Brian drove and Will fumed in the passenger seat. It was after midnight when they entered the big, lakefront development. On their left the ground sloped down toward the water. The houses there seemed small from this side but Will knew that from the water they looked enormous, all mullioned windows and soft lawns. On the right side of the road the houses were taller, to provide a glimpse of the water above the trees, which at this time of year were thin and leafless and didn’t hide much of anything.

They turned onto Greenfield and Will pointed at a yellow split-level with a spot-lit dogwood tree in the front yard. The house was not, as Will had suggested, right on the water; the lake was a few streets away, but the Arnolds' house was large and neat like all the other houses in Orchard Park. Brian didn't plan to actually stop but Will swung open his door and stuck his foot out. The bottom of his sneaker scraped across the pavement for twenty or thirty feet before Brian gave in.

Will walked stealthily around the house twice, trying to determine which of the windows was most likely David's. In the dark his anger swelled until he could have lit the house on fire, if he'd had a match and some lighter fluid, but then it collapsed in on itself, and Will thought how silly it was to lose a football game by twenty points. And David and Marion in the cafeteria bathroom: wasn't that funny, too, in a way?

Will decided that the first-floor window overlooking the backyard was most likely to be David's. The windows were set in hard plastic painted to look like wood, and the glass itself was double-paned. Will crept around to the side of the house and turned on the water spigot. The garden hose was coiled on a crank mounted to the wall. He twisted off the trigger nozzle and waited for the water to surge through the hose and bubble out the end. Gripping the hose in one hand, he returned to the back of the house and, bending to retrieve one of the fist-sized stones that formed the border around a few hedges and an empty flower bed, in one motion heaved the stone through the glass and snaked the hose through the jagged hole.

Brian had driven up the road about two hundred feet and turned off the engine. Will sprinted to the car and climbed in, his hip throbbing with every stride. As Brian drove away Will looked back at the Arnolds' house, expecting to see all the lights on and

Mr. or Mrs. Arnold standing silhouetted in the entryway. But the house was dark. The only light was the one illuminating the sickly dogwood tree.

Since the football season had ended earlier than usual, Will had two weeks off before basketball practices began. He contemplated not playing that year but in the end decided he'd better play. He planned to slap together a few college applications and figured what he lacked in quality he could begin to make up for with consistency: four years of football, four years of basketball, four years of baseball, a year at Billingsco.

Lily had been distant lately so, with an eye toward rekindling the fire, Will convinced her to cut class the week after the Millvale game and drove her all the way out to Amish country for lunch and the fresh pretzels she liked so much. Lily was tense the whole time. Finally, when they were walking around a little Amish grocery store and Will was trying to decide how outrageous it was to pay twelve dollars for a pound of freshly churned butter, Lily said, "I hear you're the one who did that thing to the Arnolds' house."

After 48 hours had passed with zero cops knocking on his door, Will had allowed himself to try to forget about sticking a garden hose through David Arnold's busted window. He didn't appreciate Lily reminding him. It made his jaw hurt.

"Where did you hear that?" he said.

"From Sarah Vance."

"Where did *she* hear it?"

"How should I know? The point is, she heard it. And now *I* heard it. And god knows who else has heard it. "

Will put down the butter and picked up a little tub of ice cream. He would have to have a talk with Brian.

“Well. I don’t know squat about the Arnolds’ house. Besides, maybe I’m tired of feeling bad about other people. Maybe I don’t care what Marion does and who she does it with. You want to share this ice cream?”

Lily couldn’t think of any reason Sarah Vance would attach Will’s name to what happened at the Arnolds’ house without good reason. Sarah liked Will. Almost all the seniors liked Will. Lily couldn’t explain why she felt so sorry for him. She could come up with *reasons*, but she would have felt sorry for him even if his sister wasn’t a psycho and his mom hadn’t married a loser. She felt sorry for him in an *essential* way.

Even Lily knew that wasn’t a good thing.

“Whoever did it caused some serious damage,” she said.

“What did they do?” Will said.

“They flooded Mr. Arnold’s study with a garden hose. The Arnolds were gone for the whole weekend and no one shut the water off. It ruined all kinds of stuff, including Mr. Arnold’s baseball card collection. Someone said it was worth thousands of dollars.”

“What kind of grown man collects baseball cards,” Will said spitefully. “And where were their neighbors? How could no one notice a thing like that?”

He put back the ice cream and walked outside. He hadn’t meant to ruin the Arnolds’ house. He’d wanted to cause a little trouble for David. He’d wanted to spook him. Even though David Arnold and Marion hadn’t done anything *wrong*, what they’d done was still problematic for Will. What they’d done was sad, and Will was tired of sadness. And now the Arnolds. What was the point of Orchard Park, if your neighbors

don't see your busted window with a garden hose poked through it? In the parking lot of the grocery store an Amish man tied his horse and buggy to a hitching post. In the back seat of the buggy there was a young girl with a baby on her lap. The girl's face was partially hidden by her lacy bonnet. Lily felt terribly sorry for the Amish girl, too, and for her baby so bundled up against the cold. Lily's parents were right: she ought to attend college far away from Grant County.

Will dropped Lily at her house. She was painting her nails and reading *People* magazine when he came back ten minutes later.

"What's going on?" she said. She moved aside so he could come in the house. She walked stiff-leggedly, with her toes spread out. Will looked down at the fresh, green polish.

"There's a police car in my driveway," he said. He looked scared.

Lily used her father's newspaper to fan her feet. She wished Will hadn't come back.

"Did anyone see you drive past?"

"I don't know. I didn't stop. I couldn't see inside the house."

"Maybe they're there for something else."

"What would they be there for?"

"Maybe someone broke into your house and your mom called 9-1-1."

Lily's mother came up from the basement carrying a basket of laundry. She left the basket in her bedroom and asked Will if he wanted anything to eat. Lily's mother had grown up in Boston. She thought most of Lily's friends were hicks. Every summer she tried to arrange for Lily to stay with her sister in Bridgewater.

“Oh, I nearly forgot. Your mother called a little while ago,” Mrs. Emerson said from the kitchen. She brought Will a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on a fragile tea plate. The sandwich was cut in half diagonally.

“Did she say what she wanted?” Will said.

“No. But she did say it was important. I think you’d better call her.”

Will ate the sandwich quickly and took the plate into the kitchen.

“We cut class today. Will took me up to Amish country,” Lily told her mother.

“We got those pretzels I like so much.”

“Why would you tell me that?” said Mrs. Emerson.

“I’m headed out,” Will said, returning from the kitchen. He pulled on his jacket.

Lily gave him a kiss and closed the front door behind him. They couldn’t talk in front of her mother, but even if they could talk neither one of them would have said anything more. This was a problem for Will to deal with. More and more, Lily didn’t want to be bothered with any of that. She had an idea of herself that was separate from Grant County. Sometimes Will was a part of that idea, but as he drove off, she saw that he was not intrinsically a part of it.

“Will’s family has its problems,” she told her mother. Mrs. Emerson was watching Lily carefully. How long before her daughter’s desires began to realign with her own? As an especially enlightened parent, Patricia Emerson had always known that Lily would ascend through the muck of adolescence and see things rightly. There was a chance that it had begun. She would turn eighteen in less than two months.

“I heard about what happened with his sister,” Mrs. Emerson said. “I heard it at brunch with Margaret. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I knew you would hear eventually. Something like that never stays quiet. Not in a place like this.”

“Something like that wouldn’t stay quiet anywhere,” Mrs. Emerson said, a little too primly for Lily’s taste. Her mother could be such a Puritan.

Will deliberated for a good hour, sitting in the parking lot at Memorial Park, his car turned off. He shivered as the sun fell behind the trees and the baseball diamonds turned into little black tundras. He didn’t so much think through his options as much as come up with excuses to go home, which is what he wanted to do. This desire was mostly practical: he was hungry (he had not ordered enough at lunch, and Mrs. Emerson’s peanut butter and jelly had only alerted him to how he felt), he did not feel like summoning the lies that would be required to spend the night at a friend’s house, and he was nearly out of gas and had no money on him. The desire to go home, however, was also spiritual: remorse was making its mild demands. He was no longer angry.

When he arrived at home the police car was gone. As soon as he walked through the door, Jeff was in his face, demanding to know why in god’s name the police were looking for him. Will’s mother stood off to the side, content to let this be a conversation between her son and second husband.

“Beats me,” Will said.

“‘Beats you?’ *I’ll* tell you what beats you. *I’ll* give you an idea of what stands to beat you.” Flat-footed, Jeff’s head reached Will’s nose. On his tiptoes, they were eye to eye.

“That’s okay. I have a pretty good idea,” Will said.

“You have *no* idea,” Jeff said. “You have *no fucking* idea.”

“Jeff,” Will’s mother said.

Will made a sort of sideways motion and Jeff was on the ground, clutching at his belly.

“Call the cops, Paula,” he gasped. “Tell them he’s here. Tell them he’s out of his mind.”

Will went to his room. He doubted whether anyone would call the cops, though it hardly mattered. They would come back eventually. He’d tell them he had no idea about the Arnolds’ house. Then he would begin again—without Lily, in all likelihood, but he would begin again in time for basketball season. He would give Lawrence and Brian a permanent ‘no.’ He would go easy on Ms. Renshaw. Wasn’t that enough to see him through? Besides, what kind of proof could the cops possibly have? An eyewitness? Probably not, not this late in the game, but he couldn’t do anything about that. A fingerprint? Not the Grant County sheriff’s department, no chance. A footprint? Will searched through his closet for the shoes he’d worn that night to the Arnolds’ house. They were the shoes he wore almost every day. Still. He tied them up in a garbage bag, pulled his football cleats onto his feet, and headed outside. Marion saw him leaving and asked where he was going.

“I’m going to go throw something away,” he said.

“What’s in that garbage bag?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“You’re going to take it out to the garbage bin?”

“I’m going to throw it in the pond.”

“Can I come along?”

Their mother and Jeff were watching television in the family room. Marion ran to get a sweatshirt then followed Will out the back door. It took them ten minutes to reach the pond, which was back in the woods on their neighbors’ property. A big dull moon climbed the east night sky and shined on the water as on dented metal. Will reached back and chucked the garbage bag out into the middle of the pond. It didn’t sink. They tried throwing rocks at it but missed. The bag bobbed on the ripples and sank on its own.

“Let’s play a word association game. I tell you a word and you tell me the first thing that comes to mind,” Will said.

“Okay,” Marion said.

“Okay, ready? David Arnold.”

Marion crossed her arms.

“Sorry. I’m sorry.” His breath broke in silver clouds on the air. He thought of something. “What do you tell your shrink?”

“That’s private.”

Will rarely looked at his sister. He went through a process of seeing her, then observing her, then recognizing her, which in 18 years he had never experienced with anyone.

“Look, personally? I think you’re catching way more flack than you deserve,” he said.

“I don’t need your approval.”

“I’m not approving. I’m saying the punishment is disproportionate to the crime.”

“That doesn’t help much.”

“It’s not meant to, Marion. It’s meant to show you that I’m a decent person. It’s something to think about, that’s all.”

They walked up to the house. Will stood on the threshold of the back door and clapped his cleats together to get rid of the mud. There ought to be some kind of mechanism for remembering what happens to you, he thought. There ought to be some way to inscribe what you feel into the world, so that you never forget what it was like, so that you don’t waste so much time trying to get back.

He put down his cleats and went inside. He had forgotten how hungry he was.

Beasts of the Field

On Friday Tom Hartman woke very early and, not wanting to disturb Annie, dressed in the astounding darkness and quiet of their farmhouse. As he moved about the room the fatigue of a difficult week gave way to the ancient pleasure of the landowner who among all the living is the first to stir and the first to feel himself a vital part of the new day. Tom peeked through the blinds. A watery edge of pink imbrued the sky over the woods that bordered the south pasture. The open fields, the pond, and the outbuildings were still sunk in darkness, but it was a pure and fertile darkness that Tom could have stared into for hours without fear or discomfort. There was life in the city and life in the country. This was the essential difference: a quality of the light.

In the kitchen Tom brewed coffee and drank a cupful while standing beside the sink. The counters and floors had been redone, and from an Amish craftsman in Holmes County they'd bought a heavy kitchen table whose dark grain and rough finish imparted a boreal wildness to the room. In the blackness the hours ahead lay cool and unbroken. Tom finished his coffee and went outside. With his Wellingtons on and his light canvas jacket he crossed the broad wet lawn. It was mid-September. Every evening the doors of

the barn where they kept the horses were slid shut. Now Tom entered the barn, which smelled of hay and disused machinery. Near the stable Karl was fumbling with a sack of oats. When he saw Tom he put out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe. Beneath his coat his white t-shirt was stained yellow and sagged at the neckline. He stank of alcohol. It was so early that Tom was certain Karl had slept in the hay barn again.

“How’s the new girl?” Tom said.

“She eats like nothing I’ve ever seen. Second bag in less than a week. Like nothing I’ve ever seen,” Karl said sourly, cutting at the sack with a penknife. Tom was used to Karl’s insolence. He spoke warmly to the two horses and put a hand on Roxie’s nose. She was sorrel and six feet at the withers. Until last weekend she had belonged to a farmer near Dent who’d never socialized her properly and said she had a stubborn nature. Roxie was less than two years old and already nearly as large as Goliath, the old Belgian draught horse who’d come with the property. Annie had speculated that Goliath’s docility would rub off on Roxie. Karl had said no horse could ever be properly socialized if it wasn’t made to work. Now Roxie tossed her head and, turning an arrogating eye on Tom, kicked the wall of her stable. The sound was sharp, like two bowling balls clacking together.

“I guess she’s still getting used to the place,” Tom said. To Karl he said, “If you go into town today, I’d like you to pick up a new propane tank for the grill. I’m all out. Annie’s sister’s family is coming tonight. Here’s some cash. Can you do that?” With Karl it was necessary to extract assent. What was not explicitly agreed upon would be left undone.

“All right,” Karl said.

“Any further sign of the Bontragers’ dog?”

“Not since Wednesday.”

Tom checked the level of oats in each horse’s pail.

“When we came in last night I noticed the whole fence along Trellis hadn’t been mowed. You know I like for the property to look neat when I have patients come.”

With this observation he struck the hard bedrock of Karl’s obstructiveness. The Hartmans’ hired man began to minutely inspect his greasy baseball cap while grumbling about the tractor’s worn clutch. It was a problem he’d been complaining about for weeks, he reminded Tom, and surmised that a man couldn’t very well do a job he wasn’t justly *equipped* to do. Karl was roughly the same age as Tom but looked a decade older.

Without realizing it Tom had taken Karl to be the representative for a certain kind of life, a life that he believed to proliferate in this part of the state. Annie had hired Karl in the spring and paid him every Friday in cash. He had dull, watery eyes and a percussive cough. His build was lecherous and ill. Tom sometimes told Annie they could really make something of the property if they replaced Karl. “I won’t be heartless,” Annie said in response. “We’re not here to make a profit.”

Tom extracted from Karl a promise to mow along the fence line as soon as the dew had burned off. That finished, he told Karl to help himself to the pot of coffee in the kitchen. Karl nodded and spat in the hay. As soon as Tom was gone he lit another cigarette.

From the horse barn Tom Hartman walked around the dusky pond to the barn where the cattle fed and spent the night. Tom was not a professional farmer. He was a dentist who lived four days out of the week in Columbus and three days in the country,

on the property he and Annie had bought the winter before. The pleasures he and Annie derived from the farm were recreational. Their children were both in college. Their street in Columbus had become overpopulated. When the patients at Tom's practice in Columbus required a particularly unpleasant procedure he told them, "You should come to my country office. I had it built onto a farmhouse my wife and I bought. It's a ways out, but it's very peaceful. You can look out over the fields while I'm working on your tooth." Unfortunately the man they bought the property from hadn't managed the farm seriously in years and passed on all the inefficiencies to the Hartmans.

Half the cattle were loafing in the barn while the other half were already moving out to the south pasture, still soft with fog. Through the fog Tom could just make out the bull standing pensive and corpulent beneath the copse of honeylocusts. In August they'd sent off the best of the cattle for slaughter; those that remained were either young or old or unattractive in some way. Tom suspected that they'd lost money in the sale but had no way of being certain or of amending the loss. He didn't particularly care for any of the animals on the farm. Not the horses, which Annie loved. Certainly not the cattle. Still less the pigs and the old, blind goat that wandered about, bleating like a child. What Tom did like was the semi-permanent impressions he could leave on the landscape, the way the land would rearrange itself around his work, though it was hard to do much in a single weekend. It was hard to do much with an entire summer of them.

Tom walked up into the east pasture, splashed through the narrow creek, and followed along the tree line. Every so often he paused to check the ash and elder trees for signs of the rot that had appeared in the county over the summer. He also kept an eye out for the Bontragers' dog. It had been there along the tree line two days ago that Karl saw

the dog, missing for a week, acting strangely. The health department hadn't reported any cases of rabies since July, and the Bontragers swore the dog had been vaccinated. Karl had seen what he'd seen. During his survey that morning Tom found evidence neither of tree rot nor the dog. Coming back down the pasture, he pulled up tall stalks of ironweed. He stopped at the pond and pressed a boot against the soft wood of the pier. It surely wouldn't last another winter; it would need to be torn out before the water froze. Before reentering the house, he spent several minutes examining Annie's vegetable garden. The squashes were stony and undersized. The tomatoes and peppers looked blighted. Annie had been complaining about rabbits.

Inside Annie was seated at the big kitchen table, studying a cookbook. She had woken shortly after Tom, propelled by the responsibilities of preparing for Jo's visit. Unlike Tom, she often drove up to the farm on weekdays, to tend her garden or oversee all the contractors working on the house. All throughout their search for a place in the country she'd talked about a memory she still had of her grandfather, canning apricots beside a radio. She couldn't say why. Tom sometimes imagined building a lighthouse in the middle of the south pasture. Annie watched him prepare a piece of toast. When he came in from the fields like this—damp, tragic, the vestiges of dawn clinging to him like briars, it was as if they were different people.

"That new horse is terrible," Tom said. "And Karl's still going on about the tractor. Not that I completely trust him. But still." He shook his head. He and Annie were ill-equipped for the responsibilities they'd taken upon themselves. There was also the question of money.

“Jo says Maddie is allergic to spinach, bananas, and most kinds of fish,” Annie said. She ran her finger down a recipe in the cookbook.

“Did you hear what I said about the horse?”

“And peanut butter. How could I forget peanut butter?” Annie said.

“We need to have a discussion about this place, about what our objectives are. The summer’s over and it’s time to reassess.”

Annie, though, wasn’t in the mood for that kind of discussion. She had heaps of things to do before Jo’s family arrived. Tom was overreacting about the horse and about Karl, who was simply *necessary* at a place like this, as Tom must realize.

“And your patients all love it, darling. You always say how complimentary they are about the office,” Annie said. “We can talk later, after Jo’s visit, but it should make you happy, knowing how pleased your patients are.”

It was nearly 7:30. Tom finished his toast then went upstairs to take a shower. Shortly after he’d gone Karl came into the kitchen, loudly kicking the mud from his heavy boots on the threshold. He took a mug from the cabinet and poured himself some coffee. Annie ignored the bestial odors that filled her kitchen and the insensate way Karl interacted with the hot mug. She said good morning. He smiled ruefully and said, was it? She consulted her cookbook. It was. Oh, of course it was.

Laurie Granderson arrived at quarter-to-eight, turned on the computer, and began preparing for Mrs. Warner’s root canal. Four days a week Laurie looked after her mother, but on Fridays she worked as Dr. Hartman’s hygienist while her mother visited with Laurie’s aunt. For Laurie it was a great source of joy, her job, which of course her

mother's health kept her from doing full time. The Hartmans' farm was only a few miles from Laurie's home and Dr. Hartman was an agreeable, kind-hearted boss. The patients, too, were unusually generous. Laurie often received little notes expressing what an excellent and attentive hygienist she was, how cheerful her conversation. The patients often told Dr. Hartman he ought to hire her on at his practice in Columbus.

"It's a kind offer but it's *so* far. I don't know what I'd do with mother. Aunt Joan can handle her on Fridays, but Fridays are a very different thing than Mondays-through-Fridays," is what Laurie always said. She thought Dr. Hartman was very polite, very different from her own husband. She felt that Dr. Hartman had access to a different realm of human life, as if he could choose to be whichever way it pleased him most to be. When Dr. Hartman arrived that morning Laurie was laying out the cool, sharp instruments.

"Friday already," Laurie said happily. "My mother always used to say..." With that, Tom knew, she was off. She wouldn't stop talking until they'd finished the last patient. She had a tremendous gift for speaking right through the drilling and picking and scraping of the instruments—for speaking as though the patient were not at the dentist's office but at a café. So long as the patients liked it Tom could endure it; on some level, of course, he could endure it even apart from that. He'd been seeing patients at the farm on Fridays for five months, and to some degree it was impossible to tease apart the limpid sky outside and Laurie's constant talk, and to separate both of these from the dental office itself. The office was bright and spare, with blonde oak floors, enormous windows, and a long, neat sofa where family members of the patient could sit while they waited. Tom's office in Columbus had over the years become crowded and unpleasant, dim and full of ugly plastic equipment. Here he had a single chair and a single assistant. Though his

patients had to drive quite far—in some cases an hour or more—most of them did it gladly. His good care and Laurie's friendly talk and the office's comfortable tranquility made arduous procedures more bearable.

Shortly after eight Mrs. Warner arrived with her husband. Tom and Laurie eased her into the chair while Mr. Warner read a magazine. Laurie chatted about her mother and held Mrs. Warner's tongue clear of the pins and hooks Tom manipulated into her jaw. Laurie was on the plump side but had small and magnificently deft hands that worked in concert with Tom's. When they had finished Laurie explained to Mrs. Warner how to keep from inflaming the operated tooth. A few minutes later Mrs. Patterson came in for bridgework. After that it was another root canal. Then it was nearly lunchtime.

"You'll want to take the vicodin regularly, to stay ahead of the pain," Laurie said to Mr. Blackstone, whose jaw was already bruised and swollen. "Don't let it get out of hand."

Mrs. Blackstone had just escorted her husband out when Annie came in through the door that connected the office to the farmhouse. She only infrequently entered Tom's office. If she needed him on a Friday, she called the telephone in his office from the telephone in the kitchen. That she had not called him but now stood before him caused Tom to tense up. His instincts were sound. Annie said there was a situation. It involved the horses. It required Tom's attention, if he could spare it.

"Am I interrupting?" Annie said. Tom said he was on lunch. He told Laurie to continue cleaning up the bloodied cotton balls from Mr. Blackstone's root canal and followed his wife outside.

Annie led Tom around to the front of the house. A quarter mile down the road was the situation: the tractor, hitched to the mower, had run through the fence and stalled in the ditch. The resulting gap in the fence had given passage to Roxie and Goliath, who had been grazing in the pasture but who were now standing in the middle of the narrow road.

“That idiot,” Tom said. “That drunken, lazy idiot.”

He walked quickly down the road. Karl was standing partway between the tractor and the horses, looking stoically from one to the other.

“The clutch went out,” he told Tom. “Wasn’t nothing I could do. I came down the slope and hit the fence.” Karl spat onto the road and lit a cigarette.

“I doubt the clutch was the only problem,” Tom said. He climbed onto the tractor and started the engine. When he released the clutch the machine shook violently and produced a terrible grinding noise. Tom cut the engine and tried again with the same result. When he cut the engine again the silence was complete.

“Wasn’t nothing I could do,” Karl said.

On the road Annie was petting Roxie and trying to coax her back into the pasture. From the direction of the house the Blackstones drove slowly up in their Buick. The ditches on either side of the road were steep and thick with weeds; it was clear that the car couldn’t pass around the horses. Tom climbed down from the tractor and gestured for Mrs. Blackstone to roll down her window.

“My apologies for this,” he said. “We’ll have them off the road in a minute.” In the passenger seat Mr. Blackstone peered out at the great horses as if they had emerged from a dream.

“They’re lovely animals,” Mrs. Blackstone said.

Annie pulled gently at Roxie’s bridle. The horse tossed its head impatiently and stamped its feet. Goliath stood beside Roxie like a shadow. When Annie tried to lead him back into the pasture he too held his ground.

“The Blackstones need to get through,” Tom said.

“They can go back out along Trellis, across the bridge to where it meets Route 7,” Annie said.

“That’s three miles out of the way. They could get lost.”

Tom gave Goliath a good smack on the rump. The horse didn’t budge. The midday sun was warm and searching. There were times, during his days at the farm, when Tom would look at the fields or catch the scent of some mellifluous rot and think how long, how long in either direction stretched the inscriptions of all he didn’t know. The strong horses, the cut hay, the endless fence posts—these formed a context that enveloped Tom completely and indifferently. And then there was something about the orderliness of autumn afternoons that lent itself to feelings of conquest. It had to do with conclusions, with the single-minded march toward an ending. The year had crested its midway point and was heading toward a conclusion. All around Tom, despite his ignorance, the earth seemed to cry, *subdue, subdue*.

“Karl, you help Annie get these two out of the road, you close up the fence somehow, and then you go home. You understand?” Tom said. Karl answered indistinctly so Tom said, “You do those things. You fix this mess you’ve made, and then you go home.”

He returned to the Buick and told Mrs. Blackstone that he would lead her the back way out to Route 7. He stopped in the office to tell Laurie he would return in a few minutes, then got into his car and began driving along Trellis away from the horses. He went slowly to avoid kicking up dust onto the Blackstones, who followed him timidly at a distance of forty or fifty yards. The trees crowded up against the road with their dying leaves. In a few weeks they would be bare. Tom passed over Falston Creek, then pulled to the side of the road and waved for Mrs. Blackstone to go around him. Route 7 was just ahead. As the Buick passed by Tom could see Mr. Blackstone slouched over, asleep. Back at the house he ate a sandwich quickly but still entered the office several minutes late for his 1:00 appointment. Laurie had already seated Doug Sterner, who was explaining how he'd been unable to get past the horses, and had been forced to park his car on the road and walk the quarter mile to the farmhouse.

"You know Mrs. Hartman can't stand to see animals neglected," Laurie said. "She's a humanitarian, or whatever you call it in the case of animals. I think it's wonderful, the way she and Dr. Hartman look after them. Those poor horses. Just think where they'd be."

"I'm sorry about that, Doug," Tom said. He washed his hands and put on his examination gloves. "Farm life, you know. It's not like cleaning teeth."

Doug Sterner chuckled and opened wide. Tom was still agitated. He was furious with Karl; surely Annie would agree to fire him now. They would easily find someone to replace Karl, someone both skillful and properly motivated. Tom began drilling away at Doug Sterner's molar before the anesthesia had set, causing a savage jolt the whole length of Doug's body. Tom apologized. Yet there was a strained quality, an archness in

the way he said “sorry,” as if the very word had for Tom a private meaning. Laurie dabbed at the corner of Mr. Sterner’s mouth, where a trickle of spit had begun to escape. She wanted to slow Dr. Hartman, who was worked up about something. With that end in mind she sat back and said, “Just look at that view. Look at those cows. Wouldn’t you just love to spend all day in the sun? You wouldn’t have to worry about a thing.”

Tom turned to the big windows. Even Mr. Sterner lifted his head to look. Light was everywhere in the fields. It was a substance as enduring as the trees, as sure as the ground it struck. Laurie found it all very beautiful despite its familiarity. Her mother would have loved the view. Mr. Sterner said something thickly and lay back. Tom adjusted the height of his stool and returned to work.

Jo, Brad, and the girls were all in a bad mood when they arrived late that afternoon. They’d gotten lost toward the end of the drive. Brad had predicted that they’d get lost, but the satisfaction of being right hadn’t prevented him from becoming frustrated with the insolent back roads, and with the girls, who’d been restless nearly from the moment they’d left Pittsburgh. Brad’s irritation wore off on the others. The neat, harvested cornfields and bright crowns of golden and brown leaves turned monotonous. They pulled into the farmhouse driveway like sailors grown sick of the sea. Annie came out to greet them. The girls immediately ran off to look at the ducks.

“I forgot how tucked away this place is,” Brad said. He, Jo, and the girls had visited the Christmas before. “I’m surprised Tom’s patients don’t have trouble finding it.”

“They manage,” Annie said. She was wearing her kitchen apron and her cheeks were flushed. She called her nieces to come give her a kiss. She gave them pieces of

bread to throw to the ducks. “Don’t let them eat from your hands. Toss it on the ground and let them pick it up,” she said. The girls thanked her and took the bread and ran off again.

“They’ve been giving us hell all afternoon,” Jo said. “They need fresh air. I need a drink.”

Jo was several years younger than Annie. Annie told Tom that she sometimes felt as if she and Jo had grown up in different families. She would watch Jo interact with Maddie and Devon and think to herself, ‘Mother never would have done that. She must have been very different with Jo.’

“Tom will be finished up with his patients soon. You two go settle in. Dinner will be ready in an hour or so. Tom will get the grill started any minute,” Annie said.

Brad carried their overnight bags up to the guest bedroom. He was still tense from the car ride. When he saw the improvements Annie and Tom had made to the guest room—new floors, new windows, a luxurious comforter on the bed—he became even more vexed. He had resisted this trip from the beginning. He didn’t like Annie and Tom. They were silly and wasteful, proud of the very things that least mattered. They seemed never to have noticed that their children were arrogant and unintelligent. And now they had this farm, this ridiculous, old, rundown farm, with its decaying barns and worthless livestock. On the way in he had seen a tractor stuck in the ditch. When he and Jo were alone he began to complain.

“I’m glad we didn’t move to Columbus when I lost my job,” he said. “I wouldn’t be able to stand it, seeing all the waste up close. Look at these floors. Cherry. Look at that toilet. I’ll bet it cost five hundred dollars.” Jo sat on the bed.

“No more of that, Brad. You have to admit it’s all comfortable. And that’s what Annie wants—for us and the girls to be comfortable. *I* want to be comfortable, just for a while. Go downstairs and have some of Tom’s whiskey.”

Brad parted the curtains and looked out over the property. The girls were tossing pieces of bread at the ducks, which had clustered in a wary scrum. The furthest fencerows were in danger of being subsumed by the woods. The walls of the dairy barn bulged like a woman’s hips. The blind goat sniffed at the weeds behind the cattle barn. Brad had never seen such waste. Down in the kitchen Jo helped Annie chop vegetables and prepare the great slabs of meat for the grill. Annie had set out a tray with several glasses and a bottle of good scotch. Brad rarely drank and especially didn’t like to drink in front of Jo’s family. He went outside to see if he couldn’t get the grill started but discovered it was out of propane. You didn’t say! Even the grill. Brad found a grim humor in this. When Tom wandered down from his office a minute later, Brad was therefore able to greet him with something resembling agreeableness. He explained to Tom about the propane.

“No, no,” Tom said. “I just told Karl this morning—” But of course Karl hadn’t gotten around to it.

“I’ll go get a new one,” Brad said, doing a bad job hiding his satisfaction. “I’d be happy to. We passed a little grocer a few miles up the road. I’ll bet they’d have some.”

Tom knew the place Brad meant.

“You and Jo just arrived. I’d hate to send you out on an errand,” he said.

“You’re not sending anyone. I’m volunteering. I’ll be back in a flash.”

Tom could see from the sardonic way Brad disconnected the propane tank and carried it to his car that he’d already found plenty of things to despise. Tom would let

Brad have his judgments. It cost Tom nothing at all. He went into the kitchen and poured himself a scotch. The room smelled like onion and rosemary and something sweet that Tom couldn't identify. He kissed Jo and told the two women about Brad's errand. Annie looked at him reproachfully.

"Keep an eye on the girls, would you?" she said. "That pond makes me nervous."

"The girls are excellent swimmers," Jo said. "You should see them at the Y. Natural swimmers." She'd been drinking. She was thinner than Annie, and there was greater emphasis in her words and gestures. Part of that was youth. Part of that was living with Brad.

"All the same," Annie said.

Outside the girls were growing tired of the ducks. The feeling was mutual. The girls had run out of bread and watched from the shore as the ducks set sail on the moldy waters. Tom warned the girls not to get too close to the edge, and to stay off the rotted pier. He didn't have much of a rapport with his nieces but the girls chirruped their assent and, spotting the blind goat, asked if they could pet him. A few minutes later Brad returned with the propane and a few minutes after that they had the steaks and the vegetables going. Annie took Jo and the girls over to see the horses, who had been bribed back into their stalls with apples. Tom offered Brad a drink but Brad wouldn't take it. Whiskey gave him a headache. While Tom turned the steaks he asked Brad about his new job.

"I've actually been there two years now," Brad said.

"Has it been two years?" Tom said.

The light had begun to fade, burnishing the browns and oranges in the fields and trees, so that the colors seemed to draw strength from the sky. It was cooler now. The forecast for the next day was cooler still. They would take the girls to an orchard. Brad and Jo would head back to Pittsburgh on Sunday, when Annie and Tom returned to Columbus. Tom sliced open one of the steaks. It was just pink. After dinner the adults played euchre while the girls disappeared into the bedroom. Annie had bought each of them a doll that cried when you held it in an awkward position. The adults could all hear the sound of recorded cries and the girls' gentle laughter.

"I guess those dolls are a little silly," Annie said.

"Not at all," said Jo. She had had too much to drink and kept miscounting the deal. "It was so nice of you. We love coming here. I wish we could come more often. It's so peaceful."

"It can't be easy, maintaining a place like this," Brad said. Annie had already told Jo the story of the horses standing in the road, but now she repeated it for Brad. Jo laughed and laughed.

"Tom thinks I'm sentimental, wanting to hang onto all these old animals. I told him it's a privilege to be sentimental. Not everything has to be ruthless. The world isn't all like cutting out rotten teeth," Annie said.

Brad leaned into the conversation and said, "I imagine it takes a lot of energy to get up here every weekend and look after the place. It's practically a whole different farmhouse since we were here at Christmas."

"It's not so bad," Tom said. "It gives as much energy as it takes." The particular trials of the day had broken apart and reformed as a shapeless cloud huddled warmly in

the back of his consciousness, held there by the scotch and the anticipation of a quiet Saturday. He wished that Brad and Jo had never come. What more could he say? There was no justifying anything to Brad. There was no accounting to be made. The vanquishing, autumnal urges overtook Tom once again.

“Tom’s patients all love it, which really helps,” Annie said. “You ought to see the dental office we added to the house. Maybe Tom can show you tomorrow.”

Brad appeared ready to say more but instead got up to check on the girls. The noise from their room had stopped. Annie wondered if they had fallen asleep.

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Jo said.

Brad returned almost immediately and said, “The girls aren’t in their room.” He seemed to imply that this was a failure of the room, or of the house.

“But where would they have gone?” Annie said.

The four adults swept through the house quickly and found nothing. Jo began to panic in a clumsy, drunken way. Then Annie said, “Maybe the horses. Maybe they went back out to the barn.” The four of them hurried outside, but before they went Tom grabbed a flashlight and took his rifle out of the cabinet in the bedroom. The others had already turned on the lights in the barn and found the horses tranquil and alone in their stalls.

“What’s that gun for?” Brad said, seeing Tom come in.

“It’s a precaution,” Tom said.

Brad was furious.

“A precaution against what?” he said.

Tom couldn't have said. In grabbing the rifle he'd been responding to some impulse that demanded authority and quite possibly violence. What had it been? What authority and what violence? They heard a scream. Two screams, comingling. Now Tom is outside and slipping on the dark grass, hurrying down the hill to the pond, where in the beam of his flashlight he discovers the girls and, eight or nine feet away, creeping forward with its sick and broken gait, the Bontragers' dog. He shouts once but doesn't draw the dog's attention. He raises the gun.

"Don't shoot. Don't you dare shoot," Brad calls out. His voice is far from Tom, far away in the blackness. Tom shoots twice. As if it's responding to a command the dog lies down and convulses. A sound like a far-distant braking train arises from its body and dissipates in the night. The girls run straight toward Tom, straight into the bright beam of his flashlight. They are blinded by it. They cry and shield their eyes as they run.

"For Christsake, Tom, lower the gun," Brad says. "Lower that gun."

Tom lowers the gun. The girls run to him.

Whitaker Street

In order to earn a little money I told my grandmother I would not mind babysitting. It was a fairly abrupt about-face on my part. I had formerly refused her attempts to get me a job at the little dairy shop along Route 3 and at the weekly newspaper, whose publisher she was friendly with. She was growing tired of what she perceived to be my inactivity. How could I explain to her that it was a time of incubation, a time preceding full maturity, and that, as such, it could not be rushed? I couldn't. I even tried. But I could sense both her pity, on account of my parents, and her disapprobation, which, on my grandmother's worn and desiccated features, worked itself into a more natural expression than did pity.

"I'll ask around," she said suspiciously. And she did. A few days later she had found me a job. A couple called the Crates needed help with their seven year-old boy several nights a week.

"What do they do with him now?" I asked my grandmother.

"They tie him to a tree in the yard, I expect," she said.

The Crates did no such thing. Mrs. Crate taught swim classes to adults at the Y in the evenings. She ordinarily brought Phillip along, but he disliked the cavernous pool. The week before, he had made a scene.

“What kind of a scene?” I said to Mrs. Crate. I had graduated from college in the spring and had learned it is best to frontload disappointments. I was confident I could handle a scene-making seven year-old.

“He leapt into the water and nearly drowned,” Mrs. Crate said. She was an aquatic-looking woman—sleek brown hair, narrow shoulders, no breasts. Why was her son not similarly adept in the water?

“So long as we keep the bathtubs drained, then, I think we’ll be all right,” I said.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Crate unguinously.

She showed me around the house. It was very small. The walls were dressed in narrow wood panels. The carpet throughout was garish and made of a fabric that would flay the skin right off a knee. In the middle of the dining room table was a glass vase with a fighting fish inside. Its fins were like long ribbons. Phillip was out with his father.

“My husband works nights at the hospital. He’s in food service,” Mrs. Crate said.

“Like a chef.”

“Yes. Somewhat like a chef.”

In the living room was a boxy television set. Beside it was a bookshelf full of movies. Near the bottom were a few books. *Distilleries of Kentucky*. *Auto Repair for Novices*. *The Jungle Books*.

“What about food?” I said.

“I’ll make dinner before you arrive. It’ll be in the oven.”

When I thought about the house later I felt repulsed. It was the way I felt about the whole town; it had been with trepidation that I asked my grandmother whether I could stay with her for a few months. My own mother had been raised in Ohio. I abhorred the stillness. I and a friend were going to Greece in the fall. I had no money to spare; living with my grandmother was a sacrifice. Every night I dreamed of the Parthenon. My friend and I would swim in the Aegean. Dogs would beg for scraps of food in Athens. We would have our purses stolen and then returned to us by two young boys wanting a reward.

My first evening with Phillip we played Monopoly. Two players were not enough, so we gave a third piece to Phillip's imaginary friend, a Mr. Whitaker. Phillip was an unattractive child. He had a square forehead and large jaw, his hair much too thin for a boy his age. I expected him to trade his properties freely with Mr. Whitaker, but the later was more inclined to do business with me.

"Mr. Whitaker would like to sell you Illinois Ave," Phillip said.

"That is very generous of him. What is his asking price?"

"Four hundred."

"I don't think that's to Mr. Whitaker's advantage. He has me on the ropes."

"Mr. Whitaker says he's trying to be a gentleman."

"Gentlemen don't concern themselves with pity," I said smartly. "That's for us women to do. Gentlemen are only supposed to pick up the pieces when the pity has run out."

After a while Phillip said, "But that's pity, too."

"You're a shrewd customer," I said, accepting Mr. Whitaker's offer.

We ate dinner around the fishbowl. It was baked and battered cod. Phillip said his father was the better cook. Mrs. Crate arrived home smelling of soap and looking damp. I told her that Phillip had a very lively imagination.

“He’s like his father in that regard,” she said.

“Yes, the chef,” I said.

I was glad to be free of that house, of Phillip and his bald intelligence. It all had an air of indecency. The next day, I was discussing the Crates with my paramour. I thought it would amuse him. He was tremendously depressed, to be living in Central Ohio with his fiancée. He had gone to the University of Pennsylvania. He wore shoes that had been stitched together by a cobbler in Alsace. When sober, he was the most intelligent man I’d ever known.

“One whole wall in their drawing room is covered in a wallpaper mural of three deer in the woods,” I said. “Their eyes follow me around the room. I’m surprised the Crates aren’t vegetarians.”

“I think Katie might have left me,” my paramour said.

“As well she should. You’re practically an alcoholic.”

He lowered his face into his fine, aristocratic hands. The knuckles of one hand were badly bruised.

“Will you really go to Greece?” he said.

“It’s the one thing I’m sure of.”

“What will I do without you?” He had a face that was most beautiful when he was unsure of himself.

“If Katie has left you, then you should move back to Philadelphia.”

“Do you think your grandma would mind—.”

“Out of the question,” I said. “I’m in the spare room. It wouldn’t be acceptable, to have you lounging around in your underwear. Not in this town.”

“I wouldn’t lounge around in my underwear,” he protested. He could be very persuasive. But so could I.

“You’re lounging in your underwear right now,” I said.

He was not interested in talking about the Crates, but why should he have been? I have sometimes wondered whether I exalt them in my imagination. Not that I think highly of them: of Mrs. Crate and her pinniped ears, absent of any jewelry, of Mr. Crate sending veal á la Orloff up to a man with pneumonia. That’s not it. I worry that I give them importance in another way, as though they were indicative of something, like an emblem or marker. I can think of nothing worse than being a symbol. It’s degrading and undemocratic. I would lose sleep to think I had made someone else into something greater than him- or herself.

A few days later I returned to the Crates to watch Phillip again. He was not interested in another game of Monopoly. He surprised me by retrieving a book from his room and asking me to read it aloud to him. It was *The Once and Future King*.

“I’m partway through it already,” he said.

“You must be a very good reader, Phillip,” I said. I could hardly imagine either of the Crates taking Phillip onto their lap and beginning with page one of a book such as that.

“Not really. Usually Mr. Whitaker reads to me.”

Surely by seven it is appropriate for a child to have a sense of reality that is firming up around the edges. I had tolerated Mr. Whitaker's presence at Monopoly during my first visit partly out of curiosity and partly out of a fear of overstepping my authority. Now it was different. My grandmother had bothered me all that afternoon with the idea that I should find further employment. Unkind comparisons were made. I had threatened to move out and in fact considered myself to have done so, though all my things were still in my grandmother's guest room. It was therefore too incongruous to have Phillip indulging in his fantasies.

"Mr. Whitaker isn't real," I said.

Phillip said nothing so I said, "You know that, don't you? The street you live on is called Whitaker. You're very smart for a seven year-old."

He still said nothing so I picked up the book and began to read:

There was something magical about the time and space commanded by Merlyn, for the Wart seemed to be passing many days and nights among the grey people, during the one spring night when he had left his body asleep under the bearskin.

The phone rang then. It was my paramour.

"I said you weren't allowed to call me here," I said. Phillip was in the next room.

Through the arched doorway I could see the deer on the dining room wall.

"It's all over, definitively. She knew about us."

"It's all right," I said. "You didn't love her."

"I did love her."

"Then she didn't love you."

"That's a terrible thing to say," he said. His voice was furry and flat.

“We’ll talk about it some other time,” I said. “Stay away from here. And don’t call.”

I locked all the doors and returned to the living room where I had left Phillip. He was sitting on the sofa with the book in his lap. I read to him a while longer. He claimed not to be hungry, but I made him eat a little of the casserole Mrs. Crate had left and then put him to bed. Mrs. Crate was not due home for another half hour so I wandered through the rest of the house—I mean the Crates’ bedroom, really, since that’s the only room I hadn’t been in—with the feeling that I had overlooked something. My friend, the one I was to go to Greece with in the fall, would die later that summer in a car accident outside San Luis Obispo, where her step-father lived. I would not go to Greece without her. The Aegean, I imagine, feels like a silken robe.

Mrs. Crate’s closet was stuffed with blouses that I could envision pulled taut over her thin torso. In Mr. Crate’s medicine cabinet the gap between the blades of his razor were packed with little hairs. The bed was made neatly.

When I returned to the living room a man was sitting on the sofa. He was dressed very finely. He wore a vest beneath his suit coat, which had dull buttons that absorbed the light in an expensive way. He had removed his shoes. He was much older than my paramour, though not as attractive. His eyes were a caramelized shade of brown, not unlike an onion.

“You must be...” I said.

“Mr. Whitaker,” he said He bowed slightly and looked at me with his oniony eyes.

I laughed and grabbed the fire poker, which I leveled at the point where the fabric of his vest converged.

“Mr. Whitaker is a figment of Phillip’s imagination,” I said.

“Sometimes, yes, but sometimes I am a figment in my own right. I’m like an intention that becomes an action.”

I told him to prove it. He said that was impossible, strictly speaking, but also that he had sold Illinois Ave to me for four hundred dollars so that I could stay afloat for a few turns longer.

“Well, then.” I lowered the poker. “What kind of action to you intend?”

“No, you misunderstand. I’m already an action. The intention has worked itself out. It’s an idea of moral philosophers.”

I admired the kind of action that Mr. Whitaker had become, and the intention that had given it life. Without waiting for Mrs. Crate I drove him to my grandmother’s house. She was away; it was her bridge night. Mr. Whitaker poured us two glasses of bourbon from the bottle my grandmother kept behind the flour. He was a sophisticated action.

“I think I ought to leave tonight. I think this place will kill me,” I said. The future was like a vast, glittering ocean that gave me a headache with its glare. My grandmother’s town, my mother’s town, Mrs. Crate’s town—I could not be held responsible if it was allowed to melt back into the seam of resources from which it had emerged. Mr. Whitaker agreed.

“Load up your car and go,” he advised.

“Will you come with me?”

“I’m ambivalent in that regard.” He became somber. “I’m actually beginning to have doubts about my consequences. No—I think it’s better if I stay.”

I was a little relieved. After a while Mr. Whitaker would want something, and I had less and less to give. My grandmother had told me I lacked conviction. She was a Baptist.

“How will I know this all happened?” I said.

“You mean me,” he said a little sadly.

“Don’t be so melancholy. You look more substantial than you did even five minutes ago.” He now had a lapel pin in the shape of a dove and, I knew, an imaginary wife somewhere.

“Yes. I suppose it never was my prerogative to go on.”

He poured us another round of drinks and helped me load my car. I drove through the night, not stopping until somewhere in Oklahoma. I was headed to San Luis Obispo, where I thought I could stay with my friend until we left for Greece. I don’t know what I expected from her; whatever it was, it wasn’t fair. Her death marked the end of a certain portion of my life that I look back at now without longing. I was in the car with her when she died. In fact, I was driving. The man who struck us died a few days after the accident. It is hard to pick out the sense in it—my friend dying in an ambulance when a tremendous amount of time was left before her. I have yet to approach the limits of grief. I very often wonder what has brought me to the threshold of the present and left me here, dazed and possibly undeserving.

The Everlasting Arms

The year Jill finished law school I was accepted into seminary, and so we moved east, to Baltimore. A secretary at the seminary gave me a list of housing options in the surrounding neighborhoods. Near the bottom of the list was the Everlasting Arms. I called the phone number and agreed to rent a garden-level apartment for a price somewhat below what Jill and I were prepared to pay. It was a good thing, too. Jill failed the bar that summer and all that fall we had no money but the little we'd managed to save up.

The Arms was an old German Tudor building on a street of stately Federalist buildings with white columns beside the front doors and uniformed valets who helped old ladies with their groceries. The Arms wasn't nearly so nice. There was no garden to speak of. We were in a basement unit that rattled with noise from the laundry room and an average temperature that couldn't be induced to budge from 80°. The day after we moved in, our car was vandalized while parked in the driveway beside the building;

someone tried to smash the rear windshield with a glass bottle. We appealed to the building's owner, a woman named Merilee Murdoch, who lived with her son Phil on the third floor. She invited us up for tea the next week.

"I've always envisioned the Arms as a place of dignity and class," Merilee told us over tea. She explained that she invited all her tenants up for a visit, particularly when there was a dispute to be resolved.

"Over and apart from my own fondness for a good Darjeeling, I've found that, on a practical level, it's so much more difficult to be uncivil while holding a cup of hot liquid," she said. As a high school student she'd spent time at a boarding school near Oxford, where she'd acquired both her taste for tea and a curious accent. Her vowels were all elongated by unaccountable diphthongs. Her apartment, too, had a strange hybridity about it. It was crowded with incongruous artifacts—African fertility dolls and ratty old blankets, magnificently framed collages hanging on the walls above wicker furniture that seemed to have been chewed away in places by her little terrier.

"I think we're very civil people," I said. "We're from the Midwest."

I didn't want to be sidetracked. The incident with our car threatened to confirm our greatest fears about moving to the East Coast.

"Are you sure it was a resident who did it?" Merilee said.

"Who else would it have been?" I said.

Phil came into the room looking harried. He'd spent much of the last week banging ineffectually on the furnace. When he saw that it was we who were having tea with his mother, he sat down and sulkily ate a shortbread cookie.

“Phil, you don’t know anything about car in our driveway being hit with a bottle last week, do you?” Merilee said.

Phil said, “What kind of car?”

When I told him, he giggled.

“I thought it was those landscapers parking in our spot again,” he said. “I guess, come to think of it, their car is blue.”

Merilee turned to us with a triumphant smile.

“That *is* a relief, isn’t it? It would be upsetting to think it had been a random act of vandalism.”

We stayed for a few minutes longer and ascertained that Phil was completely stumped by the furnace. Neither he nor Merilee made mention of any next steps. I let it slip that Jill was a lawyer, hoping to scare the two of them a little, but the news only excited Merilee.

“You’ll have to come back,” Merilee told Jill, “so that I can tell you all about my own legal predicaments. It’s so hard to find people who really understand the ins and outs.”

“Of course,” Jill said—a little too readily, I thought, given how we were being treated. That is how their friendship began, and how one month later we’d earned a dinner invitation.

“She wants to have both of us over,” Jill said. “I told her we’d be happy to come.”

Merilee’s apartment had changed dramatically in the month since I’d been there. The big, ornate buffet was gone, replaced by an inelegant sideboard, and all the artwork

was different—the collages had been removed in favor of framed posters advertising Spanish and Italian carnivals from the forties and fifties. I noticed for the first time (for I assumed they weren't new) several photographs of a young Merilee with artistic luminaries. There was one of her with Iris Murdoch, another with Mark Rothko, and still another with Alec Guinness.

“Was this before or after he was knighted?” I said, pointing to the last.

“I wouldn't know,” Merilee said. “I don't pay any attention to titles. It's a malign tradition that I'm glad we've never adopted here.”

We were not the only guests over for dinner. It was my first glimpse of the people Merilee liked to surround herself with. Jill had told me there were always artists hanging around her place; she said Merilee was very generous. That night Merilee had gathered quite a cast: there were two men not much older than me who described themselves as filmmakers; a middle-aged woman who taught dance at the Peabody; a student fresh out of school with a degree in architecture; and an Episcopal priest. There was also Phil and a friend of his. Jill told me later that the priest—a tireless talker who kept his eyes trained hound-like on Merilee the whole night—was one of Merilee's primary sources of money.

Merilee served little crab cakes and salads full of thorny frisée. When we weren't all listening to the priest talk about his summer at Martha's Vineyard, we were listening to the architecture student talk about the arts center he had designed as part of his senior project.

“Where will it be built?” I asked him, but he only looked confused.

“It was an exercise,” he said. “For school. It's not being built.”

The dance instructor praised Merilee for her excellent posture and said it was a truism that one's carriage mirrors one's interior state. She cast an evaluative glance toward our end of the table.

"Phil, get the brandy, would you?" Merilee said. Phil did so as he did everything—grudgingly and slowly. Soon Merilee had to go in search of the brandy herself. When she was gone the priest asked the filmmakers if they had seen Christopher Nolan's latest movie.

"I saw it this summer while I was in Martha's Vineyard," he said. "It was an excellent film. Very thought provoking."

"I haven't bothered," said one of the filmmakers. He had pulled out a camera and was pointing it at the rest of us.

"Don't mind us," said his partner. "It's only an experiment. The lighting in here—you know." He waved his hand toward the ceiling with a consolidating gesture.

Over drinks we dispersed throughout Merilee's apartment. Jill mentioned the Ecumenical Institute, which got Merilee off onto religion. This made the priest uncomfortable. He shut up for the first time all night.

"The Bible has a lot to say about money. More than sex, even," Merilee observed. I nodded in agreement. The priest had gone glassy-eyed.

"Personally, I like to have plenty of both. I had both, with Gerson." She sighed. "I feel like Job. Trial after trial. All for no discernable reason."

"He came out all right, in the end," I said.

"I doubt I'll be so lucky. I'm not bitter, though. That's a victory by itself, I think."

“If anyone can see their way through, it’s you,” said the dance instructor, who squeezed Merilee’s hand and complimented its elegance. It was another truism that hands reflect one’s inner state.

The next day I was retrieving our mail from the vestibule when I saw the dance instructor.

“You live here too?” I said.

“It’s the classiest building in the neighborhood. The others are full of philistines and retired couples who never stop talking about their grandchildren.”

She dug her mail out of its box and gave a dramatic sigh.

“I wish Merilee wouldn’t talk so often about Gerson. She ought to move on,” she said.

“He’s the ex-husband?” I said.

“‘Ex’ being the key word. He’s *very* rich. The two of them used to sponsor all kinds of things. The BSO. Urban renewal. They were quite generous.”

Later I asked Jill if there was animosity between Merilee and Gerson.

“Apparently he comes down from New York from time to time and tries to get her back. He’s always drunk and makes a scene. Last time he broke the front door,” she said. It was certainly true that the door in the vestibule didn’t set flush in the frame. Still, I didn’t like the luridness in Jill’s voice.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to spend so much time with Merilee?” I said. We’d talked a little about Jill’s possibly working as a paralegal until she could retake the bar, but she said that would be a step backward.

“She’s not a bad person. I’m meeting people, at least. Merilee has a wide network,” Jill said.

“I know lots of people at the seminary. You could meet them instead.”

“I doubt *they’d* be very interesting.”

Every day for weeks after Jill went up to visit with Merilee, whose legal and money problems seemed to be growing by the day. The possibility of a Chapter 7 loomed over the Everlasting Arms like a beast. Word got out that the whole building would be evicted if things didn’t improve. One night I returned to our apartment late, and Jill wasn’t there, so I went up to Merilee’s and knocked. The priest opened the door.

“Yes, she’s here,” he said. He wasn’t wearing his collar this time. He might have been an electrician.

Jill was in the living room talking to a man with large sideburns and the soft solidity that comes from failure, and from no longer being young. I took it he was another of Merilee’s lovers.

“Have you eaten dinner?” Merilee called out to me from the kitchen. I said I hadn’t. She came out bearing a tray of crab cakes, the same as last time, which I declined. I tried to gather up Jill, but she was having a good time talking to the man with sideburns.

“I used to be an actor, but I didn’t have the guts for it. It’s much easier to write the play. I find the stakes are much lower. You’re given more freedom,” the man said.

“I never should have gone to law school,” Jill ventured.

“That’s nonsense,” I said. “Let’s head downstairs. I think you’ve had enough.”

“Merilee doesn’t keep alcohol,” Jill said bitterly.

“Still. We should go.”

Jill came with me accompanied by a long and sympathetic look from the playwright. When we were back in our apartment Jill realized she'd left her handbag at Merilee's. I went up to get it. The priest and the playwright were in their undershirts on the ground, wrestling. Merilee stood watching at a distance, nibbling at a crab cake.

"It's an old argument they have—something about realism. I can hardly keep track," she said.

I watched the two men roll around on the big rug. Merilee's terrier ran barking in circles around them. The priest was the fatter of the two and seemed to be wearing out the playwright, who eventually gave a shout and tapped the priest's back. They both pulled themselves to standing and looked shamefacedly at Merilee.

"That's enough for tonight, I think. Have some lemonade," she said.

Downstairs Jill was lying on our bed. She'd stripped off all the blankets. As a law student, she'd suffered from bad stomach cramps during the most stressful parts of the semester. When that happened, she would dissolve Tums tablets in tumblers of gin and massage her belly with her fingertips. I felt terrible, just then, as I'd always felt terrible, seeing her unhappy.

"Did you sign up for the bar in February?" I said. I lay down beside her, careful to keep to my side of the bed.

"I intended to," she said.

"You're being too hard on yourself."

"I don't feel like a person anymore."

"Oh? And what does being a person feel like?"

“It feels like you’re moving toward something. Like there was something up till now and like there’s something else up ahead.”

“You know, that’s pretty good,” I said. “Maybe you should be a theologian.”

“I’m going back to Chicago,” she said.

The next day she packed up all her things. It wasn’t much to look at. She bought a train ticket but missed the train.

“I think the fare is good for any departure today, as long as there’s room,” I said. I thought it best to be helpful. Jill sat and sat in our small living room until she’d missed the next train as well. I was at my desk the whole time, studying.

“What are you working on?” she said.

I was practicing my Hebrew. I said, “Let’s go to the park.” Outside it was cold and damp. The water cut through our shoes, turning the cuffs of our jeans dark.

“We’ll give it one year,” Jill said. “After all, you did as much for me.”

“Law school was three years.”

Jill was quiet, so I added, “Either way, I think we ought to leave the Arms.” She was still quiet. Back at our apartment, we stomped our wet feet on the doormat and Jill took a look at the terms of our lease. She agreed to think about bringing it up with Merilee.

We were charged a \$1000 penalty for breaking our lease, plus the cost of two months’ rent. It was water under the bridge. Jill had found a job. Merilee sent Phil to collect the money from us the day before we were to move out. He giggled when I handed him the check.

“I’ve figured out what’s wrong with the furnace,” he said.

“It makes no difference anymore,” I said.

“*Someone* will be living here,” he said.

“Not if they take a good look at the place first.”

Merilee had a going-away party in our honor. Jill hadn’t been spending nearly as much time with her; she was busy with work. At the party we saw that Merilee’s apartment had changed yet again. Most of her furniture was gone. So were the priest and the playwright.

“It’ll be more intimate,” Merilee said, welcoming us in with tiny glasses of syrupy red wine. Both the dance instructor and Phil were there. Merilee’s dog snarled at me.

Merilee scolded him. “Aristotle, stop it,” she said.

“I’ve always thought that’s the nicest name for a dog,” the dance instructor said.

“It’s a long name,” I said. “I read once that it’s best to give a dog a two-syllable name. They’re better at recognizing it that way.”

“That’s for simple-minded dogs. Aristotle is a terrier,” Merilee said. She gave the dog a slice of cheese.

For dinner she had induced Phil to fetch several containers of rigatoni from the Italian place down the street. The food was cold by the time we began to eat.

“It’s a new day in the Murdoch household,” Merilee informed us. “The bankruptcy’s nearly over and done with. I have several *very* exciting possibilities on the horizon.”

The dance instructor tittered excitedly.

“I hope you’ll hold onto the Arms,” she said. “You bring so much class to the building.”

“It will depend,” Merilee said vaguely.

I was becoming fed up with Merilee all over again. I even nudged Jill with the intention of leaving when there was a knock at the door. I worried that it would be the priest or the playwright or one of the other desiccated hangers-on stuck in Merilee’s orbit, but it wasn’t any of these. It was Gerson, the ex-husband. He was already drunk. He’d undone the belt from his pants and was holding it half-raised like a ringmaster.

“Should I call the police?” Jill had her cellphone halfway to her ear. Gerson said something uglily in Portuguese. The dance instructor edged out of the room, passing by Gerson with a poorly suppressed and lecherous grin. Phil giggled and retreated to his bedroom.

“We can’t leave her here,” Jill hissed at me when I made to leave as well. She still had her phone ready.

“I wouldn’t fight him, if I were you,” Merilee said. She seemed entirely unconcerned. “He’s much stronger than he looks. And he fights dirty.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I said.

Gerson gave us a stare of such hatred that Jill, shaking a little, finally allowed me to lead her past him and out of the apartment. In the hallway, the dance instructor had set up a chair and was sitting quietly outside Merilee’s door.

“What happens now?” Jill said. Gerson had slammed the door behind us. The murmur of voices could be heard inside, along with Aristotle’s yipping.

“We wait,” the dance instructor said. “Gerson and Merilee are sophisticated. They never resolve anything quickly.”

The next morning I parked the moving truck in the space where my car had been vandalized. Phil helped me wrestle our heavier pieces of furniture out of the apartment and onto the truck. Around noon Gerson came outside in a fresh suit. He stood beside the cab of the truck and watched me haul the last of our things. I felt an impulse to betray Merilee. I suspect that is what he wanted me to do. He looked very smug, with thinning hair that fanned out in the back. I preferred the priest.

“I hope you enjoy your new place,” Phil said just before we drove off. “My mother does her best to make this place respectable. Not all landlords are so thoughtful.”

“Well I do feel relieved,” Jill said as we pulled away.

“I do too,” I said. “Things are going to be better now.”

“I’ll settle for different. Do you think Merilee is okay?”

“I’m sure she is.”

“That’s right,” Jill said uncertainly. “She has possibilities on the horizon.”

In the spring we broke our second lease and went back to Chicago. It was easier, somehow, than staying.

Where We Are Going

For a long time my father drove terrible cars. Cars that didn't start as often as they did. Cars so corroded by rust the metal broke away in places like bits of wafer. Cars without seat belts, without radios, without heat. For a long time, too, my father didn't mind. He had grown up in Germany, the child of parents who had internalized the virtue of restraint, of forgoing opportunity, since opportunities so often proved to be unreliable.

My father got these cars from my uncle Mark—my mother's brother—who was a radiology technician by training and a mechanic by vocation. That was his joke. When he'd successfully raised another car from the dead he solemnly blessed it, in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Rolling Ghost. He was close friends with an insurance adjuster and had access to totaled cars. My uncle bought them, restored or revived them, and then parked them in his front yard with FOR SALE signs in the windows. A fair amount of traffic passed by the house where he, my aunt Margo, and my cousins lived, along Route 36; the cars always sold. Quite frequently, it was my father who bought them, at a discount.

“A car is only a glorified tool,” my father said whenever one of ours died. He was convinced we saved money by buying a car from my uncle every year or so. In hindsight, I’m not so sure. My father knew absolutely nothing about cars. Referring to them as “devices” (*Geräte*) and refusing to spend reasonable amounts of money on them was his way of denigrating both them and, I can’t help but think, my uncle. We were all of us—my family, my uncle’s family—out of place in some ways, as Catholics in a rural county, but my father was more out of place than most. He was badly underpaid as a professor of literature at the small liberal arts college in Sinclair, which was a twenty-minute drive from our house over undulating and unevenly paved roads. He could have taught anywhere; my mother, after the first four children, had wanted to move home. They did move home, and then they had two more.

I was part of the first batch. I was the second oldest and therefore remember many things my younger siblings don’t. My father’s run of jalopies, for example. All of us kids attended the parochial school appended to St. Vincent de Paul, one of only two Catholic churches in the county. It, too, was in Sinclair. Those of us old enough for school would pile into my father’s car and ride with him into town. Engine noise rattled the dashboard and windows, making it impossible to talk. On the approach to any large hill my father gunned it. Nearing the crest, as the car inevitably slowed, he would say, “Pick up your feet,” and we would obey, lightening, we believed, the poor car’s load. After school we waited, heads hung in shame, as my father pulled into the parking lot to pick us up, the car banging and whining.

Our other vehicle during that time was a minivan as old as I was. It was for Sundays and emergencies only. It was marginally more reliable than my uncle’s refurbs.

It never failed to haul us all to mass, and it started right up the time my brother Mitchell reacted badly to a bee sting and my mother had to drive him to the hospital in Sinclair. Visiting us one day, my uncle Mark even figured out a trick for getting the van to start. Our house was positioned at the top of a long hill—if we got the van rolling downhill, and my father waited to try the ignition until we'd hit 10 mph, the van started right up. Such a maneuver required a little dexterity on my parents' part, but they mastered it quickly enough. Starting from ground level—the church parking lot, say—required silent meditation and prayer. Sometimes, while we hoped and prayed for the van to start, my father climbed out of the driver's seat, popped the hood, and banged around the engine compartment with a rubber mallet he kept in the glove box. Between our prayers and my father's exploratory knocks, the van found the strength for one more journey.

My father changed his mind about cars the spring of my eighth grade year. It was my final semester in the parochial school. In the fall I would have to attend public high school with my older sister, Clara. Toward the end of March we were hit with a fantastic snowstorm. The public schools closed, but for some reason St. Vincent didn't. The roads were covered with a faultless, four-inch layer of snow. The wet flakes clung to the bare tree branches and packed themselves heavily on roofs and porches. Everything was white and new. On the approach to the largest hill of our commute my father floored it, and we dutifully lifted our feet. Then, in a sequence I still can't make sense of, we ended up in the ditch facing downhill on the other side of the road.

My father was usually stoic in these situations, but that morning he was on edge. He'd argued with my mother before we left the house. I didn't know what about, but it

had been enough to keep either of them from preparing our lunches. As we headed out the door, my mother overturned the change jar and gave each of us enough money for a cafeteria meal. Now, with our car settled firmly in the ditch and more snow beginning to fall, my father got out and started kicking the offending drifts. He swore loudly into his gloves. Then he called a towing service and stood beside the road to wait. His slacks were soaked through, his thin, blonde hair plastered to his head.

That evening he announced that, as soon as we kids were on summer vacation, he was going to sell the car and ride his bike to work every day. His bad mood from the morning had given way to resolve. That's how it usually went with my father.

"How will I learn to drive?" Clara objected. She was due to get her learner's permit in July.

"We'll have to put it off until the fall. I'm going to teach as many summer courses as they'll let me. That and the gas money, I hope to save enough for a decent car," my father said.

"It isn't fair," Clara said.

"Can you really ride your bike that far?" I said to my father. "It's fifteen miles to Sinclair."

"When I was your age I rode my bike every day in the foothills of the Alps," he replied. "I was never so healthy. It's about time I got regular exercise again. Besides, it's closer to ten miles."

"What about groceries?" my mother said. My father usually worked from home in the summers, freeing her up to leave the house, to run errands and go where she pleased in the car.

“We’ll have the van. It’s worked this long,” my father said.

“It started making that noise again,” my mother said. I sensed that this was the continuation of the private argument.

“We’ll have Mark look at it.” My father carefully gathered the last of his peas onto his spoon. “We may have to be creative from now on.”

My parents prided themselves on their “creativity,” which found its greatest expression in getting us kids to wherever we had to be at the correct time, appropriately dressed. My father’s was arguably a creative profession, though his students were subpar and the articles he sometimes wrote were printed in journals with uninteresting covers and imposing typefaces. There were shelves and shelves of books all over the house that we were encouraged to read and even mark up, should we so desire. The backyard was littered with half-built devices and abandoned irrigation projects. Every few weeks my father did his best to mow the grass between these obstructions. My mother, on the other hand, demanded order. It was in her nature, though she was also driven by business concerns: she tutored students in French and German. Many but not all of her pupils attended St. Vincent’s. She wanted a neat environment to work in, one that would furthermore inspire her pupils’ parents to appreciate her. She was perceived by the people from this county as a bit of a nonconformist, one now buckling under the practical concerns of family life.

“I suppose we’ll manage,” she said.

“This isn’t fair,” Clara said.

That summer was stunningly, breathtakingly hot. One of my mother's greatest joys was good weather—drawing attention to it, savoring it, going for walks in it. The mild, Ohio weather was one of the excuses she gave for why she and my father had left New England after my father finished graduate school. That summer—the summer before my freshman year—was so abnormal that she took personal offense.

“It’s *fifteen* degrees hotter than the average,” she complained to my aunt Margo. We were spending most of our time at Margo and Mark’s place, which had central air and an aboveground pool in the backyard. Margo came by in the mornings to pick us up. My mother even held her tutoring sessions at their house. I didn’t see the reason for spending so much time with my cousins, who were all athletes and couldn’t be counted on to swim in the pool without pushing me under when I wasn’t looking. There were five of them, distributed according to ages roughly equivalent to ours. The oldest was Luke. He’d been a standout on St. Vincent’s basketball and track teams. At Sinclair High School he’d switched to football. The season before, he’d scored two touchdowns against Taylor.

“You going out for any sports in the fall?” he asked me one afternoon. He spent most mornings lifting weights in the garage, then soaking in the pool.

“I doubt it,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re parents are probably too busy.”

I didn’t see why they would be any busier than his parents.

“I hate sports,” I said. “I might try debate.”

He laughed.

“That’ll be no problem. Sinclair debate is worse than the golf team. That’s what I’ve heard, anyway.”

My siblings and I usually gathered in the basement to play card games and watch our cousins’ vast library of Disney movies. Occasionally one of our cousins would wander down and join us for a few hours. Aunt Margo worked part-time at the library, leaving my mom in charge of the whole group of us. Luckily for her we were perfectly content to coexist without feeling a great need to interact. I knew of several large families at St. Vincent’s that got along, and others that didn’t. Either way, they seemed to do so loudly. We, on the other hand, were a placid bunch.

“Why don’t we have other cousins?” my youngest sister asked one day during Pinochle.

“We do,” I said. “They live in Germany.”

“Why don’t we have more *here*?” she said.

“Grandma Jacobs had a detached placenta,” Clara said knowingly. “Mom barely made it out alive.”

Jenny didn’t quite understand but she could see that she wasn’t meant to. She idolized Clara and accepted her explanation.

In the evenings, back at our own house, the six o’clock news reported high incidents of heat stroke and campfires burning out of control. Most days the Y in Sinclair was used as a public cooling center. It didn’t occur to me to worry about my father, who set off most mornings when it was still relatively cool, and who came home when the roads were already cast in shadows. He dismounted in our driveway, sweat dripping from

the handlebars of his bike. Within a few weeks he'd lost ten or fifteen pounds, provoking my mother's jealousy.

"It'd be nice if we all had time for daily exercise," she said one evening in July.

"We ought to go cycling as a family sometime," my father said.

My mother frowned.

"We would all need bikes for that," I pointed out.

"Someone is welcome to use mine," Clara pouted. "I'd rather have a car."

One Saturday afternoon my father and I went riding together. A thunderstorm had swept away much of the humidity, but as we spun our way over the empty roads, dipping in and out of the damp shade, the sun turned oppressive. We rode single file, my father in front, me following at an increasing distance. Four or five miles from our house, he slowed and dismounted. The road ahead was unpaved for a stretch of about a hundred yards.

"What do you think? We walk the bikes across and keep going?" he said.

"I don't know," I said. "It's hot again."

He used his sleeve to wipe his face.

"I hardly notice it anymore. I'm aware of it, obviously. You can't not be. But it doesn't bother me," he said.

"It's too bad we don't have a pool to sit in afterwards," I said.

"You'd be surprised," he said, "how much work goes into maintaining those things. Over and apart from the initial costs."

We turned back. By the time we reached our house my legs and arms were cramping, and my head felt impossibly large inside my helmet. My father had me stand

still while he doused me with water from the garden hose. Next I sprayed him. Then I sprayed Jenny and Mitchell and Josh, who had heard the hose and run outside. My father and I hung our t-shirts to dry on the porch railing. In the kitchen he mixed us some Gatorade. He preferred it weak, with just enough powder to give the water some flavor.

“Do that every day, and see what happens,” he said. I was nauseated and needed to sit down.

“I can’t believe you do it,” I said.

My father downed his Gatorade.

“Here,” he said, removing an ice pack from the freezer. “Put this on your forehead for a few minutes. And finish off that glass.”

We spread towels on the dining room chairs and rested in the breeze from the ceiling fan. My younger siblings squealed outside on the lawn. I slowly recovered. My father talked about the two years his family had lived in Michigan. He had been a freshman in high school—almost exactly my age—when they moved.

“Do you feel ready?” he asked me. “For school?”

“Not really,” I said.

“Believe it or not, I’d say that’s a good thing. Not that there’s anything to be nervous about. But the smallest bit of fear—I think that’s okay.”

Clara passed through the kitchen on her way upstairs. She gave our chairs a wide berth.

“Tell me that’s not sweat,” she said.

I had bothered Clara with endless questions about high school. She was laconic in her responses, understandably so. My siblings and I, crowded into a relatively short span of years, were always struggling to draw distinctions. The way to separate ourselves most successfully came through experience, through the privileges and knowledge it conferred. Our faith encouraged hierarchies based on proximity to truth. More complete knowledge meant more complete access to grace, and it was by grace that we were saved. That was my understanding, at least. How you could tell when you were getting closer, I don't know.

My worries about the coming school year were acute yet shapeless. Some days I joined Luke in the garage, where he taught me proper technique for bicep curls, overhead presses, and a variety of body-weight exercises. I felt like an imposter, weakly clutching the small barbells that refused, after two or three reps, to rise upward. I was also my mother's most devoted student. Even then I had the faint idea—certainly not shared by my future classmates—that the ability to use words, and foreign words especially, might become a mark of distinction.

"J'ai, tu as, il a, nous avons, vous avez, ils ont," I repeated to myself all summer long. *"Ich will, du willst, er will, wir wollen, ihr wollt, sie wollen."*

"That's not bad," my mother said. "You're sounding more and more native. It took me a long time. Your father's family all teased me for years. Not maliciously, but still."

I sat at the table with my mother twice a week for half an hour, reviewing the exercises in my grammar books and listening to the recordings I'd made of myself reading brief passages in either language. After me there were other students. My

mother's capacity to coax French and German sentences from teenagers was endless. She never became impatient with me or any of the others. Paging through my textbooks I occasionally found pictures of the Alps or Pyrenees, and I imagined my mother as a young woman studying in Freiburg, speaking to my father outside the university. What had she known then? What did she have yet to learn?

Every summer Mark and Margo took their family to Myrtle Beach for one week. My cousins grumbled about the monotony of the time they spent there, though they never gave excuses for staying home. That summer was no different. They all drove off the last week in July, leaving my mother and us without company or a pool for the hottest stretch yet. Mark gave us permission to spend our days at their house; we just had no way to get there. He had replaced the van's faulty timing belt, restoring it to a moderately reliable state, but my parents stuck to their policy of using it only for mass and emergencies.

The week stretched on interminably. School began in a month. I was sleeping worse and worse every night. My father was cranky from teaching three courses and biking home through the roasting heat. My mother became restless and irritable. Some days she didn't notice books or games we left in piles around the house. Water boiled over on the stove. We ran low on clean underwear. When she wasn't tutoring she sat alone in the kitchen listening to the radio. We had nothing to occupy us but one another. One another, that is, and the work my father assigned. On days he knew we were at the house, he called us from his office with a long and detailed list of chores. He chatted briefly with my mother, who passed the phone to me or Clara, who took down the list and read it out to everyone else. On Thursday of that week I was assigned the task of

recaulking the upstairs shower. Earlier that month my father had recaulked the bathroom he shared with my mother, calling me in at intervals to observe.

“The equipment ought to be in the basement. If you run out, call me. I’ll pick some up on my way home,” he said over the telephone.

“On your bike?”

“It’s caulk. I think I can handle it,” he said.

I set to work with the dull-edged scraper, digging at the crumbling caulk between the tiles. It was stupid, mindless work. I sweated inside the tiny bathroom, my arms tired after fifteen minutes. The tiles still to be scraped covered the wall in a mocking grid. My progress here was incremental, untenably slow. I resented my father, whose office at the college was air-conditioned. I also resented the litany of inventors who had given us radiation treatments and satellites, but who had overlooked a more efficient means of stripping old caulk from bathroom tile.

“Sam.”

Clara appeared in the doorway to the bathroom. She was rigid and her tone was commanding.

“I’m busy,” I said.

“*Sam.*” She said again, urgently. I turned to look at her. She was pale. Her arms were pinned against her sides, and she was shaking. I lowered my scraper and asked her what was the matter. She wouldn’t say.

“Come with me,” she said instead.

I followed her downstairs to my parents’ bedroom door. Before entering she turned to me and said, “Stay calm, okay? You’ll scare the others.”

The bedroom was empty. The door to the bathroom was closed; the strip of light at the bottom suggested my mother was inside. The bed was stained with blood. I thought it was another of Mitchell's nosebleeds, but Clara was behaving far too seriously for that.

"Wait here," she said. She knocked gently on the bathroom door and let herself in. "Yes, I got him," I heard her say. My mother said something I couldn't make out. Then it was quiet and I stood for quite awhile—or so it seemed—in my parents' empty room.

"Have you called dad?" I called out. My voice sounded perfectly rational.

"Yes," Clara said through the door.

I lowered my voice a bit: "Do we need to call an ambulance?"

The door swung open. My mother's face was the color of pearl. She was wrapped in her bathrobe and leaning heavily against Clara.

"Help me, please," my sister said.

I positioned myself on my mother's other side. I took her cold hand and brought it over and around my shoulders.

"Have you called an ambulance?" I said.

"They said it might take a long time. The heat wave," Clara said.

We guided our mother through the house, interrupting a game of Euchre in the living room. As we passed through the sounds of shuffling cards ceased. Jenny began to cry.

"Play your game, dear," my mother said.

We loaded her into the car. She loved severe, just like she did when we misbehaved. Clara climbed into the driver's seat.

"You know how to get there?" I said.

Clara nodded and began to swear. The van wouldn't start.

"Release the parking break," I said. "I'll give you a push down the hill."

The van lurched and began rolling slowly down our short driveway. In the road I pushed and pushed, digging my feet into asphalt gone soft from the heat, moving the van by inches until we'd reached the crest of the hill. Then the van began to roll faster and I fell away.

"Wait until you hit 10 miles per hour!" I shouted after it.

The hill our house stood on was long, falling away in either direction at a fairly shallow grade. My brothers and sisters had all followed us outside and stood beside the road while I pushed (even now, they knew they were forbidden from taking part). We stood together and watched the van approach the bottom of our hill. It glided down and began ascending the adjacent rise, this one steeper. It often gave my father trouble in winter. But it was summer now. It was sunny and hot. The road was clear. Clara, driving for the first time in her life, ought to have had no trouble. It therefore took me a long time to understand that the van was not climbing as rapidly as it should have—to realize that it had stopped moving forward. That in fact it was moving backward, that it was coming to rest in the trough of our hill. That its engine had never started.

"Run to the Crenshaws' and see if anyone's home. Tell them it's an emergency," I told Mitchell. "Josh, you go try the Dugans."

Down the hill, Clara climbed out of the van and shouted something up at us. I couldn't make it out. I ran down the hill. Clara was furious. She kicked at the van, beating its windows with her palms. My mother paid no attention; she had retreated somewhere inaccessible to everyone else. I ran back up the hill. The Crenshaws were out.

The Dugans, too. I ran back down the hill. I ran back up. I ran back down and back up, and when a truck finally appeared, thundering down the road, I ran in front of it. It was a landscaping service: the bed was full of mowers and trimmers. The driver exuded the smells of gasoline and mulch. I explained as best I could. He was quick to understand—I don't know how, given our hysteria, my breathlessness, Clara's shaking fists. He helped my mother into the cab. Clara climbed in beside her. They sped off. I pushed our van into the ditch and walked back up the hill.

Later that summer my father bought a new van. It was used, but new by the standards we were accustomed to. Even into the fall he continued riding his bike to work. He kept it up until the first snowfall, when he rode over the ice to Mark and Margo's house, where he bought another terrible car for his commute. He ended up in a ditch within the week. The car wasn't damaged; he drove it until it died for good a year or so later.

When Mark and Margo came back from Myrtle Beach, Margo took off another week to look after my mother. Our house remained in perfect silence until my mother could once again get around on her own. Margo was angry with my father, whom she blamed for everything. He made for a silly if genuine picture of penance, pedaling first through the womb of summer heat, then thorough a week of autumn thunderstorms, then through the premature cold of winter. My mother's beloved weather was vindictive that year, right up to Christmas. I rode the bus to school each day with Clara. She gave me no more advice; I didn't ask for any. I'd been far too afraid, I realized. The obstacles I faced turned benign the moment after I faced them. I benefited from having a cousin on the

football team, and I excelled in my own right, on the debate team, where putting words in the right order sometimes preceded full understanding, a sequence with which I was accustomed.

The afternoon of my mother's miscarriage Clara called from the hospital. My dad was there. After an uncertain few hours it had been determined that my mother would be just fine. My father spent the night at the hospital. Clara got a ride home from the parents of a close friend.

"Did you know?" I asked her that evening. "About Mom?"

"I think so, yes," she said. "Did you?"

"No. Did she *tell* you?"

"No. She didn't tell me."

I'd left my caulking project half-completed, so we all had to shower and bathe in my parents' bathroom. Earlier I'd stripped my parents' bed and scrubbed their bathroom, mostly with my eyes closed. After the youngest of my siblings were in bed I sat outside on the porch amid the heat and bugs. The lights on our house lapped weakly across the lawn and out to the street. I imagined my father, coming up the hill, his legs charging, his whole body rocking back and forth with effort. That night, of course, he wouldn't appear, but I felt it was important all the same, to watch and wait as if he might.

AUTHOR BIO

Nathan Washatka was born in Chicago, IL on July 26, 1986. He grew up in Wisconsin and Ohio. He earned his bachelor's degree from Cedarville University.