

Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art

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(kwîrkûs) Latin. n. The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub

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Kristin Quinn
Night Caravan
Oil on canvas, 38" x 36", 2013

back cover image:
Rachel Longstreet '09
Plywood and Clearance Sticker
Oil on canvas, 24" x 18", 2014

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November Sonnet

Between last trip and this, the color's paled
out from the land. The roadside shrubs have shed
their slender flames; the sumacs' reds have bled
into the shaggy earth. Frost has assailed
the groves of oak, and only here and there
a tree still holds its burnished copper pride.
Late fall pulls muted robes across the countryside,
and lays a hazy shawl upon the fields bare.
The harvest's mostly done; the low-shorn stalks
are all one sees of once high gleaming corn,
yet do not think that it's the time to mourn.
November's not the month when one should balk,
but rather look at bins full heaped with grain
and see the landscape's dullness as our gain.

—Nancy Hayes

Chilly Morning

Four children stand at the end of the lane
near the paved road awaiting the yellow bus—
not a step past the address sign, their safety marker.
The bright sun casts shadows of their bodies
onto the gravel as they wait.

Clouds of fog escape their mouths.
The once-green grass is now dipped in white frost
as the cold air tickles their noses when they inhale.
Down the road, at the bottom of the hill,
a thin line of mist floats across the valley.

Cars fly past, destined for work,
white clouds spilling from the tailpipes.
The kids play shadow tag to pass the time,
dodging one outline while stepping on another,
dancing on tiptoe to avoid being “it.”

The rumble of an engine slowing down grabs
the kids’ attention, and they form a single line.
The brakes squeal as the bus comes to a halt,
and open doors beckon them into its warmth.
The game is forgotten as the bus pulls away.

—*Rachel Pasker*

El Mercado Central

I don’t know
if we really belonged
to the city,
in the way that you
belong to nothing
when you’re twenty years old,
but that didn’t matter.
We would meet on the big steps
of the Mercado Central—
a building too confusingly
elegant,
it seemed,
to hold a loud and messy
daily market of vendors
with skinned animals
and the smell of fish
that no one could possibly like.
At night it was just
our massive abandoned palace,
and we’d sit at its quiet entrance
and drink cheap white wine
from the bottle and talk
about home and the lives we kept
forgetting to miss.

—*Maria DeSio*

Boy on Beach, 1935

The photograph was dry at the edges—delicate, like the moment it held: a young boy, no older than fifteen, with a face like my baby brother's and eyes that believed in everything. Gray swim trunks ended right above his scrawny knees, with khaki work pants in a pile at his feet and an arm cast over the girl beside him. His eyes dared the camera to trust in all that he did, with his tongue out and feet in the sand of a littered beach. The light-haired girl was laughing like she'd never seen a body of water so perfect, and maybe for some kids from Iowa that man-made lake was enough that August. The black and white had faded over the decades, living somewhere in that in-between—no true black and no true white.

Knowing what I know now, knowing how things end up, I want to tell him everything, the boy in the picture. I would tell him about his wedding day, and how pretty she would look in that light blue dress. Or about the brick house he would buy with a bowling bag full of borrowed money and dreams. And then he'd ask questions, and I'd tell him that he would have five kids that would run through those hallways and scream at each other and love and fight and move away, but they'd always come back. They'd come back to childhood rooms, or to eat pasta at the table, or to make the pasta when his wife wouldn't remember how, and they'd bring their own children. He would probably smile. But then he might ask more questions, questions that I wouldn't want to answer. I wouldn't want him to know that the pretty girl in the blue dress would start forgetting things, or that some of those kids would stop going to church, or keeping their promises, or showing up on Christmas. And I hope he wouldn't ask, because I wouldn't want to have to tell him how empty the brick house would become, or why his first grandson would never turn three. I'm scared my words would make him think that the life ahead of him wouldn't be a good one, and I hope that's not what he would believe. I could tell him about the chair that would sit at the head of the long table for decades, or that I would never see so many grown men cry at a funeral. I'd have so many stories to tell that I might get nervous and talk too fast, or trip over my words, or forget the best parts.

—*Maria DeSio*

The Conviction of Things Not Seen

Have you never felt it? The rattle of a broken table leg, forgotten in the moving truck,

echoing in a new room of unpacked boxes.
I feel it all the time:

in anxiety dreams; in the kitchen, waiting
for hot water; in light conversation when your name flits in
and out again,

a poor, lost bird.

—*Emily Kingery*

Easter Weekend

You should have stayed for the women,
the condolences, the lamb's-blood hymns.

All day there were crowds of strangers in your house,
hugging their way from door to sandwiches.

Did you watch from the stairs, or did you fear
that children, wild with candy, would see?

Even when I wash my hands and lock up,
the riddle, like a plot hole, goes on failing.

Where is your shining angel, your wound?
Where is your waterfall of applause?

—Emily Kingery

Dying with the Philistines

How strange the turning points inhabiting
our shared memory. His head, for instance,
cradled with the razor in my lap.

Forgive me—I believed the game was fixed,
foxtails long since knotted, fields reduced
to a crackle of olive ash and shame.

The weapon is always a dying animal,
the helpmeet of His warrior a whore.
The two are no more discernible

than a murdered thousand and honey
palmed from an open carcass; tonguing
the sweetened, smeary cat blood,

and rewarding a riddle solved, born
from an egg-laying greed. In His spirit,
here is one, posed to you without apology:

When are flesh and hair disposed
by their owner? Whose price is it to pay
when a palace crumbles down on crowds

of cruel, desperate children—a woman
who serves them, or a selfish man
who defies the force of what he cannot see?

—Emily Kingery

Standing on the Margins

Being here
is good enough

or maybe it is good
but never enough.

But who is to say
what blessings will come
from the velvet chin
of this Brahman cow,
from the *Hare Krishnas*
of these beaming, mischievous ones
in the streets,
or from these roses
that touched God
and then came back again?

—Sarah Wurst '11

unknown is mine, unknown is wine

Miranda said
we would encounter
poetry

and maybe
it would
stick to us.

Father Peter said
they would be giving us
poetry
for forever

whether we
wanted it
or not.

My ears
are full of sand
and my fingernails
are bleeding
but lines keep flowing
out of my pen.

And I realize—
as the priest
says that Christ's
mission is somehow
mysteriously present
where we gather—

that the essence
of this life is

scooped, captured,
and gently held

where these words
carefully rest in
lines and stanzas

heart and meaning
heaped in abundance
here and there.

—*Sarah Wurst '11*

Untitled

We are not meant to feel at home here.

And yet,
the wings of a bird
the whales decompo(sing) in the sea
the mountains watching
the dust that
we were
are
will be.

—*Sarah Wurst '11*

passenger-seat prayers

coffee smells
and spirit music jingling
around the passenger seat

mint & two different kinds of sage
on the dashboard, drying

a prayer leaks out

one that hopes for meaning

one that points
to the universe and says
“here—
I have recreated you
in this patch of soil
in this pot gently simmering on the stove
in this space between my cupped palms
in this tiny patch of sky.”

a bucket rolls
from the flag
to the drip line
and back

playing with the wind

the sun is hot on my back

maybe you could teach me to love like that.

—Sarah Wurst '11

Untitled

I desire
to be quieter

to hear the Starting under the grass

melting frost then
whispering dew and
sneaky grasshopper movement

slow, soaking darks
and darker darks
blending together

soil in your cupped hands
sandy, loam, clay, clumped compost
insects & mosses & wet kisses
on the back of my legs
“this is my body
do this and re-member me”

dandelions
bursting
all over the fields
all up in my liver

you had me
with all the murals
rich manure smells
painted radicalism onto my skin
braided purpose into my pigtails

I am thankful for this sunshine
I have been waiting for it

spread my blanket in the field & prayed
that the medicine soak up through me

but haunting melodies
and low voices of “murder”
ride on this wind

tell white secrets of my blood

make me remember what the moon has seen

where does the moon hold
all of the violence
and
all of her joy?

craters deepen but she shines on

I miss being in the woods with red woman
it’s a comfort knowing
you’re with thieves
if you are a thief too

“there is not only one way to do this,”
she whispered
“but you’ll find what’s true for you
you can be red & blue
like the sky you don’t have
the eyes
or words for”

seed lanterns
tomatillo plants

scratching lightly
at my heart strings harp strings
like a lover’s cajole
carol
chorale
orchestra

tumble-soft into this skin
not with answers
to make sense of it all

but tricks to balance
all the good & bad

offer your ghosts wine
and get them talking
dance with them on the
dining room table

–Sarah Wurst ’11

Twenty-seven Bones

Her hands rested atop the pinstriped blue sheet, arthritic knuckles pointing east and west, veins matted and throbbing. One at a time, she thought, slowly moving each finger. Yes, they were hers. Sometimes she could stare at them all day, attempting to recognize the knobs and spots above, the aches and swells below. They were hers.

Death was not being kind. She'd been patient, waiting first in the blue-carpeted room, where handholds flanked the toilet and all of her things were dispersed among the furniture that had been kept. Then it was the rose-print-wallpapered room, with the metal-legged bed and echoing tile floor, where she counted bird chirps and silence-piercing moans. But it hadn't ended until she was in that little ten-by-ten, where the bed, the lift recliner, and the wheelchair were only three shuffled steps away.

The girls planned their flights home, one at a time, gauging the number of days she might have left. Her second born was already there, followed by the first, and then the youngest. There wasn't much space in that room for all of them. Perhaps that was why they had started removing things: her jewelry box, photo albums, books.

At day five, the forty-eight-hour surety seemed like a broken promise, a boy who meant to ring a girl but lost her number. And so she waited, letting each daughter grip her hand in a fair rotation, feel her mother's touch for maybe, hopefully, the final time.

For the middle daughter, the one who'd never left home, they were her mother's careful fingers, the ones that threaded her brown-black hair into a single braid that traveled down the center of her 10-year-old back. In the afternoon, she told her mother about what had happened in the woods that morning with the older boys, with nobody watching but the weeds. "It is not your fault," her mother had repeated, making some sort of sense by weaving every strand into a single plait.

The first daughter knew her mother's hands best, or at least longest. They were so gentle—wrote in beautiful slanted, thin-looped cursive; pinched homemade piecrusts and pressed dinner napkins—but could also bury truths. She remembered the impassive look on her mother's face

when her sixteen-year-old arms shakily produced the broken body of her father's dog, the one she'd forgotten to call back into his kennel, who she'd run over while backing out the car, the dog he'd referred to as his only son. Her mother hadn't needed to speak that day; her hands had gripped the rusted handle of the shovel as she dug a hole in her garden, behind the snapdragons, in front of the hostas. With quick precision, they had replaced the soil and mulch, patting it all down to normalcy. "Must've run off again," her mother had said that night to her father, tossing a broken collar onto his lap and handing him a flashlight.

The youngest's hands were the most like her mother's: daylong stains of orange or violet pressed onto fingertips, creases at joints from clenching drawing pencils, and gnawed-off nails. Palm to palm, they seemed the same, except for the bones beneath. Unlike her sisters, she didn't so much remember the touch of her mother's hands, the lavender scent of her lotion, or the tracing of her finger across a storyline. She thought only of the sounds they made: the tapping of her nails against the dining table, the squeaking of her spit-wiped thumb as she rubbed away a single smudge, and, mostly, the un-echoing slap against her adolescent cheek. Those hands had pulled at the length of her skirt and pinched at the cool flesh above her elbow, yet they had also washed each bit of dirt out of her skinned knees, hand knit her formal dress, and, years later, silently washed the blood from her bed sheets after not her second but her third early loss.

On day seven the three sisters had finally left. Perhaps she can't let go while we're here, their eyes said as they filed out the door. The phone rang two hours later, after they'd each claimed a watercolor and parceled out her Isabel Blooms but before the casserole had finished cooking. All of them went to see what was left. They wrestled off her heavy rings—two from the right hand and the soldered, gold wedding band from her left—slipped them into their own pockets, and, one at a time, laced her fingers atop the peak of her middle.

—Lindsay Schaefer '05

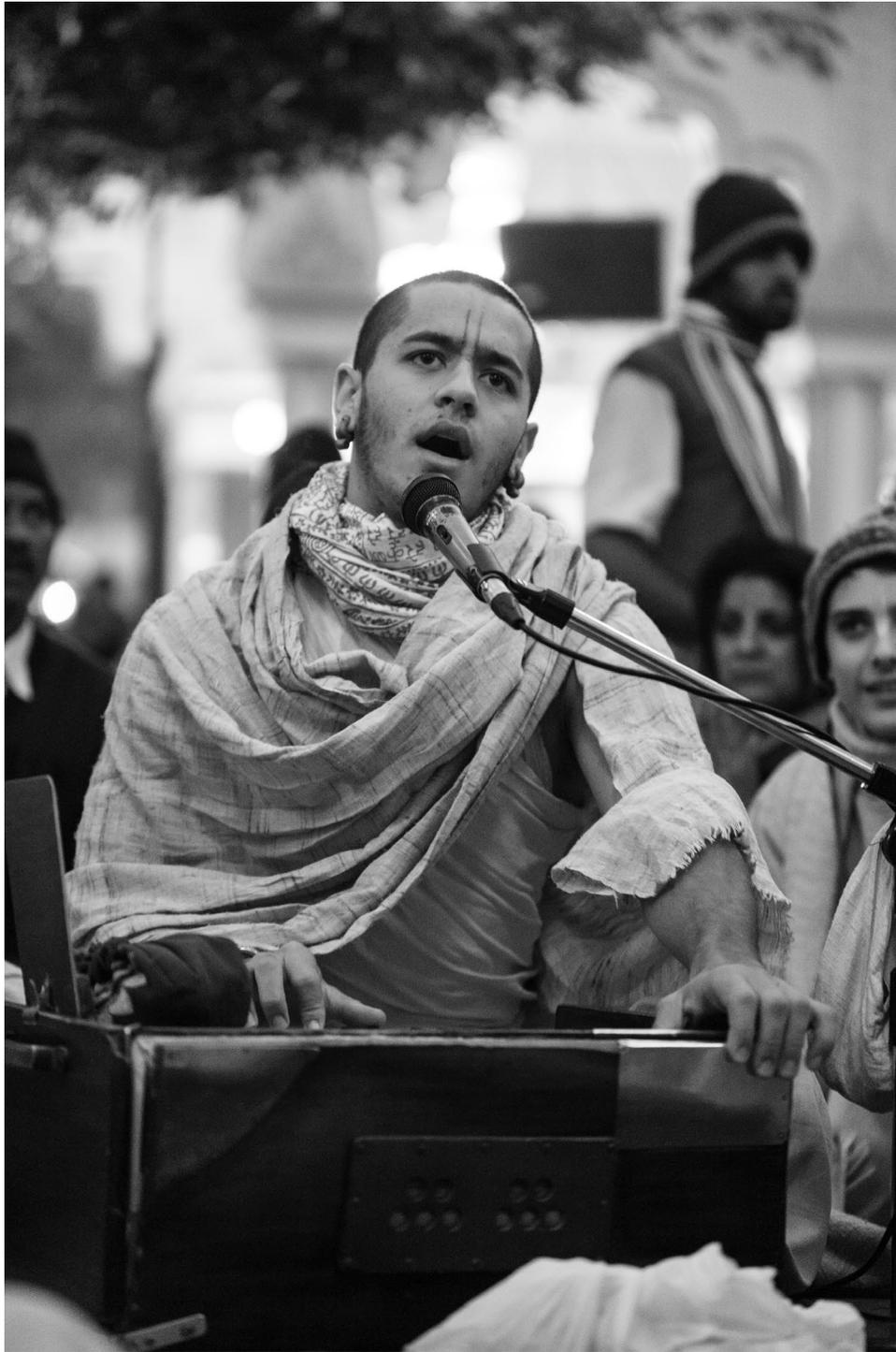


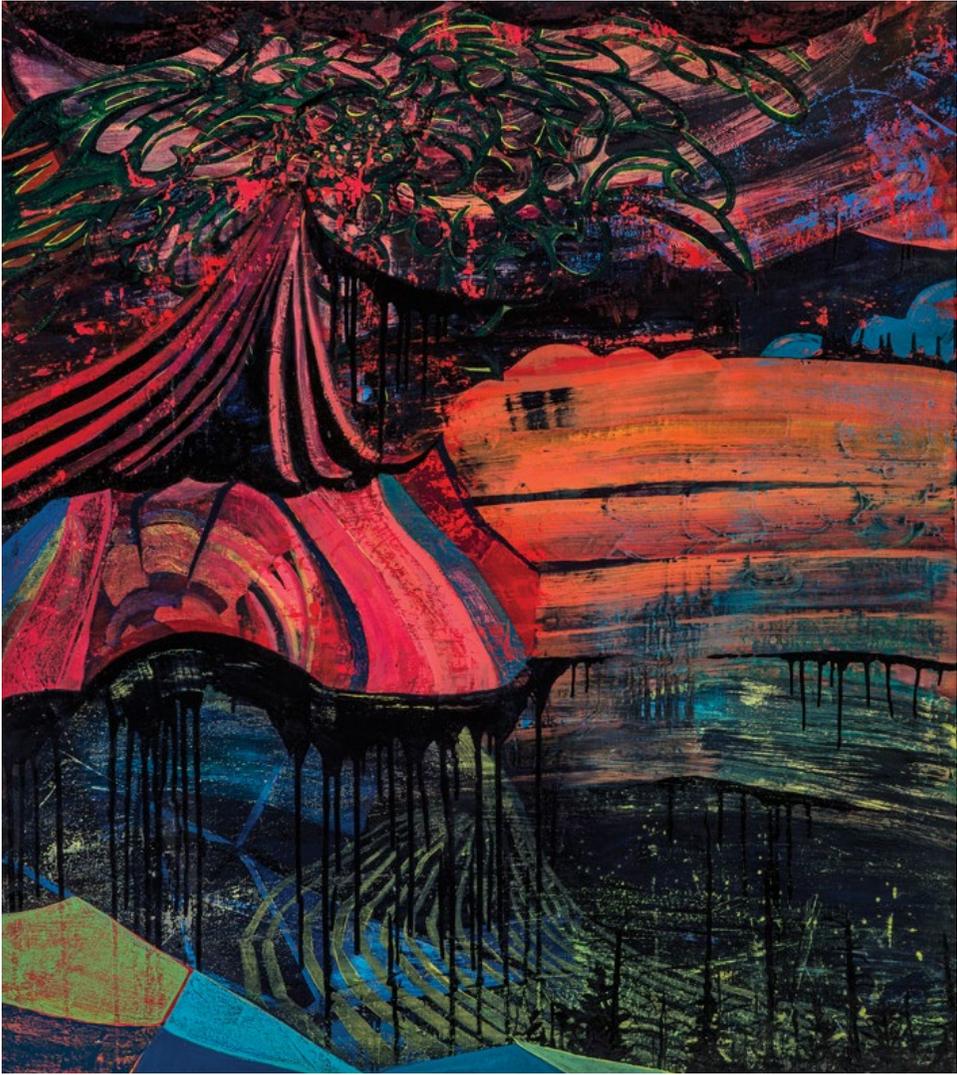










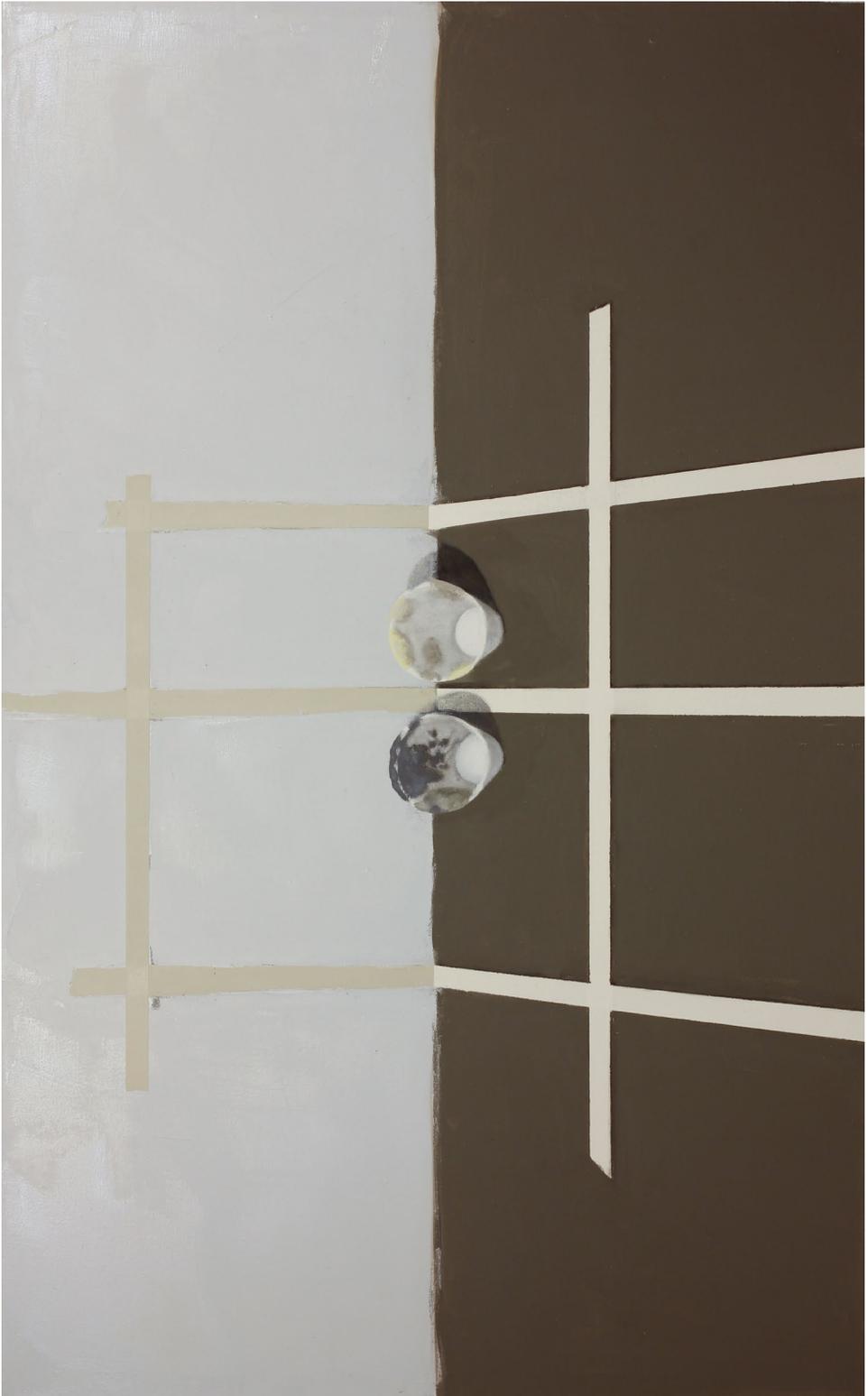


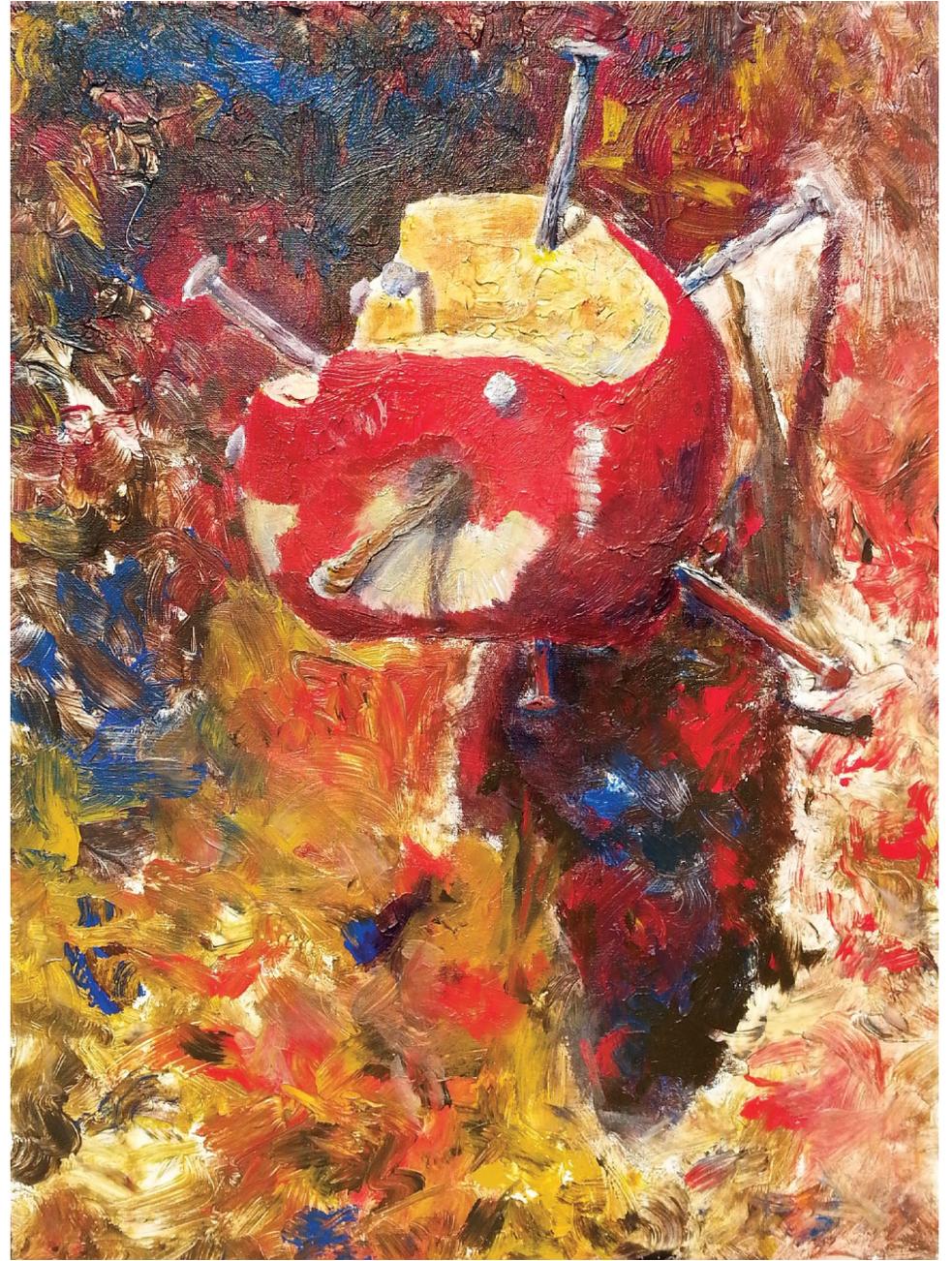




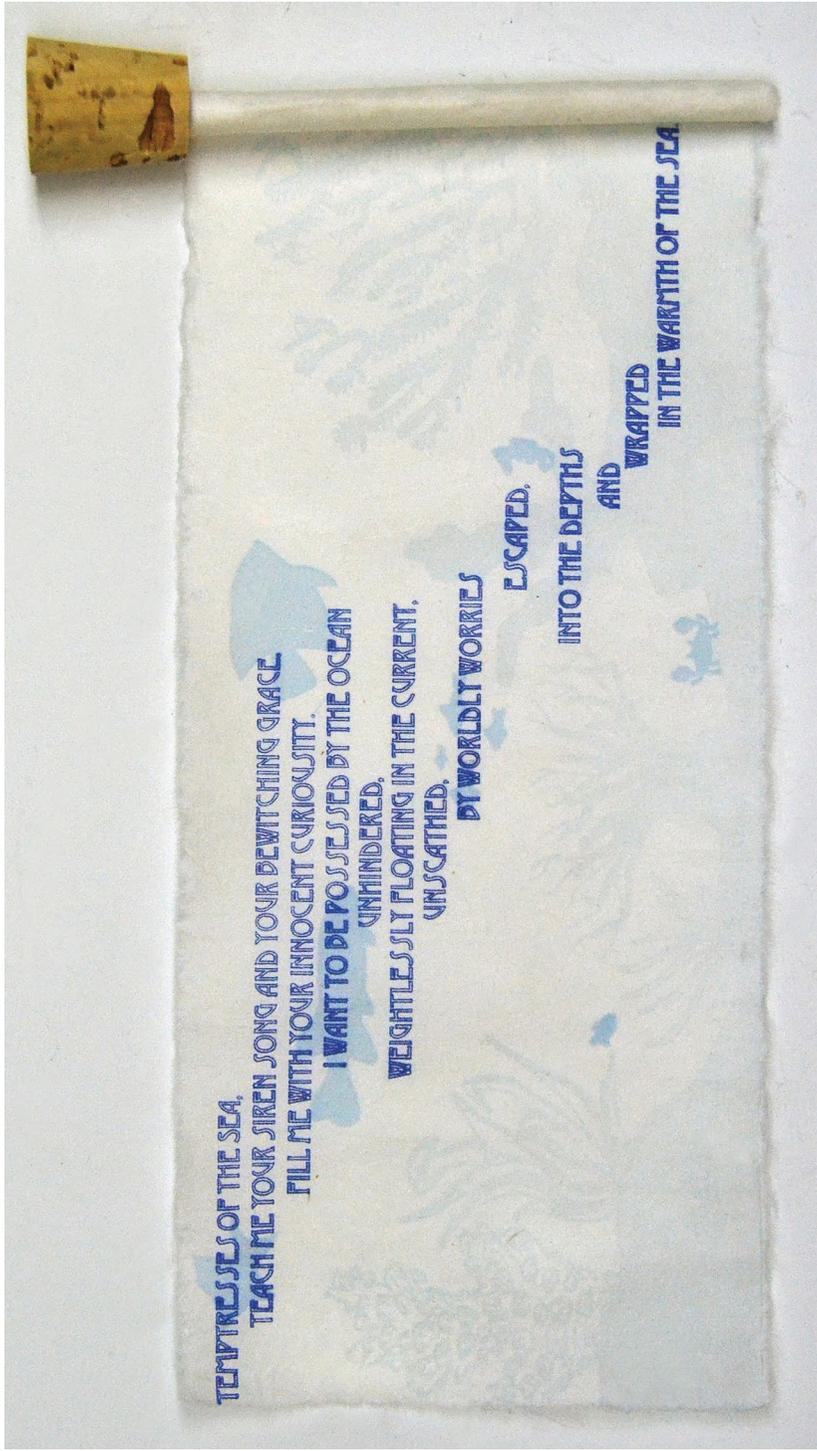












Cermak and Washtenaw

There was a tiny grocery store whose parking lot appeared to be bigger than itself, with colorful posters announcing weekly specials. The white-walled space turned into a souvenir of Mexico vacations. Every time I walked through the door I felt its humid smell cling to my skin. There were piñatas of ponies and princesses, star-shaped ones covered in tiny squared pieces of tissue paper with themed paper plates in the center. On the counter was a glass box filled with *dulces de coco*—bars of shredded coconut—*palanquetas*—peanuts stuck together covered in sugar—and a caramel-colored candy whose name I can never remember but which tasted too sweet for my liking.

—Marilou Terrones

Blue Flower

	pine trees seek shores where fish fly			fist full of blue flowers a weathered woman pleads sun-faced I squint
	roaming to wait upon the serene tao touch illusions fly			blue blossom open eyes and tear heart release our grasping
fish fly to pine tree shores to touch the tao		evergreen whispers reveal the liquid crystals splashes split white light		grasping released the impermanent blues we look without tears
	absolute stillness action seems impossible coldness in motion			note the invisible impermanent blues tao made manifest
	flying fish roam free pine trees await serenely the arriving cold			blue blossoms frequent tram crowds and trgs averted glances dismiss
	lilacs blossom moisture saturates bending boughs			desire dogs my steps midriffs pizza and beer still illusion's demands
	plum tree leaves fall long rainy seasons await butterflies on privets			physical being bright seductive subjects stone water sun
pummeled and pounded rain upon wind weary and beat down		a butterfly touch on moist lilacs surprises the blossom		compassion explosion crushes stone poems perpetual illusion
	attached to the wind lilac boughs rain sorrowful blossoms			grief made manifest being crushed by a poem compassion bursts forth
	boughs bend attached to drops that cannot be held			desire disguises danger masked perpetually as play attentiveness demanded

—Patrick Connelly and Randy Richards '71

Silver Halide Reduction

A Northern Hawk-Owl
perches on his winter branch,
bare save the snow
that has grown
from trunk to twilight.
Stars emerge
like latent images
developing in the Minnesota dark.

—Jeremy Burke '99

To Feel Black and Blue

after Carol Mavor

I have speech
but have lost the words
these blackening blue days. Forgotten
is the womb, though my eyes
were open. My mother's
calming heartbeat has dissolved
into a crimson pool. Losing infant
memory is the beginning of forgetting,
amnesia of the always-decaying human soul.
We forget we have forgotten. The words
are not a patch of yellow wall. Perhaps
I never had the paint—groping
in the black cinema night. Reaching,
but afraid of what I might find. A moment
held still, an infant
mouth to the breast, the suckling quiet.
The rest are weaned children
nursing on another's neck,
still soothed by a beating heart.

—Jeremy Burke '99

Lacrimal Punctum

The world looks like a field
already harvested
to my blank stare. I gave back
the ring. I walked
away to fill myself. This is the small hole

where my tears emerge. Today,
rather than teardrops, fall hailstones.
Frozen remnants escaping
the updraft toward heaven.

No hail cannons sound.

I trip outside
to face the hidden sun. I want
to leap into the sea, to dissolve
into foam and drift.
But there is no ocean here
and thunder still rumbles.

The world is browner than her eyes—
stained and muddied. Lacking
the spark of invention.
The flatline days waiting
for the pulse to bounce back. But the hillside
is alive with little birds
beaking for worms.

A forever mother sits
in her converted attic sewing
while she explains that the fabric's wrinkles
are called 'memory'—a folded imprint
from the past she's trying to straighten out.

Her husband wasn't a jewel,
rather a worn stone
she kept in her pocket
and rubbed throughout the day
without intention.

A habit.

Words are his nursemaid.
They caress his mind in the early autumn breeze.
Open the window. Let in the remains of summer.
Listen to the whispers
of failing lovers at season's end.
He feels the innocent erotic.
The anxious purity of the virgin waiting
for a transformation he can't repair.

Hail warms to rain
washing the salt from my lips.
Cold, damp.

—Jeremy Burke '99

The Crocodile and the Hummingbird

“Beware the creature who lies.”

I open my eyes and see a hummingbird floating no more than an arm’s length from my face.

“He will take your soul.”

If I didn’t know any better, I could have sworn the hummingbird had just said that. I move my hand towards the hummingbird to see if it’s real. Suddenly it darts towards my face, stopping mere inches from my eyes.

Its tiny mouth opens. “Your soul is more precious than you can possibly imagine.”

The hummingbird flies off, its darting body soon lost in the sun’s glare.

I’m outside. I wasn’t when I went to sleep. Actually, I can’t remember going to sleep. I don’t really even remember where I normally go to sleep. At least I still remember my name. My name is—shit—what was my name? I knew it just a moment ago. It’s like it was all a dream—all those memories slipping away. I can’t hold on to them.

I have to hold on, though. I have to remember that this place is not right. This place is trying to make me forget.

Forget what?

Was I trying to remember something?

Must have been a dream.

There’s a crocodile lying in the swamp water ahead of me. He isn’t hiding, just watching me. How did I not notice him before?

“You seem lost,” the crocodile says. His voice is higher than I would have imagined—almost like a child’s. After hearing it, though, I know it could have no other voice.

“I think I am,” I say without thinking. “I think I am supposed to go somewhere.”

“Where?”

“I wish I could tell you. I feel like it’s important.”

“Why don’t you stand on the water like the rest of us?”

I look down. My feet hover inches above, standing instead on the

shallow mist resting on the water.

“You are not from here, are you?” the crocodile asks. He senses my confusion. I don’t even know where *here* is. “This is The Swamp. This is a place not commonly passed through.”

A hummingbird said something.

“If you are not from here, you must leave.”

It was important, I feel.

“If you don’t leave soon, you never will.”

What was it?

“This place is not kind to trespassers.”

Why can’t I remember?

“Do you understand?” The crocodile stares at me. “This world will devour you.”

I nod. I feel like I was trying to remember something. Couldn’t have been important, though.

“There is a way out,” the crocodile says. The swamp moans, as if stating its opposition to this idea. “It will be unpleasant, to say the least. You will escape, though.”

I nod. I can’t find the energy to make my voice work anymore. As the crocodile begins to lead me forward, I can barely get my legs to work; I can’t remember how to walk. I stumble along, miraculously staying on my feet. Somehow I know that if I fall on this mist, I will fall through it. If that happens . . .

He will take your soul.

This mist is all that protects me from him. I continue along, stumbling less and less. I do feel more and more tired, though. All I want to do is lie down.

“We’re here.”

The edge of the world. The mist continues, but the ground beneath drops away. I start to walk forward; my dead limbs begin to wake up.

“Wait.” I stop just short of the drop. I want to go on, my body begging me to take a few more steps. “I told you it would be unpleasant. Unfortunately, you can’t just walk across that; your soul is too heavy.”

“No soul in its entirety can cross. You must leave some of it behind.”
The crocodile opens its mouth. “Just a hand will do.”

I notice now how terrified I am of this creature, its monstrous
mouth dripping saliva.

Or is it blood?

I start to walk forward, my left hand outstretched.

Beware.

My hand is shaking uncontrollably. My face is warm with tears.

The creature who lies.

I stop moving forward. I see a hummingbird hovering in between
me and the crocodile.

“What are you doing, human?” the crocodile asks. “You can’t stay
here.”

“If you feed him your hand, he will hold your soul.” I can barely
hear the hummingbird. “Then, if you walk off that edge, he will own
your soul.”

What do I do? I must leave; I know that for certain. Staying here is
ultimately death, or something akin to death. I feel myself weakening,
and if I fall asleep here I may never wake up.

Minutes now—that’s all I have left.

“Human, you know you don’t have time to stall,” the crocodile says,
urgency in his voice. “Come here and give me your hand.”

“Just go.” The hummingbird flies to my face and kisses my cheek. It
feels oddly comforting. “Walk off the edge, but just don’t give him your
soul. You will be safe then.”

I turn around and walk. I stop short of the edge, peering down. It
isn’t blackness below, or any color for that matter; it’s nothingness. I take
a deep breath and step forward.

Nothing happens; I don’t fall. I take another step, then another. I
look back, wanting to see if this world still exists.

The hummingbird is floating directly in front of my face—or at least
some abomination dressed as a hummingbird. Scales cover its body
where feathers once were. Its beak is gone, replaced by a gaping hole with

a lolling tongue. Its eyes are gone, too. Its hole of a mouth seems to grin.

I hear a screeching laugh and feel the mist give way beneath me. The
last thing I see is the creature tumbling through the air, laughing.

—*Tiber Cisco*

fissure

when i was young i could feel a coldness spreading each night
from my chest and through my veins until it seeped

to the tips of my fingers, coating my brain with a fog
that condensed on every lash until rivulets formed on tearful banks

since then the world has lent gentle puffs of air to keep me afloat
while i've drifted through its midst like a half-inflated blimp

with smiles from strangers or cracks filled with daisies
even trips on sidewalks have breathed life into my punctured heart

but when my door clicks shut and my curtained windows close
i still feel myself begin to fade

each fragile image flees from my heart as solitude quivers around me
shaking out hope like a bully looking for change

as soon as i'm alone i can't remember anything but shadows
and i don't understand why temporary isolation leaves me permanently
wilted

all i know is that the world outside in all its beauty
starts to shrink with every pulse of silence ringing in my ears

until i feel myself begin to scream just to fill the air with something

—Bailey Keimig

Storefront Windows

Sometimes when I pass storefront windows
I glance over and
your eyes crinkle around the edges
like they did when you'd smile,
both hands stuffed
into the pockets of your sweatshirt.
One of your shoes is untied—
the left one—
and there's lint on your sleeve.
I almost reach over
to brush it away,
but then a breeze picks up.
I feel its palm pressed to my cheek,
see it in the ripples it makes
as it dances on my shirt
and how it runs its fingers through my hair.
The smile melts away.
You always hated the wind,
the way it clawed across your clothes
and threw hair in your face
when we drove with the windows down.
Even your reflection pulls up its hood,
like you haven't changed at all.
I blink and you're gone,
and the wind can't touch you.

—Liw McDonald

You

As the day dies, your colors fade;
you become a silhouette
against the mourning shades of light.
Hues of plum, gold, and rose
wash off the horizon
to brace you for the night
with its cool and calm and silence.
Nebulas splash your limbs
until you're dripping with stars,
and once they dry, they coat your skin,
leaving freckles on your arms.
Comets flash in your eyes,
reflecting in the sky
the shades of your irises
that bring the dark to life.
In the shadows, you're catching moonlight
as it cuts across your cheek,
slicing through the universe,
revealing the galaxies you bleed.
And you stand alone in everything
to watch the midnight shatter,
doing nothing of importance
but holding the world together.

—*Livv McDonald*

Sillage

Every night I close my eyes
and—still awake—
see you in places you cannot be.
There, at the window,
a sliver of eye peeks out
from behind the blinds
and the corner of a mouth curls up
into a dimpled cheek.
Backlit by the waxing moon,
your features melt
until they are no more
than abstract shapes
on rain-spattered glass.
Your scent—
for a moment,
a mix of memories,
clean skin,
and pancake batter—
lingers,
then is gone.
The blinds don't even move.

—*Livv McDonald*

Somewhere in Chicago

I saw you on the corner
of Irving Park and Lakeshore Drive.
It was half-past sometime late,
but you glowed red, then green
in the smog and traffic lights.
I slouched between strangers in the bus bank.
You wore a thin purple coat.
The snow fell in dirty grey mountains,
filling my shoes with its cold.
You didn't notice me watching
as you tried to hail a cab.
It sped away from the curb,
throwing slush at your feet—I laughed.
My breath made me look like a smoker,
every exhale a drag,
but you would never light up;
you're too classy for that.
Stumbling away from the strangers
with liquor seeping from their skin,
I opened my mouth to speak to you
but was greeted only by cold air
where you had just been.
You hadn't noticed me watching.
I just stared as you left
the corner of Lakeshore and Irving Park
on the night we never met.

—*Livv McDonald*

Goodnight, Good Night

She shifted her car into park. His thoughts knotted, and he hoped his buddy would be asleep.

“Let me call Ethan to see if he’s awake,” Lee said.

A slow scroll through his phone provided a few extra moments. What had he missed?

The night had gone well—the rooftop bar all afternoon sipping drinks in the sunshine. They’d lingered for a few moments to listen to music in the street that twisted from the accordion player’s keys as the man sat on the corner in the shade of the new-leafed oaks. They danced.

Claire had even winked at him. Nobody winks anymore. A friend who coached a minor-league baseball team had bored Lee with baseball stats. Lee had looked up as Claire looked over from across the bar—she’d turned to walk with a group of girls, looked at him, and winked.

In one smooth motion she’d kept walking and talking and leaving Lee with the image flash-fried onto his mental projection screen.

His plan for the night did not include Ethan’s couch. He wanted more to sufficiently seal the bow of a friendship that had started several years before with a dead laptop on a night of too much studying and not enough jellybeans.

But at 2 a.m. Ethan picked up his phone.

“Hey, man—need me to let you in?”

Thoughts kept careening off course. Lee didn’t want to invite himself to her place, and Claire had only asked where he needed dropped off. No offer. Not a hint. The signals had turned upside down during the short ride to his friend’s apartment. Any kind of hookup now seemed wildly out of reach. He searched the silence of the car for one more opening. A glance. A moment.

She smiled. Sweet nothing.

“I had fun tonight, Claire.”

“Me too.”

Tire treads faded as Lee knocked on Ethan’s door.

“You walk home?” Ethan asked.

“Worse. She dropped me off.”

“What happened? You two looked really happy this afternoon.”

“I thought for sure we’d head back to her place.”

“You could’ve brought her here.”

“It’s not that. I missed something. Everything was there all night—she was giving me the inadvertent touches, the stares, the smiles. A wink, man. Then instead of asking where I was staying, she jumped right to asking where you lived. I couldn’t think straight. I gotta text her or something.”

“Not a good idea.”

“Have to.”

He clicked out a thumbprint prayer.

home already? come back. forgot something

Without recognizing his oversight, Lee had taken for granted that Claire had wanted anything more to cinch the darkness than a goodnight kiss uncomplicated by clothing issues, a simple way to say “Tonight was great” in three fewer words. Too often ignored for its succinctness, such a nonverbal goodbye measures moments in ways time never can.

The reply vibrated.

at my apt already - don’t worry about it

A morning flight offered no respite from Lee’s confusion. Fake blue leather on the headrest in front of him provided a canvas for replaying the night. The plane taxied toward the runway.

There’d been no lip look, no lean in, nothing. She’d stopped in front of Ethan’s apartment building and smiled in the pale streetlight.

The final piece roared into Lee’s mind in time with the steady, rising rush from the jet engines propelling a previously idle aircraft into new horizons. With the plane separated from the ground, Lee turned to the woman sitting to his left.

“When you’re driving and you drop someone off, how do you do that?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re out to dinner with a friend. When you drive her home, what steps do you go through? What’s the process? You pull up to the

house.” He motioned with both hands. “Then what?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking. I guess I slow down and hold the brake. The person gets out. Then I drive away. I suppose if it’s anything longer, if we’re chatting, I might put it in park.”

—Dustin Renwick '10



East Toward the Ocean

Walt finished his time in lockup on paper-hanging charges. He'd had a good job three months earlier, but falling in love had been his mistake. He'd bought Erica jewelry, perfume, and long treatments at day spas. There had been a dress he'd had to see her in, and black shoes with heels high enough to shape her gorgeous legs. He'd taken her to nightclubs, on a vacation, and on long weekends away. She'd seemed pleased, but never pleased for long, and Walt wanted to please. He'd had nothing in his account when the bills had come due, and he'd had to face a town full of angry shopkeepers. In jail he'd heard that Erica had met up with a new fellow. Walt had had three months to think about that.

The car he bought was crap, but he had no choice. His had gotten repossessed. That's what being stuck does to a man, he thought. Stuck with time against you. But the guy had knocked off a couple of hundred and left him with a full tank. Walt packed and drove east out of Denver.

That first night he stopped in Hayes, Kansas, in a no-name motel on the town's west edge. The room smelled of disinfectant; the towels were worn and translucent, the soap the size of a matchbox.

The next morning, he picked up a hitchhiker, thinking maybe the guy could pay for gas, maybe buy him a meal. But the guy had no money and had his own problems, and Walt listened to all of them until he could listen no more, so left him in Salina.

He pulled off at the first Manhattan exit. At a truck stop, he filled his tank and refilled the oil the engine had burned since Hayes. He entered the diner, sat at the counter, and ordered coffee. He stirred in a sugar packet and looked behind him in the mirror above the malt mixers.

He noticed her in a booth. She turned, met his eyes in the mirror, then turned back. He tasted his coffee and checked the mirror again. Sure, he hadn't been with a woman for three months, but hadn't he learned how they could make you do things you'd regret? All they did was want, and he had nothing left to give. But maybe he had learned something. And it *had* been three months, and wouldn't conversation

be nice? He watched and waited and when convinced she was alone, he went over. "You like company?"

On the table were a soda bottle and a plate that had once held a hamburger. She hadn't eaten the pickles, the wilted lettuce leaf, the mealy-looking tomato slice, or three fries.

"What's wrong with the counter?" She motioned to where he'd been sitting.

Closer, she looked heavier than Erica, and shorter. "I like to stretch my legs when I eat."

She looked away. "Go on. Stretch."

He looked at her plate again. He hadn't eaten since the cinnamon roll he'd bought from the vending machine outside his room in Hayes. She pushed her plate across the table to him.

"Quit looking and just take it. Finish my soda too, if you want." She pushed the bottle over.

"I haven't ordered yet. Don't want to spoil my appetite."

"Call it an appetizer. Call it a salad."

"It's got a lot of names." He read the menu, looked at the prices.

The grilled cheese was cheap. So was a cup of soup.

"You're not from around here," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Locals have no reason to come here."

"Are you from around here?"

"For now."

"And yet you're here."

"My first time." She turned away, seeming to tire of the conversation. Walt looked at the fries. She said, "You haven't asked my name. That's what men do. They stop by tables and ask women their names."

"What's your name?"

"Beatrice, but people call me Trish."

"Why not Bea?"

"That's what people call my mother."

He waved to the waitress and ordered.

When the waitress left, Trish said, "You must not be hungry."

"Call it an appetizer." She smiled. He said, "You and your mom have the same name?"

"My brother has the same name as our dad."

"What's that?"

"Edward. People call my dad Ed, my brother Ward. You find that funny?"

He shrugged. "Odd, maybe, but there's a logic to it."

"What do people call you?"

He told her. "What brings you here for the first time in your life?" he asked.

"I'm waiting. You find that odd, too?"

His grilled cheese on white bread and a cup of chicken noodle soup arrived. Should have ordered French fries, he thought. Should have gotten a bowl of cream of broccoli. When the waitress reached to remove Trish's plate, Trish said, "I'm still working on it."

"Why'd you do that?" he asked.

"Add the salad to your sandwich. Give it some color. Some substance."

He took her plate. "Shouldn't let it go to waste."

Walt ate half of his sandwich too fast. He sat back, stretched, tried to look calm.

"I'll tell you what I'm waiting for," she said.

Walt nodded.

"You're the third one today."

"Third what?"

"I sit here, and soon a man comes over and asks my name and whether he can sit."

"And I'm the third." Walt felt his jaw clench. "Did you offer the first two the same appetizer?" he said with an edge.

"Simmer down. I'm looking for a ride. That's what I'm doing."

"Where you going?" he asked.

“That’s better. The first two asked questions about why I wanted a ride. They wanted to hear my story to see if they should get involved.”

He picked up the other half of his sandwich and ate. The waitress refilled his coffee. “You got money?” he asked.

“You don’t mince words.”

“You can’t tell I’m in a bind?”

She watched him. “Just my luck. You’re broke.”

“There you have it. Still interested in that ride?”

“That car you pulled up in is no prize. I saw you pouring in oil.”

“It’s gotten me this far.”

She looked out the window—hoping for better prospects, he figured. “I’ve got some,” she said. “I can even help drive, if you’re not one of those backseat drivers.”

Walt took a bite, thinking.

“Well, are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Critical.”

What had Erica called him? Supercilious. Christ, he’d had to look it up. “If I see you heading for the ditch, I’m going to say something.”

“The ditch is one thing. Telling me how to hold the steering wheel is another.”

“As long as we can agree your hands should be somewhere on the wheel,” he said. “Anyway, I’m going east.”

“That’s odd. That’s where I’m going, too.”

“And if I’d said west?”

She shrugged.

She had a suitcase and a purse. The suitcase was on wheels, and she rolled it to the car while he cleaned up.

Twenty miles down the road, she asked if she could turn on the radio and he said to go ahead. She passed over two religious stations, a country station, and a public-financed classical station before settling on a local call-in talk program where the host and callers sounded pissed-off about immigrants, big government, and the price of ground round. Soon

they were out of range, and the calm voice of a smooth-jazz DJ out of Kansas City replaced the host’s ire.

Thirty minutes into Missouri, he stopped for gas and oil. Trish paid without being asked. She also paid for their meal at the diner. This time he got a cheeseburger and fries.

“Why leave Manhattan?” he asked.

“Have you ever lived in Manhattan?”

“Back there I thought you were the type to stop on that country station.”

“Does traveling alone pulling a suitcase make me look the type? What’s curious is that you didn’t have a preference.”

“I like call-in shows. I like hearing angry people vent.”

“So did my husband. He called in so often they told him he could only call three times a week. He vented about that, too. He’d vent about other things. He’d write letters to the editor. Put out yard signs.”

“A civic-minded fellow.”

“When I married him he could have cared less. We got along better then.”

“But something happened.”

“Yeah, something happened.” He waited, giving her time. “Anyway, he’s not my husband anymore.”

“Divorced?”

“Nothing that formal.”

She paid at the register and returned to leave a few dollars.

On the highway, Walt straddled the car over a dead opossum. Trish rolled down her window. She said, “Tell me you never had a relationship turn sour.”

He thought about Erica, about what she did and where she went. “After enough time, I imagine all relationships turn sour.”

She watched him. “I don’t like the way your jaw just tightened. Whatever she did to you still has you seething. Go on, vent.”

He laughed, relaxed, put his elbow out his window.

They stopped for coffee and pie at a diner near Breese, Illinois.

Trish went to the bathroom and returned with her hair brushed and face scented. Sliding into the booth, she said, "You heading east is about her, isn't it?"

He looked at her, looked outside, looked down, and took a bite of blueberry pie.

She said, "I've told you about me."

He put his fork down. He told her about the past three months, how he had shared a cell first with a nineteen-year-old in for being dumb enough to get caught shoplifting, then with an old man who had exposed himself. He told her about getting out and finding Erica and his money gone. He was going east because that's the last thing her hairdresser remembered Erica talking about, and because she once mentioned a brother in Ohio. Around Barnsville, he thought, and wasn't that east?

"And when you find her?"

Walt paused, looked at her. "That's my business."

"But you have a problem. You don't know where she is, and you don't have any money to find her."

"Besides that, what's the problem?"

"I think you know what you want, only you can't say it."

"Oh, yeah? And what could that be?"

"You want her to hurt as bad as you feel right now. And you want her to carry that hurt for a very long time. Maybe forever."

Walt stopped for gas outside Barnsville. He paid and asked the clerk for the telephone book. He found a listing for a Peter Wheeling. He got directions from a man in overalls—details about passing a Quaker boarding school, turning at a large tree, and bearing left when the road forked. Walt followed the directions until he decided the old man didn't know what he was talking about, when he saw a mailbox with *Wheeling* stenciled on its side.

"Want me to come?" Trish asked.

"Stay," he said. "It may not even be the right person."

He saw a man in the backyard bent over a skid loader. Walt said, "You Peter Wheeling?" Erica had called him an older brother, a man she barely knew.

The man laid down the wrench. "That's right." Squinting, he said, "You're not Walt Baxter, are you?"

"Erica was here?" Peter looked strong in the way farm work can make someone. But he didn't look quick, and he didn't look in shape. "I'd just like to find her, that's all."

Wheeling straightened and squared himself. "You won't find her here."

"You sister wronged me. She tell you that?"

"She said they sent you to jail."

They continued looking at each other. "She come here with a man?"

Wheeling flinched looked away. "I'm not sure." He wiped his hands on a red bandana sticking out of his pocket. "Listen, Erica's the only blood I got left. Never knew her well, but I don't want any harm coming to her."

"That's not why I'm here."

"Erica's a good kid. Started off good, anyway."

"But something happened?"

"That's it. Something happened." He wiped his hands again on his bandana. "Listen, you say she wronged you. What did she do?"

Walt kept it simple. When he finished, Peter said, "Let's go inside. It's time for my Coke and cookies, anyway."

In the kitchen Wheeling split a bottle of Coke between two glasses and set out a package of Chips Ahoy.

"Our parents were old when they had her," Wheeling said, "Too old to be raising a daughter. And they took child-rearing guidance from our pastor. I joined the army as soon as I could. Being younger and female, Erica didn't have my options."

"You said you weren't sure she came with a man."

"She came to the door herself, and I saw no car in the driveway. I suspected someone had dropped her off. She wasn't one to spend time

alone. It gave her too much time to think.”

“What did she want? Money?”

Wheeling smiled. “No, not this time. She wanted to pay me back. Some of it anyway.”

“With my money,” Walt said.

“Looks like it. I said keep it. She apologized for losing touch. I think she meant it.”

“You said something happened.”

“Erica didn’t start out the way she became. Few of us do. But she was pretty and impressionable. What I’m about to say happened while I was gone. I pieced it together.”

Wheeling explained that someone she’d gone to school with and who now farmed the adjacent pasture had mentioned something, figuring he already knew. It seemed his parents had sent Erica to a Christian home out-of-state to get her right. An all-girls school the preacher had suggested, where temptation could be better controlled. “It started because of this boy from the youth group, named Bobby Weigel. Reverend Shade had seen it first—their flirting, the secret handholding, the passed notes passed. Once, he’d caught them alone in a classroom.”

Wheeling took another cookie. “That happened between my leaves. I’m home one time and she’s my little sister; the next time she’s like some service guys I knew. Guys able to shave the truth, who didn’t like looking you in the eye, who kept secrets. Hearing about that school explained things. Feeling betrayed changes a person.”

“She never mentioned it.”

“Can’t blame her for keeping the past where it belongs. When I came back for good, she’d been gone four years.” He laughed, shaking his head. “Parents died, you see. After all that time away, I walked right back into it.” Wheeling looked down at his hands. “I wasn’t the big brother she needed. I should have been here. Maybe I could have helped. She needed someone between her and our parents. They were just too old and out of it.”

Wheeling told stories he’d heard about Erica. About the time she’d

stolen a car and wasn’t found until two days later with an older man a hundred miles away. And the time she’d gotten caught shoplifting whiskey with the mayor’s son. Because of her accomplice, at least that charge had been dropped. Then finally there was the night when Erica had run off for good.

“Tell me about it,” Walt said.

“People still talk about it when they forget I’m around. Seems she took off with the art teacher. Hell, he was hardly older than she was. To her credit, she’d just turned eighteen. She’d call from time to time asking for money. I’d send what I could, always to a different place. She liked to travel. Then nothing. Figured she had found a man and settled. When I next saw her, she was knocking on my door. Now you’re here.”

Wheeling sat back and ate another cookie, taking small bites as if savoring a last meal. “Erica needed what no one around could give her. Parents too old and superstitious, older brother in the service. That preacher is long gone—caught at the Rolling Meadows motel with the deacon’s wife. Thinking back, everyone should have stayed out of her life.”

“This Bobby Weigel still around?”

Wheeling shook his head. “I hear the family left before Erica got back from that school. They weren’t from around here, so their roots weren’t deep. Someone might still remember them. I didn’t inquire that far.”

When Walt got back to the car, Trish said, “I hope you got an address. You’ve been gone forty-five minutes.”

“You drive. I’ll tell you on the way.”

She started the car. “On the way where?”

“Keep heading east.”

By the time Walt had recounted his visit, Trish had the car back on the highway.

“Sounds like a real peach,” she said.

Walt closed his eyes. “She had other attributes.”

A mile later, she continued, an edge in her voice Walt hadn’t heard

before. "I bet you figured you were the one for her, that you could keep the relationship on your terms."

"What does that mean?"

"You're not a bad-looking guy. You probably thought it would be enough if you showed interest, bought her a few gifts. You weren't used to things turning out like this."

Walt didn't answer. He watched the landscape, knowing that instead of softening, the knot in his gut was becoming sharper, more jagged.

She said, "You didn't ask questions because you were desperate to believe her. I bet the entire relationship was based on assumptions. Men are like that—assuming until their assumptions prove wrong. And when they do, well, they do impulsive things."

"Go on, finish your thought."

"They buy broken-down cars, take off for dying farm towns in Ohio, and pick up women from truck stops along the way."

He watched her drive, noticing how she kept her eyes on the road, how calm she acted, while that knot kept twisting, cutting more and more out of his gut.

"Tell me about your husband's assumptions."

She checked her mirror, flicked a fly off her forehead.

"He had them, right? In your world, all men do. So tell me what happened. I want to know."

"You sound angry, Walt."

"You going to tell me?"

"Sure, I'll tell you. I'll tell you anything you want to hear."

"Start with his assumptions."

"Sure. Assumptions." She punched the car past eighty, the clunker shaking, rattling. "He assumed I cared about his flower beds, his Italian cooking, his little trinkets he'd bring me from business trips. He assumed I liked his ball games, his talk radio, his souvenir spoon collection. That I enjoyed hearing dull, boring stories."

"So what did you do? Take his money, lie to him, piss him off so much that he wanted to do impulsive things? Did you divorce him? Oh,

that's right—nothing that formal."

She let up on the gas, the car slowing, losing its rattle. "One night after he again fell asleep in his recliner, I stood over him and watched. He snored, you know. People with his build do. He had a game on—some baseball game, I think. Loud—he liked it loud—and he had a cigarette still going in his hand. I put it in the ashtray he never emptied. And then I did it."

She stopped talking. Walt saw sweat on her forehead, as if the humidity was ninety percent. "Did what?"

"I got in the car and drove away. I can't even tell you the direction, 'cause right then it didn't matter. I drove for a long time with no radio, no ball game, no noise. Just thinking how I was going to leave him—you know, how I was going to make it formal."

"The fire trucks were there when I got back. After I'd left, he must have gotten up long enough to light another cigarette, only this time I wasn't there to put it out. They said his La-Z-Boy went first. They found him in the hallway. Never got close to getting out."

"Fire's a bad way to go."

"The sheriff tried to get me to admit I'd had something to do with it. He wanted to know why I'd left. Had we argued? Had a fight? Of course, I felt guilty. It's not as if the idea he could burn up had never crossed my mind. Maybe I'd even wished for it."

"Once they get their teeth in you, they don't let go," Walt said. "They keep picking at you, wearing you down until you just tell them what they want to shut them up."

"I kept my mouth zipped. But had he asked the right questions, probed more, I may have told him how I'd really felt, enough anyway for him to get curious and want to know more. But it's an elected position and doesn't require one to be too smart or inquisitive."

"You're lucky."

"Didn't hurt that he'd polished off a bottle of wine. Didn't hurt that he had more prescriptions than a small-town pharmacy. Didn't hurt that the fire department had come out the year before after our oven had

caught fire when his lasagna overflowed.”

“Insurance treat you well?”

“Well enough. He was the type who took care of those things.”

“And then you went to the truck stop.”

“Buried him, then sold the car. Didn’t feel right driving it.” Minutes passed. She said, “What are you going to do when you find her?”

Walt looked out the window. Farmland looked good, he thought. Farmhouses didn’t. “Getting her to fall asleep while smoking sounds promising.”

“Unless she’s a large woman with a complex medical history, I’d come up with something else.”

“Then I’ll have to come up with something pretty soon.”

“What do you mean?”

When Wheeling had told him, it had made sense. Water, the hope of a big score, more than enough neon to satisfy her fantasies.

“We’re going to Atlantic City,” he said. “Those were her plans. Hers and that guy she’s with.”

He smelled the salt water. He could feel it on his skin, too, and he didn’t like it. Erica did, Walt knew. She’d told him about her parents driving east to show her the ocean—their attempt, Erica said, to make her better by taking her places, showing her things. Erica had laughed at that, said something about feral cats, that at some point you can’t change them.

But Erica loved the ocean, loved how the waves moved her around, how the sun browned her skin, lightened her hair. Her parents wanted to show her the ocean; instead they’d given her a destination. At least that’s how Walt remembered it now that they had arrived.

Trish said, “This should be easy not having an address. You ask everyone on that side of the boardwalk if they know where Erica is, and I’ll cover this side.”

“Funny.”

“So what’s your idea? This place is bigger than I expected.”

“What did you imagine?” Walt asked. “The word *city*’s even in its name. Erica can’t go more than three days without a manicure. Pedicure, too. And she likes those spas, the ones that want you to come early and stay late.” He bit his lip thinking about what he’d spent on her nails, how willing he’d been to spend it.

“That’s your idea? We hang out around a day spa and wait?”

“We make calls. We narrow it down.”

They found a cheap motel far from the beach that advertised low monthly rates. Walt negotiated the room from a woman who kept the office lights dim, and paid for three nights.

The next morning, Trish said, “You’re not having me call more beauty parlors, are you?”

“If she’s here, she’ll be near the action. That’s what she wanted. Bright lights. Noise. The promise of a payout.”

“Can I have breakfast first?”

They found a ham-and-eggs joint near the boardwalk. Walt sat facing the window and saw a man walk from an alley brushing himself free from a disappointing night. He saw vested casino employees heading to work. He saw delivery drivers pushing two-wheelers into open doors.

Then he put down his coffee cup. “That’s her,” he whispered. “On the corner in front of the drugstore. The one wearing sunglasses.”

“You’re kidding.” Trish turned. “You didn’t tell me she was tall.”

Walt stood. When he reached the door, he watched Erica get into a Yellow Cab. The cab pulled from the curb and into the morning traffic. It went one block before turning right.

He returned to the table and found his Denver omelet waiting.

Trish said, “Does this mean I won’t be calling beauty parlors?”

When they finished, Walt called Yellow Cab, gave the dispatcher the cab number, and asked for the drop-off location. The dispatcher gave Walt a hard time—something about privacy and company policy. He wasn’t impressed by Walt’s story about trying to find his sister.

Walt suspected the cab would be back looking for another fare. After two hours, he saw it. When he approached, the cabbie, standing

outside having a smoke, asked, "Need a lift, buddy?"

"I've got something for you if you can answer a question. It's a simple question, and you don't even have to get in your cab."

"What's this about?" The man squinted, trying to get a better look.

"A fare you had this morning. A tall, good-looking gal. Where'd you take her?"

"Who are you? The husband? Boyfriend maybe?"

"I'm just asking for an address."

"We don't give out that information. It's private."

"There's something in it for you."

The cabbie licked his lips and pulled his cap down lower. "I'm not taking less than thirty. You're asking me to betray a confidence."

"What are you, some kind of priest?"

"Forty then."

"I get it. Keep it thirty and add a cab fare for taking me there."

"I'll park a block away, and you have no idea who I am. I'm not taking any blame should something go wrong."

Walt touched what was left of his bankroll in his pocket. "That's fair." He got inside and the cabbie pulled away.

Walt thought about Trish, how she said she'd be staying in the room. Said she'd maybe swim if the pool was worth a crap—an old place like that, on the edge of things, attracting those looking for something better and those who've ceased looking.

"So what is she to you?" the cabbie asked. "She didn't act like a wife."

"What do you mean?"

"Wives wring their hands. They worry. They don't feel right. Begging your pardon, mister, but if it's a man she was meeting, she didn't have second thoughts. Couldn't wait to settle."

The cabbie stopped a block from the alley side of an apartment building on the outer edges of neon respectability. He pointed.

"Dropped her off right over there. I can stick around if you want."

"Go on. I have no idea how long this will take."

He entered through the back door and followed a corridor toward the front. He found the lobby and saw a counter where a man should have been standing. Worn into the red carpet were trails from hundreds of footsteps going to the stairs, to the elevator, and to the front desk where no one stood. He coughed and called out: "Anyone here?"

An office door opened and a man approached the counter. He had bad posture and eyeglasses dangling from a chain. Red veins crisscrossed his cheeks.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'm looking for someone."

"I doubt if he's here."

"You paid to tell people that?"

"It comes with a room."

"It's a she, and she's here."

That stopped the man, straightened his spine a bit.

"She arrived several hours ago. Dressed up. Someone even you would notice."

"Why you looking for her?"

"We're friends from way back. She told me she'd be here."

"What kind of friends?"

"Good friends. You going to tell me, or do I have to knock on every door until I find her?"

"You a cop?"

"Do I look like one?"

"Show me your badge. You got to do that."

Walt grabbed the old man's collar and pulled him close. He smelled of tobacco and sweat. "Tell me where she is."

"I don't like trouble."

"Then tell me."

"She visits John Smith. Second floor, Room 213."

"Tell me about him."

The old man breathed hard, raspy, like his lungs held things that had no business being there. "Moved in last month. Pays when it's due."

She comes and goes, but he never leaves the room.”

Walt let go. “A perfect tenant, huh?”

The man touched his neck, feeling for bruises.

“Give me your phone.”

“You can’t call him. Phones don’t work.”

“Don’t make me ask again.”

He handed over the phone. Once Walt had it, he yanked hard, pulling out the cord. “You’re right. It doesn’t work.”

Walt walked the two flights to the second floor and found Room 213. He stopped, listened, and when he heard voices, knocked. When the voices stopped, he stepped to the side.

“Who’s there?” a man asked.

Walt reached over and knocked again with more authority.

“Go away. It’s a bad time.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Walt said. He heard more talking—two voices, one a woman’s. He knocked again, harder.

“Walt, is that you?” the woman’s voice called out. Erica’s.

He didn’t answer. The door cracked open. “Walt,” she said.

“You coming out?”

She stepped out, closing the door behind her. “How did you . . .”

“Who’s your friend?” Walt asked. She looked pale and empty, a mannequin left outside and forgotten.

She leaned against the door, inspecting a spot in the worn carpet.

“You shouldn’t have come.”

“Is that right?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

From inside the room, a man said, “Come; we’ll talk inside.”

The room was dark, quiet, and smelled of tobacco, dust, and aftershave. “So, you’re Walt,” the man said.

Walt followed the voice and saw a shadowed figure in a large, overstuffed chair. It looked comfortable, like a one-time nice, expensive chair.

“Who are you?” Walt asked. He reached over and turned on the floor lamp. The man twisted away and covered his eyes. He slouched as if missing a spine. He looked a decade older than Erica.

“I’ll turn the light off, Bobby,” she said.

“No, leave it on,” said Walt. He looked at Erica and then at the man. On the desk were three pill bottles and a glass of water. “So, you’re Bobby Weigel. Is that it?”

She went to him and knelt at his feet. The man ran his fingers through her long, thick hair. Walt loved that hair, the way it fanned out when she was on her back, arms out and smiling upwards.

“What’s going on?” Walt asked.

Erica started to speak, but Bobby whispered, “Hush, babe” and continued combing.

The room became quiet, even peaceful, Walt thought.

Erica said, “Walt, please, turn off the light. He gets bad headaches.”

Walt thought about saying that he didn’t care about his headaches, that this was not about his headaches or his comfort. He watched them—she still at his feet, head on his thigh; he stroking her hair, keeping his eyes turned from the glare. Walt reached for the light chain and pulled.

“Thanks,” Weigel said. “I’d like to offer you a chair, but as you can see . . .” He gestured toward the bed.

Walt hesitated, then sat, feeling the sag of the worn mattress. Weigel lit a cigarette, took a drag, and blew the smoke away from Erica.

“You seem to know who I am,” he said.

“I recently heard the name.”

Erica said, “You saw Peter, didn’t you?”

“You didn’t leave much of yourself behind, but you did leave your brother’s name.”

“You must know I didn’t intend for you to do time. It wasn’t what I’d planned.”

“My fate? My luck? Or just bad timing?”

“I didn’t want you to . . .” She paused.

“Care so much?”

“Sure, call it that, if that’s what it was. I was in bad shape after they took you. Ask Bobby how I was when he found me.”

“Something had come up, and I wanted to see her,” Weigel said. “Last I knew, Erica was in Denver.”

“You two kept in touch?”

“Once a year, maybe,” Erica said. “Checking in, that’s all.”

“I got married. It even lasted for a while. Until she left for good,” Weigel said. “Just as well.”

“A junior-high romance, and here you are, the pair of you. A couple of losers living in an end-of-the-line rooming house. Christ, Erica. I thought you wanted more.”

“What I wanted was to keep moving and not remember. You helped more than you realized.”

“Me and all the others you conned along your way? Sure, Peter said your folks kept it quiet, but he suspected what had happened when you got sent to that ‘boarding school.’ So, what was it, Erica? A boy or a girl?”

“A girl,” Bobby said. “They named her Hazel because of her eyes, and because they were a German couple who lacked imagination. Good Lutherans from Milwaukee. The ‘school’ is still there. For enough money there’s a receptionist who’ll tell you anything.”

“She’s thirteen now, as old as I was when I had her,” Erica said. “We stopped in Milwaukee on the way here and found where she lived. Watched her walk home from school. The first time I’d seen her since they took her from me. Bobby had never seen her. She’s so young, Walt.”

“What was so important that you had to go all the way to Denver to tell her?”

Bobby struggled to lift his head. “You don’t have a clue?” He smiled and tapped his forehead. “It started with headaches. Bad ones that wouldn’t stop. Then the nausea. The pain can be managed, but that’s about it.”

Walt nodded. “So why come here? Why Atlantic City?”

“Bobby had never seen the ocean,” Erica said. “I wanted him to see it.” He watched Bobby stroke her hair. “If you came for revenge, or to

get your money, or even to persuade me to go with you, I’m sorry. Your money’s gone and I’m not leaving. Hurt me if you want. I can’t stop you. Bobby can’t either. Sure, he’ll try, but look at him. Can’t sugarcoat this. He doesn’t have long.”

“She’s right. It’s inoperable.” He closed his eyes, smiled. “I’m not as strong as I thought. I didn’t want to be alone at the end.”

“I’m sorry, Walt,” Erica said. “I am. If I could make it right by you, I would.”

Walt looked at Bobby, the way he slouched, too tired or too weak to sit up.

“It has a name,” Bobby said. “If you’re interested.”

Walt listened to his breathing, to the sound of cars honking; he heard a dumpster lid open and bang shut.

Bobby closed his eyes, Erica’s head still in his lap. They sat that way for several minutes before Walt left.

He found Trish sitting beside the empty motel pool in a chaise lounge facing the dying sun. He sat beside her.

“She didn’t have your money, did she?” When he didn’t answer, she said, “Didn’t think she would. I hope it went for a good cause.”

Walt thought about that. “It didn’t last her long. Guess there wasn’t that much to begin with.”

“And the man?”

“Not doing too well.”

“You mean after you got done with him?”

“Damage was already done. He doesn’t have much longer.”

“I see.” She repositioned her legs, dodging the gaps from the lounge’s missing rubber tubing. “I called home.”

He looked at her.

“A premonition. Mom’s had a fall. She’s going to need help. Dad’s not up to it.”

“You going back?”

She nodded. “Take me there, if you want. That is, if you need a place to go.”

He thought of Erica, that in time maybe he could take her to Ohio. Peter would help. "Right now I need to stay. Find a job. Save some money."

"Is this about her?"

"Doesn't seem right to leave."

"We could be good for each other, you know. Maybe we can make it work."

He shifted in his chair. "Maybe we could."

"So? Do you want to try?"

Walt saw the chain-link fence, the half-cocked signs warning about no lifeguard on duty and no running rusting in the salt air. He still had business in Denver. After Ohio, he could pass through Manhattan on his way west. He could stop, see how things were. He looked at her. She had her eyes closed. He wanted his anger back—the anger that had ordered his life for the past four months. He wondered what had happened to it.

—James O’Gorman