

WHAT SURVIVED THE FIRE

AND

POEMS

by

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Abstract

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Thesis Director: Lauren Grodstein

These two works, a section of a novel and a selection of poems, represent the multiple aesthetic, thematic, and stylistic ambitions of my writing. The novel deals primarily with the function of family, community, and time in the production and obfuscation of memory and history. My poems often examine technology, history, nature and civilization, and what it is to be human, and are concerned with discovering a language that is both unexpected and evocative.

## What Survived the Fire

Because the world is different now and cannot be changed. Because of the family. Because this precise moment is already over. Because we have made our own mistakes. Because brick is strong and the body is weak. Because it was written somewhere a long time ago. Because the nest was built of twigs. Because no one understood. Because no one understands. Because it is quiet. Because names, like anything, can die. Because the past is not gone, it's not even past. Because music is a mystery. Because the answer always seemed so near. Because the sun may have already burnt out. Because it was accident. Because there is nothing in this world to do except live. Because of rooms. Because of the way water shapes things. Because we project ourselves into and onto every thing we see, or because we can see nothing but ourselves. Because time is unmerciful. Because of tiger lilies, and Orion, and the smell of the farms. Because of circles. Because there was hope. Because property was invented. Because of television. Because there is never only one of anything. Because people survived far worse. Because everyone sees color differently. Because isolation is a choice. Because it was a failure. Because the truth laughs at its own jokes. Because of the tides. Because there is nowhere else to go. Because stillness is an illusion. Because the world is fair to a fault. Because pain is tied to love. Because love can be lost.

## Chapter 1

The first time I remember hearing anything about Charles Pluto I was sitting in Patty's Diner, hung over, struggling through the Sunday crossword puzzle. Normally I don't eavesdrop on other tables, but they were whispering—three people: an older sounding couple and a man I gathered to be their son. They sat behind me, the son with his back to mine. I tasted the sharp alcoholic tinge of his cologne on my tongue even through my coffee, and thought back remorsefully to the night before, and the now half empty bottle of Stoli on its side somewhere in the living room. Some days the crossword can make you feel like a genius, and some days it makes you question the whole scene altogether.

I could feel the son lean away from me, "Have you heard about Pluto?" His voice was dry and severe and I imagined crumbs falling from his mouth onto his parents' plates.

"Marty, Pluto hasn't been a planet for years. What, you think we don't read the papers?" The woman said. I would have bet my life she was eating oatmeal, maybe an English muffin, Earl Grey.

"I think he means Pouch," the husband said with a snort.

"Oh Charles Pluto," the woman said, elongating his name as her mind leapt down from the distant rings of space. "No. So?"

"Somebody's buying his lot, the house."

"Get out," said the husband. "How do you know?"

"My lawyer buddy, Rick, he's working for the guy that's buying it. Somebody from out of state, Midwest, Jones or Jackson, or Jameson, from outside Chicago."

My head pounded behind my eyes. Gloria, the waitress, refilled my coffee and left the check, which curled on edge beside the sugar shaker like a snail dusted with salt.

“How long has he been trying to sell?” the woman asked.

“Shit,” the husband said, “Ever since the fire.”

“Seventeen years,” said the son, almost proudly.

“Seventeen years,” echoed the woman. “How do you like that?”

I looked down at the little white candle pushed to the side of the table, unlit, the glass surrounding it rimmed in dust, wondering how long since it last burned.

“Well you know he’s not been doing well lately,” said the husband. I imagined him solemnly shaking his head with an air of affected wisdom, the way he might read the obituary of someone who died too young before turning the page.

A well dressed young family of four pushed through the glass doors and slid along the booth across the aisle. I dug for my wallet to pay the check.

“What will they do with the house?” the woman asked.

“Knock it down, I’m sure,” said the son. “It’s unsalvageable.” I imagined him stabbing a sausage link with his fork and raising it to his lips, and the smell of maple sausage and cologne. “Who’d want to live in a house that people died in?”

“It was a beautiful house,” the woman said, as if she hadn’t heard him, or was stuck in the pit of some sad thought, far off.

“Sure. Knock it down,” said the husband. “Should’ve been done a long time ago. I’m sorry. It’s an eyesore.”

I got up to pay and turned toward the cash register. In my mind they were wolves, but there they were, more like wax figures of any happy, achingly conventional little

family, posed in imitation of conversation above their plates and ceramic coffee mugs, not looking at each other. The diner slowed and seemed to freeze. I saw myself trapped forever where I stood, newspaper rolled tightly in my hand, hair wild, eyes red, future generations walking by me, stooping to read the plaque at my feet, reading something like *Over Easy with Bacon and Sourdough, Coffee*.

Gloria changed my twenty. Ten years she'd worked there, more or less—forty years old maybe. She had a son who she always mentioned without fail, who was playing football for some college in Maryland. “How was everything today?” She asked, smiling.

“Delicious,” I said, “delicious as always,” thinking lonely, lonely Gloria.

I looked past the whispering family as I headed for the door. My table was pristine again already. The top glared under a thin film of water and soap residue, and the plates were gone. This Charles Pluto, this name, I saw it engraved in lovely letters on a plaque, its wax figure absent—a soot stain. I saw an empty table along the front window, Charles' table—Mr. Pluto's table. I felt that someone had died. As I stepped out onto the street into the warm morning, the recording of a church bell tolled across the street. It was eleven and I had to open the store.

As I walked my block and a half I turned Charles Pluto over in my mind. Granted, I'd only lived in the area for two years, but it struck me as odd I'd never heard this story, or even this name before. But since coming to Canandaigua I'd found that owning a business, particularly something like an antique store, patronized almost exclusively by widows and gossipy landed housewives, was a shortcut to becoming conversant in local social theater—for better or worse. He must have been someone of some importance, a

name around town. He'd had a family evidently, but all indications where he was no more now than the butt of a collective dirty joke.

All around me were signs of life. I heard lawnmowers rip-corded into motion. A husband and wife pushed a twin stroller past me on the sidewalk, wearing matching sunglasses and tight nylon pants which swooshed with their steps. I waited to cross at the light, where two kids no older than twenty sat in a landscaping truck smoking cigarettes. The memory of coffee still lingered in my mouth like ash and I spit on the sidewalk as I reached the door. Before tossing my newspaper in the trash I glanced at the finance page to see how my Graham & Co. was doing. Down one tenth.

Sundays were busy days for Varick's Antiques, lots of foot traffic, lots of window-shoppers, even a sale here and there. Every day stepping into the dim shop, I felt as though I were entering an obsolete forest, its trees deformed and bent into shapes like curios, television stands, old radios and speakers. Here a far out painting of a parrot on yellowed canvas from Bermuda, 1960. There a glass table with gilded legs, and a fluted purple glass vase of silk flowers, orange lily, eucalyptus, white daisy, rose. Being the owner of an antique store is like being the curator of a cemetery—nothing moves, and everyday it seems another plot of ground is overgrown by a new token of time's passing, a player piano, a grandfather clock, a rack of sweaters, a steamer chest that came over on a boat forever ago, now empty. And the lights never helped, least of all this morning, with the vodka fog still thick around my skull, and the brightness of real daylight still passing outside unchallenged, unthinking.

I sank into the swivel chair behind the counter. The telephone was blinking, a new message. I never failed to think of Tess on Sunday mornings, back in Pittsburgh

somewhere, working at the pottery wheel over a slick brown lump of clay, or in the sun room lying on the couch leafing through the pages of Time, her tea cold on the end table beside her head. Her hair in the sun. Every time I got this feeling of being inside some dark wet lung—it expanding past the boundary of what I can see, the distended years, then squeezing in around me, my life as a moment—a tumor in the lungs of father time. Holding the phone to my ear, I shuffled through the file cabinet looking for anything with Pluto on it. The message was me, from the night before, an annoying habit of mine.

“Calvin, you dog. You fucking suck at pool. Suck. Where is the guide? Where is it?” Last night me cleared the phlegm from his throat with a short, thick cough, and slammed what probably was the bathroom door. I held the phone away from my ear. My voice had that hard liquor edge to it, “Tomorrow,” it sputtered, “you’re going to hate me.”

I hung up. I saw shards of the night scattered around me, versions of me reflected in them, husband, drunk, failure, pool shark, joker, loner. A shelf of little blue and green glass bottles across the room seemed to tremble and tingle against each other—useless little bottles with cracked corks trapped in their mouths, mute, rising like dyed stones from a flat waste of dust and flies—five dollars for the littler ones, eight for the big ones. I had a new cut on my shin. I ran my finger along its bottom edge, pink and clean; it still stung. It was probably from the corner of the low wooden coffee table beside the couch, but I didn’t remember it. My watch chimed, half past. I propped the door open with a knee-high stone elephant, and returned the American flag to its place above the main window.

In the cabinet beside the desk were the most recent transaction records, names and pieces. Wondering if perhaps Charles Pluto had parted with some furniture, I leafed

through it. The name did not appear, but I felt there could very well be something somewhere. There were Ms. Varick's files in the basement, on the bookshelf, dating back to when she opened the shop in the eighties. It's possible, I thought, that Charles Pluto was hiding among those faded folders and crumpled receipts. I wanted to get back home and try to dig something up online, something about the fire, but it would have to wait. I took a nip on a sterling silver flask I kept behind the register, something I'd borrowed from a crowded shelf of time-beaten kitchen items, and which, in my mind, was still theoretically for sale.

As I turned back toward the door and wiped my mouth with my sleeve I saw that I had customers. A group of three older women.

"Good morning," I said, feeling flush.

They were dressed in bright yellows, pinks, and oranges, like birds or butterflies. "Good morning," said one. "I didn't think anybody was here at first." She laughed and I smiled. I wasn't sure what she meant.

"Anything in particular you're looking for?" I asked, knowing they most likely weren't seriously looking for anything.

"Just browsing," said one of the other women, adjusting her hair and her yellow hat in the large mirror above a roll-top desk.

"We're killing time actually," said the first. "We've got forty minutes until our bus leaves for our wine tour, so we thought we'd check out some shops, you know."

"Such a cuuuute town," said the second, still adjusting her hair.

The gulf opened wide between us. They couldn't know what I knew, that all Varick's Antiques was—all it did—was accentuate lack, and whether I was there or not,

that lack would remain. I camped behind the desk as they flittered from room to room, sometimes laughing, sometimes picking up a small statue or a figurine and saying things like, “Look at this. Do you know what this is?”

“No.”

“Me either, but Sandra would *love* this. Wouldn’t she love this?”

Or, “Darla I love this clock, I just wouldn’t pay seventy five dollars for it.”

I imagined their husbands sitting in some parking lot waiting for the bus, splitting a mid-grade bottle of something red, a pinot or a cab—too warm, and sighing meaningfully over and over as they raised the bottle to their lips, talking their golf handicaps, or how they really need to stop talking about getting boat out onto the lake and really just do it. Though it’s unfair, it’s often the good natured, obviously happy, harmless people that irk me.

I failed to picture the ruins these women would leave in their wakes when they died. Their children, perhaps my age by then—I couldn’t see them either. These women’s treasures would stock a lake house, a boat house, some cousin’s extra bedroom, or would spend their second lives in storage. I read in their voices the subtle implication that to live well was to perfect killing time to the point of art.

Tess told me I wasn’t cut out to own a business and that I should have stayed in finance, because I tend to assume the worst in people. In many ways that’s true. Though when it came to her I always found a way to believe she was better than me; and in many ways she was, and still is. There is cruelty in it when you stop loving some one. I don’t hate Tess for it, but I don’t forgive her. Time passes.

After several more minutes of scrounging the second woman approached the desk proudly cradling a dusty, weathered Bible.

“All right,” she said, “found something.”

“Very good.”

“Well you know, I have a girlfriend who collects Bibles, I don’t know, different editions or covers or what have you. So.” She flicked her hand as if brushing the thought away from her.

I rang it up and wrote out a receipt. “Ten dollars and fifty cents.”

“Could you put it in a bag please?” She asked, slightly annoyed. “It’s just, I don’t want to damage the cover or something.”

The thought of further damaging the already discolored, ripped cover was preposterous, but as I bagged it up, something occurred to me. “Have you lived around here a long time?” I asked. “Or...if you live around here.”

She looked up from her purse, “Actually I’m visiting. I grew up in Vermont, near Burlington.”

“Oh I see. Well...”

“I’m here visiting Pat. She’s lived here her whole life.” She motioned to the third woman, who was sitting on one of the couches near the front door.

“Hello Miss. I was looking through some of my records for a man named Charles Pluto. That name doesn’t by any chance ring a bell does it?”

“Pluto...Pluto... Nothing comes to mind. Charles Pluto?” She scanned the store as if some object would jog her memory.

I nodded.

“Maybe Darla knows.” She stood up and shouted into the next room, “Darla. Darla? Where are you?”

Darla came floating in looking sort of puzzled. “Ready?”

“Yes, but he was asking us, and I didn’t know, but I thought maybe you did, do you know anyone named Charles Pluto?”

“I don’t know a Charles, but there used to be a car dealership in town called Pluto Chevrolet, or something or other.” Darla looked at me with genuine regret, the way I imagined she looked at her children when they were young, and she was telling them they couldn’t go outside and play, “I’m sorry. That’s all I’ve got.”

“Oh no thanks very much,” I said. “It went out of business, the dealership?”

“Looong time ago. Twenty years now at least. It’s the fireplace store now I think. Peterson’s Heating.” She grinned, as if satisfied with her compendious knowledge of the Canandaigua business district.

They didn’t appear to care why I was interested, either wrapped up in their own worlds, or unconcerned with mine. “Well thank you, that helps very much. You ladies have a nice day, and enjoy your wine tour.”

Smiling, they turned and walked out the front door. A Chevy dealership. We had some Chevy merchandise scattered around the store, a couple plaques hung on a wall, a model of a Camaro. I took the plaques off the wall and looked them over, with the idea there might be a name written on them somewhere, but there was nothing. And I couldn’t find the Camaro, perhaps I’d moved it, or it walked away.

An odd surplus of energy propelled me into the basement. I wanted to believe I had something that belonged to Charles Pluto, or this dealership that once bore his name.

The basement was filled with broken furniture, piled and heaped to the ceiling, covered in sheets. In her old age Ms. Varick became something of a local historian, and took to keeping track of the names of everyone who brought in a piece of furniture. To what end I couldn't guess, though it seemed so fiercely moral and time consuming, and she'd alphabetized them as well, and filled an entire bookcase with names, tags and ledgers, like a ship's log. The lives that bookcase held, reduced to smears and loops of ink—much of it was still there, as if rooted to the floor. There were things I knew would never sell. They would endure, like weather beaten gravestones—faded names, monuments of the disenfranchised past.

The bulk of my work at Varick's had been in righting the ship. The hours I spent cleaning, the lowest point. Now, most days, I read my way through the day, sometimes pawing through the far out old books on the shelves in the hallway, or the Times, which as if by magic came every day to the mailbox outside the shop, due perhaps to some glanced-over clerical error, or the ghost of Mrs. Varick—returned to earth and trying to save me from total boredom. How any productive member of society finds the hours in a day to read the NY Times, I will never know.

I began going through it all one shelf at a time, starting at the top. The folders were all arranged by month and year. There must have been hundreds of them. I sat on a stiff leather-covered chair with a broken back, below a single bulb suspended from the ceiling by an orange cord, with the files splayed across the floor in front of me. Would I leave a trail like that? Strange to wonder what might have happened to the place if I hadn't fallen into it, if I hadn't needed something to fall into. But Varick's Antiques and I

found each other at the right time, at the collective low of our lives, each on the verge of disappearing.

Ms. Varick died in the arms of pneumonia in a hospital bed, somewhere in Rochester, as Finger Lakes Credit Union and Loans pulled her shop out from under her. If I hadn't bought it, everything would have gone to auction, and the space would probably have been turned into a high end athletic apparel store, or a dog groomers. Perhaps there are times when we turn to the things around us for help, a guitar—like the faded semi-hollow Gretsch up in the front window, resting on a miniature rocking chair—or a pottery wheel—like Tess's, caked with old clay—even a collection of National Geographics, or American girl dolls.

The eighties passed without a single Pluto sighting. There were at least a dozen antique stores and consignment shops along route twenty outside Canandaigua, so chances were slim of finding something. Even if he *was* somewhere in there, it might take hours of looking to find him. And even if I turned up something, it was unlikely the piece was still there. And yet I could still hear the voices of the wax family at the diner, and the multicolored women, and because I couldn't see Charles in my mind, or the decaying house; and because of the name, which seemed unreal, or like something out of an obscure local encyclopedia entry; I kept looking.

When I was young my uncle had a cabin in Skaneateles. I remembered well the long warm summer days laying on the deck of his boat, and the water everywhere, and at night eating chicken spiedies on torpedo rolls at the picnic table, and my parents laughing and drinking with my uncle, and being very sure somehow that it was what America had always intended to be. My uncle sold his cabin twenty years ago.

After Tess and I divorced I came north with the vague idea of getting lost in Montreal, a city I've always romanticized and which seemed the ideal mask for my new emotional disfigurement. I hadn't made it. I landed instead in Canandaigua, a sort of resort lake town that happens to contain a small college—a playground for the wealthy suburbanites of Rochester and Buffalo, and a peripheral locus of culture for rural people unwilling or uninterested in penetrating the city.

The only major thing that had made the trip with me was the boat, which belonged to my father, which I hated to sell, especially after already leaving so much behind. I came to Canandaigua with the thought of spending a summer on the water, leveling out and biding my time for a few months. I told myself I wasn't trying to be fetal, or trying to recapture those daguerreotype memories of my uncle's cabin, and for a while it went all right. But as fall came on I knew I needed something else. Money wasn't the issue. I made more money from renting out the attached apartment above the shop than I did from the shop itself anyway. I was emotionally bankrupt. I needed something to keep from feeling useless. Varick's fell into my lap. And even though it was really nothing, only a guided, practical uselessness, it was tangible.

So here I was, surrounded by the dumb, severed past of a people I barely knew, and who knew nothing of me whatsoever. I'd purchased a small slice of their material history in lieu of my own, which still existed, but not in a form I could use. I could see myself pacing the living room floor back in Pittsburgh, searching vainly for my name somewhere among the cache of my myriad possessions, books, movies, photographs, ceramic mugs—like a cartoon me, fighting the unseen hand that points the eraser at him like a dagger. Tess sent some of those things, but I left most of it boxed up in the

basement of my apartment, like contraband—evidence that a life I’d once lived had in fact occurred, but could not be repurposed. I imagined Charles Pluto as the key to answering the day’s mystery, which, like most, was a mystery of my own creation, and a way to get on with the business of living.

An hour and a half and two shelves later, I found something: a receipt for the sale of an “executive desk,” dated March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2004. In the top corner of the receipt was the name, hastily scrawled in faded pencil, Charles Pluto. For a moment I doubted it was real. Maybe my mind was playing with my eyes. I was seeing what I wanted to see. But there it was. Though I had wanted something idiosyncratic, a statue, a clock, a painting, a record collection, something unique—a clear window into the man, a desk was something large and expensive enough that it could still be there, and could be marked somewhere. I scoured the folders of the surrounding months, but there was nothing else.

How long had I been down there looking? I closed at three on Sundays, and it was ten past. I tucked the receipt in my breast pocket and returned upstairs to close the door.

Once again the tomb was sealed; the artifacts were mine. I’d intended to take the boat out on the lake and fish along the ridge, but I wanted to carry the search as far as it would go.

And so the hunt was on. And if a thing is worth doing, it’s worth doing right. In the back storage closet I kept a fridge stocked with Miller. I cracked one open and stood drinking it in the back window, looking out over the small, empty parking lot behind the store, to the tall metal fence at the back, behind the dumpster.

Most days I don’t remember distinctly, because of the way things seem to run together, but I remembered clearly the day Tess and I toured the house that was to become ours. There was so much to remember there, and she was *still* there. Like a ghost.

I was so sure, when we first saw the kitchen and the way the window over the sink looked out over the backyard, so lush and alive, that the world was finally simple—the problem of life, my life: solved.

“My head’s spinning just thinking of all the things we can do with this place,” she said.

And now, looking over the grey deserted parking lot, I felt for sure I was a different person living a different life.

The thing to do, I decided, was go about it methodically, systematically, from left to right, room to room, across the store, leave no stone unturned. Varick’s was deceptively large, owing mostly to the fact that the particular building of which it constituted the entire lower floor was much deeper than the adjoining buildings, which were all built some time after.

I pocketed another beer and headed for the far room, the left most room, which I referred to as the *Glass Room*. It was dominated by two large glass cases, six feet tall and eight feet long, worth no small sum on their own, filled with china and decorative plates, wine glasses and decanters, and delicate glass figurines. The room was set up so that you entered between the two shelves and the room opened up in front and along the sides, wrapping back eventually along the wall that the doorway was in, so the other sides of the shelves were accessible. Mirrors covered the walls and stained glass lamps and ceiling fans and two chandeliers hung down from above, many of them lit, so whole room seemed to sparkle like a diamond. Taken together, the contents of the *Glass Room* were probably worth nearly as much as the whole rest of the store, which is why for the

most part very little ever left the room, because most customers didn't come equipped to spend so much for things others had, for one reason or another, long ago abandoned.

There were two desks housed in the room, neither of which seemed to me to fit the "executive" description. One was a smallish white pine writing desk, pretty beaten up, with grooves and scratches all along the legs and nicks in the edge of the top. Looking it over I did find some writing on the underside, but nothing indicating it was the desk in question. Desk number two was a simple, Shaker style, which was being used to display four vintage metal lunchboxes: Star Wars, Spider Man, I Love Lucy, another Star Wars. There was not a mark to be found on it.

Truly I had yet to develop an intimate knowledge of all the knick knacks and pieces that filled my store. Though I was slowly becoming more and more aware of my stock, and I'd furnished much of my apartment with some of it, so partly I felt connected that way. Ms. Varick's paperwork had alluded to the existence of a sort of master map of the store, broken into zones, with all the items in each, but I'd yet to come across it. It was nice to run a business built on something for which I had little passion; it simplified things.

The second room was mostly clothes. There were a few dressers, an armoire, and some disassembled four-poster bed frames, but nothing in the way of desks. I plucked a garish blue cowboy hat with gold trim around the brim from the wall and placed it on my head and opened another beer. At the threshold of the main room, where the cash register and the door were, I stopped to study myself in a small ovular mirror. I looked like an old rodeo clown who'd lost his makeup. There was a new gray hair in my goatee and I yanked it spitefully from my chin. "From my cold dead hands," I said to my reflection,

almost laughing, and blew the hair from my fingertips, imagining it settling between the fibers of the old Oriental rug under my feet. Another strand weaved into the web.

One beer and one half hour later I was in the last room, the main furniture room, ready to give up. I'd pulled desks away from walls, unburdened them of their many antique treasures in hopes of finding some hidden sign, still nothing. I'd gotten down on my hands and knees, and on my back, slid drawers from their tracks and looked them over, nothing. So now I sat in an old wooden rocker in the corner, sipping the last of my beer. The store had beaten me.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, a text from Greg B. asking if I wanted to meet down at Mac's Dock for cruise night; he was already there with a couple guys from work. I didn't really. I was disappointed. Cruise night was one of those things that sounded like a good idea at five or six, and usually by the time eight or nine rolled around I was so bored I just wanted to crawl into a highball glass and go to sleep. The spot was nice, right by the marina, open air bar, tables on a mini boardwalk right against the retaining wall. But most nights, particularly cruise night—or I own a boat night or have friends that own a boat night—Mac's was overrun with yuppies, and I was in no mood to suffer them tonight. My boat looked like a toy next to theirs, and I felt like some far out old man, an outsider.

Greg was the good natured, happily married manager of Tiffany Hills golf course, the kind of guy I wouldn't normally like—or perhaps the exception that proves the rule. We'd met on the driving range and sort of hit it off right then. I think he pitied me a little, because the Varick's thing was so absurd, and because he was self conscious about his own perfect life. But boy Greg could drink. The night we met we put a golf cart in a ditch

and his wife had to come pick us up, a memory that sloshed around in my mind, as if I'd picked up a drink I wasn't sure was mine.

Greg wasn't a yuppie, though he had every right to be, the money, the house, the pedigree. Somehow he'd avoided that scene, which I guess I respected him for more than anything. He saw everything very simply, and was less contemptuous than me of all the wasted wealth that got flung around the lip of the lake. One thing he said that first night still stuck with me, when watching the bartender dip a Margarita glass in a shallow bowl of salt, he called Canandaigua Lake a "Margarita glass dipped in silver instead of salt," an image that's haunted me ever since, and I'm certain the most beautiful thing he's ever said to anybody.

I didn't want to go. I typed into my phone that I had a lot of work to do around the office, paperwork, clean up. Was I that old? As I scanned the message over I stopped suddenly and snapped my phone shut. Paperwork and cleanup. My desk. I bolted up out of the rocker, nearly tipping it, and scampered back into the main room. That desk was the most "executive" desk in the whole damn place, and I'd been looking at it all damn day.

The desk was covered with a large tear-away monthly calendar, among other things, a jewelry display, a stack of *Finger Lakes Antique Trail* newsletters, junk. As neatly and quickly as I could I moved everything to the floor. The finish was still intact, dark and slick, probably some kind of cherry. There were three drawers on each side. The bottom drawers were ungodly heavy, full of paper, but totally unmarked. I pulled out the others hoping to find the name, or even a year, or perhaps initials. The wood was so dark though, inside and out, that probably nobody would have tried to write on it. I slid on my

back under the desk, using my phone to scan for a clue. But rather than a marking, I discovered there was another drawer, a center pencil drawer sort of recessed from the front, which I'd not noticed before. I scrambled to my feet and pulled it open. Some pens and pencils, erasers, tape, nothing. I felt the air go out of me, and leaving the drawer open sank back into my chair.

And there it was. I couldn't see it before when I was standing up. On the face of the pencil drawer, now jutting out from under the top of the desk, was a silver Chevrolet insignia with a keyhole in the center. The air came back into me. I ran my finger over the logo, and the keyhole, sort of dazed. All these days I'd been fussing around over this same desk that had once belonged to Charles Pluto—mystery man, tragic figure.

He came to life a little to me right then, because somehow I'd felt something he'd felt, though I didn't know what it meant to him—the desk, perhaps nothing, because here it was. It came from the dealership, so maybe it was tied to something painful, a failure of some kind. Yet it hadn't meant a thing to me either, until now. This man, who as far as I could tell, had lost nearly everything, who was on death's door; his old desk had been sleeping under my nose. In my own silly way I had been culpable in the erasure of his name.

For the moment he'd been resurrected, a part of his life at least. Could it stop there? Perhaps. The morning felt so distant, like another day, those people—like shadows. I still didn't know him. Those people could have been wrong about him, but I had to know more. The next step seemed to be to go looking for him online, for some proof of this fire, and find out what exactly I was dealing with, to see if what they'd said was true, and then of course, to find this house.

For the time being though I was satisfied. Part of me felt embarrassed for going to such lengths to connect myself to this name, this person; but here he was. His life seemed to speak into mine. My eyes opened a little wider. I decided I was in the mood to celebrate. I'd taken off my ugly cowboy hat when I came into the room; it was resting on the arm of the red couch nearest to the desk. I placed it on my head once more, a fitting crown for a fool, and opened my phone and deleted what I'd typed and replaced it with "ten minutes."

## Phantom

Felix, fresh from the bath, tugged at his father's pants, wanting to be picked up. It was bed time, and his father Charles was standing at the book case in the living room, one hand in his left pocket, the other cradling an atlas of the United States—propped open against his chest—doing his best to not get caught up in the inevitable nightly ordeal that was putting his son to bed. In the dim lamplight his eyes scanned a large green map of Herkimer county, where a younger version of himself once found a rare phantom quartz crystal—a Herkimer diamond—in a river bed.

He'd never sold it, electing instead to keep it in a little purple pouch in the nightstand, where it had gone untouched for as long as he could remember. Tonight I ought to take it out and look at it, Charles thought; after all, what's the point of owning something beautiful if you don't take it out once and a while and look at it?

Felix persisted, and began to yank at his father's sleeve. Emily's voice echoed from upstairs, strained and weary "Felix, it's time for bed honey." Charles closed the atlas and laid it open on the shelf. "Felix," Emily shouted again, struggling to sound authoritative and demonstrative at once, "we're not doing this again tonight." Felix moaned and stretched the word "dad" over two syllables, with a voice that rose and fell, as Charles once remarked to his wife, like a bird first taking flight after falling from the nest; and indeed he saw his son that way, as some foreign species that dropped out of the sky, unaware of its origin, ill equipped for the world into which it fell, helpless, pitiful, fragile, but quintessential, if not beautiful, a creature he could recognize and name and admire, but could not understand.

Charles scooped Felix up into his arms. “Do you see this book daddy’s looking at? This is an atlas, a book of maps. It has all sorts of maps, of places all over the country.” It was Charles’ attempt to exploit Felix, because he knew he’d do almost anything if it meant staying awake a little longer.

Felix nodded and stared blankly at the green emptiness of Herkimer County. “It looks like a puzzle piece.”

Charles sat down in his recliner next to the bookcase. When Felix was younger he’d had a soft fabric puzzle of the fifty states hanging on his bedroom wall. It was important to Charles that Felix understand the physical place he occupied in the world, because so much was uncertain, and geography seemed to him the most positive science.

“Here, let’s take a look at where we live. Let’s look at Ontario County.”

There was Canandaigua Lake, a smear of blue surrounded by vineyards and farms, though it wasn’t actually part of the county; the border lurched wildly upward at the base and came all the way around. The lake itself was Yates County, an arm reaching in to the heart of Ontario. There was Bristol Mountain Ski Resort, and Menteth Gully. Tracing his finger down route ninety six he came to rest just above the town of Ovid. “So see, my finger’s right on top of us, X.” Felix stared at the page, apparently uninterested, unable to connect what he saw on the page—the little space his father’s finger covered, to himself, or their house. There were places and then there were books. There was home, and there were the books his mother read to him to try to put him to sleep, about talking bears, lost dogs, and lost children. How could there be a book of the real world? Was he living inside the book that sat open before him on his father’s lap?

The previous Christmas the family had gone to Emily's parents' house in Ithaca, along with twenty something of her brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews, and cousins. Charles liked to kid her for only having produced two children; the rest of her family produced children at heroic speed. "They could start their own Catholic Church, the rate they're going," he told her. Christmas at the Kelly house was a formal affair, with punch bowls, a kids table, roast beef, midnight mass, and a Frazer Fir Christmas tree that reached nearly to the top of the living room's cathedral ceiling—and made the whole house smell like a forest.

Felix threw a tantrum when his grandfather, in a bit over his head, told him they were waiting until after dinner to open presents, even though Felix's older sister Claire had been allowed to open one, for reasons that never fully came to light. Charles took him upstairs and sat him down to rationally explain how it was all meant to heighten his enjoyment of the present-opening experience, that suspense and surprise made Christmas fun. The finer points of Christmas were lost on Felix, who only wrenched himself away from his father and rolled himself into a ball on the carpet.

"What if I tell you a secret that only you and I know? A secret you have to keep and never tell to anyone?" Charles had tossed back two too many Manhattans, and would have no memory of the conversation taking place in the morning. Much of that Christmas felt like a blur to him now. In fact, in the months that followed, whenever he and Emily discussed something that related to that night, or that fell near it on the calendar, he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd done or said something small and unforgivable to her that night. To know what he'd said to Felix would have embarrassed him deeply. But in that moment, sitting with his son in Emily's childhood bedroom, the poster of her high

school volleyball team from 1978—when they’d won sectionals, still framed and hanging over her dresser like a mirror into the past, he felt like the best father in the world. He smiled as he spoke, and the smoothness of his voice intrigued Felix, who to that point almost always responded to form before content.

“Felix, I know this is a big responsibility, but I trust you. This is going to be hard to believe, but it’s true. Daddy is from another planet very far away, a planet just like earth. And I came here when I was young, because they kicked me out. It’s a very long and painful story. And I’ve never told anyone this, not even your mother. X, I’m an alien. And you’re part alien.”

Felix stared up at his father in what could have been fear or wonder, unsure whether to cry or laugh. “I’m part alien?”

“That’s right. You need to be good, son. Be good now, and later too.”

Felix never asked his father about it again, and as time passed and his imagination began to overwrite just about all the mundane and inexplicable moments of his youth, he began to doubt it. He was the lone carrier of that memory, but from time to time he would notice his father, the hugeness of him, the strange brushing sound of his voice, his green green eyes, and wonder. He felt closer to him, that they shared this secret life together, a life unlike anything, even if the exact nature of their sameness eluded him. He fell asleep in his father’s arms.

Charles felt his son’s breathing slow, and whispered to him and watched for any movement behind his eyelids. Nothing. He rose slowly from the chair and set the book once more on the shelf. Emily stood in the dining room watching, relieved, surprised once again by her husband’s unpredictable affection, his tenderness toward Felix, who

pestered him so. Felix shifted unconsciously in his father's arms as he carried him toward her.

"Score one for the good guys," she said.

As he handed Felix off to his wife, Charles kissed the top of his head, his black hair, still damp, shining—thinking, a raven's wing.

With Felix in bed Emily turned to her own nightly routine. The stairway light was still on, which meant Charles was puttering downstairs. The floorboards creaked beneath her feet. It was impossible to escape the age of the house. As she removed her makeup in the bathroom mirror she saw behind her, like a statue, the reflected form of their claw-footed tub, where she'd battled Felix for a half hour—among his Legos, where Charles and his brother had bathed together as boys.

The sink below her, a one of a kind by now, Felix would learn to shave there; impossible to peel away all the layers of life, of lives lived, like tree rings. Sure she'd have her place in the family tree, her artifacts left behind to mystify her grandchildren, the little touches like the World War One fighter plane wallpaper in Felix's room, and the green trim around Claire's window that matched nothing else in the entire house, to prove that she'd existed; but it would always be Charles' house, despite all his efforts to welcome her into it, to appease her.

Whose face is this? She worked a ball of cotton over the soft pale curves of her cheeks. The many compromises of another long day at the studio flushed away down the smooth white sides of the sink, leeching off somewhere into the backyard, to work their way back into the dirt, and feed the tiger lilies by the tree line. In town, at the studio, a

series of black and white prints dangled on a line in a silent room bathed in red light, drying.

Of course the children were hers. They came to her for answers. But wouldn't they live on carrying her like Charles carried *his* ancestors? like a stone chained around his neck—at once, the instrument of his lifelong punishment for being a Pluto, and the source of his strength, for he'd had to fight so much harder for what he got, even for what was, though he'd never admit it, rightfully his.

Claire has his eyes but she has my face, my Kelly cheeks and chin—Emily thought, scrutinizing her reflection, proud, and profoundly tired. To her children she would always be as native to that house as the Sycamore tree in the front yard, or the old crumbling stone foundation out back where the milk-house once stood; it was a kind of comfort, and a kind of defeat. She brushed her teeth sitting on the edge of the tub, running her eyes over the cold white grid of the tile floor, cold beneath her feet.

She could never ask Charles to move, to break the chain; because what was killing him was keeping him alive, this baffling and instinctive sense of duty, this responsibility to curate the family history; and even more so because he would do it, he would do anything for her, but the blood would be on her hands then. Emily the traitor: who banished the family history to cardboard boxes in the attic, plastic bins in the basement, and trinkets lining the mantle. She would be strong; she had chosen what would be her cross to bear in this life, knowing always that it was of her own creation; and it was from this knowledge that she drew her strength, but it was this same knowledge that made her feel sometimes as if she were a ghost haunting the hallways of her own home.

There were footsteps in the hall. Charles, Emily thought, and dried her dripping hands. A light knock came at the door and the soft whine of her daughter's voice came through it. Emily felt herself age. Claire had been having trouble sleeping for the last month, some nights bursting into Charles and Emily's room in a fit from some dream. She knew that sometimes Claire would lie in bed and fight sleep as long as she could, holding her eyes open with her fingers, as the room grew dark around her. Claire had told her as much one night, half asleep or dreaming. Emily had done the same thing when she was a girl.

Emily opened the bathroom door, "Claire honey, what's wrong." Her daughter stood before her with a face streaked pink from tears, holding a stuffed white rabbit in overalls. She bent to her daughter and took her tightly in her arms.

"There's something in my bedroom." Claire pressed her face into her mother's shoulder. "I keep hearing noises. Something's coming to get me."

"Now, it's okay. Nothing's coming to get you. You just had a bad dream. I told your father not to give you any sugar before bedtime because it always gives you nightmares."

"I didn't have any sugar. There's a noise coming from by the window. Something's coming to take me."

Emily walked her back to her room and helped her into bed. She turned on the light at Claire's desk and the two of them waited for the noise to come again. Minutes passed, and Claire began to relax, and pulled the covers up over her chin. Her bed was her safe place, her quiet place. Sometimes, when it rained, she would spend the whole day there, reading, or dozing, imagining other worlds within the patterns and knots of the

wood grain above her head. The noise came again, a shrill high pitched squeak Emily immediately recognized as that of a bat. Claire buried her head beneath the blankets.

“Now now it’s okay. It’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s just a...” Emily thought it over, her children were so sensitive, so helpless, “...a Night Bird.”

“A Night Bird?” Claire repeated, slowly, emerging from her silk and cotton bunker.

“Yes honey. It’s a very beautiful bird that only comes out at night; and they like to build their nests in the sides of old houses like this one. So see, it’s nothing to be afraid of.” The bat kept squeaking, probably huddled just on the other side of the wall, wedged up between the shutter and the brick on the outside of the house. Emily wished it would fly off and let her sleep.

“I’ve never heard of a night bird,” Claire said, skeptically.

Emily told her that the night bird was very plain, and so it didn’t go out in the daytime, preferring instead the freedom and confidence of the dark. This seemed plausible enough, and weren’t there plenty of birds that were nocturnal anyway? Such confusions were bound to sort themselves out in time, at school.

She thought back to her dining room in the Colorado house, where one night her father cornered and stomped on a small rat until it died. She remembered the little puddle that spilled from its mouth, like red nail polish, thick and bright. She could still remember the way her father looked after, ashamed—grasping for an explanation. Had he made a face at all? Or was it something she invented, to spare her father from her judgment? This wasn’t all that bad; Claire would not judge her, and one day she would have children of

her own, so she would understand what it is to be the one to whom your children come for answers, when the answer is not enough, or is worse than the not knowing.

“It’s a very rare bird. You’re lucky to have one right outside your window. But they get scared very easily, so we have to be very quiet, or else it might fly away. Okay honey?”

It was moments like this Emily felt most alive, most human. She kissed Claire goodnight and turned off the light. The hall was darker; Charles had come up to bed. At night the hallway was the darkest place in the house; all the rooms had windows. A rectangle of yellow light leaked across the floor from under her bedroom door, guiding her in.

Charles stooped beside the bed, rummaging through the nightstand. “Pouch?” she said tentatively. Charles rarely had so much energy at night.

“Yes my love?” He might have been about to jump inside the drawer.

“What are you doing? Reading glasses? I saw them...” She went to the dresser where Charles tended to fling both his most crucial personal effects as well as spare change and convenience store receipts.

“No no. I’m looking for my Herkimer diamond. You know what I’m talking about?”

“It’s not in there? If it’s not you should check the safe deposit box. It’s possible I put it in there.”

“You don’t remember?” He pulled the drawer out and set it on the bed and began to empty it.”

“Well you know we just have so many diamonds it’s difficult to keep them straight. Check the box, I very well may have put it in there... would’ve been a while ago.”

Charles tended not to bother picking up after himself, not out of laziness or lack of respect for Emily, but because his mind was always ten feet behind his body. His wallet disappeared on a weekly basis.

The key to the safe deposit box was kept on the top of Emily’s armoire, over the mirror; and the box was under the bed, hidden behind a shoebox full of Chevrolet magnets, leftovers from Charles’ most recent sales road trip from Detroit to Rochester.

A small birthday card on the bed caught Emily’s eye. Charles had liberated it from the drawer. On the cover was a picture of a sun setting behind a mountain, and in the foreground two people stood and looked at it holding hands. She had given it to him when he turned thirty.

She turned the card around and looked at the barcode on the back, and the price, eighty cents plus tax. She held her left hand up in front of her face and studied her engagement ring. The gold band seemed to have grown into her skin. The blueish diamond glinted under the lamplight. How odd, she thought, I never see my hand without this on it. “Nice birthday card this thoughtful person got you,” she said, fingering her ring.

Charles pulled the heavy box out from under the bed. “Awfully. Though a sunset on a birthday card, not exactly encouraging.”

“Imagine it’s a sunrise, if the light were different.” She didn’t look at the inside, and set it down gently in the drawer. The crystal was indeed inside the box. The purple

bag jumped out at Charles amongst the passports, birth certificates, and insurance policies.

“Aha.”

“Success? Why’d you need it?”

“I don’t,” said Charles. He slipped the crystal out. It was heavy in his hand, tinted light pink from mineral impurities in the rock. He turned it over and looked through it toward the lamp. “You could file the outside of this down to the phantom diamond inside and it would look just a like a scale copy.”

“Except why would you ever want to do that?”

“I wouldn’t. But someone could.” Charles knew the diamond formed from inside out and that the inner “copy” was, in actuality, the original. But he liked to imagine it fully formed, and some force bringing forth a second bloom inside the rock, an echo. Could a diamond like this keep on growing, he wondered, making perfect copies of itself?

When he looked Emily in the eyes, and they really held it, and were close, in the right kind of light, he’d watch the tiny picture of himself in her pupil, reflecting back and forth between them, he assumed, forever. He could never know her as anyone but himself, and this always frustrated him. Who was Emily the artist? Emily the mother? Emily.

“You want to sell it?” Emily said, half joking. She had no clue what it was worth, but knew it meant too much to Charles to get rid of.

When he found the crystal he was twenty four years old, a six hour hike in from the road, fishing a river for trout in the Adirondack Mountains. What had made him look

there among the rocks where the water met the shore, at that exact spot? Could the sun have caught the diamond? He could not recall the moment he first saw it, but he remembered quite clearly taking it in his right hand and holding it against the blue backdrop of the sky, and laughing, as if he'd just been given a sign from above that his life was made.

"I just wanted to look at it," he answered, half listening.

It looked like a six sided homage to the Washington monument, surprisingly uniform and smooth. Now, as he knelt beside the bed and held it in his hand, it felt heavy, as though it had put on the weight of all he had not known then, what he now knew, and all the time that had since passed. Was this stone a coalescence of everything in him that was unresolved? Was it a curse? His black pearl, his totem. He slipped it deftly back into the bag and returned it to its rightful place in the nightstand. Emily turned off her reading light with a long breathy sigh. A trip to the Adirondacks, Charles thought, to the mountains; it's been far too long.

"There's a bat in Claire's wall," said Emily, flatly.

"Is there?"

"We heard it."

Charles turned off the other light and undressed. "Well," he said, flopping onto the bed, "I don't suppose it's anything to be worried about. I don't think he could get in."

"No. It just scared her is all."

Charles dreaded another morning. Tomorrow he would have to wake up at five AM to meet the gasoline delivery truck at the dealership, just to stand and watch his bank account bleed out. And there was the appointment with Glen Ross, the lawyer, whom

Charles held in the utmost contempt, not simply because he was a lawyer, but because he appeared to enjoy it so. How Charles' father had made a go of it, even through the lean years in the seventies, was difficult for him to fathom. The box of Chevy logo magnets below the bed ticked in his brain like a live grenade.

Knowing Emily sympathized with him was of some comfort, though her understanding of the business was perfunctory, practical at best. She didn't care a wit for cars. How unhappy she had been in those early years before her studio was off the ground, pushing papers as his secretary; it would have destroyed their marriage if she hadn't gotten out, hadn't pursued at least a scaled back version of her dream to make a living with pictures. Charles fell on the sword for both their sakes, so that they could live, so that she could be happy with her life. In the morning he would put on his suit of armor, his blue tie and collared shirt, his Dockers, and ride off into the sunrise. How trivial and small, he thought, all these petty tragedies of life.

Emily rolled over to her side and rested her head on his shoulder. "What are you thinking about?"

"Tomorrow," he said, working his fingers into her hair, which she always wore up to bed, pulled back from her face. It was a beautiful face. He always used to tell her to take more pictures of herself; she had thousands of pictures, of hills and mountains and fields, rivers and lakes, strangers and their children, houses, but barely any of herself. Black and white, the woman he loved; he saw a picture of her dancing on the beech in California in her college years, it might have been the jazz age for all he knew, the way she looked so brave and young. Now the warm curves of her body pressed against him and he tuned himself in to that feeling, and kissed her; how badly he needed her, how

completely he desired to understand her, not to possess her exactly, but to dissolve himself within her.

Sex was not what it had once been between them. It wasn't so much an obligation, or a chore, or an indiscretion; it was natural. Emily kissed his neck and rubbed his chest. She was tired, but it was a comfort to her. When things had been at their worst she had kept herself from him, and more than this she hadn't even wanted him. That was before she understood him, certainly long before she understood herself. She didn't want to believe her body was the source of her power over him; she was his wife and she knew he loved her. And she loved him. Though when she felt him swell within her, she couldn't help but be ashamed, not because she still believed in sin or felt the need to be untrue to herself, because she couldn't stop thinking, and was never fully able to release herself from doubt.

After, as they lay beside each other naked under the sheet, Charles took her hand and kissed it. He marveled sometimes at their life together, all the unforeseeable details of its playing out, and these still moments when he felt most certain about the place he'd made for himself, for both of them, and the children.

Emily rolled away sleepily onto her side and said "Good night Pouch."

Charles lay on his back and looked out the window at the moon, hidden partially behind the oak tree.

"Good night."

In these moments he felt completely sealed within himself; a smiling; shivering effigy, finally free of the past, and unafraid of his death. What he had wanted and failed

to attain did not trouble him. He heard nothing but the wind. His skin tingled. He was alive.

## **The Plow and the Desk**

It seemed to be only at the very beginning and very end of the day that Charles managed to get anything accomplished around the dealership. By nine or ten it was Bill or Neil; the mechanics, constantly knocking on his door with problems, needing phone numbers, part numbers, another set of hands. The middle of the day was for conference calls, appointments, and mail. In the afternoon he sold cars, sitting in his office staring across the same desk where his father had spent his life, talking with many of the same people his father had sold cars to. Charles watched the clock tick past five and tapped his pencil against the wood. Charles had never known that room without that desk; it may as well have grown there, like a tree that had been cut down and the stump repurposed, as if it had been easier to build the dealership around it than to dig it out.

Charles' father, Paul Jr., managed to keep a hold of the dealership during the wave of Chevrolet corporate buyouts and closeouts in the sixties and seventies. His wife told him he was nuts. They almost lost everything when it flooded, in the Spring of 1981, and again three years later. One of the first things Charles did when he took over was to put up the wainscoting in the office over the watermark, as part of the first serious cosmetic renovation the dealership had undergone since it opened in '51. His father scoffed at it when he saw it, but Charles liked to think that deep down his father was glad to see his son making the place his own, that it was natural to be repulsed—initially at least—by the signs that one's time had come and gone.

There had never been an official handing over of the reigns to Charles. Paul was sick and in the hospital when he took over, the first of many prolonged visits after he began having complications from diabetes. Charles had envisioned sitting across from his

father in his office, his father telling him what the dealership meant to him, to the family, and the future, and that Charles was ready, and what it meant to him that Charles take his place; and then standing up from his chair and motioning for Charles to sit in his seat, not just as a son, but a torch bearer, a carrier of the family light. But in truth it had been his mother Bethany, who was always the practical one, who convinced his father that he was no longer fit to walk among the kingdom he'd built as its king.

It was a pyrrhic victory for Charles; the kingdom was his, the cars, the showroom. He was the "Pluto" on the front of the building. But in the same fell swoop his father had begun his long and steady descent into old age. By 1996 he'd lost his left leg and part of his right foot, and was nearly blind. A year later they buried him in the family plot down the road from the house at Greenwoods Cemetery, beside his parents and an empty coffin; put in the ground in 1944 for his brother Julian, who was sent off to war in Japan and never came home, the most recent in a long family tradition of boys who died before their time, and the most conspicuous source of his father's unrelenting cynicism, which he carried with him like a badge to his grave.

Charles decided to make a pot of coffee. A heavy snow had been coming down for about an hour, and he knew the Department of Transportation would be on the horn before long, and he'd have to go out plowing. He ripped open a premeasured packet of coffee and smelled it; just the smell of coffee could warm him, the same way looking out into the white wasteland of snow that was his parking lot could chill him. Stokes' Hardware was barely visible through the squall, and every minute or two the wind shook the windows of his office.

What if the snow piled up so high it buried the whole building? What would happen to Emily, Claire, Felix, and Rose? He didn't want Pluto's Chevrolet to bury him the way it did his father; he wanted his own life, the life he'd made. But there was so little time. He'd always had grand visions of the father he would be, the type of man he'd be, strong and wise—a hero to his children, not like his father, who came home every night completely emptied of energy, aloof and preoccupied. But it never worked somehow; everyone around him demanded his time as if he owed it to them. He had two families, one at home and one at the dealership, and because he could not forsake either of them totally, he was forced to forsake each of them minutely, systematically.

The call came over the CB radio. He closed up the shop and headed around back to the main garage, and the plow truck. He filled the truck with diesel and let it warm up. The engine beat loudly against the metal walls of the garage. He walked with heavy footsteps to the workbench in the far back corner, where the old key grinder still sat, and lifted the garage phone from the receiver to call Emily.

Her voice sounded different on the phone—disembodied. He could never picture her exactly in his mind, holding the phone to her ear, her world invaded. A click—and her voice came on the other side, “Wait wait, don't tell me, plowing?”

She possessed an innate talent for rendering his gestures irrelevant, “How'd you guess?”

“It's the only time you call. Is it this bad in town too?” Charles could hear Rose crying in the background.

“Terrible. Hopefully I'll only be an hour or two though, since it's early, and they just finally fixed one of their trucks. How's Rosey?”

“Fussy. But she had a good long nap in the middle of the day. I could use one.”

All Charles wanted to do was plow his way to the front door and seal himself inside the house until spring. Hardly anybody would be out driving anyway, even with the roads plowed. He could see the house in his mind, cutting his way toward it through the snow and the approaching darkness, a bright light beaming out from its windows, like a lighthouse calling home some ship long thought lost at sea.

“Well tell her I miss her too. I’ll see you later tonight.”

The truck cab was warmer, but the seat was cold. Charles pressed the automatic garage door opener and the door jerkily ascended. Even in the failing sunlight Charles squinted in the bright light, at the whitewashed form of the dealership. Hopefully somebody needs to be on the road tonight, he thought, otherwise this is all just a big waste of my time. He flicked the truck into four wheel drive, lowered the plow to the ground with a loud mechanical clank, and urged the truck into the storm.

Although the truck was new; the plow was the same—the same they’d always used, save for new bits and screws here and there. Charles remembered it most sitting in their back garage up at home during the summer. Along with his brother Zach, Charles used to like to climb into the plow truck and imagine it was plane, and fiddle with the maniacal looking levers that stuck out of the floor, making gunshot noises as if they were flying over the rice fields and jungles of Vietnam.

In the beginning, Bethany hadn’t wanted Paul to take any of the children with him when he plowed. Charles had been the first; his father snuck him along one early morning when he was seven or eight. Strange to imagine his father now, standing at the doorway of his bedroom, whispering for him to put on his coat and come downstairs. How’d his

father do it? They sat beside each other, quiet, watching the snowy world roll by. I'd give anything to relive that morning, he thought, as he turned the plow onto Gelt road, by the deli.

Could he come to Felix's door some morning and take him for that first ride? Would it become a ritual then? So heavy, the weight of history, thought Charles, suddenly realizing that Felix would feel it all the more. Even if Charles could humble himself before his son that way, the way his father had, could he trust Felix to pass it on? Was that even what he wanted? Felix would cut his own path through the world, and would that be so bad? Long ago Charles accepted he was not the type of man to stray far from the path that he'd been put on, but that was no reason Felix couldn't. Indeed maybe he should. Felix's future confounded Charles, the same way Charles' past confounded him. He was skeptical of the present—gone in a snap of the fingers, he would say.

The seat beside him suddenly looked so empty. He imagined Felix sitting there beside him, bright and smiling in his red jacket, staring out from under the hat Emily knitted him, into the world. Then Charles imagined himself sitting there, as a boy, solemnly looking over to the drivers' seat at what the world would do to him one day, wanting to get out of the truck and run.

It was getting to the time of night when headlights did nothing, just short of twilight. Charles turned on the radio to the AM sports station. There was a hockey game on that night. It was the pregame show, and Charles half-listened to clips of interviews with the coach, and the goalie, and was not troubled too much by the storm, which had by then blown southeast over the lake and, swollen with snow, settled over a fifteen mile band of central New York. They didn't get the games on TV back at the house.

The radio had been salvaged from some wreck his father pulled out of a ditch outside of town. Wrecked cars were always part of the landscape around the dealership, even home—if his father wanted to tinker on a weekend. Everything was cobbled together. The field behind the house was a minefield of decay. A family of raccoons lived in the old Plymouth. One car, rusted beyond recognition, became target practice for Zach and Charles, who shot it full of holes on a Sunday afternoon.

One summer he helped his father rebuild a lawnmower engine from spare parts. Charles remembered standing beside him in the garage when the engine finally turned over, and his father raising his fists to the sky, “It’s alive.” Charles had helped give birth to motion, and he still felt a chill when he thought of it now, the way it came together, as if pulled into being by some magnetic force, of which he was some crude utensil. That lawnmower sat now in the field among the wrecks, seized up, rusted beyond use, worth only its weight in scrap. Charles smiled; in his father’s waning years, with his prosthetic leg, and his dialysis machine, he began referring to himself as the tin man.

Charles eased off the gas as he approached the top of East Hill, the second tallest point in the town of Ovid, and the site of his final childhood ride with his father. He and his sister Olivia both were allowed to accompany their father during an ice storm in late February. The air had warmed during the day and the snow had melted and frozen again at night. Charles had fought Olivia for the middle seat, even though the shifter was right between your legs. Olivia won, and gloated the whole ride, smiling devilishly behind her scarf. As they slid down East Hill they came upon a Buick completely on its side in the ditch beside a frozen creek.

Charles remembered his father telling them to stay in the truck, as he got out and inched slowly over the dangerous ice to the Buick, which was smoking or steaming from the underside. He rolled down his window to try to make out what was being said, but could hear only the loud rush of the wind pouring down over the hill. They waited there until the fire department and the ambulance came. Firemen took off the door and cut away some of the roof, and painstakingly extracted the driver, a woman, Charles was sure of it, though he never got a good look at the face. They set her on the ice at the side of the road and strapped her to a stretcher.

Olivia was captivated. She spoke only in questions; what had happened, how fast was she going, what do you think she was thinking as she went off the road. The mangled car made its impression on Charles too; he'd always gone extra slow down hills in the winter. Now, in the rear view mirror he imagined he could see the car receding from him. The fire department left the car sitting at the bottom of the hill through the night, because the ice was too bad to tow it back to town. So it just sat there, silent, leaking fuel and oil into the snow, staining it brown.

There might come a time when Charles would have to face his own crisis; what, he did not now, but he feared it. How his father must have hated to think what Bethany would say when they got home, because she never wanted her children to witness any real danger without her. How isolated his father must have felt beside the two of them, who barely understood him, and barely understood the value of their own lives—the proof of his failure, or his arrogance. Charles imagined Claire and Felix sitting beside him. He imagined driving off some cliff, and disappearing.

On the ride back it had been Olivia that broke the silence, bouncing up and down in her seat, asking earnestly if the woman had been scared when she went off the road. Paul only said, “No,” shortly—as if it felt like pulling out a tooth—and then he switched on the radio. A man with a hollow voice read the news the whole way home, and nobody said a thing. Charles thought sometimes it was the silence that scarred him, not the accident. He’d seen worse.

Would he ever be able to escape his life? He felt like a piecemeal person, the incidental culmination of innumerable, unrelated decisions, a walking mosaic composed of fractured bits of his past, unable to see past the glare of his own movements. Archipelago Man, he thought, some kind of B-line superhero.

At the bottom of the hill the road opened up between two broad, flat fields. Snow drifts blew powder across the road—a total whiteout. The truck eased to a crawl. I could sit between these drifts for hours, Charles thought, and no one would know I was here. Would it be such a bad place to spend the rest of his days, wrapped in a curtain of snow, numb to the world, with no desires—even of his own, to trouble him? I won’t sleep until I’m in the ground. He knew it.

Did he envy the dead? Not exactly. The peace of the dead he envied, sure. Nirvana seemed like a wonderful prospect, but it was not an option. He would never disappear. He pictured his name on the long list of Pluto’s past. Charles F. Pluto: 1958 to what? A link in a chain that stretched over the Atlantic Ocean, to places he’d only heard about in stories, and read about in the diaries of his grandmother, and in the letters she exchanged with his grandfather. They filled the desk in Rose’s room, the room that had once been his. How obvious, he thought, how strange. The Pluto family could never be a

Möbius Strip. There would never be a point when one of them would rise up and declare, “I’ve done it. I’ve lived forever.” Charles laughed in spite of the pain of it, and felt himself shrinking into a footnote.

So there is nothing left to do but keep going. He broke through the whiteout, past the fields, where trees again shielded the road. The world was no longer his. It had squeezed in around him, not like a coffin; because it wasn’t over, more like a chute; because there was no other way to go. When Lazarus rose and took those furtive steps into the world again as a living man...how could he have done it, with the inescapable weight of time bearing down on him?

Charles imagined himself as a fish that had gotten sucked down too deep into the ocean—the force of the water crushing his bones. You are a coward. A damn coward. Wasn’t this everything he wanted? Was he not the man who had everything? Hadn’t he made a life for himself?

He thought about the Herkimer diamond again, trying to remember the way it felt as he raised it up that first time. It is impossible to touch the bottom *or* the surface of anything, he thought, to know anything. A damn coward. That’s all.

## **Bomber**

Felix often dreamt of planes. All sorts. But mostly, ones like the ones on the wall—with split wings and propellers in the front. He loved the sound of the word “dogfight.” He loved everything about the word “dogfight.” For his birthday, they had taken him to the air show at the fairgrounds to see the fighter jets. They were the loudest things he’d ever heard. Behind them they carried trails of colored smoke, blue, and gold, and red; though Felix decided they went far too fast to get a look at, and he could never imagine himself flying one. Too fast.

Last summer had been the best summer—the best by far. It was the last summer before kindergarten. Emily’s garden came up strong, and Felix spent a lot of time wandering through the cornstalks, and the sunflowers, and tomato plants, here and there picking a stone from the dirt and hurling it back into the field, imagining cutting his way through a jungle—a downed fighter pilot. Claire grew before his eyes, and he could not decide if he would ever be like her. She was so big, and so sad. The days seemed to go on forever.

One afternoon in late August, when he came inside from playing in the back yard, Felix found a small cardboard box on the dining room table. Charles stood beside it in oil splotted jeans and a dusty flannel shirt, smiling.

“X, come here. This is for you.”

His father waved his hand over the gift like a magician. Felix opened the box. Inside was a small model airplane, unlike any he’d seen before. The wings were broad and rounded at the tip, and did not come back at nearly the angle of the modern planes.

There was what looked to be some kind of bubble on the bottom. The plane was made of aluminum and there was a white star on each side.

“This is a world war two fighter plane,” his father explained. “Your great uncle flew in one like this a long time ago. When he was in the war. It’s a present for you, because you’re starting school.”

He drew Felix toward him. Turning, Felix eyed the plane from his father’s arms. His father smelled like the barn, old motor oil, rust. Did things mean more than what he could see? The phrase “Great Uncle” vibrated in his mind, what did it mean? The plane looked brand new. He could see it, huge and high in the sky. “What does it do?” Felix asked. “Does it fly?”

“No it doesn’t fly. It’s to play with, to keep.”

Felix frowned. His father released him and plucked the empty box from the table on his way out the door. Felix took the plane into his room and set it on his desk to study it. It was as if someone had taken a full-size plane and shrunk it. He wondered if it could fly, of course it could. He started rolling it along the desk, taxiing it from one end to the other. If I could fit inside, he thought, I could fly it out the window and over the field. To think of being smaller was easy. What lay beyond the field, past the woods? It was so near, and yet there must be so much of it. Felix wanted to see it all, to own the world.

There was a door in his room that opened up to a small staircase, which led to the crown of the house—the cupola. It was the highest point in the house, and you could see out in all directions.

It was known in the house that Claire was jealous that Felix got the extra room—the crow’s nest, as Emily referred to it. Claire resented him for it, though whenever she

went up inside she found that there was very little to do. The room was small, all windows, and a bench that ran around beneath them. Felix liked it because it felt closed off from the rest of the house, his own space.

Shutting the hatch in the floor Felix looked out toward the road at his mother, who was weeding the flowerbed near the mailbox, looking like a picture on a puzzle, delicate and wreathed by blues and yellows and purples and greens; he saw the scene fracture into little pieces, more than could ever be reassembled. He turned to the barn in the backyard, imagining his father inside, bent over the workbench, or on his back beneath a car. Everything seemed so remote, so far from him, that he felt like another person—a mystery person, unknown even to himself. Wind blew the sweet tang of Sycamore through the windows, and Felix felt himself dissolve in it, as if there was no border between him and the world. He needed nothing.

He held the plane over his head. The house lifted with a groan into the sky. It rose above the clouds, the hours rolled by without change, and felt like minutes. In the distance the barn roof peaked through the clouds—a target, well-guarded. Felix spun in his bubble under the belly of the plane. Other planes fell and burst into fireballs all around him. The hum of the engine was deafening. His body was tense and hard, intentional and honed.

Still holding the plane aloft Felix spun around, and spun and spun and kept spinning until eventually he fell to the floor, the room still spinning around him. He rested the plane on his stomach, and lay staring at it, and at the unlit lamp that hung in the middle of the ceiling. He felt like a bomb on its way down, screaming through the sky. He was weightless. The plane loomed over him. There was the calm that came before the

ground, and then the explosion. He rubbed his eyelids with his fists, and watched the colors move. This is the truth, he thought—now.

Months had come and gone; and the plane had, on separate occasions, suffered two broken wings, a cracked fuselage, a dented nose, and had become clogged with sand. But his father had, without fail, repaired it. For the most part through it remained on Felix's desk, scarred, imperfect, but hard, like a war hero, not really asking to be left alone, but not needing his attention.

His mother thought it was a hazard. It was sharp, and heavy. It could cut him. He could choke. But time after time his father rescued it from the garbage, or the back of the closet, not because of what he thought it meant to Felix, but because of what it meant to *him* that Felix have it, that it be a presence in his room, because his son moved so fast from phase to phase, that no gesture seemed worth the breath and time it took. Beyond this though, the plane was the only thing he knew about his son; if it were to disappear he would be forced to admit that he was no better than his father, who felt more and more like a stranger among the crowd in the ever-growing cast of characters that populated his past.

Felix sat and watched the propeller spin, every so often stopping it with his finger and starting it again, he thought about flying low over Canandaigua Lake and diving in, or plunging the plane straight into the water. Maybe it could keep going, under water, and he could find something down there, something only he was meant to find, a ship, a reef, a cave. Then he thought about water and the sky and how they seemed the same.

Claire, who had been standing for a few seconds at his door, tiptoed across the floor and stood beside him. She leaned on the desk and watched him flick the propeller.

For some time she had been aware of her power over Felix, and now that he was older, and less needy, it meant more—he possessed a will of his own within hers. Claire had felt her father close off to her after Felix came. He was the favorite and that was fine. He was a burden to her mother, Claire was the forgotten one. In the beginning she acted out, because she couldn't understand why her complaints suddenly went unheeded, why her parents reserved all their love for Felix, why she found herself alone. But she grew, and as she grew she became more assured, and defined herself always in relation to him.

It was Saturday and Claire was bored. "Let's go outside. It's nice out," she said, looking out the window over his desk at the driveway, at Charles, who was crossing from the yard toward the barn, pushing the lawnmower.

The smell of cut grass came to her. Had she smelled it before? Or had it only come at the sight of her father, plastered with grass clippings, pushing the mower?

Claire wore a white dress that crinkled beneath her as she lowered herself down to the floor. A puzzle was strewn about the carpet, barely put-together. She fit two pieces together. The box sat on the desk, a picture of a lion staring straight ahead. Felix hadn't inherited the same patience she had. Often he ran from room to room, high or low, running circles around the house, turning the living room into a palace, disappearing into the basement and making strange sounds, bouncing around with endless energy.

"No," Felix answered

"Why not?" She fit another pair of pieces together. The lion's mane.

It took her a long time to love him, and she did, though not as an equal, more like a pet, something to take along on walks outside, something timid and just a little less than real. Watching him became a kind of sport to her, all his inexplicable movements, his

sounds; she saw herself as his interpreter, his auger. To her parents, Felix was only what he was, their second born—their youngest, but to Claire, he was miniature force of nature, a religion; he was the part of her she'd been born without, pure, totally mad, and free.

“I’m doing something. You play,” said Felix.

“I’ll push you on the swing.”

Felix shook his head and sent the plane rolling along, humming.

“Ah come on.”

Felix kept humming, ignoring her. But she knew what he loved. “Gimme that,” she said, and snatched the airplane and made a break for the door, sending puzzle pieces flying with her feet. Felix lit out behind her, down the stairs and out the front door into the yard.

He couldn’t catch her. She broke for the barn. He shouted her name. Tears started coming. How could she be so fast? I’ll kill her, he thought, as she ducked into the barn.

Claire was laughing as she tiptoed lightly through the first room, past the stairs, to the truck, which sat against the far wall of the second room. The bed of the truck was half full of sand. Checking first to see that he wasn’t right behind her, Claire set the plane behind the rear tire and climbed into the bed and ducked down, waiting, listening. He needs someone to push him, she thought, or else he’ll live his whole life in his own world. She worked her fingers into the sand and let a handful slip through her fingers. At school they told her there were more grains of sand on the earth than there were stars in the sky. She liked the idea of that.

“Claire,” Felix shouted. “Claire.” He wiped his face with the back of his hand. Thief. What right did she have to take it? Now he was out, she’d won. Where was she? He came to the door half expecting to see the plane in pieces. But the barn was still. In the middle of the first room the old tractor sat like a stone, almost rusted to the floor, cobwebs spanning the spaces between the metal. Beside the door a row of rakes, shovels, and unnamed tools lined the wall. With all his strength Felix closed the heavy, rusty-hinged door behind him. If she opened one of the bay doors he would hear it. He went to shout once more but another voice, his father’s, beat him to it.

“Felix?”

He froze. His father’s legs appeared where the stairs met the ceiling. “Felix. What’s going on? What are you doing?” A long orange extension cord was coiled around his shoulder.

“Claire took my plane. She took my plane and she ran in here and I hate her.” He started crying. Whenever he cried Felix felt like some kind of cornered animal, small and alone.

His father shushed him and rubbed his back. Was it impossible for his children to simply coexist in peace for a single day? “Here sit on the steps and I’ll find her okay. You just sit here.” He guessed that Claire was in or near the truck in the next room, because she rarely went into the back room, where he kept all the hunting trophies. “Claire,” he called, not hiding the agitation in his voice.

How odd that these times should belong to me, he thought, as he crossed the threshold to the second room, where the barn opened up overhead—the old hayloft, where he’d stayed the night when he ran away from home one night long ago. His brother

found him in the morning, cold and covered with chigger bites, and led him back to the house like a refugee. Perhaps he should have gone farther, past the barn, and the field, past the trees and the vast cornfield beyond, down into the valley, and waded into the lake. What then?

He called to her again but she didn't answer. He approached the truck and stuck his head in the passenger side window. She was in the bed; he could see her pressed against the near side trying to hide. "Claire," he said again, as he leaned over the side of the truck bed above her. She didn't look at him. She covered her face with her dress.

"All right come on out of there," he said, picking her up under the arms and lifting her out. Sand shook out from everywhere. "You're filthy. Absolutely filthy." She smiled. "Did you take your brother's airplane?"

She turned downward and hid her face. "No," she whined. "He gave it to me."

Felix crept silently around the stairs and stood at the threshold, listening.

"Did he? And why did he do that?" Charles asked, scanning the room for the plane.

"He doesn't like it anymore. And he gave it to me."

Felix's face burned. Idiot. Liar. His face broke, "She's a liar," and he ran to his father and buried himself in his side. "She's a liar," he said again.

How many days had come and gone before this one, Charles wondered, and how many more could there be? My two cubs, at each other's throats, he thought, as he watched Claire's face contort and redden, as she too began to cry. Charles cursed the plane. Claire had always been jealous of it, he knew. Was it a sin to favor one above the other? He reached for her, but she pulled herself away. There had been a day when

Charles too had cried in that room, when he watched his father cut the head off a chicken for the first time. He was caught now between the two of them. He could not hold them both at once. Is it the father's fate, he wondered, as he held Felix tight against him, to be at once the hero to whom the children come for help, and the root of their desperation?

Claire looked back at her brother, so fragile and small. How could he be better than me? The plane was still behind the wheel. She grabbed for it.

"Claire," Charles saw her emerge from under the truck with it in her hand. "Give that back to you brother right now." The hardness in his voice startled him. His children changed him, he felt it then for the first time, not just how he acted, but how he was, who he was. He gazed down at Claire like a judge, tall and cold behind the bench of his age, raising his life over theirs, more like a weapon than a gavel.

Felix shifted in his grasp to look at Claire, as she raised the plane high above her head. She did not see him. She was looking up. She didn't throw it. Instead, she let it drop from her hand, as to give it a chance to fly and save itself. As it broke against the floor, she looked at him.

## **A Picture of Mountains and Lightning**

In the months since she'd become pregnant with Rose, particularly now as her due date was just a week away, Emily had had to scale back her hours at the studio dramatically. She'd only that day stopped in by way of the doctor's office, to see how Ian was holding down the fort, and to retrieve her camera, which she wanted to have at home for when the baby came. Claire and Felix were spending the afternoon with the neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Quinn, who were very sweet people and had no children of their own, and so were always eager to take the kids for an hour or two here and there.

Winter meant family photos for Christmas cards, and the studio was inundated with images of smiling families in matching turtlenecks, lying on a lushly carpeted floor together in front of their faux fireplace, blemishes airbrushed away, smiles whitened like fresh snow. "Cameras the way they are now," Ian said, responding to a comment she made walking in about how quiet things seemed around the studio, "we're lucky to still get people coming in."

She liked Ian, because she knew that Ian disliked himself, that he hated the long, raised scar that cut down his right cheek; which was why he hid behind his camera, and wore day in and day out his grim mask of ennui. Best to draw attention to it, Emily had decided, to demystify it. Ian was a good friend, the kind of person Emily would have prayed for if she still prayed.

"The wives just like to come in for you."

"They come in because they don't know what to do with their family besides take pictures of it."

Emily snorted. She knew Ian lived alone in an apartment a couple blocks away and that he'd had problems with pills. When she came to Ovid she was shocked to find anyone with a serious interest in photography, but she was much more of a snob then. Ian wasn't as good with people, but he was a whiz behind a camera, even more-so on the computer, where Emily found she had precious little patience of her own.

Sometimes Emily tried to imagine Charles as an artist in his own way. Hadn't he told her that salesmanship was an art? It was a stretch to her. Perhaps there had been an art to it in another time, in his father's time even, but now everything was corporate; from what she gathered he hardly ever cut a deal of his own design, and there was a sickening amount of schmoozing—afternoon golf games, dinners, conferences—all of it seemed so vacuous and trivial. He didn't understand art, certainly not photography; he barely ever really looked at anything, and why should he? Everything he'd ever needed had been within the boundary of his family's land. What need was there to look for beauty in the world without the sense that something could be lost?

Whether or not she was aware of it then, part of her sensed that some day soon Charles would suggest she let Ian buy her out; and so she lingered about the office, sitting at her desk and idly checking dates marked on her calendar, comparing a pair of proofs that were, for all intents and purposes, identical. Across the street she watched an old woman carry a brown paper shopping bag to her car through the gray, salted slush. How could people live their whole lives in this place?

She had become familiar years ago, when she had Claire, with the guilt that went along with having children. But was it not enough that Charles had taken over her body,

and made her into this vessel for the perpetuation of the Pluto name; he had to have her soul as well?

It felt good to her to have a life other than her own burning inside her. When she was first pregnant with Claire, friends had told her she'd never feel so whole, which she resented. She refused to believe she needed a baby inside her to be a complete person. Instead it seemed to her like Charles was one and a half people, in a way—himself, and half the child inside of her, and so she felt almost hollowed out, emptied of some part of her. But that line of thinking always led her back to longing for the day the baby would come—its soft pink skin and scrunched up face, its tremulous breath—something like a cure.

On the wall beside her desk hung a photograph she'd taken of a thunderstorm in the Rocky Mountains. The mountains looked hard and lifeless, but defiant—jagged and gray—and a lightning bolt split the scene almost down the middle, like a spike driven into the earth from the clouds. She never used to worry about her soul. The woman she was then, when she took that picture on her long drive coming back East—twenty-something, would have shaken her head at the woman she was now.

Her hands were cracked and the dry paper of the calendar against her skin sent a chill up her spine. She didn't believe the world could ever end, but part of her almost wanted it to happen; it's no less than the world deserves, she decided. For what was the world to her, but a word? World News Tonight. War of the Worlds. The picture of the thunderstorm called to her through the years, through the miles and miles of America that separated these two versions of her—miles which seemed to her more like measures of lost time than of distance—back into a smaller, simpler world, when the long, seemingly

infinite horizon of her life was still a mystery, discernible only in bits and pieces between the many mountains that lay before her.

This child that turned and kicked inside her—how long could her dreams persist in the face of such a life? In many ways her children were Emily's great hope for the future; in them she buried all of her failures, in hopes that some day they would understand what had to be taken from her to bring them into this world. If they could keep free from doubt, and not care so much about every damned little disappointment, perhaps they could be truly happy. That was what she wanted most of all; for if her children grew into lives unhappy, then all her pain would be for nothing.

## Poems

## The Slow Death of the Tiger

I believe in my lifetime the tiger will at last be driven from the receding wild  
 from the sweaty green jungles and the underbrush under the withering canopy  
 and from the mud brown water and the reeds where it hid  
 out of the tall grass matted where it slept

to take up permanent residence in zoos to live a criminal life  
 pacing in a cell where people will crane their necks  
 amazed that such a thing could ever have existed in the wild  
 so beautiful the tiger is cursed with beauty

beauty has murdered the tiger it is still murdering it  
 there at the point where my vision  
 fails and becomes my imagination the last wild tiger is dead  
 and there at the horizon is the image of my life passing

our lives thinly are passing and so now the wild must forget the tiger  
 and we will commandeer the memory for it is we  
 who should keep the records we who have made language together  
 and may catalogue all accounts of our violence for posterity and because it is educational

what good is a world without tigers I ask you  
 what good is it to extinguish one by one the bright  
 still burning candles of our night in the forests and the wilderness  
 I feel myself being driven from the road into darkness

I am afraid of this man-made darkness  
 and I've decided I will never see a tiger  
 in the wild and have begun to grow  
 accustomed to my guilt

I want a tiger skin rug to lay before my fireplace  
 so I can lie on it and read books  
 and drink whiskey warm and happy childlike  
 representing leisure and good taste and breeding

I would read the best books  
 books in Latin leather bound books political tracts  
 at night I'd curl up like a cub under my baby grand where  
 Thelonious Monk taught the elephant tusk to sing

ah hell man I could never own a tiger skin rug I don't  
 have a fireplace my piano is digital a plastic Casio  
 I possess no great fortune so what is the point of this clutter?  
 or the tiger it is a bad thing to die completely

so why bother  
 kill the tiger that's something do I  
 take comfort in the fact that I yet live  
 while so much around me dies

where is there in a zoo for the tiger  
 to go to die? the corner of its cage  
 the spot of its birth  
 we are approaching here a history of the tiger

tiger domestication commences  
 humans build farms factories and pave roads  
 over the dark relics of its youth the sites  
 of its wild ritual life they will be recycled

am I no better than a zookeeper?  
 keeping a copy for posterity  
 no better than the tiger  
 sitting in its cage absurd icon of an aborted species

my jungle has a toll bridge dig there is no darkness  
 my jungle sparkles in the night and does not believe  
 in sleep motion has become a god we pray to  
 incidentally

I keep my cage near the reptile house  
 above the food court I paid my way  
 the apartments are laid out in a grid landscaped  
 each with a view of the big mud puddle in the back yard

my cage is overgrown my desk is in a constant  
 state of disrepair at night I watch television desperately  
 we need a new word  
 for *captive animal*

how will we tell them we are turning  
 tigers human? three square meals a day  
 maybe a job at the circus a nice lazy  
 retirement on a rock

how long will their weary bodies haunt the jungle?  
 how many hours of commercials will we waste on them  
 saying we can save them we won't and I am  
 right sick of hearing about it

the tigers have the bomb  
we gotta' get to 'em before  
they get to us we've come too far  
to let the holy city break apart

so what? do we preserve our slow descent  
into the low creaking bowels of history  
do we press on? without hope or humor discovering  
constantly the fruit of our failures

this cage in which I live  
I helped to build myself  
all around me I see the many  
self-built cages of my kind

## Two Paperweight Hands

moving, doubt and in  
time — a house

walking upright      inside

poverty a silk dress worn badly

closet of chance                      with       thin—fanged

in harmony

beside the center

of the surface

blush is the face  
of  
glass

## A Game of Chess with Mark David Chapman

he always sits the same way when  
 he's thinking his bent right arm rests  
 on the tabletop his hand holds his face  
     the way his mother might have before  
 she knew it titled up to  
 her own she  
     immortal in the playing out  
 of all the potential courses of his life

his left arm is on his hip and his body  
     cocks over that way his uniform  
     stretches over his shoulders tight so  
 water bounces right off it

he studies the board with a scowl  
     I think he wants to kill me

he dangles his knight above the table  
 in imitation of a general grave hovering over a map  
     is there a Beatles song throbbing in his brain?  
 I wonder as he takes my rook

he believes in things  
 he stays in the tower  
 because it isn't safe for him outside  
     he's a celebrity

the first few times we played  
 I was cruel I imagined the king  
 to be his first born I thought  
     there you son of a bitch  
     and sat tall the way a man sits  
     who does not know where he will die

but right now I'm  
 thinking he looks  
 rather like a costume of  
 waste incarnate  
     thrown over the body of a child  
 fingering a fallen knight  
 lying sideways  
 on the table

us guards we all practice our vengeance on him

these days I let him get closer  
tonight he is winning  
I consider throwing the game like  
some hero my shift is almost over

am I too weak to see  
what this might mean?

or is it nothing  
in the long  
unchanging script  
of nothing  
which passes for life

I raise my queen above the board  
like a dagger and he knows his doom  
Attica is the quicksand castle  
and it is mine—or at least I work here

thing is:

Mark and I are the caretakers of each other's  
squandered days our twilight years  
our profound boredom  
he is my life's work

he understands honor better than I do  
when the game is over  
we sweep the pieces from the table

I return the chessboard to the cabinet  
where it belongs and escort him  
to his cell where he tells me  
this is always the best part of my day

I imagine as he says this  
Dear Prudence playing in his ears  
on continuous loop

### **To Mom and Dad from the Moon**

How does it feel there  
under the tip of my finger?  
your dreams the idea of green  
though the mute empty leap of time

I never knew we were so close  
to the ocean blue and small little earth  
a bruise hung on a string  
above a crib can you feel my familiar  
arms stretch toward you mother father?  
from your little speckled seed I'm sure I am  
too young to sense the distance rightly  
to judge how you can how far from you I've flown

here on the moon I am an orphan  
I weigh almost nothing I float  
I jump and each time I wonder  
how close I've come to leaving

## God as Glassblower

the furnace glows  
bright orange a monster  
of brick and iron  
swollen and immovable and  
yet it breathes

a pair of withered hands  
work in there holding a long  
pole on the end of which  
a knob of glass softening  
beats like the infinitely  
chambered heart of its maker

who's face like a cracked  
and misshapen tile flares against  
the heat—watching the glass  
turning it and pivoting  
his pole—sending the glass into  
orbit around the furnace  
to bake and burn  
in the complete spectrum of its fire

he sees impurities burning off he  
sees the glass orb turn a solid  
yellow red like the color made  
by the flickering wings of some  
hummingbird that never lived—  
—perhaps later a glass hummingbird  
to hang in the window and catch  
the sun in morning

but now he pulls the orb  
from the furnace, and it is good  
so he mates his lips  
with the mouthpiece of the blower  
and breathes into it—and the world  
bulges and balloons  
he must be delicate

in his mind he sees the pattern  
the frenzied shapes scattered  
across its finished surface even the  
flecks of dust resting there he sees  
the entire life of his art this world  
perched on a shelf beside all the others

made and yet unmade

he whispers into the glass—"It is  
a strange fate to create"—and the glass  
bursts open and his words escape  
into the empty loft and he is ashamed

when the glass cools it hardens  
into the shape of those words  
the beautiful wound  
of a half opened flower

he places it at the back  
of the display case with the other  
failures behind a little  
piece of white paper pert deftly  
folded on which is written  
in dark black lettering  
a word: *outburst*

### **Celebration at the Inn**

“Clip my hair in the braids—stale, clustered academics,” said the balcony, to the chair, while the muse sang hymns that were a train inside a snow globe, like the one that shattered, and shattered the skull of the room, as our flaws drew circles on the ceilings. “I am so sorry,” said the alarm. We cried together, grandmothers in a pillow of flowers, endless funeral, and wiped our tears off with needles to the forehead of the magician sitting cross-legged on the floor, in the corner, drinking brandy, tasting blood, laughing and envying some woman who died in the seat of her potential. “Let’s spit on the whores chained down to the sidewalk,” said the lover, from heaven. Better yet, we made love and stuffed it in the freezer, to shatter later, with a homemade hammer.

## **The Rise of Rose**

no doubt  
 you are all here  
 to hear of the meteoric rise  
 of one of our very own

eager as you are  
 I'm sure  
 to shake off  
 the disappointment of  
     you know whom I mean

let us  
 forget her  
 forever

for now I will tell you  
 about Rose of whom  
 much has been written  
 in some of the very best papers  
 and also on the internet

yes, Rose!

girl who put the virgin  
 in Virginia the petter of injured cats  
 on the side of French road  
 pride of Butte, Montana

the crimson bootblack  
 girl of too many names you know her

the Iroquois  
 call her she who nods at acorns  
 but you know her as  
 Rosemary: gift of the Magi

girl who broke our hearts  
 and turned down  
 the marriage proposal of

former aristocrat  
 Stu Da Vinci  
     who became a poet  
     and sends her poems on the legs  
     of pigeons  
     from the drunk tank

the woman who smells like Helen

and grew up hard in the sidewalk crack  
 in front of the old library

you see her picture Rosie  
 who smiles in her sleep curator of old water  
 bottles isn't she strong? in college  
 they called her  
 Fencepost Jane and have all forgotten

she frowns at chocolates  
 typer  
 of word documents

are you aware she's left handed?  
 in Georgia she won the  
 southpaw peach-picking derby  
 miss peach basket  
     at work she was voted most likely to incur  
     unwanted sexual advances  
     from management but she'll  
     own the company some day

in a minute I will tell you about her

Fencepost Rose  
 and her meteoric rise

soon you'll see her name

in letters  
 so big  
 they blot out the sun

## Strange Fire

King Saul burnt down his own throne with strange fire

fire    licks the auger's

circlet feet

Samuel, altar    nomologic

nom olos olo mon

Say

Isaac

Ready (bound)

to die for the mind of God

**Day Before Sunday**

we fetch  
    wood—on Saturday  
a face  
    enough—to warm us each  
in slow  
    fire—we stay, alive  
a while  
    persist—the mass of smoke  
ascends  
    fixed—our kneel defers  
to scratch  
    afford—to eat, and sleep  
delay  
    hush—a cinder fell  
imposed  
    a heat—unnatural  
with hands  
    born—of need, we pray

## Imbalance

1.

plywood covers the windows of the burnt brick shack  
on Haddon Avenue things spend their entire lives  
living in dust black soot trim around the frames red  
eyeliner on a hideous face what silence  
still moves in those vacant rooms?

in winter snow  
blows through and coats the fireplace  
where once maybe fifty years ago a family sat and  
listened to the Phillies on the radio the snow  
settles into little piles the family is gone

summer birds make nests in the rafters a sparrow  
in the dining room a cardinal in the kitchen  
chicks chirp and decorate the gaunt rooms with their  
movements is the last masterpiece of the baby sparrow  
the sound of undeveloped wings beating against the air?

is the promise of flight  
enough  
to risk a fall? if the bottom falls out  
they keep falling a soft thump  
against a wooden floor

2.

miles up the road Collingswood unfolds  
along the grey stem of Haddon Avenue green petals  
yellow buds of lights hung on strings  
above its streets wine glasses soft white  
fingers plates of steaming ziti mouth-  
-stinging bowls of curry roadside jazz

Somebody says,  
“Imagine, this same road runs right through Camden.”

might the Delaware River winds that bray  
through its burnt-out windows stir what sleeps  
inside? the latent persisting echo of a human heart

**Futurist Manifesto**

we are the machine that breathes  
    in orgiastic waves  
to the lip of all there is  
    a cornucopia of lights  
we admit nirvana  
    is the point of science  
we destroyed ourselves  
    completely and we are perfect  
shivering beads of energy alive  
    along the curved black pane of the void

am I the one who asks the question?  
    or the one to whom the question is addressed?  
the ontological dilemma drops away  
    when you become immortal  
time is demystified  
    demoted to the level of weather  
our stomachs are full of little  
    metal bugs our stomachs  
are not ours alone pain is impossible  
    we solved the riddle of art with math

imagine running your fingers  
    through a pool of blue water  
your voice  
    from far away  
these are your thoughts  
    this: your history  
the water breaks between your fingers  
    your life opens like a sea  
before you you stride across the surface  
    of that water like a god