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Elysium

A Novel by Darren Bulhak

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.

Mentor: Fred Reynolds

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A Novel by Darren Bulhak

*Please note, this is 109 pages of a larger project in which multiple characters, perspectives, and other techniques are interwoven to tell a story of family, love, loss, and survival. It's tragic and redemptive, forceful and alive. It challenges ideas of emotional and physical distress, family bonds, sacrifice, life, death, and rebirth.

To my wife and son...for everything.

~

A special thanks to the dedicated faculty, mentors, and inspired writers of the City College of New York, especially Fred Reynolds and Linsey Abrams, for their support and guidance.

CONTENTS

<i>Instinct</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Billy</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Penny</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Afterlife</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Walter</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Sally</i>	<i>101</i>

Instinct

He fights. For love and for hate.

He fights for sunshine and storm. Life. Death. He fights with his fingers curled, his thumbs pressed over knuckle. The meaty part of his fist creased with the wrinkle of river and rail. Fights with the smog of industry in his lungs, the dirt of want in the pockets of his skin.

He fights with the anger of armies and the innocence of first breath. He forces the air out of his nose and grinds his molars smooth. Fights with his fists, forearms, and elbows, biceps and shoulders, legs, eyes, soul.

He fights. Focus. Intention. Survival. He is movement and force. Liquid rushing forward. He is the stiffness of death fastened in earth. The purple bruise that fades yellow over time. Bones splintering and healed

stronger. Muscle tearing from tendon. Congealed blood. Huffing beast, seen and unseen, heard, felt. There. Everywhere. A shadow. A mountain. Skyscraper stretching into sky. Hardening steel. Always rising. Rising still. Eternal. Cursed by devils. Blessed by the Almighty. Always searching. Seeking. Tending to wounds. Ocean of tears.

He doesn't stop. He's always searching. Always pressing forward, wanting more.

He doesn't quit. Can't quit. Won't quit.

He fights. He fights still.

There were times when he wanted to stop. Fear, mostly. Or the fear that spread across the faces of those he wanted to protect. The moments when he wasn't around were what panicked him. The absence stirred him in sleep, kept him awake for days.

He remembers the sight of a crow tearing at a litter of kittens. Tufts of black fur carried by the wind across packed snow. High-pitched mews fading into the chatter of beak and bone. A mother returning with a plump mouse squeezed between her fangs. Then, the quiet panic. Stillness. The sorrow filling her eyes. The feverish licking, the tentative, twitchy movement, each sound flattening her to earth. The fur on her back rising, doubling her size. Her ears pinned back. Her damn eyes.

At night he'd hear the moaning. A low, deep growl. He wondered if it would ever stop, if she would ever sleep again. He'd open the window at night, and cry with her. He wanted to make sure the animal knew it wasn't all alone. In the morning he'd wake and listen for it. And just as sure as the sun would rise, it was there.

The first movements were spastic, sudden. He'd strike at his pillow, wake himself from the dark of sleep. Over time, it became expected. The pounding. The repetition. The need to feel impact, create sound, break silence. The pounding turned ritualistic. Two fists flying through air. The wind created when his arms coiled back. The tension in his musculature, blood filling, spreading across the spaces inside. Skin tightening, stretching across the angle of bone. The spark of neuron activating movement. Release. Instinct.

With time it became as necessary as food or water. Didn't matter who or what was in the way. He'd wrap his hands or leave them raw, skin turning to leather. He'd strike at everything, at nothing. In the openness of field and forest. In the constriction of closed space, the inability to freely move, the need to improvise, always finding a way out of the darkness of incapability.

He'd strike to fill voids, to eliminate fear or happiness.

There were times when he was watched. By birds and squirrels. By a passing fox, a deer. Dogs would bark at his staccato movements, bite at the air around them. They would chase lazily at their tails, curl into themselves, fall asleep watching. They'd dream of him turning his fists at the wrist, all in opposition of each other, left, right, up, down. The pivots, the shuffling, the exaggeration, the waltz. They'd wake to him taking in breath, hear the pitter-patter of sweat falling to ground. Sometimes the animals would gather in clusters as if to justify his existence. They'd watch each other watching him, and then fly closer, walk closer, sniff at the ground, at the air.

It wasn't about hurting. It was always about being hurt. The evolution of pain into something less than pain. It was about trimming the distance between earth and sky, moon, and sun. About reaching for it, trying to find it, trying to get it, trying to hold onto it forever.

He knew it would sustain him. He expected it to kill him, to stop his heart, so that it might one day beat again.

The moaning eventually faded into the scratch of determination. The mother cat gathering stray sticks and leaves, nesting. She, pawing at the earth, lifting her head toward the treeline. In the shadow of dusk, he watched her watch him. He watched her pupils dilate. Watched her move through the shrubs and the trunks like spilled ink. She lengthened her body

up against an oak, stretching, reaching, driving her claws down the length of bark.

In the morning he woke to find her missing. He finished his routine and was wet and huffing. He walked around her shelter, bent at his knees, looked inside. When he turned, she was at his feet with the crow in her mouth, an explosion of black and feather. Her white fangs, the green of her eyes, shutting, squeezing, wrenching away hurt, breaking bone.

Billy

Sometimes I wish I could tell Bob all those things I never told him when we were kids. But Bob wouldn't have wanted it that way. He was too busy fighting for us, for me. He'd take those mitts and rub my head and cover my mouth and tell me quiet down while holding me to his chest. We'd listen to Pop cursing in the den at night at his demons, at nobody. Can't beat what you can't touch, I suppose. Bob took the smaller bed in the smaller room. Said if I couldn't stretch my legs, I'd never grow as big as him. Made me laugh, too. Seemed like nobody would ever be as big as my brother. Shoot, his hand was near the size of my head. And even when he wasn't around, I'd look up when I thought of him. Weirdest thing was his shadow disappeared it took up so much space. Maybe I just never looked hard enough.

Pop was too busy sipping his homemade hooch to listen to anyone, even Bob. Got tangled in it. We'd fall asleep to the shatter of glass and the muffled moans of a man who sounded more like a beast fighting to escape something. Maybe he was trying to dig a hole to get out of our house, or town, Pennsylvania. Or he was just trying to be heard. Sometimes Bob would come into my room on worse nights and I'd pretend to be sleeping. I knew it was him, though. No shadow. I'd hear him breathing or whispering. I'd hear him talking about warmth and safety, heaven and Mama. Sometimes it sounded like singing. Looking back, I guess it was a lullaby. My lullaby.

Mama died when I was born. She never made it out of the hospital. Lost more blood than she could get back. That's the easy way to explain it. I was wrapped in a bundle made of cotton so thin that I could feel the winter coming. It was early September, but I swear I remember. My body so wrinkly and pink and small, it looked like I was the neglected runt of a litter of stray dogs. I was all sounds and grunts, trying to find my way to the surface to breathe. Bob carried me home. He was only eight, but looked sixteen. He said I looked just like Mama. I swear I remember that, too. Pop didn't come home for a couple nights. The hospital sent Bob with

enough instruction for me. Enough supplies to last for a bit. Some formula, and diaper rags. Blankets and bottles. But he had instinct, and maybe that's all you needed to get released back then. He was the only one there.

Mama was the only woman Pop ever loved, he swore to God. Maybe he was trying to find her. As if the whole thing was just a misunderstanding. I'd like to think Mama kissed me, and said things to me that only mamas say, before she left, but I'm not sure. For years, I would go by the big lake near school and sit at the edge and listen to the breeze and pretend it was her talking. I'd look into the water and hope to see something—a figure beneath the surface, or her hands reaching up—but only the curious fish and turtles would gather, and then swim off again, disappointed it seemed. My fingers hitting the water would disrupt the stillness and reflection. Everything would bounce and shiver, until time would settle it along with most of my thoughts. Sometimes the clouds looked like they were dancing and I'd lie on my back with my arms knotted under my head and think of her lifting and swinging me around her, never losing contact with my skin, my eyes, my heart. I'd close my eyes and listen, though. To the birds, and that breeze. To the water lapping lazily against the shore. I'd try and find her voice in the emptiness. I'd try

to find her in the trees and the spaces in between objects. Or where the sky met the horizon. Or when I'd run down frostbit hills with my arms spread wide. I'd try.

Our boxy brick home outside Pittsburgh was too big for the three of us, especially after Mama died. People used to say it's the only house in the neighborhood that looked like it was frowning. On clear days, though, it seemed like you could see the Atlantic. Bob liked to stay inside his room mostly. I liked to stay as close as I could to Bob, followed him like a duckling. I guess that makes sense, too. He was the first person my eyes met, besides Mama. Our house sat on a hill. Everything sloped and slid and seemed to want to get away.

On warm evenings after Pop fell unconscious, I'd hear Bob walk down the stairs outside and watch him from my window, staring at the night. Sometimes he would just stand still as a tree, firm, thick. Other times he would slice his arms through the darkness swatting, it seemed, at everything imaginable. Striking the moon, the wind, the stars. I'd swear he was like a stalking panther, becoming a part of whatever it was out there. Of nature, or something. Humbled by all of it. Hidden, but there. I should have realized it back then that Bob was going to become the fighter and protector, a part of that pleasure and pain. His hands were built for it. He

walked like a hiccup and, for a boy his size, he moved with boundless grace. He was silent and gentle. A ghost. And if he weren't my brother, I'd swear he was one. His trips outside at night became regular. Didn't matter it was raining or snowing, steamy or dry. He'd come into my room after, and I'd hear him breathing, long and deep. He'd watch me pretending to sleep while his sweat patted the wood floor. Or maybe it was his heart pounding beneath his ribcage, still fighting, that I heard. He didn't know I was watching him early on like that. Exposed. But I couldn't look away. His actions, his dance, was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

On mornings when Pop was still asleep dreaming of brown rivers, Bob and I would play in the yard. We'd always eat our eggs and toast, never left a crumb. He said we needed a good breakfast so our bodies and minds could react if they needed to. He also said if your stomach was growling, you weren't doing something right, that your body was trying to tell you something and to shut it and listen. Mine never made a peep with my brother lurking about. He seemed to know before I did, often throwing a banana or an apple or a buttered roll, saying, *Just eat it*. And I did. I think he was worried about me growing proper. Where Bob seemed to grow everywhere, the only thing that grew on me was the curly brown hair

on my head. He tried not to look too worried, but I could tell a lot from an expression.

We'd play catch and tag, mostly. Sometimes we'd play hide-and-seek, which I loved because I'd always hide in the hardest of places to find. He'd get so worked up sometimes, screamed and got red in the face. I'd say, *Up here*, or *I'm over here, brother*, and he'd run to me like he was about to tell me the greatest secret. But his eyes would be sick and red with worry. And I swear I could hear that same heart trying to get out of his chest. He'd wipe his brow, beaded with sweat, and say, *You're too good at that. Don't ever get too far from me. Hear?* I'd tease him and punch him in the meaty part of his thigh, but it ended up hurting my hand more than it did his trunk of a leg.

The times we were running and chasing each other or throwing that scuffed football were my favorite. We'd talk little, didn't need much talking. Our town seemed most peaceful then. Just a few crows calling out to each other, or the distant sound of a train running through to the west. In summer the leaves seemed to clap for us when the breeze took them. In winter the sky looked like blooming ice. Fall was my favorite, though. The ground smelled like mud and apples. The night looked spilled with stars. We'd sit on our porch after and talk about where the trains might be going.

I'd say that they were heading to California to get the sun back. He'd grab me closer, and whisper in my ear that we were going to both put our feet in the foamy Pacific and play in the sand. *Promise that, hear?* he'd say. Bob laughed like a man who was trying to cough up something, or swallow it back down, I could never really tell. Made my insides hurt to hear it until I had to pee, which I'd do around the corner of our house on a dying Honeysuckle. *Watering the flowers again?* he'd say, still laughing. *If we had them I'm sure they wouldn't mind a drink!* I'd holler back.

Our house started to fade and crack shortly after Pop lost his job at the factory. Steel had been in his blood, and his daddy's before that. His hands looked like the thing he created, cold, hard. He was real crafty with things, too. Used to be able to bring things back, give them a once over and they'd work like new. Even gave Bob and me a bicycle for Christmas one year that looked familiar, but we never said much about it. We rode the heck out of that thing and, every time it bent or chipped or lost its shine, Pop would go to the shed out back and come out only when it was ready, smiling between a stunted cigarette. Months later we found out that the bike belonged to a colored boy the next town over, so Bob gave it back to him and said it was used well and that he was sorry. The kid must have

really believed in God then. He could barely say thanks or nod his head. Maybe he saw the same thing I see in Bob.

Pop had been sipping on that clear homemade stuff more than he should, and fell asleep one day when he was tinkering with something in the shed. His cigarette dropped from his mouth and ignited a gasoline-soaked rag that had fallen to the floor. Minutes later the shed was a bed of flames. Everything seemed to want to burn hard and fast. Bob saw the smoke and grabbed Pop under the arms and flung him outside. Pop's hands were ribbons of flesh. He never felt a thing. Was on his knees holding a picture of Mama. Never said a word to Bob. Never worked again.

I found some of Mama's jewelry in the attic one day, a golden necklace with a pearl in the center, and a red-colored ring that looked prettier than the moon. Pop was out on a binge, and Bob was too busy finding a way to keep the Patterson boys together. I slipped the ring on first, and it was just loose enough to fit over my thumb. I hung the necklace from my neck, surprised at the weight. I didn't know gold could be so heavy. Didn't see much of it, really. I'd like to think the pearl came from somewhere as pretty as Mama, maybe deep in the ocean near some unknown island, where the blue turned purple the deeper you went, and

everything was silent and still. It was so shiny, so perfect. I'd lie on the floor and close my eyes and wait to hear or feel her. But the quiet made me sleepy, and I'd rest there until I could think about other things. Time moved forward like that for us for some time. Pop never stopped drinking. Bob never stopped growing, swinging, protecting. And I watched and waited for her to come back, but she never did.

By the time I was seven, and only an inch bigger than I was just a few years earlier, I knew things were going to worsen. I'd never have that spurt of growth Bob kept whispering about. Never could run as fast or throw as far as the others in school or the neighborhood. He kept saying I was the lucky one and pointed to his short pants and his ill-fitted shoes. Kept repeating, *At least you got Mama's looks. Her way.* Bob said *way* like he said *amen*, urgent. Guess Mama didn't leave me with nothing. Gave me a fragile, pretty face, and a small frame.

"Bob," I'd say looking up at him. "She ain't ever going to come back here, is she?"

"Isn't," he'd say, always finding a way to fix me. "But she's always with us, you know."

"Where?"

“Here,” he’d say, pointing to his chest. “And here,” pointing to his temple.

“It’s all my fault, Bob. I did this to her.”

“Don’t you talk like that. Ever,” he’d say, grabbing my shoulders and bringing me closer. “Don’t you go talking like that to nobody.”

“But if I hadn’t been so much trouble—”

“Shut it, Billy. Listen to me and listen to me good. It ain’t your fault. None of that. You go ahead and get that out of that mind of yours. Those doctors tried as best they could. They said it to me. Told me that you had nothing to do with it, and it was just one those things that happens. Said you were a fighter, and weren’t supposed to make it either, but did. You remember that, Billy. Don’t matter how big you are on the outside. You fought to get here. And you did it. You already won,” he said.

Bob grew into a man before men usually do. At sixteen he was a touch over six feet and growing wider with each meal. His forearms were thicker than tires, his legs like steel cable. His clothes strained under the expanse of his back. Those hands resembled meat hooks. Bob had kind,

knowing eyes, and the expression of someone who was always about to tell you something interesting. But people walked to the sides of the street when he passed, like he carried a curse. Maybe they knew he was Pop's boy, and didn't want any of that to disrupt their day. Maybe they knew what happened to Mama, and didn't know what to say. Bob started to turn gray when he was fifteen. Looked like the hair of an old man. But Bob wasn't past his prime. He was just getting started.

My skin was paler than boiled milk. I had perfectly round freckles that gathered at the bridge of my nose. And, Bob was right. The pointy nose was hers. My eyes were hers. My face, hers. Everything, hers. I looked younger than I was, and often was given treats—cookies mostly—that toddlers get when they are unruly or disobedient. I was slight and low in muscle. And no matter how hard I worked at it, my body wouldn't listen. Some nights I tried to stretch as high and as wide as I could. Nearly pulled the arms out of my sockets doing so. Bob would knock on the wall and say, *Only sleep will make things go quicker*. He must have been a great sleeper, when he wasn't fluttering about in the yard at night.

I woke up one evening and heard Bob climbing the stairs. I'd fallen asleep on the floor watching him outside and didn't know how much time

had passed. But the floor shook when he lumbered towards his room so I followed him in, dazed.

“Get to bed, Billy,” he said before I could open my mouth. “Now.”

Bob had blood streaking down his right eye and, from the looks of it, his knuckles were a jumbled mess. He smelled like beer and smoke and strangers.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Got us some grocery money,” he said before closing the door and shutting the light, and surrendering to the arriving sun. “Get to bed.”

The next morning Bob was washing in the bathroom, wincing when he dabbed the split skin on his hands.

“Where did you go last night, Bob?” I asked, staring at the dried blood he couldn’t see on the back of his thighs. My stomach turned.

“Ain’t important,” he said.

“Yeah, well I want to know cause it looks like you run into a wall.”

“Went to Irish. Got in a scrap. Got some cash,” he said.

Irish was the pub where most of the workers went before and after their shifts at the factories. It always seemed to be filled with smoke and tension. Most times patrons never spoke a word to each other, nursing

their beers and smoking mercilessly. Seemed to hold up the bar with the weight of their elbows and knees. Other times, when the wind blew right, you could hear the hollering from across the river. Irish Bar and Food also had bare-knuckled fights on Thursdays. It was supposed to be a secret, caused too much ruckus, but word got around town just like it always did, fast and without concern. They had a back room filled with bottles and motor parts. Barflies cleared the center of the room so that the men fighting could have some space to dismantle each other. They'd bet on who would win or lose. They'd bet who'd swallow their tooth first, or forget their name, or that they were just factory men and not Mazeroski. A dollar here, a couple of coins there. Most times they'd just sit and watch for the fun of it. Men pummeling each other until they couldn't. Men crying out in anguish and in ecstasy. Men praying and begging. Most exciting thing that happened in these parts in a while. You could feel the heat off of Irish pulse even in mid-December when the freeze was terrible. Men would come in with all the troubles from work or home, sip some suds, and try to show their manhood when the drinking and talking took a turn from friendly to fierce. But the place had a pulse on fight night. It breathed.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You heard me, Billy. I’m fine. Don’t say a word to Pop,” he said.

“Swear it,” I said.

He looked at me like it was the first time, all concern and caution.

“I promise, Bob. Cross my heart,” I said. But my heart filled with worry. Another trait I got from Mama, I learned. I wanted to grab Bob and run away on one of those trains to California, and forget everything about where we were and why we were. I figured Mama wouldn’t have wanted us to spend the rest of our lives here, especially when California promised sunshine and possibility. At least that’s what I figured. We ate well for the next few days and I slept heavily, dreaming of the Pacific.

The cuts and bruises on Bob seemed to lessen as the weeks and months went on. Some nights when he stumbled home, he’d wait until sunrise, shadowboxing in the dark. I don’t know where he’d find the energy. Told me that some of the fights lasted longer than he’d like. Came in one time with a nose that didn’t stop bleeding. Said Donovan’s eldest hit him with a cheap fist he never saw coming. Big John was twenty-six with legs like tree trunks and a head like the rear end of a car. His forearms

looked they swallowed stones. Bob said the fight lasted close to two hours and that he finally laid Big John out with a blow to his body that made him squeal. Big John peed blood for the next week and never fought again. Rumor had it that he left Pennsylvania for Ohio to find a new way of being. Bob came home with a broken nose and a headache that lasted for five days. But he won close to twenty dollars that night. We ate steak that night and for the next three after. He was only sixteen.

Pop asked Bob where he'd gotten the food one night. Got real angry, too. Took Bob out in the back and gave him a few blows with some rebar to his shins. Never noticed that Bob's eyes were the color of poppies. Bob couldn't walk right for a couple of weeks. Pop said it ought to be a lesson, but it never stopped Bob. He told me as long as he had breath that he'd fight so I wouldn't have to. Said we needed to eat and get bigger than everything. Even joked that he'd have to be twice as fast with his fists because of his limp. I told him to be careful every chance I got, but he would just hold my mouth so I wouldn't be able to talk, and then kiss me on the forehead.

Truth is, Bob must have enjoyed it. I always wanted to know what it was that kept him going. Wanted to see if there was something about making another man surrender that was somehow like running in an open

field in June with the wind whistling in your ear. Wanted to know what it was like to be brave and strong since I was neither. I'd watch Bob disappear in the distance, never turning back or second-guessing, and wanted to know what it was like to be so sure of something that you were willing to break for it. Mama would be proud of him. He'd walk out into the night, awkward, and for the first time one September evening when the moon looked like it would burst, I saw his shadow trailing after him. It was the first time I knew he was real.

I wonder what he liked most. If it was the actual feeling of winning something, or the knowledge that he was doing the thing the Lord meant for him to do. Maybe it was a little of both. I think he liked the uncertainty of it all. Not knowing if you were going to be awake at the end of it, or remember where you were. Not knowing for sure if the pain was the most pleasurable, or if the darkened corners of Irish, and then McFadden's, and then Piotr's Polonaise Room, made Bob disappear for a little while. I wonder if the darkness was comforting and, in the midst of all the hollering and fighting, he found light. Bob became a part of the darkness, then. Among the drunkards and tough guys, he became a prince and then king, all the while never sipping any of the free offerings they would bring to him. Grown men would hoist him on their shoulder and he'd accept, but

never say a word about how it felt to be up there above it all. I always asked him late at night when he walked by my room. But that was his, and his alone.

Bob also became an enemy of most. Grown men would weaken at, get frustrated by, that weakness. Those who lost, vowed revenge. And if it wasn't them, it was their brother or their father or their drunkard cousin that would step up to the challenge. All men. All bigger and older than Bob. All with something to prove. Bob's mythic rise followed him wherever he went. It was a sickness he couldn't shake. And when they couldn't find any weakness in his armor, they eventually sought out the weakness in mine.

After a while, Bob seemed possessed. The more he was hated or feared, the more he withdrew from himself, from me. I'd still read him those stories that would take us to those magical places together, but he'd be out there somewhere, not on the wings of my words, but alone, distant. I'd try to keep him with me, though. If I could hold him down and tie him to me, I would. If I had magic in my hands, I would take away the cuts and bruises, the lumps and the pain. But my arms were too short. I was too weak. I couldn't prevent Bob from going. Some things you just have to let go.

One cool, rainy night when he didn't come home, I grabbed a coat and headed for Irish. I hated Pittsburgh on nights like that. Seemed the sun would never get to come up, like it too was hiding from this part of God's Earth, like it knew something we didn't know. Truth is, it felt drab and cold most nights. I couldn't ever get warm in my bed. Slept with a wool cap until summertime. My hands always shook. So I'd ball them into small fists and wedge them between my thighs like two cold river rocks. Doctors said I had the shivers when I came out of Mama, like I never wanted to leave her stomach. Maybe they were right.

I found Bob slumped in the side alley of Irish, knees to his chest. He was missing a shoe. Rain was falling around us, and the metal shed next to the bar seemed like it was playing a one-note song. By the time I got there I was soaked and cold and knew a vicious flu would eventually surface. I ran to him, shouted out his name. I was afraid to come closer when he didn't hear me, feared the worse.

"Bob!" I shouted.

He lifted his finger and hugged his knees.

"Best get home, now," he said. His voice was funny.

“But, Bob. You all right?”

He leaned over on an elbow, like he was out in the beach somewhere. Ran a bloody hand through his wet hair. I could tell he had been crying.

“Miss her,” he said.

I crept over to him. His shirt was torn, and his other arm was wrapped in a tablecloth. His fingers looked stiff and fake, like they belonged to someone else. I grabbed his arm and he took in a fast breath. I didn’t know where to touch him, so I grabbed his giant head and sat on the muddy ground and let him rest it on my thigh. His face had swelled so badly on one side, I didn’t know where his eye was supposed to be.

“Six to one,” he said. “Not fair.”

“No. Not fair,” I said.

Rain continued to fall around us. The sky lifted to a lighter shade of gray. I held his head and made sure the blood wouldn’t pool near his bad eye. Held him like that for several hours until the rain became a drizzle, and then a mist. I suppose we both fell asleep on the backside of Irish, but it didn’t matter. This was the closest to home we’d ever be.

When he woke, Bob grimaced and made his way to his feet. I could hear his bones cracking awake. He steadied himself along the brick wall, and reached a hand for me. Lifted me up like I was magnetic.

“Can’t say we never went camping now, can we?” he said.

I smiled and hugged his side.

“Usually there’s a tent,” I said.

“And marshmallows,” he said.

Bob reached into his pocket. Had trouble getting past the small opening with his busted hands. He motioned for me to dig into his pocket.

“Get all of it,” he said. “Get to the butcher and stock up, Billy. Then get some groceries at Milton’s; the usual, milk, eggs, soap. You know better than me what we need. Get all of it. Hurry up, now. You must be hungry. Then get home and take a hot shower and get the blankets from your bed and put them in mine and get some rest. Stay there until I get home. You ain’t getting sick on account of me now.”

I felt the wet bills. Had to be over a hundred dollars worth of wadded up wetness in there.

“You won, Bob?”

“Go ahead now, Billy. Early bird catches the worm.”

Pop held it together as best he could. Truth is, I think he saw Mama in me, and wanted to hold on to the possibility for a while. He came back after the second night I was born, with a crib he made out of a fallen oak tree, and a table to change me on. It's still in the garage. Didn't catch fire. Every now and then I'd go out there and finger the wood, feel the knots in it, wonder how I could have slept without her feeding me, or singing to me, whispering. He tried being a good father, but the bottle made him turn after a few years of the same. Of Mama not walking through the door. But I reminded him of her every time I was hungry or tired. Heck, I'd feel the same way if I were him. Pop was lanky but had the same muscles that popped underneath his clothing that Bob did. He had Bob's eyes, and was to blame for Bob's early graying hair. Pop's was slicked back with grease, and he always rolled the sleeves of his shirt, making him look like a factory worker even when he wasn't. He'd go on smoking binges, too. Carried one or two spares behind his large ears, just in case he ran low. Looked like a dog that might turn either way, with his eyes. Those unnatural brown eyes, friendly and fearsome all at once. Never seemed to blink and, when he did, it was only to fall asleep. But

Pop was only with one woman in his life. Never even mentioned our Grandmom to me and Bob. It was always your Mama this, and your Mama that. And then when Mama wasn't, he just stopped speaking about the past, and never seemed to mention a future. Pop would go out back and drink his homemade. Come back red in the face, and mumbling. He'd come back with junk coming out of his nose and bloodshot eyes, like he'd been crying for years. He'd break stuff in the garage. Take a bar of steel and smash whatever was there. One day I'd heard the racket out back, sounded like a bad one. I remember the splintering of wood. Heard Pop curse, and call out for Mama, over and over again. I walked out back when he drove off in his truck, expecting to find my crib broken in pieces, but it was right where I'd seen it last, untouched. Perfect.

I think Pop tried to find his heaven in that liquid he made out back. That somehow, someday, he'd get to her, just like I'd been trying to get to her all these years. Find Mama on that liquid river, waiting for him on the banks with a flowing dress and a smile stretching across her face. Waiting for him to pick her up. She'd give him a kiss on his hollow cheek and ask where he'd been all this time, while clearing away a few stray strands of oily hair from his eyes. He'd whisk her back home, and get back to the

way he should have been, all those promises he must have said to her while I was trying as best I could not to interrupt. I must have grabbed onto her heart too tight from the inside. Took the life out of it or something. Squeezed the wrong parts. Held on for too damn long. Pop tried for a while. For a while, he tried. I don't blame him. I don't blame him. I don't.

“Whatcha reading there, Billy?” Bob said.

He came into my room one morning, had been out late the night before. A fresh set of bumps and cuts marked his face. His left eye was starting to turn blue. He still had that limp from Pop. He rested at the edge of my bed, and it sank when he sat.

“About a boy who could fly and could go to this place, Neverland,” I said.

“Is that near Pittsburgh?” he said.

“Afraid not,” I said.

Bob reached for the book and held it in his hands. He flipped through the pages like he was looking for something specific. Then handed it back to me.

“Ever read it?” I said.

“Don’t think I got to that one,” he said. “Any good?”

“It’s wonderful,” I said.

I held the book close to my chest and closed my eyes. It smelled musty and ripe, like the woods. Reading came easy for me. I remember knowing how to say words before I should of. Remember just knowing them and what they meant. I thought all kids knew how, and that it was something you were born with, like brown hair, or freckled skin. Took to books because they took me all over, to places I’d never heard of or would ever be. Would get lost in them. Read them from cover to cover and, when I was done, started again from the beginning. Never said anything about it to anyone, except Bob. He was the only one who knew why I’d talk about funny things all the time. Bob didn’t know too much about some of the things I was reading, so I’d share it with him, like it was a secret only he’d understand. Felt like I was giving him a gift or something. That by giving this part of myself to him was like giving him a million hugs, or connecting him back to me when he’d get lost in the darkness. He’d listen, too. No matter how rough the night was, he’d curl into a giant ball at the end of my bed and give me his attention. I think he liked going to the

places I went to when I read him those words. I think he liked the sound of my voice, or the expression I made when parts were real interesting. How I'd hush my voice and get real quiet, and then explode at just the right parts. Made him jump sometimes. I think it made him feel closer to life.

"Whatcha thinking about, Billy?" he said.

"Neverland," I said.

"What's it like?" he said,

"Don't really know," I said. "But seems like a pretty great place.

Has pirates, and Indians, and you never really grow up, and get to do all sorts of neat things."

"Everybody?" he said.

"Yup, everyone," I said.

"How do you get there?" he said.

"Well, need some fairy dust and good thoughts, I suppose," I said.

"Hey, you know what? Peter Pan reminds me of you a little."

"Really? Why's that, Billy?"

"Only a small little guy, but he isn't scared of nobody. He's got that thing inside. He could fly and was a leader to a group of kids called the

Lost Boys, and he fought a bad man named Captain Hook. Chopped his hand off in a swordfight, Bob! He's the bravest."

Bob rested his hand on my leg and drew in a deep breath.

"Shoot, Billy. I'm scared all the time," he said. "You've got to know that."

"No you aren't," I said. "You're the bravest person I know. Hands down, isn't anyone in this wide world that can tell me different."

"Well, what if I said you were," he said. "That you were the strongest, bravest, person I'd ever met. And all those cowards I take out at Irish or wherever aren't going to ever go as far as you. That's God's honest truth."

The room filled with silence and heat. "Read me the first line, Billy," he said.

I opened the book to the first page and cleared my throat. "All children, except one, grow up," I said.

"I like this one already," Bob said.

"We gonna ever get to where we need to get to, Bob? I said. "To a place like Neverland?"

“Shh,” he said. Bob reached for my face with his thick fingers and covered my mouth. His thumb ran along my cheek. I could smell the night on his fingertips. I could taste it on the blood that dried on his palm. “Read me this story, Billy. Start from the beginning.”

I was ten, and Bob was eighteen, when Pop died. He caught a terrible cough shortly after the fire in the garage. Found blood in the sink one morning after I'd heard him in there. He tried to clean it away, but he didn't get all of it. Some had splattered next to the toilet and it made a shape that looked like a crescent moon. Doctors couldn't really say what it was that killed him, but I think it was the realization that he couldn't get Mama back, no matter how much he swore or prayed or broke or drank. Hell, seems to me he was racing to get to Mama all along. It happened fast, too. Last thing he said to us was that he was going to pick up some cigarettes and that we should clean the dishes and get to bed before he got back. Actually thanked Bob for cooking the roast, though it came out more like a swear and a cough.

Pop was taken to St. Luke's hospital at the end of a stormy week in spring 1965. By the time we got to his hospital bed, he was already leaving us. Flashes of lightning made his face glow in between the darkness. Pop never looked like he was in pain, though. Took it like a man who expected it all along. Never blinked. The doctors had to shut his eyes for him. He never looked so peaceful, rested. Bob walked to his side before he left, and whispered something in his ear. Brushed the hair off his forehead and leaned in real close. Pop made a fist that crumpled the sheet but then released it, like he was letting something fall out of his hand. Bob motioned for me to join him near Pop, so I did. Pop turned his hand over and we held onto his fingers as he went. I swear I felt him squeeze.

Bob liked talking about Mama mornings after getting our grocery money. He'd talk like he was talking to her, alone. He'd go to another place with his eyes and he'd rub his hands together, like he was expecting a hot meal. Got real quiet with it, like if he spoke too loudly he'd lose the thought forever. I'd watch and take it in. Felt I knew Mama best that way, by looking into Bob's eyes. It was like she was there with us, lying in my bed between us, holding us. He'd just speak. I never had to ask. *She's got*

the touch of warm grass in July. She looks through you, Billy. Mama smiles crooked like this. Her fingers squeeze your wrists like this when she is concerned, and like this when she's mad, and like this when she wants you to know you are hers. If she knows you're lying, she'll grab your shoulders and bring you close to her face and look at the lie wedged in your throat, then make you laugh out the truth. She smells like the river and the wind. Her kisses make you believe in God.

After Pop passed, Bob made sure I'd kept to reading and writing. Kept to school, and my studies. He got removed one day. They emptied his locker, nothing really in there but a torn hat and some loose paper. Never warned him, either, just took him into the principal's office and told him he wasn't going to come back. They said he was too much of a distraction, with all those bruises to his face and body. I think they were just scared, is all. No matter, though. Bob knew as much as anyone about anything, and was busy making sure we were fed and could get by. Hell, he was no different than all those kids' daddies working at the mill, providing. We didn't have anyone else come to watch us or help out. Most relatives were already dead or gone. Some kind neighbors visited every now and again to make sure we didn't need for anything extra, clothes, books, fresh baked pies. We got along just fine on our own, but they

pitched in with work for Bob, downed trees, or leaky pipes, that kind of thing. Pop handled all of that when he was alive, even when he was half drowned and slurring. Did a fine enough job that nothing seemed to bust or break for a while. Mr. Pritchett, a hunter who lived a few miles away past the county line, even gave us a buck he shot. Cut it up and everything. Pop used to help him with a bad boiler system that seemed to break each winter. We put in our freezer out back, had enough meat to last several seasons. Bob kept to fighting, though. Went from one night to several. A part of what he was. He couldn't pry it off of him, that sickness, that instinct.

Pop was cremated. Said he wanted his ashes to be dumped into the lake owned by Republic Steel out in Uniontown, where he and his daddy used to catch trout and catfish by the bucket. Bob and I hitched a ride with Mr. Pritchett one light afternoon. Bob carried Pop between his legs and held my hand along the way. Never let go of me, or him. Kept us secure, attached. Saw him scratch his head with a swollen fingers every now and again, but he was quiet otherwise. Just stared out the window and sighed.

We arrived nearly two hours later. The sun lifted over the lake and made it sparkle. I knew why Pop wanted it be here the moment I stepped out of the pickup. Suppose there were enough reasons to never want to leave a place like this. The air smelled sweet like flowers and burnt sugar.

Made me think of Pop different. Never imagined him living in such a beautiful way. By the time we crossed the Monongahela, I knew I'd never make it out of Pennsylvania. Everything was too big and too pretty. I never knew so much green was out there, always thought the sky was a sheet that covered the color of things.

We let Pop out by the north side of the lake. He came out like a soundless wave, and parts of the water rippled in rings, then disappeared. Bob said the wind would take parts of him down the length of the lake, and that he'd like that, to be a part of as much it as possible. He tried making a joke about fish bait but it came out like a sad song. Bob looked older in the sun. It caught the grey of his hair and made it light up. Saw how tired he was. Saw the scabs that looked like leeches attached to him. Saw his muscles twitch and flex. Knew that he'd never make it to twenty if he were going to keep up the fighting. I held on to him as our feet sank in the muddy water. Our toes touched under bits of leaves and muck.

"Think he's with Mama now?" I said.

Bob shielded his eyes and looked out past the trees. Then he closed them tight, looked toward the sun, waited.

"What do you think?" he said.

“I think he and Mama are sipping lemonade and having apple pie,”

I said.

“That sure sounds nice, Billy,” he said, smiling.

Mr. Pritchett lit a cigarette and began to cough. He was standing by the truck, swatting at flies that took interest.

“Think he’s still angry?” I said.

Bob shook his head and rubbed his hands together. I heard his fingers crack.

“Nah,” he said. “Not if Mama’s grabbed a hold of him.”

The first time I was surrounded, I let it happen. It was just two of them, but felt like more;, as many times as I was struck in the stomach and head. Swore it was thundering and lightning at the time, with all the flashes and thuds. Tried to cover myself with my arms, but after a while those felt like loose rope. Kept at it, too, no matter how much I begged mercy. Swore I’d never tell anyone, and I didn’t for a while. My nose sprayed red on the loose stones around me. The sky had no color.

I was walking home from school with a growling stomach and a new book from the library about a man who lived in a place I’d never

heard of. McKenna and Jones, seniors in the twelfth grade with varsity letters in football, and local college scouts interested, followed me a quarter mile before pinning me against the side of an abandoned bicycle shop. They looked like twins with fence post arms, dark eyes, and crew cuts, but they were just teammates whose fathers had lost their money to Bob. By the time they were finished with me, my mouth was filled with dirt and blood. My vision was blurred. It took several minutes before the breath returned to my chest, which felt tight and separate from the rest of me. *Payback, asshole*, they whispered into my ear. I felt their angry breath. Saliva rolled down the back of my neck; couldn't tell if it were theirs or mine.

When I got home I shut the door to my room, and pressed an icy venison steak from the freezer to my face, everywhere. I wondered if Bob felt like this, broken, and unable to think, hard to inhale. I didn't want him to see me like this. As the sun began to set, an orange glow fixed itself to my wall, and darkened with time to different shades of red, then purple, then black. I shut the light to my room and tried to find a way to rest comfortably without crying because it hurt just as fierce. I fell asleep and dreamed of Mama, and Pop. I wondered if they were holding hands and talking about when they first saw one another on that fairground near the river; Mama with her wavy hair pulled back, bouncing side to side, and

Pop tripping on a pitched tent, staring at the most pretty thing he'd ever laid eyes on. They laughed at each other's jokes and talked about the future while eating iced cream with chopped nuts on top. Pop held her hand all the way back to her house, several miles from any place he needed to be. The world darkened around them and the stars began to twinkle and pierce the darkness. Pop kissed her hand, and Mama said she'd appreciate it if he'd never let it go. She kissed him once on each eye, he said he'd like to remain like that forever. Confessed later that he thought if he kept them shut it might hold the memory. They held each other until sunrise under a large oak. Pop never slept. They married weeks later, didn't see any point in waiting. They were each other's first, last, only.

Later, the sound of a fast moving storm woke me. I was lying in bed, still in my dirty, torn clothes. Outside the window, I saw lightning crawl across the sky. Soon after, the low grumble of thunder lifted me to my feet, and then to the bathroom for a drink of water from the faucet. I cursed as pain ran through me. I hadn't eaten dinner, and never heard Bob come home. I could see a sliver of light underneath Bob's door, and knew he'd be up. I tried not to make the floor creak as I crept into the bathroom, pressing the wall at my sides to make me lighter. My arms were still a part

of someone else. I could barely lift them past my sides. I pulled my lips to the faucet and turned the knob, releasing cold water into my mouth. Everything tasted like pennies, and I gulped viciously. Even though the light was off, I stared into the small mirror above the sink and could tell I looked different, older. I touched my head in the dark and felt the heat come off some of the larger bumps, like they were another part of me that had begun to live. Flashes of lightning lit up a framed picture above the toilet. Pop, Mama, and Bob were on a low lake fishing for crappies. Mama had on a large straw hat that wilted from the sun and hung at the sides. Pop looked proud and smiled widely. He couldn't get any closer to Mama, looked like he was inside her. Bob held a dangling fish off a hook next to his head. He was looking off to the side, like someone had shouted something at them from another boat nearby. His eyes were squinted, and he was shirtless, but even then his muscles were starting to ripple. He looked upset. I hadn't been born yet. I wondered if Bob knew who he'd become when he was sitting in that boat, all bulk and size. Maybe he was looking at someone who'd said something about Mama, a catcall or a holler about her bare legs that never made it to Pop's ears. But Bob heard something I suspected. And it looked like his muscles were the first to react.

I pulled the covers over my forehead in bed. Tried to dim the flashes of lightning outside. Large, heavy drops of rain began to fall, and soon everything smelled like wet clay. I heard Bob call out from his bedroom, said something about next time and showing what it was like. Must have been dreaming. A large crash outside made it sound like part of the sky fell in the yard. The storm had come full force, so I lifted the blanket higher, and waited for sleep to come. I heard a long wail that sounded like a siren cutting through the night. Figured the lightning struck something in town and made it catch fire. Happened sometimes with electric storms, and local fire trucks rumbled to life. I soon realized the wailing wasn't a siren at all, but Bob. He sounded like a wounded animal. I'd never heard anything cry so hard.

“Who was it?” Bob asked.

Bob pressed his hands over my head like he was feeling for loose pennies in a couch. I winced and tried to pull away, but the weight of him on the bed kept me still.

“Nobody, Bob,” I said. “Fell down off a tree is all.”

Bob ran his hands over my shoulders and elbows and examined my fingers, turning them in his own, searching.

“Bullshit,” he said. “Who did it?”

My stomach sank. He never liked to swear in front of me. Didn't like for me to know that his mouth could be just like Pop's, turned up at the sides, like a dog who didn't trust the world. But I heard him curse plenty, at night in his room alone, or the bathroom when he'd try and put his body back together. I'd never lied to Bob about anything. I'd lied more in church on Sundays, especially when Pop was around.

“Nobody, Bob,” I said. “Cross my heart.”

Bob tore the shirt off me with one forceful tug. My arms dangled above my head, then hung loose at my sides. I tried to cover the discoloration on my body, but there was too much. Looked like jelly smeared across my skin. Felt like my insides were coming out, exposed. Everything burned and ached. I got dizzy.

“Who?” Bob said. He forced air out of his nose, then choked it back. “Be back in a minute.”

Bob started towards the bathroom and returned with a funny smelling ointment and two bottles of liquid in plain brown bottles. He had a handful of cotton that stuck to his fingernails. Started wrapping me up fast, and without much explanation. He put medicines on me that made my skin feel like it was tearing off of me.

“You don’t take care of this within a day, you risk infection,” he said. “You hear?”

“Uh huh,” I said.

“You eat last night?” he said.

“Nuh uh,” I said.

“Drink anything?” he said.

Before I could answer, Bob disappeared into the kitchen and came back with some buttered bread, a glass of milk, and a cold rag.

“Here,” he said. “Eat this. Drink this. Get something in you. I’ve gone and put two eggs to boil. You eat both of those as soon as they are done. Got it?”

I nodded with a full mouth and pushed the bread in as fast as possible to the back of my throat. Didn’t have the heart to tell him my

mouth felt loose and it was near impossible to chew. Bob continued looking me over, even asked me to drop my pants, which I did. Made me stand naked in front of him as he circled my body. I shivered.

“Gonna need to get some more of this stuff in town,” he said holding up a tube with a greasy end. “It’ll help with the swelling.”

His palms were warm and surprisingly smooth. The backs seemed hard and tight, like bark. He had more scars and fresh wounds on them than Pop ever did during his time at the factory. He shook his head and clenched his teeth, making veins pop on his temple. I felt a wave of heat come off him. He got red and moved up and down my body like he’d rehearsed this a thousand times, careful, and sure.

“Keep pressure here, and try not to cover these open ones on the back of your neck. The air will close it better than any tape,” he said.

“Keep this one as clean as you can. Hear? Looks like it needs some string, but if you don’t move your hand too much, should be fine.”

My legs began to shake and my teeth to chatter. Bob held me close and searched for some clean clothes with his other hand, dressed me, then put me flat on the bed. He covered me with my blanket, then left to get his.

“I’ll bring in those eggs with two more pieces of bread. That be okay?” he said.

Tears gathered at the corners of my eyes, then fell down my face like a swollen creek.

“Now, I’m not gonna ask again, Billy,” he said.

Bob took me by the shoulders and brought me close to his face. I saw deep lines spread across his forehead. I saw the hairs curling out of his nose. I heard the breath rattle deep inside him, like a cave with no bottom.

“Jones and McKenna,” I said. “Surrounded me by the place that used to sell and fix bikes.”

Bob kissed me on the forehead and told me to get some rest. He smoothed out my hair, slid his hand down and held my face. He took a thumb and traced a lump that grew on the side of my head, and reached for the cold rag. Bob was looking at me and then out the window at a pair of trees up on the hill that looked like they were drunk and leaning. He went to his room, slammed the door, and came back out wearing a fresh set of clothes and a glazed-over look in his eyes. Swore Pop had come back to life. Bob mumbled something, but I couldn’t make out the words.

He left my room, ran down the stairs, and was out the front door before I could ask. I looked out the window and saw him lumbering down and away from our house. The sky was damp and gray, and a mist hung over everything. Bob's big feet sunk into the soft, muddy grass as he walked out of sight. Mud clung to his heels and slowly climbed as high as his ankles. I pressed my forehead on the cool glass and closed my eyes. My insides ached, and I felt the house sway and tilt like it was going to crash and pin me underneath itself. I opened my mouth to try and scream but nothing came out but a gasp. I never felt so alone.

I must have fallen asleep watching for Bob when I heard the front door unlock. Soon he appeared at the side of my bed. Bob was wet, and the smell of wood smoke and pine followed him into the room. His face looked smooth, younger. Rain dripped from his white hair and pooled on the wood floor around his mud-caked shoes. The tracks on his forehead seemed to disappear. Bob cleared his throat.

"You eat?" he said. He walked to the windows and drew the blinds, though the sun hadn't appeared in several days. My head throbbed.

"No, Bob. Must have fallen asleep before I got a chance to get 'em," I said.

“Sleep is good. Helps you forget about those bumps for a little,”

Bob said.

“Until you get up, I suppose,” I said, managing to prop myself on my elbows.

“How you feel, Billy?”

“Not sure yet,” I said. “Hey, where’d you go? You’re soaked through.”

Bob rubbed the outside of my thigh with his hand. It looked pink and swollen. He leaned for me and kissed my head. His breath was sweet, like honey.

“I’ll get those eggs for you, Billy,” Bob said. He started for the door and held the frame before walking down to the kitchen.

“Was the drug store open, Bob?” I said. “Did they have any more of that funny smelling stuff?”

Bob didn’t answer. I knew why almost immediately.

Bob came into my room one night after fighting at Irish. Couldn’t have been more than a month or so after Pop passed. And though it was

dark, I could tell Bob had taken a decent pounding. His head was swollen and one eye was closed. Both lips had been split and he tried talking without moving his mouth too much. Bob never woke me after fights. That night was different.

“We’re getting out of here soon, Billy,” he said. Bob knelt at the side of my bed; seemed like he was going to pray or beg for something.

“You okay, Bob?” I asked. I reached out to feel for him.

Bob put a hand on my cheek. His closed eye was dripping something on my pillow, but I couldn’t tell if it was blood or sweat. He smelled like sawdust and rot and his voice was scratchy and skipped.

“We’re going to California, Billy,” he said. “We leave in a couple of months.”

“How Bob?” I said. “Where we going to live?” And though I’d heard the words come out of his mouth, I thought for sure that I was dreaming.

“We leave in a couple of months, Billy,” he said. “Too many monsters here. Time to go. We get on a train after your school is let out for the winter. We’ll find you another one when we get there. Leave everything to me. Hear?”

Bob shifted on the ground and sighed. "We're going to swim in the Pacific, Billy."

"California," I sighed.

"California," Bob repeated.

I dreamt of Mama when I fell back asleep. She was bright and smiled so wide it looked like light was coming out of her mouth. She kissed me on the forehead and held me to her. Her breath was warm. Everything was warm. Mama was California. Mama was the sun.

Not sure I believe much in God. Seen some storms come through this part of town, though, that might make anyone believe in a higher power, beyond the sky, through the stars. Saw trees split and crash to the dirt, narrowly missing a pair of kids that thought it would be fun to play hide and seek during a summer storm. Felt rolls of thunder in my throat that made me think the earth was cracking apart and gonna swallow us up. I once even saw a big fat orange cat sleeping in the middle of a gravelly road. Might have been twelve or thirteen cars gone by before he woke up and lazily walked into a house like someone was calling for him in for supper. Those furry ears just inches from moving steel, twitching. Saw

things happen to people, good and bad, that should make anyone believe something's out there. Thought I saw God, though, when Bob told me not to worry about McKenna and Jones ever again. Never saw or heard from them after they beat on me. They disappeared from our side of Greene County, out of Pittsburgh, out of Pennsylvania. Instead of looking for places to play college ball, their mamas and papas were looking for special schools that dealt with unique situations. Heard McKenna was now drinking his food, and also thought he was a bird. He kept repeating the same things over and over, making whistling sounds in a high-pitched voice. Wore a bucket around his neck to collect the spit that fell from his mouth.

Jones never walked right again. A chair with stiff, squeaky wheels got him here and there. They said his ribs were backwards, spine looked like a cooked noodle. His mama didn't recognize him in the hospital bed when she came to visit. She was so sure it wasn't her boy that she started tearing the bed sheets off other patients in a frenzy. Went room by room before they gave her a pill that made her smile and pass gas. They soon packed up their belongings and left for another part of the country, but no one knows for sure where. No one ever asked.

But if God was real, I'd like to think Mama and Pop were with him, catching up with one another. Apologizing for things that were said or done to Bob and me when she wasn't around to cover our ears or our eyes. I'd like to believe that some God will forgive me for taking Mama away too soon. But I knew the God everyone was preaching about on Sundays couldn't possibly be real, when I was chased the second time.

Winter fell on us that year. Never really did have a fall I can remember. Trees just shook their leaves like they were expecting it all along, or too afraid of the chill that would soon strip them bare. Everyone kept saying they were expecting it, but they were just as surprised when the lakes started to freeze up. Bob had been at it all summer and, by the end of October, we had enough cash saved to last us a while. November came and Bob said he was gonna get us out of here, and I believed him. He'd fought enough times in the back of barrooms to get us to an island deep in the Pacific, but we both knew California would be our new start. Come December, we'd be on a long train snaking west, with nothing more than a couple of bags and our futures. He'd hold onto my hand the whole way, like always, make sure I never needed for anything. He'd tell me

stories about how nicely Mama danced, and even some of Pop when things weren't as bad. We'd eat deer jerky and drink fizzy colas till our bellies were full. We'd laugh about how pink our skin would get underneath the big, bright sun. And we'd sleep and dream about the sand and those high-pitched gulls that would skim the water looking for fish and crabs.

The ground grew hard, stubborn. Sun seemed to want to hide behind things. The light was dull, flat. Was only a few days 'till winter's break, and my stomach fluttered and moved so, it was hard to keep any food down. Drew maps on my blanket at night with my fingertips. We'd move across America's thickness like explorers. Hold our mouths open at things too hard to imagine. Valleys so wide and full they had no beginning or end. Mountains so tall they disappeared into heaven. Lakes with reflections so clear, looked like you could jump into the clouds. Deserts like oceans of earth flooding over, with nothing but the hope of something even more breathtaking to come. Never knew which way that train would turn. Never knew the path. Couldn't sleep. Didn't want to miss a thing.

The days were short and began to run into each other. Each looked more like the one before, and the one before that. Snow so white it stung

your eyes. Trees were bare. Patches of grass, gray and yellowed.

Everything with heat and life was ground from the world into dust, and swept away in the frozen wind.

Bob kept close. Ever since Jones and McKenna left town, Bob was never more than a holler away. Told him not to fuss, but he pretended not to hear.

“Pack light. Don’t forget anything you gonna think about when we’re gone,” he said the night before.

“We going, Bob? It’s time?” I said.

“Bring what you want. I’ll pack the rest,” he said. “We got to go.”

I heard Bob in his room open and close things. He went to the shed and was messing around in there for a while. Came back with some of Pop’s tools and the flask he made to keep his hooch. Got some pictures of all of us, of Mama, put them in a pile in a greasy bag made of burlap. He opened my bedroom door as I was packing the last of my clothes on top of some books I planned to read along the way.

“I’m gonna get us some more supplies in town in the morning,” he said. “You get your rest. Tomorrow’s a long day for us.”

Bob's hands creaked and mumbled when he rubbed them together. He looked off, but lingered at the door, like he was trying to listen to something low. His shadow was gone.

"What's wrong, Bob?" I said.

He remained with his head turned away, breathed real slow and deep. Sounded like a large animal getting ready to hibernate and dream.

"Not sure, Billy," he said, his voice fading. "Not really sure."

Bob's eyes looked heavy and full. The muscles in his jaw flexed and jumped like a secret forcing its way to the surface.

"Just wish it went different is all," he said. "Just wish you had normal. Normal life. Normal family."

I reached for Bob and wrapped myself around his leg. Felt like he was carrying burdens in his pockets. Everything was hard, unyielding. He put his meaty fingers through my hair. I thought of Mama and smiled. I thought of Pop's crib in the garage and felt warm. Bob held me tight and, for the first time, I heard all the things he never said. Came all in a flash of sound and light. Everything buzzed. I floated up and over it all, above the darkness.

"You are my normal. Always you, Bob. Always, us," I said.

He released. I heard everything rush like a river.

Morning brought with it crippling wind and high, thin clouds. Bob was gone when I woke. Left a note on the kitchen table.

Be back soon. Train leaves at ten. Time to chase the sun and never grow old. Love you, Bob.

I dressed and decided to go to the lake nearest school, pay respects to Mama. Spent more time there than anywhere else. Put Mama's necklace and ring on. Promised then to keep it as close to me as I could and never let go. I slid on a pair of boots and my coat. Reached for Bob's note and put it in my chest pocket, opened the door and left.

Thought of taking a lake stone with me to California. Thought of making collection for all the places we'd stop along the way, from here and everywhere in between. I could barely contain myself. Never did feel my exposed face fighting winter's claw. Never felt the tips of my fingers beginning to seize. It was all shadows and spaces along the way. Heard my breath and my anticipation rise. Heard some crows caw. Heard the faint whistle of an arriving train. Never did hear that pack of boys come

across the ridge and pin me against the shore. The snow and freeze can mute things. Never did hear them laughing and gaining momentum.

Figure there were six of them. All had fresh wounds, and blank expressions. They circled and made sudden movements. Their mouths flashed white and smoky air circled them like a moving storm. Some carried bats or rebar. Others tied their hands with lengths of rope and rubber. The world darkened and sank at the corners.

The tall one hit me with a ball of ice that had fragments of stone in it, made the earth shake around me, and a fog crept inside my head, blurred everything. I ran for the lake as fast I could. Felt dull warmth run down my face and saw I was leaving a red trail. They followed like a pack of wild dogs, seething, hungry. The snow lessened the farther I went. Didn't think those boys would be blind enough to follow me toward the thin parts I knew would hold me. The air tightened my chest, sucked everything in. I turned and saw they were closing. I made my way for a clearing in the snow, knew the ice was fresher there. There was a pocket of black. I slipped and fell to my knees. Bubbles were frozen in large frosty circles underneath. Darkness stretched below the glassy surface like an endless night. A branch rose in an angle ahead. It had a lone yellow leaf that danced in the wind. I steadied myself and rose to my feet. The cracks

of ice split my reflection. I looked big, immovable. I felt strength and turned to face those boys, even forced a smile through rattling teeth.

All my life I believed I'd get back to her. All those times I saw her hover in the clouds, and rise with the moon on clear, bright nights. All those times I smelled her in the wet trees and cut grass. All those times the water looked like light, and the birds sang songs you could never repeat, they were so pretty. I saw her. I heard her. Knew she was listening to the things that would make my eyes swell and leak at the corners. I'd lace my fingers tightly, kneel by my bed, and feel her cover me. Feel her in me. Knew she was in me when I lifted Pop's head off the toilet and tucked him under the covers. I knew Mama was in me when I looked past them boys heaving and huffing, and saw Bob come raging behind like thunder, closing in. He moved like wind. Roared. He the beast that could begin and end all things. My brother. My lovely beast. My love.

"Billy!" he screamed.

The cracking sound rippled through the sky, sharp. I heard Bob shout for me, and then it all went silent, still, dark. My mouth filled and I reached high but was turning slowly away from the light. I saw Bob hover above, sliding. He forced half himself into the icy stillness and reached for my arms, then my hands. But I got heavy. I got too heavy. My fingers

never were going to grow as big as Bob's. His, filled thick with instinct. I had Mama's hands. Had her thin, narrow body and weak arms. Bob squeezed and I squeezed back. My instinct. Bob had me, but then I saw Mama clear as morning and let go. And she was so beautiful and I got heavy. I got too heavy. Mama reached for me and smiled, and I got heavy. I reached for her. She smiled and I saw light. I got too heavy. She smiled and I saw the sun.

Penny

I fell in love with blood the night Daddy took me for root beer floats after working a double at Republic. It was my sixteenth birthday in '58, and all I could think about was Otis Zilinski and his dumb wide neck. He sat in front of me during fifth period English, before we were let into the lazy summer break. He had a trail of muddy brown freckles that stretched across his neck, and trailed off into the center of his back. Every time he took in breath, his shirt would tighten and I'd cross my legs and wonder how far his little constellation reached. It was a hot June for Cleveland, and my skirt seemed to always stick to my thighs, to everything.

That evening was heavy and, by the time Daddy came home, he was shiny and sweat-stained. Ma passed a year ago, after the storm swept through St. Clair. Lightning bolts cut the night sky, scorched some of the

brick off of St. Stanislaus, knocked trees down like giant bowling pins. By morning, the roots resembled claws reaching out through the soil. The neighborhood was swallowed, then threw itself up. The local paper headline read, *By the Hand of the Devil: Storm Leaves Three Dead, One Missing*. Ma was one of the dead. When Daddy woke, his arms were still holding her tight. She never did like weather. Always jumped at the sound of thunder. She'd shake her head and hold her ears so tight it would take time before they turned pink again. Daddy would hold her close and whisper stuff by her neck that made her shoulders settle. She'd turn and say, *It'll pass, sweetie*, but I knew she wasn't talking to me.

Daddy never was the same after Ma died. He decided it would help to wear a wide smile everywhere he went. *Never show anyone you are sad, Penny*, he'd say. *Sadness will swallow you and never let you go*. I think he still felt some guilt after reporters started to question him about Ma. Started asking him how long she was laying next to him before he realized she was stiff and cold. One tall reporter with narrow shoulders and bucked teeth kept licking his thin, greasy lips and scribbling into a notepad. When Daddy asked what he was going on about, he just looked him dead in the eye and said, *You sure you ain't just squeezed the life out of that poor girl?* Daddy slammed the door in his face and told me to

hurry to my room. His eyes went distant before they filled at the corners. When I reached the top of the stairs, something crashed in the kitchen. Sounded worse than any of the storms that have swept through since.

The next morning Daddy was busy repairing the oak table we ate at during holidays and special occasions. His uncle had made it for us from a tree he took down in the north woods. Split the five inches of hardness right down the middle. His arm was wrapped to the elbow, and he had on that toothy grin. And even though he was smiling, he was crying harder than anything I'd ever seen. He was kneeling there, fumbling with curvy tools, making noises. Sounded like an animal trying to find its mother. I held him, and he grabbed onto my hips and looked up at me and swore to God Almighty that he would never do anything but love and protect her. *She was my sweetheart, Penny. She made everything bright and perfect.* Sometimes I still see Ma holding her ears in the kitchen with Daddy close behind. But there is no storm, and there is no me.

By the time Daddy got home, I'd already made a roast with potatoes. And even though it was hotter than hellfire out, he was always preaching about eating three squares, and keeping our bones stiff as the steel he rolled. All it did for me was stretch my legs and make my chest grow. Daddy's friends began to linger in the doorway when they picked

him up on their way to the mill. They found new ways to chat about the dumbest things. Asked if he needed a ride back before they could even get out the door, or let him speak. They'd kick at their heels and whistle unnamed tunes. Met most of their hungry eyes as they slowly climbed their way up my thighs and flat stomach. Felt like itchy wool. Guess Ma didn't leave me with nothing.

I wasn't going to ever work as hard as Daddy. I had bigger plans. As soon as I could, I was going to set us to move out of St. Clair and start fresh. Thought it a good idea to skip town together and never look back. St. Clair suffocated you with its smoke and sin. Far above it all, thin clouds stretched into other parts of the country I'd only heard about from Sally Fassberger. Her father traveled from New York to California selling Frigidaire Unimatics to lonely housewives smitten with his thick thighs and straight white teeth. He called everyone *Honey*, like he'd already put them to bed. I would beg Sally to tell me all she'd heard about New York when we'd get together, but she was more interested in telling me about the right time to sit on top of the Unimatic. *Penny, do the math. One thousand one hundred and forty revolutions per minute*, she'd say, extending each number and looking toward heaven.

But Daddy was stuck to his work and his memory and the bed where Ma used to rub his shoulders after long, difficult days. Knew I'd never get him to pack a bag, or leave Ma's grave. *My life is here with my girls*, he'd say, then correct himself, and fidget with the back of his oily brown curls. He'd go to kitchen and look in the fridge for the lemonade Ma didn't make anymore. Caught him one day with his head in the freezer. Looked like he was dreaming. *Just trying to cool off, Penny*, he said without seeing me. Must have heard me inhale sharply. Then he'd go to the couch and pretend to sleep, his eyes fluttering like he was running through a grassy field. *You okay, Daddy?* But he'd pretend not to hear or feel me touch his forehead. Looked like a small animal hiding in the side of his neck, struggling to hide, or escape, his heart beating so fast.

On the morning of my birthday, the sun was full and heavy. Looked like it would pop and cover the world in shades of orange and yellow. Smooth shadows arched across my bedroom wall and seemed to stretch out of our house and our town, and I'd daydream about seeing salty oceans. I knew I only had a matter of time before I could convince Daddy about starting fresh somewhere else. Nothing left here anymore but bad

memories and constant reminders. Saw it in his eyes. I'd seen wet stones by the river that reminded me of him. He'd paid his dues in the mill. His skin was rough as bark, and starting to gray. His voice always needed to be cleared. At night, he'd talk to Ma. Was the only time he sounded like himself. He'd wake, and I could hear his hands searching the bed sheets, then the long wheeze of disappointment.

Ma was prettier than dawn creeping over Black Oaks in the bluff, with those silly song sparrows calling out to one another. Never did know what they were singing about, just knew it was the sweetest song I'd ever heard. She drew you in with her hide-and-seek eyes, and the curl of her mouth, like she knew something we didn't. She made you look off to the side when she talked, staring through you. Was like trying to look at the sun. Became a habit, to turn away from mirrors after she passed. Hurt too much to see me turning into her—the angles that I grew into—the cheeks that pulled toward her ears, the chin that looked like the bend of molten steel before it cooled, those lips that grew full and dewy. There was only room in this world for one kind of that beauty. I didn't want it to be me.

Sometimes, Ma would appear in my room and uncover her ears. She'd curl up behind, fit into me, rub my shoulders and back. I'd feel the

heat of her breath on my neck and feel myself turn to spun sugar. She'd speak to me, too. Wipe the hair from my face and tuck it behind the crook of my ear. She'd cup her fingers and pull her lips close. She'd say, *Penny*. She'd repeat, *Penny*, just to make sure I was listening. Wasn't sure if she expected me to answer, or if she was praying and saying *Amen*. And if I really listened, I could hear Ma sing it like those song sparrows. *Baby girl. My sunshine. You fight. You rise. The stars are yours. The moon is yours. It's all yours. Take it.*

Daddy cut himself shaving with his straight razor that morning, and I tore out of my sheets and ran when he barked. He came out of the bathroom, mumbling something about *mistakes* and *breathing* and *sorry*. I ran for some tissue and held it to his chin. The blood spread fast and, as soon as I reached for more, some of it had fallen on the back of my hand and began to curl down my wrist. Not sure why, but I licked it off, and held it in my mouth. Daddy didn't see. He was fumbling with the tissue, flushing the used down the toilet, one after the other, apologizing to me, to no one. I remember the taste of copper coins and rare meat. I got so hungry I ran to the kitchen and ate some sliced bread and baloney I found at the back of the fridge. A housefly buzzed around the garbage can and then took an interest in me. I slapped it away and noticed some of Daddy's

dried blood near my thumb. I grew dizzy and went to my room, stretched across the bed, slid my hand down my underwear, and tried to think about Otis Zilinski.

When Daddy got home from the mill, he was smiling like always. Hell, I don't think he knew how to stop from wiping that silly grin off his face. Men at work started noticing, began to think he turned cuckoo. Dunbrowski and that fat-ass Zeke favored circling their index fingers around their ears and crossing their eyes when Daddy wasn't facing them. Most joined in the fun and got red in the face, swallowing laughter. Others looked at their laces and shook their heads, arms shoved so deep in their pockets, looked like they were trying to scratch at their ankles. Truth be told, fifteen years at the mill was low man on the totem pole. Daddy was by far the most able, but he was getting slower, weaker, and more forgetful. Some guys had been there since before they'd shaved and stayed until they couldn't walk proper without wincing every other step. Daddy seemed to be fading from the insides. Got pale. Got lost. And even though the bosses cut him slack after we buried Ma, they were starting to lose patience. It wouldn't be long before we would be forced out of St. Clair.

"Night, Penny," Dunbrowski said. "How old is you again?"

Dunbroski's gruff voice trailed off as he rubbed his fingers together. I could see white tufts of hair poking out of his ears, curling toward the sky. His fat tongue slithered inside his bottom lip. Daddy looked at me and read the disgust that shadowed my face. He thanked Dunbrowski while scratching his neck, reached to close the door, but the oaf had stuck his work boot in between the frame.

"That'll be all now," Daddy said, his voice growing stronger.

"Now just hold on there a minute," Dunbrowski interrupted. "Your pappy here tells me you are celebrating a birthday today."

I stood behind the heart-shaped dining chair and held it tight to me.

"See you on Monday," Daddy said. "That's enough now."

Dunbrowski stared at my chest and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving a black smudge across his cheek.

"All right, all right," Dunbrowski said. "I'm going. Y'all have a wonderful night now. Happiest of birthdays, sweet girl."

Daddy shut the door tight before Dunbrowski could say more, but we both heard a loud grunt and a high-pitched squeal that rode heavy up my spine as he crossed our street.

“Just gonna get cleaned up before we head out to Pierre’s, Penny,” Daddy said, cutting the stillness. “Should be busy, what with all the heat we’ve been having.” He paused like was going to say more, but instead let out a soundless sigh that seemed to go on forever.

Daddy made for the bathroom and turned on the shower. Humidity filled our house in a hurry. I pulled the lock tight on the front door and exhaled. The same black fly from the morning buzzed near my face and landed on the windowsill, crawling and wiping itself with its brittle legs. It looked gorged, sick. Could barely land without a thud. Couldn’t care less that I was there, walking with its silvery little wings raised up like tiny, glass doors. The windows in the kitchen began to fog and carve little rivers that pooled at the chipped wood frame. I thought about the crooked, filthy Cuyahoga, and where it might reach. I thought about Sally Fassberger’s father, and how his eyes looked full, greedy. I wiped the window, but it glazed over too fast to see if Dunbrowski was still lingering on the corner trying to gawk with those dead eyes into my bedroom window. Became a habit of his, and some of the others. They’d point to their crotches and make gestures, or stick their tongues on the inside of their mouths and cackle under the stars.

Sometimes, I'd stand in the window—the moonlight highlighting my curves—and let them have their fun. *Always smile*, Daddy said. *Never let anyone see we got holes in our hearts*. Those idiots would hoot and holler and raise hell jumping and pulling at each other like wild animals. I'd stand there with that smile pasted to my face, till they forgot what it was they were looking for. They'd leave soon after, spitting at the soil, and head for the bars, searching their manhood.

I looked at the fly fumbling on the glass, wiped my hand on the roundness of my backside, raised it in the air, and smashed it. *Greedy bastards*.

Pierre's Ice Cream was filled in at the corners. Seemed as if all the guys from the mill and their families were sucking on cones when we got there. Wouldn't be too long before the boys would head out to the bars on St. Clair Avenue and come home stinking of smoke, whisky, and false promises. I overheard Zeke asking for three scoops of chocolate, but he didn't have a wife or any kid tugging at the tail of his sweaty shirt. Son-of-a-bitch slurped at that sweetness and didn't come up for breath. He made sure to suck on his short, thick fingers, and not waste any to the floor. His

face reddened, and he even dozed in the middle of all the commotion, his lids fighting to stay open in the surge.

“Our usual, Penny?” Daddy said, leaning close.

He smelled like spice and even combed his curls into a shiny, flat part. His big ears looked silly exposed like that, and it made a cloud of laughter burst through me. Daddy was rugged handsome, the way old leather looks when it’s been used right. He was all creases, sharp angles, and furry brows. He wasn’t the football type you see at the mill, but his muscles stretched and pulled his shirt, and he felt like braided cable when you squeezed him tight. Daddy says his father was put together the same, but both his parents died before I was born. Grandma got swallowed by cancer. Gramps went on a fishing trip to the Boundary Waters and never came back. Rumor has it he took his life soon after Grandma was put in the ground. Never liked to talk much about the past, even when Mama would ask at supper. He’d switch subjects and talk about her pretty eyes, give me a knowing wink, and that would be the end of it.

Daddy was always doing the unexpected, though, which made his leather shine. During a downpour, he carried Ma on his shoulders and sang goofy made-up songs the mile home. She’d just purchased a pair of shoes in town after her toes popped out of her only set. He followed her all the

way to Anton's in the main part of town. It was early, and Daddy had just worked the second hard double of the week. Ma wanted him to sleep late, but Daddy felt the rain. *Can always feel a storm coming*, he bragged later when they were wringing their clothes dry in the tub, pawing at each other like new lovers. Laughter filled the house like a warm breeze. They stayed in their room until morning, and woke wrapped in one another.

"Sounds good, Daddy," I said crinkling my nose, and traced the beginnings of a scab that formed at the base of his jaw. Root beer floats had been a birthday tradition for as long as I can remember. And though I wasn't feeling celebratory, I could tell Daddy needed some normal.

"Be right back, then," he said, and winked.

The Pierre's crowd swallowed Daddy. I looked for familiar faces, but focused on the roundness of my big toe instead, and kicked at nothing. The smell of sweet cream and smoke mingled and hung in the air like a cloud. Elbows and wide bodies, chests and sweaty arms jostled me here and there. Caught Zeke looking at me and sucking on his pinky. His eyes were at half-mast, and he tried to suck in his gut and smooth the front of his shirt. Not sure how those damn buttons held that cotton together. The bell on the front door clanged, letting in small drafts and bits of engine

noise. I pushed my way to a corner where the air was cooler, inhaled, and held it.

“Where in holy hell does this line even start?” Dunbrowski shouted at nobody. “Jesus H. Christ. I didn’t know they was giving it away today!”

Dunbrowski pushed in. His voice cut through the murmur of the crowd, and immediately sucked the air out of Pierre’s. Some spat back insults through tight lips and shook their heads. Others pretended not to hear and looked at fixed points in the sky. Dunbrowski rubbed a greasy hand down the center of his head and swayed. The smell of funk and whiskey spread and clung to everyone around him. A mother left in a hurry, apologizing to daughters with red faces, quivering lips, and hungry, warm mouths. A boy in short pants and untied laces pinched his nose and laughed until his father poked him forward.

“Better have that butter pecan, or we’re gonna have ourselves a problem,” he said. “Ain’t that right, Zeke!”

Zeke acknowledged with grunt and a wink that made his fat face crease and his forehead stretch. He raised an arm to clear space, and Dunbrowski settled at his side. Dunbrowski punched Zeke in the belly for good measure. Zeke spat and coughed and got redder than fire. Dunbrowski nearly choked with laughter, slapping his fencepost arms on

his overalls, and wiping the spit at the sides of his saggy cheeks. I covered my nose with the back of my hand, tucked my free arm over my chest, and tried to disappear.

“Hey!” Dunbrowski howled. “Hey, Wally!”

Daddy was balancing our floats past, when Dunbrowski smacked hard on his back. The floats were sent to the ground and glass shot in all directions. Root beer curled around the soles of feet, and scoops of vanilla melted and swirled and drifted to the corners of Pierre’s. The crowd hushed and hopped and skipped like the floor was full of gators. Everyone watched with darting eyes and began to move away. It was church silent. I looked at Daddy’s face, and the smile was gone.

Dunbrowski spotted me and stuck his tongue out and made a gesture with his fingers. A smug, distant look washed over him.

“Don’t slip on any cream, folks,” he announced. “Wouldn’t want any *accidents* now, would we?” Hey tightened on accidents and it felt like a knife poking through my chest.

But before Dunbrowski was able to say another word, Daddy had jumped through the air, and whacked him square on the bridge of his wide nose. A thunderous crack echoed through Pierre’s, and my stomach turned.

Never heard bone shatter like that. I once heard a chicken's neck break between the butcher's knobby fingers, but this was much different.

The oaf stumbled into Zeke, who slipped and fell in the slippery mess with a thud. Dunbrowski waved and scratched at the air before he fell on top of Zeke, moaning and blubbering like those girls who never got their banana splits. Bright red blood burst out of Dunbrowski, and the sight of it running down his face made me quiver. A small red river began to trail down his cheek and mouth, loop down his side, and pool onto the tiled floor. The sight of it made him pale and begin to stutter.

"That's enough now," Daddy growled, leaning real low to his neck. "No more nonsense. No more nothing." He straightened his shirt and shook out his hand before ordering two more root beer floats.

Some patted Daddy's back and cleared a path, saying things like *Nice shot, Wally, and Look at that faucet drip.*

Dunbrowski moaned and spit blood from his mouth. Truth is, I'm not sure if he knew how he ended up on top of Zeke. Wasn't sure how long it took for him to remember his name, or if he was the one that told on Daddy and had him fired from the mill the following Monday. I'm also unclear if Dunbrowski ever did breathe again without a whistle.

“Come on, Penny,” Daddy said. “Let’s go home.”

Daddy took me by the hand and opened the door with a lowered shoulder. Outside, the air wasn’t much cooler. Damned if I didn’t hear those song sparrows, though, calling out to one another. The June moon was smiling and the stars looked important, like each one was competing for my attention. I took a sip of the sweet root beer and closed my eyes as it slid down my throat. I drew in another longer sip, filled my mouth and swallowed. Daddy squeezed my hand. I wanted more, though.

“Just one second, Daddy,” I said. “Be right back.”

Inside, Pierre’s was still a commotion. Some of Daddy’s mill worker friends pointed and nodded. Some looked at me and held their opened mouths. Maybe they were remembering another version of me, or the woman I was turning into, or the look in my determined eyes, and couldn’t bear to turn away. But the woman they were staring at walked slowly to the center of the room and knelt down. Dunbrowski tried to roll, but I wouldn’t let him, forced his shoulder down with my hand. I stared into his beady black eyes and knew it would be the last time I’d think about him or Zeke. It would be my last root beer float at Pierre’s, and the

last time Daddy's lips would kiss my chin goodnight. Would be the final time Sally would talk on about how good it felt when the Unimatic switched cycles. That muddy Cuyahoga had to flow somewhere. It was time to find out. *Only room in this world for one kind of that beauty.* I reached for Dunbrowski's bloody face and pressed my thumb hard against it, until I felt the shattered bone shift underneath. He winced and cowered. I pulled my thumb out and sucked on it, grabbed his genitals with my free hand, and squeezed till I heard it pop. I filled my lungs and howled at the song sparrows, and the sparkling, sultry night melted into shades of red.

Afterlife

Life after death.

He hopes that it's true.

That a part of you can remain in the ether, while the rest is swallowed up by land or lake. That the part of you that makes your heart swell and body hum can be somewhere higher, warmer, better.

That he can inhale and hold him there.

That Billy can be with her.

Night falls and the sky turns purple. He remains on the ice, his face pressing the frozen surface, his eyes searching the hollow below. An owl caws and silence answers. The moon rises. Stars multiply and dust the

night. He curses his hand. Pounds it against the ivory sheet, until the bones or the ice or both splinter. Miniature clouds escape his mouth.

Repetition.

Fist striking ice.

Grunt of breath.

The noise can be heard until the sky turns the metallic grey of morning.

The steady thud.

Repetition.

Small clouds rising.

Another day dims into the still of night. Stars wheel across the sky, shift his attention from the banging. The wind exhales across the lake, lifts loose snow and shades the bright moon. He closes his eyes. He listens for the owl. The quiet is beautiful. It's all so beautiful. He opens his eyes and sees the moon or the stars or a light and pulls close to it. *See you soon. See you soon, Billy.*

He feels the bump before his eyes open. His hand is stiff and blue.

Something foreign. His body, a collection of sting, ache, throb. He feels the bump again underneath the ice. His damn hand. Flashes of memory squeezing. Squeezing memory. The scream. Billy sinking below. His arm

reaching, hand grabbing, pulling. *Help*. The pack of boys fading into earth. Grab him. Pull him up. Don't let him go. The muscles grind in him, bend, come alive. Pull him up. The scream. He opens his eyes. *Help*.

He knows not to waste time. The sooner he lifts out his brother, he will get on with it. Business to tend to. Life after death. Huger. Thirst. The sun lifts above the treeline, begins to make everything slick, wet. He slurps, gulps, and spits. It's too salty. Grabs some snow instead and forces it down. He knows not to look. He shouldn't. Reach in and pull. Get on with it.

A flock of geese fly overhead. They are all honk and echo and angled streak. He shields his eyes and watches the birds bleach into the lightening sky. He moves his arm, loosens his shoulder. A series of cracks and pops interrupts the silence. He turns his head left to center, right to center. He does it again. Gets to his knees and twists, winces. Grinds his teeth. Squints. He reaches into the icy water and feels for him. His fingertips bump across stiffness.

The plan. Go west. Fast. He knows the consequences of searching, of being searched. They will look for him. He will look for them. They will

seek revenge. He will seek more. Life after death. He won't wait to find which comes first.

He finds a man named Cooper who was once an undertaker until he became a gambler. Asks him for a favor. *Favor will cost you some, boy.* He asks again, points at the soaked burlap sack trailing him. *How much you got on you?* He reaches in his pocket, shoves it all in the fold of his oil stained hand. Coins fall and clang on the pine floor, roll in different corners and distances, twist and vibrate until they become silent. *That'll do, I s'pose. Bury or burn.*

He fingers the stiffness, grabs a piece of clothing, pulls. Everything moves as a unit, unyielding, unwieldy. He pulls.

Later, Cooper hands him a small wooden box and lifts a cigarette to his mouth, pulls. *There ya are. That's all of it.* Smoke engulfs Cooper's head. He turns to reach for a bottle of whiskey at the edge an uneven table. *You leavin I s'pose?* He nods. Cooper gulps, smacks his lips. *Not much yer takin' eh?* He shakes his head. *You've no money now.* He shakes his head. *You gonna make it out there?* He nods, rubs the wooden box, leaves.

He digs one hand into a pile of snow-covered branches and snaps off a piece. He carves at sections of the ice so they become usable. He braces his knees and feet in the snowy mounds, reaches in, inhales, pulls.

The Afternoon Steeler to Cleveland is the last train out. He hovers around the station, shivers, keeps the box close. The pain behind his eyes makes him see images that aren't there. *You okay, mister?* Everything shifts, bounces, blurs. He sits on the edge of an empty curved bench and holds his head in his hands. He winces. He remembers Billy's story, the one about the boy who can fly. He closes his eyes, drifts. Neverland. *Mister, you okay?* Soon, a rainbow forms over the cluster of a crowd and commotion and he smiles before everything turns dark.

He bites his lower lip and squeezes, torques his body. He knows not to look. The pain radiates through him. He pulls harder, knows it's almost done. With one great tug, the ice cracks, and he falls to his back. The air punches out of his lungs. His ribs creak.

He turns and sees him. Billy is pale, bloated. The skin is pulled tight, his pants torn from his body. His undone shoelaces fall across the ice and look like letters formed at the beginnings of sentences.

I. You. We.

He reaches for Billy, searches over him with trembling fingers, starting with his shoulder, his elbow, his hand. But his hand is no longer a part of him and is missing. A crow calls from a leafless oak, flaps his wings, lifts and bounces against the sky.

He wakes to the scream of the train whistle. When no one is looking he tucks himself near the bogie beneath one of the cars of the locomotive and waits. He holds the box, and steel rods, squeezes it, him, clenches tight. He feels the soft breeze turn into a fierce wind. Three hours later he arrives in Cleveland, crawls out from underneath. He is ragged and broken. It takes several hours before he is able to hear without the metallic clang and screech of rail hitting wheel. Several days before the feeling returns to his limbs. A week before he can walk without sharpness. A month until he sees the sign, *Hudson Inn Brawlers. Come One. Come All. Cash Prizes.*

He looks at Billy. His eyes are open, appear to be tangled. The kind of look that stretches across a person's face after they've just seen the love of their life. His mouth is stuck in the widest of grins. He turns Billy on his side to face the rising sun and they lie there together. He smooths the hair across his forehead, kisses it. He covers his body with his own, leans in close and whispers in his ear.

Life after death.

Walter

They say you can see the flames flicker and tickle the night sky as far east as Toledo. Some catch the char at the back of their throats when the southwest wind stretches just right to Dunkirk, Silver Creek, and into the Niagara River, where Canada kisses Buffalo. Bessemers scream at dawn. Scrapers rise and bleed wavy silhouettes onto Eerie. Soot coats cars in shades of graphite and rust. Rub it between your pointer and thumb. Feel that steely print stain you. It presses into the bread of your sandwiches, into your thin upper lip, into the roundness of your shirt where your belly growls, even into the pecker you shake at the trough.

You catch the Madison 117th Street to the Public Square streetcar, and head to the mill. Shift changes every eight hours. Fifteen thousand men in waves, in, out. *Watch Your Step. Eskimo Pie. Leisy's Light.* You

see everything, nothing. Bells ring. Brightly colored two-frames blur outside. Neatly cuts squares of green lawn. Men cough into hankies, or the bend of elbows. Women in tight fitted caps search for seats with rolling eyes. Some wait for another to pass, in woolly, dark coats. During summer, dresses dance in the hot wind. Faces tighten. Fingers tap nervously, expectantly. Slovenians, Poles, Germans, Jews, Blacks. Fried chicken at Deering's. Doo wop on Superior Ave. Café Tia Juana pulsing with Parker, Cole, Vaughn, Fitzgerald, Eckstein. A darling in white dress and matching bow weaves between Packards, Studebakers, Desoto's. Her father holds her between his legs at the stop sign to light a cigarette he pulls at feverishly. A man in a black-rimmed hat reads his Plain Dealer and spits neatly into empty space. *Cuyahoga Expected to Burn Again, Fish Float to the Surface.*

Sometimes you taste it. And it's everything you've imagined it would be, toxic, intoxicating. It stays with you into the night, when you cough mercilessly and wake with muddy traces on the empty pillow next to you. The man you are. The father. Widower. Orphan of circumstance or deliberateness. You smile through a clenched jaw. And by now, it's all tight. It's all tight now.

You've read the note a million times. *Daddy, I gotta see what's out there. I'll be home sooner than you think.* But you know that isn't all truth. Her migration has just started. Her fever is fresh. She was always going to rise above the rolling red black smog. Above the blue flame of burning coke. Above. She, growing into woman, all curves and danger. She, already stronger and more resistant than the steel you make. She. You.

Protect, you said. *Love,* you swore. Your wife. Your daughter. You wrap your arms around her. Your girls come first. Iron ore. Coal. Limestone. Add heat, pressure, and time. You make steel. Steel melts into liquid fire. Slag the furnace with dolomite. You are the spark. Thunder in your ears. One shovel, after the next, after the next. Cover her ears. The fire dances in front of you. Your eyes burn. It's hard to breathe. You can't look away. In time, things will cool, harden. Things will harden in time. You've gone and done the unthinkable. You wake alone, and scream at the silence. You miss her, them. Cover your ears. Your teeth hurt at the root, and lightning strikes your toes. You smile. Squeeze.

It's been a few months, and the summer has loosened into the cool of fall. Your girl has written. She writes. You wait for the mailman to turn the corner. You wait. Your job has been taken. You still wake in

movement. Shovel. Wipe. Shovel. Wipe. You still squeeze the shovel. Tight. Your job has been taken by two men from Pittsburgh. You still squeeze tight. She's always joked that you do the work of two men. Two men from Pittsburgh have taken your job. The tips of your fingers are stained. *Can't work here no more*, they said. *Can't go causin' trouble*, they said. *Can't work with that broken hand*, they said. *Fix your mind*, they said. *Dunbrowski's connected*, they said. You wait for her letters. You wait.

Two men with broken boys have taken your job. You'd like to tell them what broken means. Jones and McKenna have taken your job. They have broken boys that can't talk or walk right. They are from Pittsburgh and have fire in their eyes. There's a school close by that can help with situations. They look like hungry raccoons. They look like sick raccoons. Eyes always darting back and forth like you are about to take what they already lost. You'd like to tell them what broken means.

You are waiting for the mailman when they roll by in that shiny round Chevrolet and tell you to get in. Jones and McKenna. Zeke and Dunbrowski. *We're going hunting*, they say. *Get your gun*, they say. *Pelee Island*, they say. *Two day trip*. The sun is dropping and the sky has turned

to amber. They hoot and holler and the car rolls and bounces. *We'd like to hunt in Pelee*, they say. *Your old man's taken you to Pelee*, they say. *You know Pelee*, they say. You miss the talk, the noise, the smell, the fire, the mill. You've heard all the apologies, over and over again. *Let bygones be bygones*. You wonder if the car smells like burning bones. You miss it. The mailman must be late again.

Your Daddy taught you to hunt before you were able to whistle. Took down mostly for food. Wild turkey. Pheasant. Squirrel, if times were tough. A deer, if the heavens were kind. Only time you felt free, alive. Early mornings packing gear. The smell of leather, wood, him. The steady thrum of nature. Wild things dying was never the appeal. It was the moment between living and not that took away your breath and filled your heart. How fragile it all was. Everything like glass. You'd always squeeze your eyes tight before the crack of sound cut the stillness. Whispered a prayer. *Thanks*. The echo would stay inside your head for days. *Thanks. Thanks. Thanks. Thanks.*

Your Daddy kept an eye on you, watched. Sometimes you can still feel the burn of his beard on your face, or see the liquid pool of his gaze. *Okay?* he'd say real close, a whisper, and you'd feel his breath seep into

you and search the dark. He'd wink. The hairs would rise high on your neck and you'd nod and bite down on your lip. The sun would lift above the brush or sink beneath the hills. The ground was cold, wet, hard, fuzzy. Above, the clouds fused together in thin lines, or were grey and full and wanted to melt into the land. A breeze could smell like honey and lick your curly hair down flat. The hush took your talk away. You'd listen to the hummingbird, to the crack of dried grass under foot, to your Daddy. Mud dries and flakes off of your skin. *Okay?*

You wonder how your Daddy took himself. Did he stick his tongue out at the world and laugh until his stomach hurt? Did tears drown him? Did he squeeze his eyes tight, and think of that cancer that made Mom forget how to breathe? Or did the echoes speak to him, too? You wish you could have been there to see the white pines stretch into the sky. The loons dipping beneath the glassy surface. The curve of bedrock sloping out of earth. Daddy's shot was as sure as his intention. You feel his humid breath, still, and the burn of his beard on your cheek. You whisper, *Okay?* and wait for the answer. You'll always wait for the answer.

The boys smell like booze and secrets. McKenna laughs at nothing. Jones stares at the horizon and nods. Zeke throttles the Chevy with

Dunbrowski barking directions all the way his rusty boat in Sandusky. All the boys have their Remingtons wedged between their thighs. Close to two hours later, we get to the boat stocked with enough booze and jerky to last a winter. The sky bends into the purple of dusk.

“Pelee have any of those bobwhite quail?” Dunbrowski asks.

“Hear they get mighty *big* this part of the season!”

“Nice one,” Zeke says. His belly bounces before the laugh.

You nod and force a smile. You think of waiting in the underbrush with your Daddy in the stillness of dawn. The scent of split timber and decay. The morning dew coating everything like diamonds, all sparkle and shine. The design of a spider’s web when the sun blanched the patch of leaves and needles around you into yellow segments. You remember his jaw clenching down on a long strand of grass, and his eyes searching. The sound of a bawling deer over the ridge. The shot of another hunter’s rifle splitting your heart. Your Daddy reaching back, his fingers stretching, always feeling for you. *Okay?*

Two hours later, you and the boys tie the boat around a mossy post on Pelee. The ride is choppy. You tell Dunbrowski to take it just east of the lighthouse. A strong wind from Ontario has pockmarked the lake with

crests of white and, sometime after Kelleys Island, Zeke has lost his lunch. You keep one eye on the new fellas, and one on the island. They are talking close to each other, and swearing at everything. *Goddam fate*, this, and *Son of a bitch luck*, that. You notice their hands won't stop shaking, like their bones are hollowed out and at mercy to the breeze.

“Light a fire, boys,” Dunbrowski says. The moon begins to lift and the inky night bleeds into the patches of purple and orange that have lingered when the sun slipped beneath the horizon. You watch the trees bend and sway in shadow. Everything sounds like the rush of water. You draw in a breath and release. You can't hear your thoughts.

“Hurry now, ladies,” Dunbrowski says, between swigs from a rusted flask. “We ain't got all night.”

Later, the new boys shine their Remingtons by the fire with the bottoms of their shirts and their foggy breaths. You eat a roasted weiner and watch their shiny glances bounce off each other through the flame. You watch Zeke piss on some rotting logs that have washed ashore. Dunbrowski paws at the end of a can of beans, and washes it all down with a flat beer. He belches and laughs at the sound.

“Hey, Wally,” Zeke says, still fumbling with his zipper. “You ever go big game huntin’?”

Dunbrowski shoots him a look. You say you used to hunt with your Daddy. Biggest thing you tried to get was a buck. You say it was the most beautiful thing you ever saw. That it looked like a mountain in the middle of a desert, all brawn and muscle.

“You kill that son of a bitch or what?” Dunbrowski says. He picks at his nose and then the underwear that has found its way in his crack.

You shake your head and look at the low-hanging stars.

“Shit, Wally,” Dunbrowski says. “Better be able to hit a mountain tomorrow morning!”

The new boys cackle at this, and it carries and hangs somewhere between the lake and the constellations.

You ask why Zeke didn’t bring his Spaniel, but he’s fingering a few wieners on the fork of a branch and lowering them to the jittery flame. You ask again.

“Ain’t got to worry about no dogs out here,” Jones says. “Only got to think about aiming and firing that there gun of yours. Don’t need no freezing, do we Mac?”

McKenna is on his ass, rocking side to side like a pendulum. He's pressed his knees far into his neck. You can't see his eyes, just the roundness of his bony joints, his hairy arms, his distance. But he's wet. All wet, dripping, when everything else isn't.

"Sleep tight, shit birds," Dunbrowski says. He retreats into a sleeping bag, and the others soon follow.

You're restless, and feed the fire with chunks of wood and dried grass when the flame sinks low. You keep your gun tight to you, and look across the lake at the dim flicker of city. You think about Penny and her migration and wonder when you'll smell the roast in the kitchen, or feel that beauty fill your house. You listen to the night birds and the jumping fish. You hear Zeke and Browski choke on breath. And you make out the low rumble of Jones and McKenna trying to hide conversation. You fall asleep and dream of the storm that took her away. The lightning that lit up the night table with the picture of you and her and Penny at Pierre's. You in the middle with your arm round their backs, pulling them close. The ice cream that stained your upper lip, the toothy smile of your girls that made you forget.

When morning lifts, you wake with your fingers curled tight around the barrel of your shotgun. The fire has gone out. Only a slow coil of rising smoke meanders through a clearing in the trees. You reach for the tin of water next to you and empty it. Your throat is dry. You wonder if you've extinguished the fire with your breath during the night. You search the other tins, but they are filled with piss and Kentucky bourbon.

Jones and McKenna are already packed and ready to go, shifting their weight and checking their chambers every other minute. Zeke and Dunbrowski are slower to rise, stretching and scratching, telling them that four on one isn't worth the rush.

"In due time, boys," Dunbroski says, flinging a crushed can at McKenna's boot, the liquid inside hitting the chalky cinders and making it glow. "Ain't nowhere to run. He ain't gonna know which way his ass and head supposed to go soon enough. Promise you that."

You wonder why they didn't say five on one, and whose *ass* they are talking about. The new boys hold still and look through you. Their eyes are full of fire and hate. Their eyes search you slow, bottom to top. You look at Zeke and Dunbrowski while they force bullets into their chambers, then pack a small bag with the rest.

“Thought we were shooting for pheasant?” you ask. You wait.

“Hey. What is all this?”

“We gonna divide up now, see?” Dunbrowski says, breathing hard.

“You fellas go with Zeke up over that hill. I’ll go with Wally around that stretch of honey locusts and cut in. You know the drill. Whoever hits first gets the pot.”

“Pheasant are going to be on the other side,” you say. “They’re gonna be closer to the water.” No one hears you, or looks at where you are pointing.

“What happens when we get there?” Zeke asks. His face is near swollen shut and, even outdoors, you can smell the funk in his creases.

“Whatcha mean what happens, fat ass,” Dunbrowski says. “You shoot.”

You know pheasants use Pelee Island as a dry place to rest before taking off again over Eerie. They stick together. They like edges. The edge between the pasture and crop. The edge of water and thicket. Your Daddy told you about Pelee, how pretty it was when the leaves were turning, how the island held secrets. That if you listened hard enough, you could hear your past. You think about your dream during the night.

“Get to where?” you ask. “Where do we all have to *get* to?”

Everyone fans out, starts to move. Your legs feel heavy and your hands begin to sweat against the weight of the gun. You wonder why Dunbrowski isn't careful with his steps, like he's trying to warn those birds before he gets to them, make a real challenge of it. You try and walk without splitting the fallen leaves. You try to become weightless, a ghost.

“Keep your eyes peeled, Wally,” Dunbrowski says. The chill of morning and patches of shade send a shiver through you.

“Pheasant are going to be in the thick grass by the water,” you say. “Might be some up ahead, between those two points.”

You feel Dunbrowski's laugh shake the ground.

“Right, Wally,” he says. “Whatever you say.”

You keep moving forward. The tangle of limbs and underbrush snag at your pants. You duck beneath outstretched limbs of giant pines. After a hundred or so yards, you stop in a clearing where the light softens the earth. You hear something.

“They must be up there a ways,” you whisper. “We can flush out whatever is feeding just past those hoptrees to the left.”

Dunbrowski cocks the barrel of his gun, spits off his shoulder, crouches low, points. You sink to the ground and smell the dirt, the green turning shades of yellow and orange and brown. You catch your breath and hold. You think about your Daddy and his hand reaching back for you, and wish you could grab it.

“There’s the fucker,” Dunbrowski says, slowly lifting the length of the barrel in another direction.

You squint, search.

A wooden shelter, big enough for one or two, is up the length of forest hugging the coastline. To the right is a man cutting through a heap of wood with an axe. He is large, slow. He is wide, quick. Everything, and nothing. You can’t look away. The wood seems to split before it’s struck. Splinters of pine spin through the air and coat his sweater, his beard. He strikes down, and the echoes can be felt in the back of your neck. The blade of the axe catches the sunlight before the violent descent. You can’t look away. You have to remind yourself to breathe. In. Out.

Before you can ask, a sharp sound rings out. It feels like the sky has fallen, and you check to make sure you still have all your limbs, that your brain hasn’t oozed out of your ear. After the wave of sound, you hear

the screams of men close in, primitive, guttural. You watch Dunbrowski rise and the yellow flash of his teeth, his lips curling into a snarl. Across the ridge, a small cloud of smoke rises off the end of Zeke's shotgun. Jones and McKenna race down a slant of wild grass, chasing their wall of ammunition that catches branches, trunks, a stack of wood, a cabin, the man with the axe.

You run, from the noise, towards the noise. At the corner of your eye, the blur of a dozen pheasant rise toward the sky, over Eerie. Another blast and your teeth feel like they have cracked. You scream. You run. The rifle drops from your hands, and you crash to the ground and cover your ears. A jagged rock tears the skin off your knee, the edge of a fallen tree pokes deep into your hip. Your ankle turns and pops. It's all noise and flash. It's all flash and noise. You cover your ears tight. You squeeze her. You squeeze.

The man drops his axe and twists. He bends at the waist, and a piece of him flies off the top of his shoulder. There is burst of red. He turns and runs. He runs for the coastline, through the trees, toward the rising sun. The boys chase him. Four against one. You are the fifth. You are not the fifth. He runs and seems to lift from the ground. His hands curl

into two large barrels that slice the air. He runs. The boys shoot and run. The boys run and shoot. He runs and seems to lift from the ground, arms pumping like an engine, legs curling, gaining distance. He is a vision, a blur. And then, all of a sudden, he's gone. The running man has disappeared, like he got sucked into the dawn, or the ground. Gone. The boys stop firing. They stop. They look around, shouting, shaking, coughing. They run in circles. He's disappeared. The boys scream at the sky, fall to the ground, wail.

You sink into the earth. You feel your Daddy's beard, and his sweet, soft whispers. *Okay?* Penny's letters. Penny. Iron ore. Coal. Limestone. Clogged Cuyahoga. Three thousand degrees. Slag the dolomite. Liquid fire. You are the spark. She's gone and done the unthinkable. Her heart stops too soon. In time, things will cool, harden. Things will harden in time. Lightning cuts the night sky. Uncover her ears. Wrap your arms around her. Kiss her neck. Squeeze. *Thanks*, she says. *Love you*, she says. *I'm better now*, she says. Release. *Thanks*, you whisper. *Thanks. Thanks. Thanks.*

Sally

They call me *Fastburger*, because my body is a loaded weapon, quick, dangerous. My sweaters stretch the cotton where it counts. My hips are wide and sway like a pendulum. Side to side. Side to side. My lips are thick, pink, dewy. Have eyes the color wild honey. Hell, you can bounce a penny off my backside it's that firm. *Fastburger*. All the boys gawk andstare like I am one of those speedy comets racing across the night sky. Quick now. Hurry up. Got to catch a glimpse, or you might lose me behind the moon. Stare too long, and you'll get tangled in my stars.

Fastburger.

Daddy leaves so often I think he's forgotten I'm his only girl.

Mom's around, but lately she's been more interested in planting tomatoes

in the garden and praying along side her King James Bible. Swear if I hear one more peep about zucchini or Ecclesiastes 3, I'll just die. Last two trips he came back with a Shirley Temple doll and a replica of the Empire State Building stuffed inside his briefcase. *Here baby girl. Thinking of you.* Uh huh. Sometimes, he tries to hide those red brown leech marks on his neck with that silly silk ascot he picked up in Boston. *Damned razors!* He once called to tell us it was cool in California, that the ocean felt like the liquid at the bottom of a tall glass of iced lemonade. Later that night, I saw him with his arms locked around the daughter of a mill man on St. Clair. Some immigrant from Poland, who barely spoke English. She had sandy hair, knocked knees and skin the color of milk. Found out a week later that she was going to be in my senior class, liked puppies and the smell of a man. They weren't talking much. Suppose he didn't care what she had to say either.

Some afternoons Mom falls to her knees in the yard, presses her hands together. Looks like the heat tires her. I go to the kitchen, pour some cool tea, and bring it to her. *Thanks, Sally,* she says, before lifting the glass. *Pray with me. Take my hand.* But I turn and leave her with her arm suspended in the air. Her shoulders sag and her hair falls off her ears and sways in the breeze. I can see her lips move, her eyelids twitch from my

bedroom window. Don't know much about the God she is talking about, but I wonder if he is hard to find.

Sometimes Mom falls asleep out back. Turns onto her hip and dreams in the middle of the vegetable rows. Her dress slips to the side and shows the white of her thighs. Mom is pretty when her face isn't smudged with soil and fertilizer. We don't speak much anymore. Our conversations have become a collection of gestures and bible pleas. She's too proud to leave him. *1 Corinthians 7 verse 10. And unto the married I command, not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband.* I do love the feel of dirt between my fingers, against my skin. When she's not there, I lie down, close my eyes, and try to find the God she's always whispering about.

I was drinking a pop with Charlie at the Harbor Inn, when those buffoons Zeke and Dunbrowski came in with a couple of new faces. Charlie was a mill boy, Irish, with hair the color of fire, and the thickest accent you ever heard. Every time he said something I didn't understand, I'd squeeze his arm and laugh wildly. *I ain't sure bout much. But em sure I'm needin you.* He'd flex, then throw back his beer. Must have had two or

three before I figured out he was talking about the town where he grew up as a boy, where everything was green and smelled that way.

Harbor Inn began to hold fights for dollars in their downstairs storage room. A place like Harbor gets that way to keep the crowds coming and things interesting. Dockworkers, sailors, mill men, and the girls that followed, were all regulars. Most girls sought free drinks, or more, for more than just talk. I went to Harbor because I wasn't supposed to. Harbor turned dangerous when the sun went down, flirting, fighting, pushy men who didn't like the word *no*. But, I wanted to find Daddy here, and speed up the process. If Mom wasn't going to leave him, catching him in one of his silky lies might send running to the arms of one of his sinning whores. That velvety talker would finally have nothing to say. No dimpled doll or metallic toy could ever fix what broke long ago.

The boys were aggressive when they wanted to be. They'd smirk and lick the corners of their mouth. *Just got paid*. They'd try and grab at me, slide their hands between my thighs, pinch my backside, forget their problems. *How 'bout we talk a little more in private?* They'd cuss and holler and beg and plead for a kiss. *Have a drink. Loosen up!*

I'm as pure as the sky is blue. Never shared a bed with anyone. Never took any alcohol. Stuff tastes and smells like diesel. Just pop for

me. Seen too many girls lose their heads, and more. *Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge, Hebrews 13 verse 4.* I'm saving myself.

A real man will work for my heart, not one of these pimply boys acting like they know what they preach about. Shooting their mouths off about how good they are, just give them a chance. They'd hold up their greasy hands and say, *Whatcha think these do?* To which I'd politely respond, batting my lashes, *Wipe that pasty white ass of yours, of course.* They'd get all red and fume and foam if they had enough of that brown river flowing through them. Most boys got excited, would get dry in the mouth and forget their names. Some felt offense, and would hold on real tight, leave nail marks in my skin. I never let them see me flinch or pull back. *The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil: so stripes the inward part of the belly, Proverbs 20 verse 30.* Never let them see me soften, or the pain behind my hazel eyes Bat my eyelashes. Never let them see me cry. Always a pop for me. A real man will never leave.

My first kiss is going to be from a true gentleman. A man with a job like a lawyer or doctor. Someone who can use their brain and not their hands to teach me things they want me to remember. They'll hold on to me at night and tell me about the disease they cured or the bad men they put

behind bars. I'll make them supper and we'll sit and stare at each other and forget that we are hungry. We will vacation in warm, sunny places I can't pronounce, and laugh until our bellies ache and our mouths are sore. I imagine kissing is like a warm ocean, wet, soft, exhilarating. But I've never seen one, so I'm not sure.

I kept an eye out for Daddy. Every time the door opened, I'd imagine what I would say, then dream of the look on his face, the stutter in his speech. After his fourth beer, Charlie pushed himself away from the bar and went to the washroom. The Friday crowd was tense. Everyone was in a mood. Mill boys get uncomfortable at week's end, like their bodies don't know how to function once they aren't told what to do. Everything is hard, rough. The way they move through the crowd, pick up a pint, laugh, talk, smile, everything has an edge and a weight to it. It's all forced, unbalanced.

I saw slivers of yellow light shining through the spaces in the floorboards. The storage room was filled and the ground was all glow and pulse. Smoke was curling around the uneven wooden boards. At first I thought there might be a fire, but the rising cloud was Lucky Strike and cheap cigar. Harbor Inn was buzzing. The shouts from below grew in number and intensity. Everyone was beginning to descend the side

stairwell and catch the action. *Luke 24 verse 5. And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead?* I decided to follow and see for myself.

The night the big storm blew through and took Penny's mother was special. Mom was out gardening, and Daddy was in a warm bar in Tallahassee. The lightning looked like it was breaking apart the sky, thought I saw faces looking down on us between the patches of grey. Mom was on her knees in the mud, a stack of carrots by her side. The downpour matted her hair and her clothes hung off in clumps. She was looking up at the sky, smiling. *Isaiah 29 verse 6. Thou shalt be visited of the LORD of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire.* I wonder if those faces were telling her stories, too. I tried to help her in and get dry, warm. But she refused, pulled her arm back. I left for Harbor Inn. *It's a sign, Sally. All of it.*

The heap of people below the bar spread across the cramped space in a half circle. Everyone was damp with sweat and stink. No one seemed to care that it felt like an inferno, the heat hanging like a cloud about to unleash another terrible storm. It was hard to catch your breath. A huge man in the center tucked his large fists close to his ears. He ducked and lifted, his head in constant movement, his body a shifting wall. He seemed

oblivious to the crowd, to the noise. A wall mirror behind him started to fog and drip. He stalked, and the image of himself followed, and it was difficult to tell who was winning. His legs pulsed and smudged, silent and dizzying across space that didn't seem to be there. Some of the watchers had already heard about him. Others were there because they heard he was there and wanted to see for themselves. They wanted to see if the rumors were true—rumors that started as whispers and escalated to arguments.

He's a beast! I love him. I'll kick his ass. I want to have his children. He's the devil! He's never smiled. He killed his own brother! He's Jesus Christ.

The man danced in front of the mirror. He was a series of movement and shuffled past emptied barrels and bags of garbage. He looked like a blur. I stood on a stack of old newspapers to get a better view. He was already the biggest man I'd ever seen. Couldn't have been a day over twenty. Sweat coated him like oil. His entire body was a constant tension and release. The muscles exposed were alive. Those hidden below sweat-soaked clothing trembled and snapped like a secret forcing its way to the surface. His face was all angles and shadow, hard to see even under the hanging bronzed light above him.

Zeke, Dunbrowski and those new faces were pointing at him among the crowd, taking in each other's ears. Those new boys looked

funny, like they'd seen a ghost. Stood there with their mouths open, mumbling. They were white, trembling. Had hate in their eyes and fear in their souls.

I saw Daddy flattened between two girls with heaving chests in the corner of the room. The girls started to follow the crowd and shout along. *Bob! Bob! Bob! Bob!* Daddy was too busy staring and squeezing the girls closer to care. Everything sounded like an engine churning, revving, roaring. The noise so loud, I had to hold my ears. *Bob! Bob! Bob! Bob!* The man's bulging arms cut through air, without resistance, without hesitation. A real man should know when to leave. And we were all caught, tangled. Caught in a reality that is as hard to believe as death or birth. *John 3 verse 16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* I closed my eyes. I'd seen what Mom was whispering about.

The morning after the great storm, Mom was still searching the rolling clouds through shivers. I brought her a blanket and some warm tea and she held my hand while she sipped. Several minutes slipped by without so much as a nod and a half-hearted grin. I told her about Penny's mother and she squeezed my hand and wouldn't let go. *We're leaving that*

sonnofabitch at month's end. Don't know what Mom heard in the sky during that terrible storm, but I sure am glad she listened. I rested my head in her lap, opened her soggy bible, started to read the smudged words out loud. And word by word, passage by passage, I started to scream, as loud and as fast as I could. Faster. Faster, until the clouds cleared, and the sunlight warmed our flesh.