

## DIRTIES

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*Malinda McCollum*

Cale tried to relax in the low-slung vinyl chair. In the examination room with him was the tallest nurse and shortest dentist he had ever seen.

"You're a teacher at Greenwood?" the tallest nurse asked. The dentist was in the corner, washing.

"Student teacher," Cale said. "I'm in training. Mostly I just observe."

The tallest nurse clucked. "Gang stuff starting there, right?"

"Kind of," he said. There had been threatening graffiti on the fenced-in bridge that spanned the freeway, and on the brick wall in the parking lot. Some cars had windows smashed. Loose, stupid gangs were coming together all over town, mostly white, though in the central city some black kids had joined Bloods and Crips franchises, Des Moines a nice stopover between Chicago and L.A.

"Some south side kids called The Young and the Wasted are causing trouble," he said. "There's another group, the Dirties, at Greenwood." He didn't tell her he was involved.

"Kids are evil," she said. "No offense."

"None taken," he said. "I'm not one."

She fastened a mask over his mouth and nose and switched on a light above his head. The light hurt his eyes, and he tried to stare past it, focusing on the stippled ceiling. He imagined his consciousness a fat gray balloon, drifting up there to burst.

A few seconds or minutes later the dentist plucked the mask from Cale's face. The room's air rushed cool in his nose.

"Let's pull some teeth!" the dentist said, loud. On the edge of his vision Cale saw the tallest nurse return with a needle. He was being purposefully distracted. He was flattered by the deceit.

"I was talking to your sister in the waiting room and she told me you're nervous," the dentist said, pulling on a glove. "We'll be sure to give you plenty of juice."

Something quick on the inside of his elbow.

“We call this kind of anesthesia ‘twilight.’ You won’t be completely knocked out, but you won’t remember any pain.”

“Will I feel the pain?” he asked. “Originally? Before I forget it?”

The dentist stared at him. “I’ll ask you afterwards if it hurt,” he said finally. “I can guarantee you that you will say no.”

He tried to make sense of it, that he might feel the dentist cut into his gums and tug out his teeth, but that it didn’t count because his brain would be tricked into forgetting. His body didn’t count. He tried to make himself believe that his body was nothing, a painted-up carriage, a wheelbarrow. A wheelbarrow. He liked that.

“Twilight wears off more quickly,” the dentist said. “You won’t be gone for hours. You’ll be back at work tomorrow.”

“Great,” he said. He had promised the Dirties he’d bring them his drugs.

“It’s kind of like mothers after they have their babies,” the dentist continued. “They forget how much it hurt.”

“My mother didn’t forget,” he said. “She told me it was an unequaled pain.”

“I hear you,” the tallest nurse muttered. The dentist said, “Oh, Ingrid.”

“My mother,” because it was important the dentist knew who he was cutting into, “my mother said she gave birth to me every day of life, with everything she did, every choice she made.”

“How about you stop talking now and relax,” Ingrid said. The dentist picked up something cold and heavy.

“Each occasion as painful and joyous as the very first time.” He could see they didn’t believe him.

“Your mother sounds very special.” The dentist leaned over him.

“Or something,” said Ingrid.

“My mother,” he said. He had lived with her until he was twelve, in a small wood house sunk between two dying trees. The house was filled with medical books his mother constantly cross-referenced. On weekends she took him on searches, driving rural roads to small clinics and emergency rooms in nearby counties, getting him multiple prescriptions which she would fill and consume. She would determine which symptoms he needed to display and then would induce them. To get his eyes red and runny she stopped the car and pulled weeds from the roadside, rubbing them gently over his cheeks and eyelids. For excess phlegm she’d have him drink quarts of milk. He was naturally skinny. That helped too.

When he was just a baby his mother had tried doing searches with his older sister, Christine. But she didn’t have a good memory, and in offices she’d get flustered and cry. His mother could tell the doctors at the city clinics were getting suspicious, so when Cale was old enough she took him instead.

Christine left when she was sixteen. Two years later she graduated and got a full time job at an everything store called Places and rented the bottom floor of a house near the high school. And she came to get Cale. His mother didn’t fight it—their searches had become more infrequent since she had hooked up with a young pharmacy student studying at Drake. Years later she married him and moved to

Quincy, Illinois where her new husband's father ran a pharmacy. They received a postcard from her at Christine's house. "I'm hitched," it read, "I love Quincy." Christine had said, "Don't ever forget this, Cale. Nobody gets what they deserve."

"Hey," the dentist said. "Hey. All finished. Your sister is here."

"Done?" His eyes focused and he saw Christine, hair pulled back, grin on the lower half of her face. "Where did I go?"

"Brother," she said.

He loved her so much. "I figured it out," he said. Speaking felt like chewing glue.

"You've come up with a theory, have you?" She turned to the dentist. "He's wasted."

"Don't have theories," Cale announced. "Suspicious of truth."

"What do you suspect is true?" she asked.

Ingrid had returned, and with three people gathered around him he got lost in the attention and forgot his discovery. Ingrid tried to help him sit up.

"You have something to ask me?" Cale said to the dentist, resisting.

"I have a few things to tell you," the dentist said. "Make sure you let clots form in those empty sockets. Brush real carefully, and chew with your front teeth."

"Ask me. Have to ask me."

"Take it easy, bud," Christine said.

"Promised you'd ask me," he said. He grabbed hold of the dentist's coat and willed him to understand.

The dentist jerked away, but then his face relaxed.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

Cale felt like he was betraying somebody when he answered, but he said it anyway: "No, you did not."

He followed Christine to the car.

"I remember when you were teething," she said fondly, once he was buckled into the passenger seat. "I used to pry open your mouth to see the teeth coming in. Just like buried broken stuff being dug up."

He was surprised she'd ever done such a thing. For as long as he could remember she had avoided physical contact with him. He had a secret sick fear he'd once made a sexual advance that had forever scared her off.

"You were crying all the time then." She shook her head. "All the time."

It felt like there was a fist in his mouth. Buildings, as they sped by, had tracers, as if just by looking at them he smudged their edges.

"What powerful eyes," he said.

"I should ask you some questions now." Christine laughed nervously. "You seem so chatty and right-on at the moment."

She was always trying to get him to talk. She thought he was closed off and hiding something good.

"What do you think of my life?" she asked. "What do you think about Gary?"

Gary, her boyfriend, worked at Pidgeon's Organs at the mall. He was the sales-

man that hovered at the entrance, occasionally flipping on a calypso rhythm and picking out a one-fingered melody above it.

"There is an ocean," Cale said. "You're drowning. Waves of pettiness. Attachment. Desire."

Christine slammed on the brake, and his seatbelt caught him.

"Don't talk like that to me," she said, eyes dark. "Don't talk to me like you're her."

"Sorry," he said quickly. "So sorry. I shouldn't."

"Do you think that woman felt things deeply? Do you think she knew something I don't?"

"No." And yes, he thought. Christine didn't know what his mother knew, and what he suspected, some twilight still in his blood. The inverse proportion of care and control.

"You think she was mellow, she lived lightly upon the earth. She was driven, Cale, she schemed. She manipulated things to get what she wanted."

"To get what she needed," he said.

"She didn't need medication. She needed to deal with her life."

"Different responses to pain," he said.

"Yeah, and hers was to pass it on."

He stopped himself from answering, puzzled by where the conversation had gone. Christine usually lived her life looking forward. Her world was a place without regret or surprise.

They pulled into the parking lot of Brown's Pharmacy. Two Greenwood girls were there, leaning against a maroon Volvo, chewing on straws.

"Thanks for waiting at the dentist's," he said.

"It's not fair," she said. "I tell you everything. And you just sit there, silent, and judge."

"I like to listen," he said lamely.

"No, you don't like to share." She saw him checking out the girls. "We got to get you a girlfriend," she said, softening a bit. "That'll get you talking and less morose."

"Sure," he said, but he didn't believe her. He'd kissed enough to know kisses were nothing.

Grubby longhaired boys on their lawn, throwing egg after egg at the house. When Christine honked, the boys scattered. Styrofoam cartons littered the driveway. Egg yolks oozed down the front door like thick yellow tears.

"Just go inside," Christine said wearily. "I'll clean it up."

He swallowed two pills at the kitchen sink, then went to the living room and slipped his yoga tape into the VCR. After unrolling his sticky mat, he got down on all fours. He preferred doing yoga in the morning, when his mind was sharp. By this time in the afternoon, his body was loose, but he had difficulty concentrating. Still, it had to be done. Yoga was part of his routine. He weighed himself daily, and examined the color and caliber of his feces.

He moved into Downward-Facing Dog easily, but as soon as the thought came

he tried to clear it. He wasn't supposed to congratulate himself when he made a pose, just like he wasn't supposed to despair when he couldn't get aligned.

The man on the tape was a pose ahead of him. Cale stood and moved into the Extended Triangle Pose. He often lost track of the movements. He was naturally flexible, able to hold poses without feeling strain. He remembered a time from his youth when his mother and her friend Kelly had been sprawled on bean bags in the front room, smoking cigarettes as slow as possible, listening to Joni Mitchell records. He had tumbled into the room and stepped on Kelly's hair.

"Fuck!" she screamed. He burst into tears.

"I'm sorry, Cale, sweetheart, I didn't mean to scare you," Kelly said quickly. "Don't cry, baby, stop crying, don't cry." She looked at his mother helplessly. "He's crying."

"Come here," his mother said.

He sat on the carpet next to her. "He likes this," she said. She positioned his hands on the ground in front of him, and took his feet and worked one behind his head, then the other. His back against the wall kept him upright. It didn't hurt. His breath was shallow. His tailbone rock hard on the floor.

"Can you imagine?" Kelly said. "I mean, look at that."

"I see great popularity in his future," his mother said.

"Really?" He was breathless and proud.

"No," his mother said. "No popularity. You'll always be alone."

"Jesus," Kelly said, "don't saddle the poor kid with that."

"I'm not saddling him, I'm blessing him." His mother knelt before him, and he felt himself blush. "Being alone, you're free to take risks. To keep going, the world needs risky people." She took a drag on her cigarette and turned her face to exhale. The smoke drifted to a cartoon of gurus she had taped to the wall.

"I was alone once," his mother said quietly. "I was once of some use."

"You're horrible," Kelly said. She rose from the bean bag and adjusted her vest. "As a mother, as a female, as a *human*." She rushed out of the room, wobbling.

His mother sighed. She patted his head absentmindedly. "Women," she said. Then she took her hand away and crawled toward the kitchen, calling, "Kelly? Kelly, honey?"

He watched her go. He didn't panic because he assumed she'd return, but then he heard glass break, and a door slam, and a car start and pull away from the house.

The problem: he had flexibility but no strength. His mother could put him into difficult poses, but he didn't have the muscle control to get himself out. His arms were trapped by the pressure of his thighs. He couldn't summon the force to raise his feet up and over his head.

"Lift," he muttered, "Lift!" Nothing. Joni sang about kissing a pig on some street.

"Help!" he yelled then, but it wasn't very loud because his chin was tucked into his chest and he had no air.

There were footsteps on the stairs, and then Christine sauntered into the room, buttoning a new cover onto her Bermuda bag.

“Holy shit, Cale.” She stared at him for a second before setting down her purse and grabbing his shoes. “Why do you let her do this?” His freed feet thumped-thumped on the floor. “You got to stop being the easiest thing in town.”

Now, in the living room, his attention back to the tape, he realized he’d missed several more poses. He gave up, fast forwarding through Half-Moon and Camel and Sitting Staff, stopping at the final position, the Corpse pose. He arranged himself on his back, arms to the side, made his legs heavy, opened his shoulders. His tongue settled into his lower palate.

“It’s all inside you,” the man on the tape whispered encouragingly. “You turn inward, and it’s already there.”

When Cale awoke, the living room was dark, and there was a deep pain in his jaw.

In the light of the bathroom mirror he saw his face shiny and swollen. One of his cheeks had turned a grimy green. The bottle of pills was on the toilet tank, and when he screwed off the cap he saw the bottle was half-empty.

The door to Christine’s room stood open. Gary was in bed with her, elbow on her ass, watching television.

“I like how your face is uneven,” Gary said. He always complimented Cale. He had started out simply, I like your shirt, I like the cut of your hair. But as time passed the compliments became stranger: I like the way you ignore me. I like how you get hiccups after eating broccoli raw.

“Do you know where my pills are?”

Gary nudged Christine’s shoulder, and they both watched her wake up.

“Where are the rest of my pills?” he asked when she opened her eyes.

“You were so out of it, you probably spilled some down the toilet.”

“So I spilled half the bottle without knowing it?” he said. “And then I put the cap back on?”

“I don’t fucking know. I don’t know what you did, I don’t know what you do.” Her words slurred.

“It really hurts.”

“Sorry, bud,” said Gary.

He had promised each of the Dirties pills and now he had barely enough. He’d have to swallow four or six aspirin instead. A few weeks ago one of the rich girls had overdosed on it. Her boyfriend had been sleeping with her best friend. Ho hum. He knew she didn’t mean to die, but she had swallowed fifty tablets and her blood thinned to nothing, and she passed out and never came back.

“Where are my teeth then?” he asked, resigned.

“Kitchen window,” Christine muttered.

The bottle was on the sill. He was unscrewing the cap when the phone rang. From the bedroom Christine yelled, “It’s fucking three a.m.!”

He picked up the receiver, and a mean young voice chanted, “Dead dirty, dirty dead, die, die, die.”

He hung up. Kids were evil. He spilled the teeth into his palm and held his hand to what was left of the moon. Three teeth with long rusty roots, one tiny and quiet and clean.

Before school the Dirties hung out on the bridge over the freeway. They were mostly skinny guys who smoked aggressively and had scars on their cheeks. The rich kids had come up with the name and it stuck. They were dirty. They were. In part because most lived in old houses with small hot water heaters, but in part because what was the point of clean?

Cale hated smoke, and the teacher's lounge was thick with it, so he had started taking his breaks and lunches out on the bridge. The other teachers didn't approve, but Nora, the woman whose class he was observing, had supported him and told the teachers it was outreach. In truth, he felt closer to the Dirties than to the bitter, hopped-up teachers. The Dirties didn't like him much, but they tolerated his presence. And sometimes, when Christine went away for the weekend, he'd have them over. They'd steal his CDs and drink Christine's gin, but at least the house was full and the air was warmer and smelling of boys.

The most vocal of the Dirties, Donald, was balling up newspaper and setting it on fire, then dropping it off the bridge on cars. Shane, a short kid with a bi-level haircut and a thin T-shirt proclaiming "PUNK AS FUCK," was trying to mask some of the Young and Wasted tags on the pavement with black spray paint.

"Dudes," Cale said.

"Looks like somebody clocked you," Shane said, finger on the paint nozzle.

"My teeth were yanked." Cale pulled out the bottle of pills. "I have something for you guys."

"Score!" Shane yelled.

Donald looked up from his firestarting. "You're famous, man, check it out. Came out yesterday." He held out a copy of the school paper. On the front was a photograph of the Dirties assembled on the bridge. Cale was in the background, misidentified as part of the gang. A week earlier, after the Young and Wasted graffiti had appeared on the bridge, a reporter from the Greenwood paper had made her way to them, clutching a notepad to her thigh-length suede coat.

"You guys have any response to this?" she asked, pointing out the tags.

"They better watch out," Shane said. "This is Dirties turf and we don't like strangers."

"Yeah," Donald said, "If they want a war we're ready to step up and battle."

"One thing we got is balls," Shane said. "Put that in the article."

"I don't think they'll let us use 'balls,'" the reporter said. "I'll probably use your quote about the war and whatever."

"We kick rowdy ass!" Donald said. He jumped up and down, fists in the air. All the Dirties imitated him, and at that moment the reporter took the photograph that was now in the paper. Because they were moving, most of the Dirties' faces were blurred. But Cale stood out clearly. Beneath the picture was a pulled quote, attributed to an anonymous Dirty: "We're ready to step up and battle."

"Mr. Tough Guy, you're going to get notice," Shane said.

“Right,” Cale said, “Principal Lane will kick my ass.”

“Man,” Donald interrupted, “we were at the Lost Planet last night, doing some monster hits on my brother’s bong. You should have seen it. This pussy over here was coughing for like ten minutes straight.”

“I got asthma, asshole,” Shane said. “My lungs are thrashed.”

“You shouldn’t smoke,” Cale said. His newspaper appearance had him feeling articulate and worthy. “As you smoke, your insides turn to wind. Your outside gets thinner and thinner. Eventually your outside disappears, and since your insides are wind, you just blow away.”

“This guy,” Donald said, shaking his head. “Where does it come from?”

“Blow this,” Shane said, and, of course, grabbed his crotch.

“Hey,” and suddenly they saw the cop at the other side of the bridge, fists on her blue hips, “You boys setting fires?”

“Book!” Donald cried, and the Dirties ran toward the school. Before he thought to do differently, Cale was running with them.

First period he observed a lower track science class called Science in Action. The teacher, Nora, had given up on it quickly. All they did was study natural disasters—floods and earthquakes, volcanoes and fires.

“Ouch,” Nora said when he entered. She sat at her bare desk, drinking coffee from a stained mug. He perched on the desk, and she leaned close to his face to inspect the swelling. She smelled like peanut butter, burnt.

“And you made the front page of the paper. Nice move, Cale, getting photographed with the losers.”

“I’m going to get it from Lane this time.”

She shrugged. “You’ve decided you don’t want to teach anyway. What power does a principal have over you?” She reached back and massaged her neck. “Lord, I’m sore. I must be sleeping all wrong.”

“I told you yoga will fix that.”

“I can think of plenty of things that would fix it.”

“Sure,” he said. She was all right, but she scared him a little, too quick, her voice skating along so high. He took his seat at the back of the room.

They were doing a unit on hurricanes, and once the bell rang they watched a hurricane special Nora had taped off the Weather Channel, footage of interstates clogged with evacuees, and downed power-lines, and slickered reporters whipped by wind. Then she passed out a photocopied article about how the hurricane season had been busy enough to use almost all of the storm names the National Hurricane Center had prepared. Van and Wendy were the only ones left. She gave them a worksheet with the letters of the alphabet printed in boldface and the instruction to “Imagine if you were responsible for coming up with a new set of hurricane names—what would they be?”

*Andy*, he wrote next to the letter A. Then: *Bandy, Candy, Dandy, Eandy, Fandy, Gandy, Handy*... When he was finished he read the article. At the end it talked about Tropical Storm Tanya. “It’s a fish storm,” some meteorologist said, because all Tanya threatened was open ocean. Cale pictured the ocean, and then

out of nowhere the whirl of the hurricane, frothing the surface, and the fish diving to where it was purple and cold, systems slowing, surviving down deep.

Nobody in class had asked about his swollen face. No one had mentioned the newspaper article. He sat in the back row, invisible as the new moon. The girls in front of him had finished their worksheets and were talking about another senior, whose father was the governor of the state. The senior had been on the news the night before, pulled over for speeding. The cops had found paraphernalia in the trunk of his car.

"I heard he's doing a lot of scary shit," the first girl said.

"Yeah, well," her friend said. "People like him don't die. They get killed. And drugs can't kill him."

A crazy urge came over him then, to change the way he was. He leaned forward and said in his sternest voice, "Friends don't let friends do drugs." He meant it to be funny, or ironic or something, but the girls just looked at him, puzzled, and he resolved to stay quiet for another ten years.

At lunch he walked to the bridge, fingering the tooth vial in his pocket. The Dirties were already there, and he could tell they'd taken the codeine—lips loose, shoulders relaxed and low. The homecoming court had been announced that morning and they were talking about which attendants they'd be able to beat up.

"I wouldn't take on Patrice Walker," Shane said. "She's just a freshman, but you can tell she's crazy. I hit her, she'd totally lose it. She probably bites."

"But she's got that hair you could grab a hold of," Donald said, "then you get her in the nose."

An engine fired and then a long rusty car pulled next to the bridge, and up on the curb. A kid jumped out and came over to Cale, holding a gun, short-barreled and black, to Cale's face. Cale put up his hands without thinking.

"You've had it, dirty," the kid said.

"Go back," Cale said. "I mean—"

"Shut up," the kid said. His arm was shaking, and his tongue darted out and licked at his top lip.

"Seriously," Cale said, and his heart was so fast, "seriously this is really not cool."

"You wanted to step up and battle. So here goes, little fuck."

Oh is it going to hurt, Cale thought.

The kid closed his eyes. Cale did too. Then he heard a tiny well-mannered click and he fell, he just fell.

"I want you to know there's more of this on the way," he heard the kid say. "Look out for the Young and Wasted in days to come."

He let his eyes open. The kid stood over him, gun in his hand as natural and loose as an extra finger. Then he dropped the gun. It hit Cale in the forehead, without much impact, and he picked it up. It was plastic. A price sticker was still glued to the handle. It had been purchased at his sister's store.

"We know where you live," the kid said. Then he dove into the car's front seat. A girl drove. She was laughing, and she was covering her mouth, and her fingernails were painted bright green.

Cale rolled onto his stomach, arms extended and tense, and fired at the car as it sped away. He couldn't help himself. When the car made a wide turn onto Spence Boulevard, he stopped shooting. He stood and brushed the dust off his thighs. He put the gun in his pocket and looked around him. The Dirties were gone, every one.

After talking to the principal and the policeman-on-duty, he was sent home early. He walked the back way, along 24th Street, the earth refusing him with each jarring step. Two blocks from his house a crazy woman who sold paper napkins out of a shopping cart accosted him.

"Okay, okay, okay," she said. "Hey boy, over here, okay?"

"What is it?" he said. "I'm going home."

"A question is all. That's all. For you, boy, for you."

He waited.

"Ever been part of something grand?" she asked, face big and hot. "Okay? Ever touched something more large than you?"

"I'd rather touch—" he shouted it, letting his throat open up, jumpy and angry because she'd pinpointed the lack of his life, "I'd rather touch a fucking eyeball!"

"No," she said, but she was smiling, smiling, "Not an okay way. Not okay."

Christine was home. She motioned him into her bedroom. She took a small plastic bag out of her top dresser drawer. It was full of his pills.

"I was so tired I was seeing through things," she said. "I was desperate."

"Christine—" He came behind her and put his arms around her waist and pressed his face to her back.

"I didn't want you to worry it was all starting again." She started to cry. "But I made it worse because you knew all along I had taken them. You're too smart."

"Just keep them," he said. "I'm fine."

"I'm not her, Cale." She pulled away and held out the bag.

"I'm not either."

"Yes, you are." She stared at him, then looked down. "No, I guess you're not. But these are for you. They've been prescribed. You deserve them."

She was wearing a dress she hadn't worn before, and he suddenly saw it on her five years from now, soft at the hem, lighter across the thighs, a gap in front where she would have re-sewn a button slightly off-center.

"I shouldn't take them anyway. I'm pregnant."

He thought: Another person requiring care.

"I haven't told Gary. I can't sleep, I'm thinking all the time. So I took a couple pills last night, and then a few this morning. And then I looked in the mirror and I was her, same eyes, everything. I was scared. I got in the car and headed for the clinic, to get rid of the baby right away. I thought about leaving Des Moines, going to Colorado or somewhere." She lifted a comb from her dresser and scratched at her chin. "The whole time I didn't think of you even once. Just like her."

"Christine—"

"You don't have to talk to me, ever, if you don't want to. I know you're in there."

"I just don't know why you wouldn't want the baby. You'd be a great mother."

"I wouldn't."

"You did a good job with me."

"That's just it. I ruined you."

"I'm fine," he said. "I am."

Christine replaced the comb on the dresser, her chin red. "You were just a few months old," she said slowly, "and Mom was out of it, and you were crying. I came to the crib and picked you up. I didn't know you had to have been pregnant. I was stupid, I was just a kid." She closed her eyes. "I lifted up my shirt and put your mouth on my breast."

He felt a little sick. He tried not to, but he did. "You just wanted to make me feel better," he said.

"No, I didn't. I was doing it for me. I had seen Mom feed you, how her face was. The two of you so complete. And so far from me—" Her voice was ragged. "I messed you up. You'll never be with anyone."

"I don't remember it happening."

"It's imprinted on your brain," she said. "You can't erase it. No way."

He wanted to tell her that wasn't true, but the phone rang. When he picked up the receiver on her nightstand, someone whispered, "Dead dirty, dirty dead, two days dirty dead."

"I'm no—" he said. The caller hung up.

"Who was it?" Christine asked. She stopped crying.

"Wrong number," he said. He knew then that he had to do something. The eggs thrown at the house, the phone calls. The gun pointed at his third eye. We know where you live, the kid had said. We know. Christine looked at him, pregnant and concerned. Before she could press further he asked, "What are you going to name the baby?"

"Name it?" She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I'll have to talk to Gary, I guess. You have any ideas?"

He considered. "Van?" he said finally. "Wendy?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Maybe not. Maybe never."

"Believe me," he said quickly. "You didn't hurt me. I'm fine."

"How can I believe you?" She slumped onto the bed. "I see you. I see you."

He sat next to her. He loved her so much.

"Brother," she said.

"Yeah," he said.

"Here," she said and reached for his wrist, "feel."

She put his palm on her abdomen. And, touching the swell, he realized more keenly that there was nothing in him.

"Feel?" she asked.

He nodded, pretending.

"So why are you home early?" she asked, leaning back on the bed, holding his hand to her.

"My mouth was hurting."

“See? You need your pills.”

He realized that he did. He really did.

The front door rattled. Someone pushed against it, hard, and when he heard it open, he knew it was true. Kids are evil. They have no perspective or shame.

“Hey—” he began, panicked.

Gary came into the doorway, tossing his keys. He looked at Cale.

“I like how you and your sister are,” he said.

On their last search, before Christine took him away, he and his mother had set out for Keokuk. It was early spring and people were burning their ditches and lawns, leaving blackened troughs around the edge of their land. Long lines of fire burning off winter weeds and refuse so that grass could come back green and strong.

“Sometimes, on windy days, the fires get big and take the houses,” his mother said.

He didn’t know how he was supposed to respond.

“When I was a baby my mother took me on trips,” his mother said, trying again.

“Really?”

“She would lay me on a pillow in the passenger seat and drive for hours.”

“Could you see out the window?”

“Lie down.”

He arranged himself awkwardly so that his head and back were flat on the seat.

“What do you see?”

“Your face sideways. A little of the top of the sky.”

“Me too, I guess,” his mother said.

“Where did you and your mom go?”

She sighed. “What a little man you are. Let’s hear about the destination. Who cares about the journey.”

“Sorry.” He always tried to be more than he was, or at least more than she thought he was, but he never fooled her.

“She was driving grain to the elevator, storing it until the price rose enough to sell.”

They were coming up on a barn as red as soup, windows high on the side, with warped wooden slats that let sunlight through in flashes. Just past the barn, over the rise of the hill, his mother pressed hard on the brake. Tea splashed from the mug she was holding onto her sweater and the thighs of his jeans.

The road was crowded with dozens of silent cows, wide-eyed and set. A fence somewhere must have broken. He imagined it, split and fallen, and the cows discovering it, nosing the splinters, lifting their heavy hooves over the wood. Could a cow smile?

“Wow,” his mother said. She eased through the mass, slow, with an occasional soft honk to encourage them off the road. His window was unrolled, and he could hear sticky chewing. The animals were pressed so close to the car he felt famous.

It took almost twenty minutes to drive a mile and a half. The cows’ broad flanks

absorbed the growl of the engine. Their breath came through the window, sweaty and old. He was enclosed in a small warm space with his mother, and she couldn't get away, even if she wanted.

That day, after they'd obtained the script and filled it, she didn't wait until they returned home to dose herself. She pulled off the road, driving right into a field. She swallowed a couple of pills and led him in a series of standing asanas: the Triangle pose, Warrior 2, the Tree. Then she pulled off his sweatshirt to use as a pillow. It was okay with him. It was warm for March.

She fell asleep quickly. That was the part he hated. She looked ugly when she was asleep, face slack, breath thick and wet in her mouth. Uglier still because the sleep seemed so selfish. She left him after she got what she wanted. He didn't know then that was how it would always be.

While his mother slept he skipped around in the field, trying to keep the sun on his skin. An hour later she awoke, eyelids swollen. She swallowed a pill of a different shape and surveyed her surroundings. The horizon was rich with the setting sun. A thick haze had drifted into the field, like smoke from a slow fire.

"Unless you want to go crazy," she said, voice hoarse, "make sure you're often in the presence of beauty." She fingered the tea stain on her sweater. "Or in the presence of ugliness if it is the truth."

He shivered. She had read his mind. "Sometimes I think you're ugly," he said. "I'm true." Then: "I think you can be ugly too."

"But I'm not true," he said. "I lie all the time. You make me lie to the doctors."

She pulled at a piece of skin on her palm until it came free. "Dishonesty has its own kind of beauty," she said then. "Especially if, as it often does, it reveals a deeper truth."

"Oh, Mom." He watched her try to untangle her hair with her fingers. "Can we make tacos for dinner?"

Her hand was stuck. "What?"

"Can we make tacos for dinner?"

"Tacos? As in hamburger and crispy shells?"

"And lettuce and tomato and white onions," he said encouragingly. He wanted her to list more ingredients. Hearing her say "hamburger" made him as happy as being surrounded by cows—at such times he knew things were simpler than she made them out to be.

She eyed him. "You think tacos are beautiful, don't you?"

He grinned. "Gorgeous tacos."

"Wrong," she said. "Tacos are brussel sprouts are chicken breasts are cupcakes. All any of them do is make you feel full." She scratched at her face. "And then you are able to ponder other, more significant concerns. Food is something necessary. Food is not beauty."

"I throw up when I eat peas," he said.

"Why do I bother," she said, but with some affection in her voice, maybe. She stood and stretched her arms over her head. Then she moved her belly closer to his and hugged him. She twisted a lock of his hair down to its roots.

"Resent that which is necessary for its hold over you," she said. "Admire that which is beautiful for the pleasure it bestows."

“Yeah,” he said. Her sweater was mohair, and he licked at it, lightly, as if it were fur.

The clearing the kids called the Lost Planet was in a little valley, off the street and down past the railroad tracks. He had a difficult time keeping his balance as he made his way there. The Planet wasn't really country, but it seemed less city than much of Des Moines. No cracked sidewalks, no bad stucco houses, no rusting orange hatchback cars. Instead there were logs dragged into a circle to contain somebody's fire, a mucky pond, brittle blonde weeds that slipped against each other, hissing. He had taken several codeine tablets before walking to the Planet, and his limbs felt longer than they were supposed to. In Downward-facing Dog you feel a sharp stretch up the back of your legs, then the teacher reminds you to raise your hips and sink your torso, and when you do you're surprised to feel your on-fire muscles give more.

He stood by the pond, trying to identify its smell. Something like when he was younger, on the outskirts of Cedar Rapids, he and his mother approaching the city and catching the heady odor from the Quaker Oats factory—

No. He picked a stick off the ground and broke it at an angle. Holding the tip against the inside of his arm, he sawed into the skin until a welt rose. Then he lifted his shirt and made long criss-cross scratches on his chest. He threw the stick down. There was a knotty tree by the water and he kicked at it with one shin, then the other. That hurt some. He charged the tree, sideways, hitting shoulder first, then backed into the tree quickly, over and over, going for bruises on his back. He considered the best way to bloody his nose. If there were three guys that jumped him, two might hold him, while the other one hit him in the face and the gut. At some point they'd throw him to the ground and start kicking.

His mother was dead. He found out for sure a week later, when a letter arrived from the pharmacy student, typed and sent regular mail. But he knew she was dead that day at the Planet. He didn't need to read it on paper. If you let them, visions come to you. You can bring them to your face, like your own hands. He lifted his hands and saw his pale mother. When he let his arms fall, she disappeared, and he knew if he raised them again he'd see prairie, or water, bone-still and green. His mother was already gone. For a moment he let thoughts of her grow like mushrooms inside him, until he was full, then he forgot his mother and never recalled her again.

He should probably carve Y & W into his skin. He was marked. He tried it, with his Swiss Army knife, but gave up after doing one line of the Y. They'd take everything he had, he realized, so he emptied his pockets. He threw some dollar bills in the pond, and a black comb. In his jacket he found the plastic gun, and holding it by the barrel, smashed the butt against the sockets of his eyes. Neon snow, tenderest bone. He threw the gun to the weeds. His teeth—he removed a big one from the vial in his pocket and pressed it deep into his upper arm. But why the mark of a single tooth? So he threw the tooth far, and then the rest of the teeth, and then he bit into his arm and held it, leaving a complete impression. Then he stopped to assess his condition: dizzy, bleeding, battered. He had to leave himself

all right enough to walk up to the road and catch a ride to the hospital, to call the police and then the news. He wanted everyone to know he'd received more than his share. He'd been paid back twice over. Now no more. It would be up to the Dirties to come together and avenge him...

But before all that. He would ride in a cruiser to the emergency room, where an officer would accompany him inside. With the sun going down, the place would be busy, plenty of crying, blood on the floor. As they waited, Cale would tell the officer what happened. He'd make up the boys' builds, the words they screamed as they struck him. He'd say they threatened all the Dirties. Threatened to take them out one by one. The officer would ask a few questions about baseball caps and distinguishing marks.

Then the best and worst part. The officer flips his pad shut and touches Cale's cheek. "They sure got you," he says, with something close to pity. Then he rises, and in a voice as sure and dark as spring thunder, demands of the room, "Someone get over here and take a look at this man."