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A BOY IN THE TREES

by

Mark Robert Lindquist

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in English (Nonfiction)
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Patricia Foster

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in English (Nonfiction) at the May 2012 graduation.

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To my mother, who always told me to march the beat of my own drummer, and to my
father, who never gave up on me

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I. SUMMER DRIFTING

The summer my mother died, I was living in a window-less converted storage room down the hall from my father. It was a little larger than his walk-in closet. A florescent light buzzed from the ceiling. My father once told me that he planned on taking out a wall and installing a big bay window. He liked the idea of breaking down walls and adding onto the house, but it was one of my father's plans that never came to fruition. At various times, he talked about digging pits for swimming pools, expanding the kitchen, vague ideas that came to him. How serious he was, we couldn't quite tell. A big bay window would have been nice. Telling time was difficult without seeing the sun. Instead, just those white walls and the flicker of the light above. That summer, I was twenty-years old and stayed up until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., slept until 12:30 or 1:00 in the afternoon. I didn't really know what I was doing. I had vague plans to write about my upbringing in small town Idaho and my mother's history of mental illness and hospitalization, but I tended to put it off. Writing was always the next day. I stayed in that room, coming out for lunch or when my father called us in for dinner.

Sometimes, I saw high school friends like Matt Henretty floating around on the Internet and I thought about asking if he wanted to see a movie, but I felt distant from him, too. People were gone to me in the Boise Valley. At most, I played basketball and drove through the hills, half-expecting that eventually, I would be at a stoplight and see a lonely girl who would wave to me, tell me she liked that I listened to The Beatles at high volume. With a small smile, I would open the passenger door and offer her a ride home. We would date, marry, have children. The eternal power of music and love. Those were

things I believed in. I somehow thought it might work like that, while I was driving through the center of town on Eagle Road. Eventually, it would fall into place. It had to.

This was in June, in the early summer before anything changed. Driving the dirt roads of the Boise foothills, basketball at the Brookwood subdivision, that little cave off to the side of the hall between the laundry and my father's bedroom. My clothes lay piled on the floor. After one or two loads of laundry upon my return from Moscow, I stopped caring. I wore the same pair of shorts every day. In the corner sat a pile of my workout clothes, damp with sweat. I didn't bother to wash them, either. For days, they just sat there, until my father stuck his head into the room to tell me we were going for pizza—Thursday was our Family Pizza Night and even when the Yankees were playing, I still kept up with Family Pizza Night—and then noticed, “This room stinks. You need to do laundry.” I mumbled something about meaning to do it. I was embarrassed and defensive when my father said things like that, because it made me aware that he was thinking about how I was living.

He wanted me to work, but in my twenty years, I had never held a job. It would get me out of the house, it would be good for me. When he asked me how my job search was coming, I told him I was looking, that there wasn't a lot available, that I had applied to some places and hadn't heard back. It was my stock answer, akin to my mother's “I had a bowl of Grapenuts” when I asked her what she had eaten that day. Albertson's Grocery, Hollywood Video, Hastings Entertainment. Those were the places I applied to. I filled out the applications online so that I wouldn't have to talk to actual people. The applications asked the same things Do you consider yourself a hard worker? Do you have experience dealing with customers or helping others? What experience do you have

that would suit you for this job? I answered the questions as basically as I could. Yes, I considered myself a hard-worker—I had helped my father lift tons of hay when I was a teenager. No, I did not have experience dealing with customers or helping others—and I didn't really talk. N/A—I knew that Bob Dylan's favorite ice cream flavor was vanilla, but that would probably not help put groceries on the shelves at Albertsons. In the first week after submitting an application, I thought I might be qualified for stacking groceries. I can do something in this world. When they didn't call back, I forgot. I didn't follow-up on the applications. Those were jobs to be applied for in March or April, before the summer kids took them. I was a summer kid, too, but I didn't want a boss. I wanted money, but I didn't want to work for it.

The work that raised me was what my father put me through. When I was in high school, I dug ditches in the field at our Rush Road home, for the sprinkler system my father was installing. He spent years on that sprinkler system. When I was in my basement room watching baseball, I heard his call almost every weekend, "Hey Mark, I need a little help outside." Help digging the ditches, setting the big metal pipes which grew hot under the Idaho sun, clearing debris away from some random spot on the five acres. We tended to the mustangs, too, though we didn't ride them. Banjo was nosey for hay, Coco tended to aggressively charge and try to bite when you were in the field, Presto shied easily. A few times a year, my father woke Matthew and me in the early morning to help him load hay for the horses. We drove to small farms on the outer edge of the Eagle foothills in my father's wobbly-steering, broke-heater pickup. Our gloves had holes worn into the fingers, and even wearing gloves, the twine of the hay bit into our hands. We seemed to be one pair short almost every trip, which left our father to pick the

bales up with his bare hands. I loved my father for lifting the hay that way. It was such a simple act. Heavy lifting, no gloves, his fingers swollen and bleeding by the end. It was a gentle thing that my father did, a sacrifice he made.

The hay scratched and bit at our arms and legs as we lifted, and on the last bales, I did not have the strength to push them to the bed of the truck. Matthew helped me, which I appreciated, but also loathed. I wanted to do it myself. I wanted to be strong like my father. After several hours, when the twenty or so tons were loaded, my father looped black and orange rope around it to keep it “secure” in the bed of the truck. The stack dwarfed the truck and weighed it down. Bales stuck out from the side. We drove at twenty miles an hour with our caution lights blinking, my father glancing out the window to make sure the lanes on Ballantine were clear. In our fifteen years with the horses, we never lost a bale. The rope held well.

I considered myself a hard worker, somebody who did what they were asked to do when they were asked to do it. I just didn't have a job. And really, since I had enrolled at Idaho, I didn't have to do much of the outdoor work. Especially after we moved to Cobblestone Lane and no longer had the five acres. Then, it was just the occasional hay lifting expedition. By then, I was older and it didn't make me feel like a man, the way it had when I was fourteen. At the age of twenty, that sort of thing was tedious. On Saturday afternoons, I just wanted to watch the baseball. The game didn't matter to me—our local FOX station aired western teams like the Mariners, the Diamondbacks and the Angels, teams I didn't care for. But it was baseball. In cynical, tired moments, I wondered why we still owned the horses. They just milled around our neighbor's field and ate when we fed them. My father paid our neighbor each month. Banjo became fat

and lazy, often just lying down for the day until it came time to eat, his ankles diseased and hurting. The horses were just there, like scenery. Not much different than me, I suppose. We didn't serve a practical purpose. Them, out in the field, me in my storage room listening to John Sterling and Suzyn Waldman, not leaving until dinnertime or until the day cooled enough for basketball over on the Brookwood lot. It didn't matter if it was a Saturday or a Wednesday. We were just there.

My father placed little clippings on the computer keyboard regarding this job or that job. "I put them on the keyboard because I know you'll see them there," he told me. I couldn't tell if there was a slight edge to the statement. I knew that I spent too much time at the computer. He didn't tell need to tell me. Several times he placed ads about poetry or writing camp. I appreciated this, because though my father was an engineer and didn't write or read much, he understood that I was at least trying something. I didn't have the money to sign up, though, and I was too proud or too afraid to ask him. Or both. He also tried to secure a job for me as a technician at Micron, where he worked. The job description was basic and stressed no experience necessary. I simply put off on applying until after the deadline. Things like this didn't make me feel like a good person, but I was comfortable in that storage room.

While I was happy to sit around jobless, other people were losing theirs. The Idaho Statesman churned out articles about economic downturn each week. The electronic sector was the largest source of employment in the Boise Valley. Companies like Micron and Hewlet Packard, creating computer parts and equipment. I saw the headlines, but didn't think much of them. My father had been laid off before, back in the

earlier part of the decade, but I assumed his job was secure—even though every year, more and more people seemed to be getting put out of work from Micron. He mentioned it during dinner once or twice, not indicating how he felt. He could be like me, quieter about the big things. Once, I asked him if he liked what he did. “It’s work, you do what you do” he said, then maybe thinking about my own situation, followed it up with, “It’s nice to get paid.” That’s the most he said about that. His voice was deep and gruff, and he smiled at the end. I smiled back before letting another application slip by. Two days after my mother died, my father was laid off from Micron.

Both of my parents were 52 years old that summer. My father had been working since the 1970’s, whether it was an early lifeguard job in Houston, or his work in various labs for IBM or Santa Clara Plastics or Micron. He owned a home and several cars. Four kids, one of whom had graduated from college, another (me) who was set to graduate within two years, the youngest two who would both be going on to college. When we were off to wherever we would spend the rest of our lives, my father would stay in that little house down Cobblestone, sleeping on the small mattress in his bedroom. Better for my back, he told me. The queen-sized mattress would become piled with books and car parts and clothing. Gradually, the rest of the house would fill with these odds and ends, too, as my father grew old sitting on the back patio with a beer and a cigar, watching the mountains turn black. And my mother would live in her little apartment miles across the Boise River, friendless beyond the two cats she owned, drinking boxed wine, reading mysteries, and taking pills each day to keep her mind from tipping. My mother and father would become old in these ways, I believed. By then, there was no illusion in my

mind that they would ever be together again. That had been shattered years before, during the hospital stays, the medications that only worked marginally, the slow grinding of her life down to the very basics. Unlike my father, my mother didn't make an effort to date after the divorce. Each week melted into daily phone calls to me, trips to the grocery store, doctor appointments. And in the month following Matthew's graduation, she seemed less than even that. There seemed to be a slip in her awareness of the world. It came across, so strongly, in our phone conversations. I hated talking to her on the phone during that June. She was unaware of how stagnant her life was, or I was more aware than I had been before, or something in-between. Maybe I could feel it more because I was like her. I wasn't moving or improving, either.

“I have to go to the doctor at the end of the week. I hope I have enough money for gas.”

Or

“I sold Matthew my computer.”

Or

“Today I had a stack of ten books at the library.”

But we kept talking, and there was something simplistic and almost innocent to her that I admired. I wondered how we could talk every day without her complaining about those things in her life that had failed her. On the surface, there seemed to be no bitterness to my mother. I wondered where the anger was—the anger with God, with my father, with her own mind, with a system that had not fixed her. At various times, I had all of those feelings, and yet she didn't seem to. The medications and her intake of alcohol dulled her to some degree, but I like to believe there was something inherently

good in her that came through on its own. She was a better person than I was. This I was sure of. If I had told her that, she would have asked me to stop. But I never told her I was proud of her for the way she handled her illness. It was my own regret to let that pass along with her. After she died, I prayed to God to pass on a message to her if she was up there. Those things I didn't tell her linger. They come through harder at night, while I sit in front of the word processor in the low light of my Iowa apartment. I can type words like "proud" and "love" repeatedly, but she is not there to read them.

"I saw *Pearl Harbor* last night. I liked the love story."

"I didn't think anybody liked that movie."

"I know. I feel silly to say it."

"You should," I said with a laugh.

I chided her about *Pearl Harbor*, the same way I scolded her for giving up on the Houston Astros too easily. We both liked sentimental movies and random thrillers. Her VHS collection included *Speed* and *The Frighteners*. She was the person who sat with me during my first viewing of *Jurassic Park* when I was seven. As the tyrannosaur ripped down the fence, I needed to use the restroom. I didn't tell her I was scared, and she didn't ask. You could hear the roars and screams from outside the theater. She waited patiently, sipping on her Diet Coke. Sometimes you don't need to ask. Her life wasn't a movie, though. She was my mother, and I didn't know if she was scared about the future or if she thought about the past or if she simply wanted it all to end. I wanted to help her, but in my mind those questions would have broken down that basic trust we had built over the years of phone calls, when our Friday nights consisted of both of us talking, separated by the hundreds of miles, the farmland, the mountains. My father

might have said that there was nothing I could do if she wasn't going to show up, but that wasn't true. I could have asked her why she wasn't at my high school graduation. I could have sounded hurt. I didn't want my mother to think she was capable of hurting me, though. I wanted her to know I could forgive her for who she was, that for all that was broken, love was not. But it was hard.

That summer, I felt something of what I think Elsa and Glen were feeling during their teenage years—that stunting of the vibrant person our mother had been, back when she read *The Hobbit* to us on the porch when we were young and Idaho was new to us. Once, at a church meeting while our parents were married, the pastor asked every couple to take off their wedding rings in a demonstration about the devotion to Christ. Neither my mother or father could, the rings were too tight. They were married for thirteen years. The woman my mother had become by June of 2007 wasn't the woman my father married. The medications for her depression dulled her. In one of those phone calls, she told me about watching *Forrest Gump* for the first time that week. She cried during the movie when Sally Fields died. “It's a great movie, I can't believe you hadn't seen it before,” I said, then after a pause, “I cried at that part, too.”

His salt and pepper beard had begun to gray more and more. There was the surgery to remove his prostate when I was a junior in high school. He took pills every morning, too. Not the same ones my mother took, but other ones, to regulate his blood pressure. Her medications took up most of a shelf in the kitchen. Reaching for a bowl or a plate, I saw long names and lists of side effects. I can't remember any of them, and not once did I pick up a bottle or ask her. I didn't know how often she tried new

medications. Years after her death, my father told me that the prescriptions varied from doctor to doctor, as did the diagnoses. When we were cleaning out her apartment, my father took the half-filled bottles and placed them in a bag. Then he walked into a doctor's office and placed the bag on the table. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do with these," he said. I can imagine him sitting there, unsmiling, worn from the days of our grief and the arrangements for my mother's memorial and funeral. He sat there and told the doctor, "I don't want them."

I wasn't privy to what went on during her doctor appointments, or the appointments with her social worker. She mentioned them in passing, as if she was talking about the weather. They were a part of her life, something concretely routine. I think once or twice she mentioned that she missed an appointment. She slept through one of them, I remember. When she told me about it on the phone, I laughed. Sleeping through an appointment, what a lark. It sounded like something I would have done. There was no pushing on the situation from either side, mine or hers. Her small slips began to happen more frequently leading up to Matthew's graduation.

The autumn before, she underwent emergency surgery to have her gall bladder removed while I was at Idaho. We talked using phone cards almost every day prior to that October. My first few months at Idaho, her phone bill came to \$364. I was embarrassed. I didn't realize I was calling her that often. That's when she started buying phone cards, or having her mother send her phone cards, or send me phone cards. She was the only person I knew who used those things. I called on the same phone card several days in a row in October of 2006. She didn't return the calls. Those first days were easy to chalk up to miscommunications. Not everybody will be at their phone every

night. Each night, I dialed the number, then a long pin which I jotted down on a post-it, like 58776366491. 58776366491 was my mother. The phone rang through to her answering machine each time. I expected her to pick up and tell me that she was making popcorn, or that she was tending to the cats. Instead, only the pulsing tone. It took a week of non-answers for me to think she might be bleeding out on the floor or lying unconscious at St. Alphonsus. Only this time, there would be no need for her to pay a laceration repair fee. She was beyond repair. I told myself that perhaps she had run out of clean, hospital-free years. That like the cat's nine lives, she had only been afforded so many by God. The thought distressed me, but at the same time, I felt like something was going to give eventually. It was an inevitability.

The image of her dying while I was sitting in my Moscow apartment wasn't logical, though. Logically, I assumed, if she was dead, somebody would have called me. My mind leaned toward her death, but that was how my mind worked. That was the first thing it jumped to. I was afraid to call my father and ask if something had happened. We didn't talk about her, and I imagined my embarrassment at asking him only to have him go silent on the other end before saying that Elsa and Glen had seen her the day before and that he wasn't sure what I was talking about. "Your mother?" he might say, "your mother is fine." Maybe didn't have the money to buy a phone card. Maybe her phone service was out. Maybe something like that. There were a lot of maybes in my mother's life. She didn't always have the money to take them out of the equation. I went to class each day, worked on new essays, bought more albums, most nights laid in bed listening to the music and expecting the phone to ring.

Finally, in November, she called. Her voice was thin and raspy. She described what had happened. In late September, she felt a pain in her abdomen which she chalked up to indigestion. She tried to sleep it off. Then after two hours she called my grandmother, who lived in Texas, said she was worried. At 3:00 a.m., she stumbled into a hospital several miles down the road. I don't know if she walked or drove. The way she described it makes it difficult to believe she walked. She used that word, "stumbled." She used the word "staggered," too. Her voice reminded me of my father's from after the surgery to remove his prostate. Weak with no air behind it. Normally I could laugh and change the subject, but I was scared when she called. There was no brushing it aside as minor or "just one of those things."

"I'm telling you, Mark," she rasped over the phone in November, "it was worse than the worst pain I've ever experienced. I felt like my insides were on fire."

"Uh huh," I said, closing my eyes. The phone was sweaty against my ear. My hand trembled. My roommate was out drinking.

"The doctor said if I'd come in an hour or two later, I probably would have died."

My mother could have died, I thought. It was a concrete thing. "How are you now?"

"Grandma's come to Boise to take care of me. The doctor said I can't be doing things."

"It's good she's there. It's good somebody's there," I said.

We talked for ten minutes longer before she told me that she was going to lie down to rest.

"I was worried," I said.

I paused. I didn't know how to say what I felt.

"I didn't know what was happening because I kept trying to call and you weren't picking up, and you weren't calling me. I was worried," I repeated.

"I'm OK. You're such a good boy. Try not to worry too much," she said before hanging up.

Ten minutes later I called my father. She could have died while I was up in Moscow just watching baseball and writing little poems. She was that close to it. I didn't want him to hear me emotional, though. I was supposed to be strong. I was supposed to be an adult.

"Mommy was in the hospital?" I asked.

"Yes. I guess it was something with her gall bladder. She's getting older, Mark. These things happen as you get older," he said. His voice was dry and he was careful with his words.

I didn't know what else to ask.

I didn't tell him that I wanted somebody to call me, that I needed to know. I didn't know how to say it. We talked for three more minutes, then I said goodbye. My head hurt. I left my room to look for Matthew. He was in the computer lab printing off a short story.

"Hey, Marko. What you up to down here?"

I didn't bother closing the distance to his chair before I began to speak, my voice moving fast and a little loud.

“Did you hear about what happened with Mommy?” I asked. His face went slack and I knew he was thinking about her wrists and her medications. He was her son, too. He quieted and said no.

“She’s OK,” I said, “but she was in the hospital to have her gall bladder removed. She’s OK,” I said again. That is all I can remember from our conversation. I didn’t want to go back to my room. I wanted to be in Boise with my mother. The whole situation was fucked up, I thought. Wandering down to the street at 11:30 at night. A hard rain fell. I thought to go jogging, but instead just walked around campus, occasionally muttering to myself. I felt as if she had died. There was this dullness in the pit of my stomach. I would get the same feeling three years later, when my father hit a patch of ice on a bridge while driving to a small town in Idaho. He flipped his Subaru, the windows smashing, him hanging upside down by his seatbelt. Somehow, he came out uninjured. He e-mailed me photographs. Him smiling next to the wreck. Oh Dad O, you are a crazy cat. I e-mailed back. But he could have died, too, while I was teaching a class at Iowa.

My mind hit these repetitive thoughts. I was just waiting for when I would get that feeling and it wouldn’t be a drill. Especially for my mother. I just expected her to die at some point, probably before I turned twenty-five. Her life didn’t seem to have meaning. It would be a bottle of pills, or slashed wrists, or she would jump, or something would just give out. I had been steeling myself to that since the divorce. It was going to happen, eventually. It just would, and it would happen when I was still a young man. As I walked through the rain I began to cry, not openly weeping, just little tears that mixed with the rain. Had I passed anybody, they wouldn’t have noticed. The sidewalks were empty. It was a Tuesday night in Moscow, Idaho. Nobody wanted to walk out in the

rain. Icy autumn rain. Water dripped from my hair and onto my glasses, which I didn't wipe off. "If somebody walks by right now and looks at me, I'm going to fight them," I thought. Nobody cared about my mother. She could have died a month before and not a soul at the university would have blinked. People didn't care about anything but themselves. I didn't care about anybody but myself. There was nobody to fight, so instead, I just kicked at a muddied clump of grass. Near the library, I punched a street sign with the flat of my hand. The sound was muffled and unsatisfactory. I hit it three more times. How could nobody have told me? What overcame me, though, more than anything, was a wave of self-loathing and pity. For a month I hadn't talked to her—this after talking to her almost every day for the last five years. Yet I still didn't have the fortitude to call my father and ask if everything was OK. That was on me, nobody else. It was easier to just walk through the rain and hit things.

That phone call with my mother was the only time I talked about the surgery with her. We discussed her recovery, but we didn't dwell on how close she had come to dying or my anger with my father for not reaching me. Likewise, it wasn't a subject I broached with my father again. There was something about the resignation in his voice that scared me a little. We all liked to forget the past. The past was a hard, dark thing that we were moving to get through. My mother sliced her wrists and was hospitalized, and like my father's prostate cancer and the rare blood disease of Matthew's youth, we didn't talk ourselves through the past. Matthew had been diagnosed with a low platelet count at the age of five. His body bruised easily and if he was cut, the blood would not coagulate. My mother told me that she was terrified when she drove him to the hospital. "I was afraid of every single bump." His first video game system was given to him while

hospitalized—one of those old gray block Game Boys. A box in Matthew’s new apartment contained the get-well-soon cards from his classmates of yore. He and Angie moved into a duplex in Moscow, in which they promptly piled their movies and games and systems and books, massive piles and whole walls taken up. It was quite impressive, really. When I moved out of my dorm, it would take just three or four boxes to pack everything up. They accumulated far more than me. We lived in Beacon, New York, at the time of Matthew’s illness. My parents had only been married for seven or eight years, and I was a boy. I loved dinosaurs and sharks, not Bob Dylan and baseball.

We were all older by June of 2007. Glen was sixteen and involved with his first serious girlfriend. Elsa was preparing to go off to college in Michigan. Matthew lived with Angie and they talked about buying a house. The least changed of us was me. I was still set to live in a dorm room that fall, at the age where most of my classmates had moved to apartments. I would still eat lunch in the cafeteria, still blast “Like a Rolling Stone” until it annoyed my roommates, still kept the hair buzzed short. I wanted to be a writer, but summer was about the New York Yankees battling the Boston Red Sox. A baseball game a day set my schedule. I was young, damn it, I didn’t want to have to be somebody.

In late June, my father asked if we would like to go camping. We often traveled when I was a boy, usually during the summer months, taking week-long trips to the forests of Idaho, Wyoming, Montana. They meshed with my romantic notions of living in the west. Instead of theme parks, rivers. Instead of malls and cityscapes, mountains. “Roughing it” was how my father described what we were doing. During my parents’

marriage, it was my father who took us out. There are pictures of my mother at Yellowstone—those mornings were so cold, my mother liked to say—but mostly, she stayed home. These trips occurred in the early years of her depressions. She read mystery after mystery in our absence. I do not know if she was taking medication yet, or how deep her dark periods went. My father told me later that she had begun to see a therapist in 1995, in the months leading up to her first hospitalization at Intermountain Hospital in Boise. I didn't know about the therapist, and I didn't think of my mother as a sad person. Happy, sad, those were words I used to describe people. There wasn't a middle ground. You were happy, you were sad, maybe you were mad. Depression wasn't a thing in my world until my mother was diagnosed with it. I only remember my father driving us into the trees.

During our stay at Glacier National Park one year, after our mother had been hospitalized, in fact, after the divorce, I think, we were fishing when a storm hit Flathead Lake. We never caught anything when we fished—my father said that his luck evaporated after he had children—but on that afternoon, I felt a deep pull on the reel. It was hard and wrenched my arms. My father quickly took out a knife and severed the line. I did not understand why, at first, until I realized that there was no fish, only the wind and the waves. Clouds billowed overhead and the water crashed against the hull of our rental boat. Lightning flashed. The canvas overhang snapped in the wind and my father wrestled it down as Matthew and I helped him. He slid behind the wheel and steered us toward shore. With each wave, we were soaked. All of us whooping and hollering in the gale. We were an epic family, we were a family of winners. God had thrown the waters of the earth at us and we had taken it. We were family, then, I knew it,

and I was happy. When we drove back to our camp, the rain-fly that covered the tent had taken flight. “No, no, shit, come back,” my father yelled at it, racing out of the car into the woods. We laughed and did our best to cover our clothes and sleeping bags.

After the storm had begun to die and our site was secure, we drove through town until we came to an A&W. The storm lifted completely an hour later. By the fire we roasted marshmallows and huddled to catch its warmth. The sun set against the clouds and it seemed as though the entire sky was breaking open. Everything felt possible. We were just children trying to dry out in front of the flame. I was thirteen or fourteen years old. What I looked forward to was becoming an older man and being able to share adventures with my own children. Unlike my father, I wouldn't be able to tell them that there had once been a time I was able to catch fish. In the crackle of the campfire I could tell them about the man my father had been and how together we had battled the raging wind and rain on Flathead Lake, and together come out the maw of the storm triumphantly alive.

By my college years, my family no longer camped every summer, or skied during the winter. It was special when we started to plan one once more. My father's idea was to campout in northern Idaho, somewhere near Moscow. We would drive for Matthew's birthday on July 3rd, a Tuesday, and after spending a night with Matt and Angie, continue to our campsite where we would stay for two days. By the time my father put forward this plan in late June, I had stopped talking to my mother every day. For four days after our last Sunday visit, none of us called her. Each evening I drove to Brookwood to shoot hoops and listen to ESPN Radio or 94.9 The River. Driving home drenched in sweat made me feel like I had done something. I told myself I was too tired

to talk to her or hear about her latest trip to the grocery store. To some extent, talking to her had become a chore. She wasn't calling us, either. That she had stopped probably should have concerned me. She sat in that little low-rent apartment with her cats and if she wasn't calling, then I didn't know what she was doing.

While the conversations dwindled, Glen, Elsa and I still drove to see her each Sunday. We didn't branch out in our visits—library or a walk in the park when she could not afford to take us out to eat, perhaps a visit to the local buffet restaurant Chuck-A-Rama if she had a little more cash. On one visit while we were at the apartment, the phone started to ring. She refused to pick it up. Somebody called the other day, she told us, and she didn't want to talk to them. She didn't elaborate, but her voice was firm. I thought it was probably a debt collector calling her about an overdue payment. As the phone rang, she sat next to Elsa and Glen on the couch with a blank look on her face. She pretended she couldn't hear it, and we laughed at her. We weren't trying to be cruel, though it must have pained my mother to hear us. The whole thing just seemed odd. Twenty minutes later, the phone rang again and again she did not pick up. Somebody, Elsa, I think, said, "Pick it up. It just keeps ringing." But she didn't. "Doesn't it annoy you?" Elsa asked. There were messages on her answering machine that she refused to listen to. At least fifteen of them. Some of them were probably from me. I think she had simply stopped listening to her voicemail, afraid of what might be on there. I wondered who was calling her and why, if she was dodging payments, or maybe doctors or her social worker. But she was also dodging me in those unlistened to messages. Sitting in that apartment with her while she refused to pick up the phone felt like a scene from a movie or a bad headline. Paranoid mother thinks the world is out to get her.

Things weren't going to improve, I thought. She was 52 years old and afraid to answer her own phone. The scars on her arms had blended in as scenery, as had the old faded bloodstains on the wall. When you visited Katy Lindquist, you became accustomed to such things. Seeing her stare straight ahead while the phone rang was more concrete and real, in a way that the scars on her arms never were for me. Even during the mid-90's, when she was both hospitalized in Boise and eventually institutionalized at State Hospital South, I hadn't seen her cut her wrists. She disappeared to the little hospital, bandaged up. I could stop myself from imagining those scenes, if I really wanted to. Not like this, where everything she did was on a basic level of behavior, where she seemed almost gone. We would reach a scattering point, I thought.

The idea of these scattering points came to me one night as I was lying in bed at 4:30 a.m.. I drew a diagram on a post-it note. Two lines running parallel in a circle until one broke off toward the edge of the sphere. The scattering point was the place where the two lines diverged from one another. We all reached our scattering points at some point in time, through death or divorce or the simple falling out of touch between loved ones and friends that can happen without realizing it. They are the times when a person leaves you. I drew the line for my mother and me and wondered where the point would be for the two of us.

The day before we departed for the camping trip, I dialed her phone number. She picked up on the third ring.

“Mark, it’s so good to hear from you,” she said, as if I had been away for months. I had not thought that she would recognize how the calls had begun tapering off, and I winced.

“I just wanted to call you and say howdy before we left for our camping trip.”

“How’s the packing coming along?” she asked.

“Oh you know,” I said, pacing back and forth in my father’s darkened bedroom. I paced when I talked on the phone. It was one of my things. Or played Minesweeper. I couldn’t remain still. “I don’t really have much to pack.”

“That’s true, that’s true.”

“We haven’t talked. Lately.”

“I’m doing great,” she said with emphasis. “I was just reading when you called, getting ready for bed. Did the Yankees win?” she asked.

The line sounded like it was filled with static.

“What?”

“I asked did the Yankees win.”

“Yeah,” I said, though I still wasn’t quite sure what she was asking.

“Well that’s good. You know…” the rest of the sentence dropped out.

“I can’t hear you, Mommy,” I said. I could hear random words coming in. Maybe “cats” or “father” or “home” or “miss.” I lightly punched the wall, as if it would make everything work. The way the phone call had fallen apart frustrated me. It was a moment that seemed to encapsulate the world. “Let me call you back,” I said, hanging up quickly. I re-dialed her number. When she answered, her voice was more crisp.

“Stupid phone,” I said. “What were you asking?”

“I wanted to know if the Yankees won.”

“Yeah, they won.”

“That’s good!”

“Astros didn’t.”

“Darn it. I don’t even like them, they always do this. You know, I just wish they had won one game in the World Series.” This was what she always said whenever we talked about the Astros. One game would have been enough for her.

“It’s too bad. I was rooting for them. Nobody likes the White Sox.”

“Yes, it was too bad, wasn’t it?”

“So change of subject, I watched The Aviator the other night.” She had loaned us the movie.

“What did you think? That Hughes was a weird guy.”

“I’ll probably be Howard Hughes some day. Leo has come a long ways since he was the annoying kid on Titanic,” I said. It was a joke. My mother knew I had a soft spot for that movie.

She responded with another question, but again, I couldn’t hear her. The line had begun to break down again. Again, I hung up and called her back.

“I think I’m going to have to cut this short while it’s still sort of working. I couldn’t hear anything you’re saying,” I said.

“OK. It was nice talking to you, Mark. Have fun camping. I love you. Is your brother or sister around?” she asked.

I told her I would check. I walked into the darkened living room where my father lay on the couch watching a movie on the projector. He gave a little wave. I didn't want him to have to think about my mother.

"Is Elsa in here?" I asked. He shook his head and waved again. I walked quickly out of the room, paused in front of her door. It was closed. I peeked under to see if any light was creeping out, like if she was reading. I only saw darkness. Then I stood and walked toward my room.

"No, no Elsa," I said into the receiver, "and Glen's out with his friends."

"That's OK," she said. "It was nice talking to you. You make sure to pack some warm clothes. I don't want you catching cold, Mark Lindquist."

"That's enough, Mommy," I said. "I'm twenty years old, I can pack for myself."

"Just making sure," she said, laughing. There was a pause. I thought the line might be dying again. Finally, she said, "I love you very much." She said it hard, like I might not be able to hear her. It didn't sound like a simple goodbye. There was finality in her voice. She sounded like a sick woman. She also sounded like she loved me very much. I blinked back tears.

"I love you, too, Mommy," I said. I waited for the line to click. It clicked. I closed the phone and set it back on the table. For years, I've struggled with that final conversation. I struggle with whether there really was some finality, or if it's been layered on in my mind in the years since. I recall, very strongly, that her goodbye was not the same one that a person gives as a token at the end of a conversation with a family member. I thought there was something more to it, like she knew that she was in trouble, maybe afraid to ask for help, maybe hoping that it was only a small episode. Or maybe

she simply knew that the line was falling through and that she had to emphasize for me to hear her. It has been years and I still do not know. I will never know. It would be the last time I talked to my mother, who told me again and again that I should always march to the beat of that drummer in my heart. There are many things I have forgotten about her. I have forgotten her phone number and her apartment number. I have forgotten what kind of tape player she listened to on her walks into the foothills, and what our lives were like when she was married to my father, what it was like for them to be happy. I have forgotten what was wrong with her except in the broadest, most general terms. I have forgotten things I should not have forgotten, and I am sorry for that. I only know that she loved me very much, and when the nights grow cold and I cannot sleep, I hope that love is enough to make up for what has left me.

II. SCATTERING POINTS

As my father drove us north, the forests were burning. Forest fires often rage through Idaho, and closer to Eagle, brush fires snap in the foothills. Through the summer months. On driving out of Eagle, there's a Forest Service sign of Smokey the Bear with a changeable warning: High was red, Moderate orange, Low green. Mostly, during the summer, the fire danger is High. Idaho is a desert state. The summer temperatures, particularly in July and August, often reach the upper 90's, sometimes low triple digits. Usually the fires are sparked by lightning, sometimes by careless campers who forget to douse their campfires before sleep, or flick a lit cigarette butt into the underbrush. Trucks driving off-road through the hills also tend to start fires. Little patches of smoke billowing up from the foothills on a summer afternoon were a sight from my youth. The air smelled of smoke, the sun appearing orange or almost red as it struggled through the layers of haze.

After making it through the winding mountain passes outside of Horseshoe Bend, we broke out into the wide plains near Cascade and McCall, and from there, the smoke appeared thick and black in the distance. We joked that I, jobless, should have applied to be a smokejumper. "They would need you right now," my father said, to which I smiled. "I shall be burnt to a crisp if you throw me in there." Somebody in the backseat agreed that yes, I would definitely be burnt. One of the big fire helicopters flew toward the distant smoke. It was normal for that time of the year. Everything just lit on fire and burned to the ground, and afterward, acres of acres of forest were charred and ashen. The dead trees sticking out at strange angles from the charred ground, nothing moving,

nothing there. It fascinated me that life could come back after such devastation, but it did, it always did. Those forests would be green some day. No good thing ever died, it seemed. A hundred miles down the road, we passed a large tarp staked into the ground, a makeshift tent for the fire fighters. The tent was empty. A sign on the table inside read “Be back soon.”

As we drove, I wasn't thinking about the fires, or the people spraying water on them. My right ear was bothering me as we moved to a higher elevation. The world sounded as if it was underwater. Every few minutes, I shook my head, or pressed my finger inside the ear canal to try to free up my hearing. For a time, these tactics would work, but the next morning when I woke up, nothing helped. I was disappointed. The earache merely annoyed me, though as the weeks went on, I began to wonder if it had been some sort of warning that I had not realized, my body knowing that something bad was about to happen. Even when listening to music, I had to turn my head. Hendrix sounded washed out, and washed out was no good way to listen to Hendrix. The fires and the earache aren't related, really, outside of the fact that they stick in my head far more than anything else from that camping trip. It was the same as most family trips. The tent, the fight for who got to sleep where, “I don't want to be next to Mark, he rolls in his sleep!” the same old gear we had used for years—some of it bought before I was born, like the kerosene lamps or the cooking stove in the tattered box—the search for long sharp sticks, the marshmallows, the hiking, the bug bites, waking up smelling of campfire smoke. It was normal. We stopped to visit Matthew, we ate cake on July 3rd for his birthday, we drove on to our camping site seventy-five miles to the north. My

hearing remained washed out, though sometimes when I shifted trying to sleep at night, there were brilliant moments of clarity. Morning came and the clarity had disappeared.

“Why don’t you pass the phone on to any of us when you’re talking to Mommy?” Elsa asked that first morning in front of the fire. “We like to talk to her, too, you know.”

It wasn’t something I had thought about since that phone call. I became defensive. I had tried. She was asleep. Glen was gone. It’s not like I was trying to stop them. My conversations with our mother always went longer than anybody else’s. Sometimes I had the sense that Elsa and Glen didn’t even want to talk to her, the way they sighed when I passed the phone on. That wasn’t true, though. They were teenagers, and when our mother told Elsa to bring a warm coat to Michigan, Elsa already knew that, and rolled her eyes. That’s the way it went. The thought rarely crossed my mind that the rest of my family missed our mother, too.

“I tried to give you the phone,” I said, “but I thought you were asleep.”

“I wasn’t asleep, no. I was just reading.”

“Well I didn’t know that,” I said, staring off at the trees. I couldn’t look her in the eye.

“You could have knocked,” she said.

“I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t mean to not give you the phone.” I shrugged in my petty little way. I wasn’t going to apologize. Our mother was there. She didn’t leave. It’s not like that would be the last time to talk to her. Our mother never left. For a moment, silence, then my father or Glen said something unrelated, and the argument was over.

Elsa and I sometimes bickered over this or that, because she was more level-headed than me, and I was more childish. They were short arguments. Elsa and I were the middle children in the family. When we were kids, we called ourselves the Middle Twins. Once, we were riding our bikes past a dying bird and stopped to move it off the sidewalk. When we came around again, it was gone. We saved Little Lucky, we said. Both of us inherited the blue eyes of our mother. Elsa was the one who cooked dinner when our father was working in California, I was the one who picked him up from the airport on Friday evenings. We were the Middle Twins. That counted for something in my mind, even years later, even if I did not know quite what.

Our campsite did not burn down that summer, and though we were older, the family dynamic remained the same. Glen was laidback, Elsa was sharp and witty, I was the weird one humming Bob Dylan to himself, and my father was the one who started the fire. We were still family, after everything. We drove back on Wednesday. My ear ached, the state of Idaho was burning, and after seven hours, we pulled into the driveway to find that our mother had left a message on our phone's answering machine. The message started the way every one of her messages started. "Hi guys, it's Mom." She was calling to see if we knew what we wanted to do on our Sunday outing. As Elsa called her back, I felt assured that I had been right in my little spat with Elsa. See, there she is, calling us like normal. But our mother didn't pick up on Elsa's dial. Sometimes, she didn't pick up the phone. Other than the surgery to remove her gall bladder, it had been years since she was hospitalized. Those scars on her arms were white and old. They didn't cross my mind the way they did when I was in my earlier years of college and she wasn't answering. On this occasion, I did not worry. She was probably asleep, I

thought, as I walked into the house and threw my sleeping bag into the corner.

Somewhere in Idaho, the fires continued to blacken the landscape.

The next three days I remember mostly as phone calls that went unanswered, and one we received on Saturday afternoon. I tried calling her Thursday, the evening after we returned, and she still did not answer. She had just left a message on the machine the day before. Nothing horrible, I reasoned, could have happened in a day. Don't overthink things, Marky boy. She was reading and didn't feel like talking, or she was out for a walk in the mall, or her phone was having technical issues. 99% of the scenarios I thought up were reasonable. Sometimes, people missed calls. It happened.

On Friday, I tried calling her at around 8:00. I had to hold the phone to my left ear because my right one was still blocked up and I couldn't talk with the receiver on that end. I waited. Pulse. Pulse. Pulse. Again the phone rang through. This time no answering machine picked me up. The phone just kept ringing. I felt something reminiscent of the previous autumn, when my mother told me she could have died had she not stumbled into the hospital. My hands were sweaty. I didn't know why she would unplug her answering machine. Maybe the calls from the collection agencies had just become too much for her to handle. The old nerves returned, the ones from when I called her from my dorm room on weekdays and there was no answer, when I knew she had nowhere to go. Then, I played songs through my stereo and left them as messages, so she would know I called, but this time, I couldn't do that. There was no answering machine. I couldn't leave a message, but I talked against the dial tone anyway, as if she would hear

it. “Hey, it’s Mark. Just want to fill you in on the camping trip. It was fun. Call me back.”

For an hour, I played basketball at Brookwood. Midway through, I couldn’t focus. I paused and did something I hadn’t done since my early college years: I tried to bargain with God over a game of basketball. I make this shot and she’s fine, I mumbled. There was no Amen. I didn’t think there needed to be. God and I knew the score. I slowed before I lined the ball up. With a deep breath, I launched it. The ball clanged off the back iron and rolled into the parking lot. “Fuck it,” I said to myself. One shot determined nothing. I tried again. This time, it was an air ball. For a moment, I sat on the concrete and stared off toward the foothills. There were no burning bushes or pillars of fire. There was only Idaho. Sweat dripped onto the sidewalk. An older couple walked past, waving at me. I returned it, unsmiling. No more basketball that day. I drove back home slow, looping several times to the music before settling beside my father’s truck. I waited for a moment and then folded my hands. “Let everything be alright. Amen.” My father was watching PBS, Elsa was with him. Glen was at his girlfriend’s house. I lay down on the bed and put an arm over my head to block out the florescent light as I listened to The Beatles. The Yankees were playing their final series before Major League Baseball’s All-Star Break. My mother loved the All-Star Game, seeing all the different players in one game on national television. Somewhere in Idaho, the forests were burning, and perhaps there were people in that tent near Whitebird, or perhaps it was just that sign, “Be back soon.” My father and Elsa closed their doors at around 10:30 that evening. My father did not say goodnight as he passed. Sometimes he didn’t.

After I thought they would be asleep, I crept into the kitchen, carefully unplugging the phone. I walked into the living room and took a breath. There were loose newspapers and circulars on the floor around my father's chair. I slipped on them, tried to be quiet. I didn't want to wake anybody. It was like Christmas, sneaking around the tree. I left the light off in the living room. Clear night in Eagle, Idaho, nobody on the streets. I held the phone and dialed her number. She was going to say hello, I was certain of it. There would be three rings and then a click and then, "Hi Mark, I've been looking forward to talking to you! How was your camping trip?" The number dialed, the tone pulsed. It didn't stop. I let it go on for a minute. It was as if there was nobody in the other room, as if the phone was just ringing and there was nobody there for it. She was gone, somehow. I closed the phone and set it on the counter, then walked into my bedroom and wrote a ten-line poem titled "Goodbye." I had written many, many poems in the last few years. Some about dead parents, none about my mother dying. This one was about her. Normally, I couldn't think up titles until the end, but I began it with the word "Goodbye." After finishing, I told myself not to bring it up when I inevitably talked with her again. That would just look foolish. "Hey Mommy, wrote a "Goodbye" poem about you." "Why Goodbye, Marcus? I'm not going anywhere. I'm still here." Goodbye, ten lines, the end. I expected her to call back that night. For six minutes, I wrote a poem. When it was done, six minutes had passed.

Goodbye

The bells ring through the valley.

You are no more than a fleck
of dust scraping the blue above
me. I don't think you can hear
them anymore, not those bells
hollowing evening. One tree
on this hill scatters the horizon
light. There are miles out there.
I sit against the autumn's shadows,
the falling leaves, and close my eyes.

I didn't know what else to do. I slept.

Every August, before school was back in session, our grandmother from my mother's side visited us in Idaho. She took us to the art museum—said, “it wouldn't hurt to have a little culture in your lives”—to Eagle Island for picnics and swimming, occasionally to the movies. She stayed in Boise for a week. On the days when she wasn't visiting us, she took my mother out to eat, or to the various thrift stores around town which my mother enjoyed. Many of the pictures of my mother from the years after the divorce are the ones my grandmother snapped. She was a high energy woman despite being in her mid-70's. On birthday cards, she wrote that I was her favorite individualist. I always thought it was a polite way of calling me weird, but I liked it nonetheless. She was also very good at Scrabble, much better than me. I was horrible at the game.

She once told me that she was proud of me for always being there for my mother. She knew there weren't many people in my mother's life, that I was trying. I didn't know how she felt about my father. He divorced my mother when her illness was at its worst, yet there was little frostiness when she saw him, at least from what I could tell. My mother talked to her often, and I assume my father came up, that during those conversations, she was more upfront than she was with me. The closest my mother came to voicing any feelings was after I called her about his engagement to Kathy.

"I know about it," she said "Elsa let it slip."

I sat behind the piano that night, sixteen or seventeen years old, and as I talked, I heard my mother wounded. Though her wrists were laced with scars, she rarely sounded hurt. There was usually this wall. It was much, much easier to just discuss the Yankees. I had my wall, too. We built them, my family did, and I didn't think it made us worse people.

"Oh. I didn't know that," I said.

"I wish you guys had told me. You know you can talk to me, Mark."

I wanted to say, "But I didn't know how you would react. I thought you would hurt yourself. I thought you would swallow a bottle of pills, or cut yourself like you did when I was nine. I thought I was protecting you."

I didn't say that. I couldn't be that honest, even with her. Instead, "You're right, I should have said something. I'm sorry." I meant it, too.

"It's alright," she said, then a pause. "I still love your father, you know?"

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just said, "Yeah."

"I hope he's happy."

That was the extent of the conversation. We went on to talk about this and that, but I had the feeling that her mind was still on my father, and I hung up shortly after. I stayed up for a long time that night. A light snow fell outside. Those words, “I still love your father.” I hadn’t thought about her feelings before. The divorce occurred when I was a boy. I wanted to know what happened after, when two people are together for thirteen years, raise four children, and then break. I didn’t know what was left, there—whether he loved her, or she loved him, or what love even meant for them. He built his furniture in a cold barn in a little town on the edge of the foothills, and she read her mysteries in the low-cut light of her apartment across the river, in a poor neighborhood, and I didn’t understand what was left, if this was just how life was as you grew older, that people just fall from each other, as if there was never anything there to begin with except for us, their children.

The phone rang in the afternoon on Saturday, July 7th, the day after I wrote the poem. I thought my mother was calling back, but it was not her.

“Hello, Mark, it’s your grandmother,” the voice said, just a touch scratchy. She rarely called us.

“Hi, Grandma, how are you?” I asked.

“I’m good,” she said, then a pause as she tried to think of how to say what she wanted to say. Her words were slow.

“I was wondering,” she said, “if you have heard from your mother recently?”
I took a deep breath.

“Not since we got back from our camping trip, no.”

“And what will you do if you haven’t heard from her by tomorrow?”

“I guess we’ll just drive over there at 11:30. That’s what we usually do.”

An even longer pause.

“Uh huh.”

I didn’t know where the conversation was going. I blinked several times and licked my lips. The room felt too hot.

“May I speak to your father?” she asked finally.

I was quick and overly enthusiastic. I was scared. “Sure! Just a minute.”

He was in the kitchen cooking steaks for dinner. He frowned when I handed him the phone, and his words were clipped. Our grandmother was describing something about our mother to our father. Later, I would find out that our mother had been hallucinating that week, that she had not been well. I only remember the end, where he said, “We can go check on her.” After he hung up, Elsa and I loaded our plates and sat down. My father asked if I would like to see a movie. Usually, when asked, I begged off, preferring to watch the Yankees, preferring to be by myself. I was too much an individualist for family movies like *Ratatouille*. I needed to see my mother, this time. “Yes, I’d like to.”

Before we left, I went into the bathroom and splashed my face with water. I stared in the mirror and muttered something to myself, something about how I wasn’t going to cry no matter what, that I was going to just stare straight ahead and take it, whatever “it” might be. Since the age of eleven or twelve, I believed my mother would die before she was able to grow old, before I was able to grow old. That she would not see me marry, that there would be no mother-son dance at my wedding.

I would have to tell my wife—that woman I was determined to meet on a street corner in Eagle while I drove past listening to The Beatles—about who my mother had been. And I would try to explain what those nightly conversations had meant to me, how they had carried me through when I didn't think I deserved to be carried through, how I believed that talking to her might be the only thing that could save her, that in the end, I needed to hear my mother's voice to feel right in the world, even if it was only my mother describing how she had woken up to Billy Joel's "Only the Good Die Young" on her clock radio. I would try to explain that life deals us hands and we either take them, or we don't, and that my mother had taken a bad hand and made it work as best she could. And that, sentimental though I tended to be, I would not have asked God for a new person, I would not have changed a thing. I would try to explain all this when I was an older, wiser man, when I was no longer pretending. My father and Elsa stood outside waiting and I joined them. Together, we left Eagle.

Neither of them spoke as we pulled out of the driveway. We moved slow down the gravel end of Cobblestone Lane, dust lifting behind us. We turned left onto State Street and passed the King's, where Matthew worked for several weeks one summer, passed what used to be Eagle Video, where my mother took us on Saturday evenings to rent bad horror movies like Piranha when I was eight years old. We continued down State Street, stopped at the light in front of the barbed wire eagle statue. High school girls sat at a picnic table in the park, children ran through the fountains. Temperatures were in the mid-70s, and only little clouds puffed in the sky. The air smelled clean. There's something beautiful about Idaho on days like that Saturday—the simple way the

foothills cast shadows, the mountains green, the Boise River meandering. I loved living in Eagle on those days.

As we drove I watched these familiar scenes pass by. I didn't look at my father or Elsa, afraid that they would see something on my face that I did not want them to see. She's fine. She would answer the door with a small jump when she saw us, and she would smile at my father and say that she was feeling better. Then I thought, she's not fine. We wouldn't be going if she was fine. And then finally, She was never fine. In the window, my reflection was tensed, my eyes set and staring out at the Idaho Fairgrounds and the Dairy Queen she took us to after we swam at the YMCA as children. This valley was where I had become who I was at that moment. It was my life. Two people in I knew had died in my memory, neither of them close to me. Matthew's friend Brian, who liked AC/DC, had violent seizures and died at the age of fifteen. My grandmother on my father's side. Her obituary was posted the day Timothy McVeigh was executed. I clenched my fist. I wanted us to stop. We could just stop and whatever might be coming would never need to come. Past the Dairy Queen where she drove us after our trips to the YMCA as children, the Fred Meyer where she shopped for groceries, the Barnes and Noble where she searched out her Sue Grafton mysteries, the intersection in front of the mall where I crashed the car in high school, the hospital where she lay after she first cut her wrists. And finally, we pulled into the parking lot of the Town Square Apartments.

When we parked in her lot, we pulled in across from the Neon. My father might have talked before we left the car, but I do not remember it, and I do not believe he did. He, Elsa, and I climbed out and walked slow. I could feel my heart beating against my chest. My mouth was dry. Everything was washed out on the right side, because of the

earache. Nobody loitered in the faded parking lot, or opened their doors. My mother did not know those people. We did not know them, either. It was just us making that walk. I stared at the stairs as we started up. My hands were shaking. My face twitched. There was the slight sound of cars coming from the distance, there were birds. We stood on the landing and my father knocked on the door. His knock seemed gentle, to me. There was no answer. There was no sound of anybody moving inside. We waited. My father knocked again, this time saying in a quiet voice, “Katy, it’s Paul.” It was the most tender I ever heard my father. He used her name. I could barely remember him using her name before. I just wanted to hear footsteps, something. Even crying, though I cannot remember seeing my mother cry.

These moments seemed to happen slowly, without any words from my sister or myself. My father reached into his pocket and took out our copy of the key to our mother’s apartment. On the name identifier, she had written “Katy.” She gave it to the family when she was in the hospital during the autumn, after her gall bladder was removed. She needed somebody to feed Quasi and Penny, her two cats. He slid the key into the doorknob and turned. The door opened and I saw the familiar rooms where I had spent so many Sundays. When I tried to take a step forward, there was a jolt. My father blocking me off with his arm. I went no further, did not enter the apartment until days later. I saw a sliver of her apartment, of the kitchen and the living room. I saw my mother’s body lying on the ground—my mother, only just, before my father closed the door. He shut it fast and turned to face the cement wall beside the door. He took the phone out of his pocket and hit three numbers. There was a pause. I could not hear what the person on the other end of the line was saying. Instead, my father’s responses.

“Hello we need an ambulance.”

I stared over the railing at the rest of the parking lot, Boise beyond. The sun sank lower in the sky.

“I think she’s dead,” he said, his voice as low and rough as I’d ever heard it, like he was talking without thinking. The words shocked me. They were blunt and forward and I could not breathe.

“I don’t know. We just need an ambulance.”

“I don’t think I can go in there.”

“I can’t go in there.”

“I can’t go in there.”

By the end he was crying, his voice shaking. He gave the address and hung up. I kept staring over the railing, the wood biting into my hands. I dug them in until I thought they might be bleeding. When I brought them up, they still looked like my hands. I put them down again and pressed harder. Slowly, the sound of a siren rose in the air. It started out barely audible, rising with each second. It took me a moment to realize that this siren was coming for my mother, that it wasn’t just one of those passing things to tune out. An ambulance was coming because my father told the dispatch operator to send one, because he told her my mother was dead. I continued to stare at the parking lot.

Eventually, I moved because I heard Elsa crying. She was sobbing on the steps, and I realized that her mother was gone, too, that Elsa would not receive those care packages filled with holiday candy as I had, Glen's mother was gone and she would not be there to see him finally get that haircut, that Matthew's was gone and she would not see another word that he wrote, that our mother was gone. That my mother was gone.

I remember what she told me, about my own life. "When you get too big for this world, Marcus Lindquist, and you're signing books and doing interviews, remember that I gave birth to you. You owe me big time, Marcus," she said. And I told her that when I became rich, I would buy her a mansion with its own special cat room. At my wedding, she would wear a simple white dress and when Bob Dylan's "When the Deal Goes Down" began to play, Dylan's voice weathered through his own years, the two of us would dance and I would thank her for everything. She would be a good grandmother who doted too much on her grandkids, buying them candy even when I told her that the kids didn't need candy, they would be up all night. You were always up all night, she would say. You kept me up those long hours when you were a tot. I know it, I was there. She would begin to talk with my father more, because the two of them were older, and they had shared a life together, and they both missed that life, even if only I heard her say it. And when her time came to die, at the age of 75 or older, not 52, I would sit beside her bedside, myself worn and different, and read to her in the low light for an hour before checking on the score of the Astros game. The Astros would still be losing, because they always did, and maybe one more time my mother would say how she just wanted them to win one game in that World Series against the White Sox, how that would have been enough.

When I stood to get her a Diet Coke—still, as an old woman, she wouldn't quit with those Diet Cokes—she would tell me that she loved me very much. Outside the snow would be falling and somewhere, from deep inside a church, the sound of a choir echoing through the cold bone of night. When visiting hours were over, she would kiss me on the forehead three times, for good luck as it had been for years, and before I let her go, I would tell her that she was the strongest person I knew, the best person I knew. In her dying moments, I would tell her she had convinced me that every life, even the hard ones, even the ones where you can't stop yourself from bleeding, are worth living.

I took my hands off the railing. I was twenty and it was summer. The sound of sirens grew louder, and below us, I saw an ambulance stop. For a moment, I was standing beside my father, who was still shaking, and then I saw Elsa on the steps crying as I had not seen my mother cry. She had my mother's high cheekbones and we both had our mother's blue eyes. It didn't matter what I had told myself on the ride over. I took three steps over and sat down. The concrete felt cold. I put an arm around Elsa's shoulder and I could feel her body shuddering with each sob. I didn't know what else to do, but she was my baby sister, and she was crying.

III. MOVING ON

That evening is still clear to me, in ways that so much else with my mother was not. Diagnosis, never clear. Her feelings about my father, not quite defined. What she did in the daytime hours while I was attending my classes at Idaho, unknown. But the evening we discovered her body seems concrete, rigid in its detailing—Elsa, my father and me standing outside the door while he knocked, him saying “Katy, it’s Paul,” him calling 911 after opening the door, him saying, “I think she’s dead.” When the police arrived at my mother’s apartment, ten or fifteen minutes had slipped past. I was sitting on the steps with the two of them. My father’s face seemed dark and red as he stared off toward the parking lot. There were no more tears, though we all kept sniffing. Sniffles on a summer day. All of the emotion building through that evening burned down to a charred emptiness and a feeling that the thing—her life, the first twenty years of my own—had ended. In the spring, before the irrigation waters were turned on, men from Ada County walked through the ditches and set fires to burn the debris away. I felt like one of those ditches, still smoking, blackened to a husk as the men stepped out of their cars in the uniforms.

The first police officers did not speak to us except to ask the apartment’s location, and they shuffled past as my father pointed to the landing. They could have been young or old, male or female. They could have had families of their own or lived alone on the edge of town. Boise was small enough that a death like my mother’s—caused by an overdose, accompanied by knife wounds and a history of mental illness—might have registered as unique. I wanted to think she was different than everybody else. None of them slowed. After ten minutes, or twenty minutes, or five minutes, a slightly pudgy

officer wearing a pair of glasses walked down. He gave a slight nod. “Are you her family?” My father said yes. “I’m sorry, but she’s passed away. There was really nothing we could do to help her,” he said. His voice was flat and did not waver. *That* part felt like a movie scene. I wondered how often he had to tell other families those kinds of things. Did the police flip coins for it? If you did it once, was it somebody else’s job the next time? Did some officer’s cry or go home to sit in the dark with a glass of whiskey? Does it just become a job at a certain point?

He was the first person to use the words “passed away.” It took me a long time—maybe two years—to allow myself to say that she was dead. Passing away was somehow easier to handle. She was not dead. We had lost her, she passed on, but she was not dead. My grandmother used the word “dead,” and it felt wrong. She reminded me of my mother too much, she talked about my mother too much. Hearing her speak reminded me that my mother was no longer alive. A year after the funeral, both she and my aunt, Andrea, visited again, staying in a hotel. When they gave us a tour of the room, my grandmother said, “And Katy’s staying in there.” There was a slight pause as she realized what she’d said, and then she said, “Not Katy, not Katy, Andrea.” No, not Katy.

My father nodded at the police officer, and I nodded, too, because I thought that was what I was supposed to do. We could cry behind closed doors, where I allowed myself to feel young while my father called Glen and Matthew and my grandmother and the funeral parlor and the church. His voice was steady, except when he called Glen, who was out with friends that night. “Glen, you need to come home. It’s about your mom.” Then, my father broke again, and when he did, it seemed primal, something that

no words could approach. He was supposed to be the steady man who knew how to fix things. He wasn't supposed to be me.

The shadows grew longer and longer as the sun set. I had no watch. Above us, the officers were checking my mother's body for signs of foul play. Routine, I understood, but it seemed absurd to me. She knew so few people. She killed herself. I just wanted them to accept that and tell me. I just wanted to know, for once. That routine was keeping me on those steps, as they studied her apartment. My head hurt. I thought vaguely of my mother's cats and what would happen to them. It was a strange moment, thinking about the cats. Quasi might have mewled at the officers as they worked. Penny hid behind the water heater, where she would remain for days until Matthew's girlfriend scared her out using a vacuum cleaner. Standing in the lot of the Town Square Apartments, where my mother lived out the final eleven years of her life, I could hear the blood passing through my head. It sounded like water.

While the men asked my father questions, neighbors gathered on the steps across the way and watched. They were just sitting and staring at us. The Alambaugh complex had seen multiple drug busts in the time my mother lived there. Mostly meth. Boise was one of the meth capitals of the country, I had heard once. I suspect the neighbors across the way were hoping for somebody to be led out in handcuffs. When I stared back at the neighbors, they glanced away. "She appeared to have knife-marks on her body," an officer said to my father, who shrugged. He seemed to shrug a lot when he spoke about my mother. "She's been doing that since," and then he paused, said a year, maybe 1993 or 1994. He shrugged again. *Huh, thought it was later when I was in middle school and was starting to buy books about mountain climbing. I thought that was my phase when*

the bandages started appearing. It was an idle thought, and I don't think I really cared. It didn't matter anymore, I told myself. What's the difference when it's all said and done? "There's a suitcase half-open," the man said. "Was she planning a trip?" My father wasn't certain, but after a moment of silence Elsa spoke, her voice strained and weak. "I don't think she unpacked from her Moscow trip." Elsa said this twice. The first time it was no more than a whisper. She said it again, more forcefully. I said nothing and just stared at the officer. He didn't look at me. I had forgotten about the trip to Moscow. "I suppose packing and unpacking looks the same," said the coroner, laughing. I gave a small laugh, too. I was good at being polite, even in those moments when I could not feel myself. The coroner handed my father a bag with my mother's bodily possessions. A watch, a wedding ring. Or he received these items later. I am not sure. Sometimes I saw the bag around the house, the items still inside. Sometimes I walked into my father's bedroom and opened the book of wedding photographs on top of the dresser, and I wondered what thought as those photographs were snapped, only knowing that they were not thinking that anything like this would be possible. Such a strange sensation, to feel like my own life wasn't something that should be happening.

We did not speak on the drive back from her apartment. There were no small jokes to hold off the moment, no profound statements about love or family. The roads were dark and mostly quiet. The mountains cut black against the horizon. This was the Boise Valley, this was home. There was nowhere else to go. My father's family lived in Chicago. My mother's Texas. My family lived in Eagle, Idaho, down Cobblestone Lane, where you couldn't drive over ten miles per hour on the gravel road or our neighbor would take out a gun. Crazy Idaho neighbors, we joked. I had not spent a night in my

mother's apartment in the time she lived there. The Town Square Apartments were a way station for me. And my mother felt the same, that it was not her home, either—during relaxed phone calls while I lived in Moscow, she liked to talk about Eagle and how she missed her foothill walks. How walking evenings in the Town Square Mall surrounded by high school students buying pretzels at Wetzel's Pretzels and overpriced t-shirts from Hot Topic weren't the same. She couldn't have those faded asphalt roads of Eagle back, no matter how badly she wanted them. And then she died, and everything I knew of her was confined to the past.

My father stopped at a gas station outside of the Western Idaho Fairgrounds in Meridian and handed Elsa five dollars. "Are you guys thirsty? I'm thirsty. How about we get something to drink?" he said. He sounded exhausted. Had he had that tone a day before, I would have joked that he sounded dead. I made a note to myself that there had to be a moratorium on dead jokes. The thought came, it went, and then I couldn't think anything else. Elsa and I walked to the cashier with three bottles of soda. I bought an orange Mountain Dew. My mother liked to joke about how eventually, Mountain Dew would become the soda equivalent of crayons with all of its colors. When the man asked how I was, I responded with "Good, thanks," though I had never felt less good in my life. I imagine after we left, he wondered about us. Our dulled faces—our eyes red from crying, our faces flushed, ashen. "Good, thanks." Or maybe he didn't think about us at all. Maybe he couldn't tell.

My father lay on the couch after we returned. Him, staring at the ceiling. I stood in the doorway of the living room next to one of the chairs he had built. “I’m so sorry,” my father said to me.

“I know,” I said, feeling my face twitch. Then, “it’s not your fault.” Afterward, I wished I had not said that, because saying it made it sound like maybe a part of me did blame him for my mother’s death. A part of me probably did blame him, but no more than I blamed myself or my siblings. We all might carry our burdens of guilt, but I wished there was a way to shield my father from it. I wanted him to know it wasn’t his fault. I wanted him to know that. “Yes,” he stammered, “I know that. I’m just,” he said, his voice growing louder, “sorry.” There would be no asking God whose fault it was, because it was not that simple. We were all responsible, somehow, and at the same time none of us were responsible.

My best friend, Thor, who I would meet in Iowa three years later, tried to commit suicide by swallowing a handful of pills and locking himself in his father’s Jeep with the engine running. He had been misdiagnosed with schizophrenia. We talked about suicide while sitting in the bar area at the Riverside Casino in Iowa. Each of us pulling cigarettes out and lighting them, first lingering on his recent breakup with a girl from our writing program, and then, slowly, we began to talk about my mother. He told me there was nothing I could have done to save her. He told me that I might not believe him, but it was true. When I told him that she did not leave a suicide note, that there was not even that, he said that all notes were the same—written by people past any point of logic. That didn’t change the principle. She had left nothing beyond a wicker basket of books and a cabinet of pills. And though I nodded my head and said I understood what he was saying,

I cannot shake myself. Even now when I pray, I still say “God bless Mom, Dad, and Matt and Elsa and Glen.” I have tried to leave my mother out, but I cannot—frozen on “God bless...” and not being able to just say, “Dad...”. I prayed for her since the age of eight. I did not know how to stop after she died. Each night, I continue to pray for her. I don’t believe God can answer prayers for the dead, only the living. I also do not believe God can wash me clean of my past. There’s not enough water on earth. “Katy, it’s Paul,” I hear. I hear it over and over and over again, it does not leave me. As I lay on the bed the night she died, Glen opened the front door. After fifteen seconds, Glen began to sob. He sounded like my father. There’s not enough water.

The days dragged. Silent meals, all of us separating out to our own rooms. My father didn’t have the energy to cook, so on that first night after her death, we drove for twenty minutes. The radio might have played, it might not have. I can’t remember, and music is something I always try to remember. Soundtrack of my life, but I can’t remember. The evening was comfortably warm and Glen, Elsa, my father and I walked through the streets of Boise slowly, none of us speaking or making eye contact with the people we passed. Instead, we headed to the Brick Oven Bistro, one of the restaurants we visited every now and then in town. Children splashed through the fountain in the plaza outside the restaurant while their parents sipped beers and watched through dark sunglasses. We ordered our food politely—I went with the same barbecue sandwich I had ordered for years—sat down at a corner table, ate, finished, and until my father said, “You guys ready?” in a dulled voice, not a word was passed between the four of us. Before my mother died, I did not realize what it was for our entire house to truly be

silent. I thought grief was supposed to be all crying and catharsis, but it wasn't that. The morning after we discovered her body, I lay on the bed in the storage room in a pair of basketball shorts, not thinking about her. I tried to cry, I couldn't cry. I don't know what I thought while I lay there. When my father asked if we wanted to go out for dinner, I nodded and averted eye contact. After we returned home from the Brick Oven, I walked past Elsa and laid down on the bed. I asked God where Mommy had gone and then I slept.

It took much, much longer than those first months for me to begin to try to conceptualize what had happened, but there were some things I felt even in those early days. Like hating that she had to die in summer. I wanted winter—to watch for snow, to throw snowballs at my family in the driveway, to feel a change coming on. Summer reminded me of boyhood trips to Eagle Island State Park with her. We ate picnic lunches near the sand and she bought us cookies and Mountain Dew. In pictures from those trips, she smiled in the sunlight, and I believe she was happy. There was one picture where we all lay slumped on the picnic table. Our grandmother had told us to look tired, and we had abided. In the picture, my mother is laughing behind an Agatha Christie mystery. Or perhaps she is not in that photo. I remember the moment my grandmother took it, but somewhere through the years the photo had been tossed into the shoebox that held all our old photographs.

Look tired. After she died, the hot months wore on me, and I could do nothing except look tired. The months were washed out in their brightness, the land baked under a cloud-less sky, and I waited. Autumn's whittling of the leaves from the trees. Geese flying south. Shortened days. Snow on the Washington Palouse. Anything. I could

gauge time by what had passed since her death. One week, two weeks, one month, two months. In mid-August, a month and a week after she died, I packed my clothes, books, and music into a bag and my father drove me back to the University of Idaho dorms.

I moved in, again, stacking books in alphabetical order, albums chronologically by artist. Several hours spent in front of the shelf while my roommate, an engineering major named Long, sipped a Diet Coke and watched anime on his computer. He would glance over from time to time and make quips like, “They’re already on there, why are you moving them around?” Jumbled, I mumbled. *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* didn’t belong next to *Blood on the Tracks*. Anybody could see that. You could see it in the years on Dylan’s face from album to album. So young on *Freewheelin’*, about as old as I was as I slipped it into its place. When I was finished, I clapped twice and smiled as he shook his head. I told him not to mess with the order, and he grunted. It was supposed to be a joke. My clothes lay heaped across the floor. Empty energy drink cans sat on the desk next to the computer along with crumpled Top Ramen wrappers. I didn’t bother with those, they could stay. I was on my knees trying to figure out whether to place *The Basement Tapes* in order by release date, or by recording date. They were released in 1975, but Dylan had recorded those songs after his motorcycle crash in 1967. Went with recording date. If anybody asked, I could explain my thought process when it came to ordering. But nobody asked about *The Basement Tapes*, so I merely thought it, satisfied in my inner logic.

My nights at Idaho that autumn semester were spent searching for Bob Dylan bootlegs. Even bad ones delighted me, say a concert from the early 1990’s that a clever soul had titled *Name That Tune*, because Dylan was so drunk and off his game that it

sometimes took several minutes to understand what he was singing. On some of the tracks, like “New Morning,” the band just kept playing and playing waiting for Dylan to start singing. They played that intro on loop. “It’s “New Morning,”” I said to Long as if he cared. He asked what I liked about it. “He doesn’t start singing for three minutes. That’s just cool.” I said. “But he sounds like dying,” Long told me. “Yes, but it’s a glorious dying and I need to hear it.” I had lifted my moratorium on dead jokes. It was just a word, so long as nobody used in conjunction with my mother’s name. The air began to cool and I couldn’t sleep. More to the point, I didn’t sleep. It wasn’t insomnia. Instead, I simply didn’t want to sleep. I did not want to be one day older and closer to the grave, as the old song goes.

Dragging those night hours out until the point of physical and mental exhaustion felt right. At random times during the night, I walked down the middle of the road toward the stoplights that only flashed red, singing to myself if nobody was nearby. I didn’t know what kind of person sang to themselves outside at 3:00 a.m., but I had turned into that person. The funny thing about the phone calls with my mother is despite the fact that I only talked to her, and despite the fact that I called her Friday nights, Saturday nights, when other kids my age were out with their peers sipping beers and playing Xbox, those calls at least allowed for some vague sense that I was not alone. You can’t be alone when there’s another person out there willing to talk to you, even if you are a twenty-year old kid and the only person you feel you can carry on an extended conversation with is your mother.

Without those calls, I couldn’t fool myself. The phone wasn’t going to ring, and I wasn’t going to dial a number. Beyond my family, I had nobody I could call. One

moment, *Hi guys, it's Mom. Just wanted to set up our Sunday meeting*, and then nothing. There were no more nightly phone calls. There were no phone calls at all. I didn't miss them, exactly—they simply no longer existed. That I could seemingly forget so easily, or move on so easily, or that forgetting meant stasis and stagnation. I did not know what to make of me.

When I passed people on the sidewalk, I turned my head down and away, or gazed beyond, toward a point a block down the street, like a stoplight or a car. There was no music. I had no mp3 player to help me pretend I was engaged. Instead, my instinctual blank stare. If you saw me, you might think me stoned. It was a vacancy cultivated in hospital waiting rooms from the age of nine onward. Do not smile. Do not make eye contact. Do not emote. My thoughts drifted and skipped, but I did not think of my mother and I did not think of myself. The Yankees playoff chances, a song line stuck in my head, the way drunken people staggered, not her, and not me. She was gone like the radio on a mountain road, fuzzed out to static.

Two drunk kids stumbled by as I walked. They wore Vandal t-shirts and smoked cigarettes. One of them yelled in my face, and I jumped. As they turned the corner they laughed. For a moment, I thought about chasing after them and trying to throw them to the ground, hammering punches into their skulls and screaming obscenities. I wanted to believe there was something stone in my heart. That wasn't me, though, as much as I might have imagined it. All I could do was startle, and then curse myself afterward for being so vacantly out of tune that it would be funny to yell at me after a few beers. I blushed and began to sweat. *People don't understand*, I thought. *Don't they know who I am?* I could feel myself near tears, my face twitching slightly, but I shook my head and

kept walking. I bought chicken fingers from the Zips along the highway. I ate them in a corner booth in the darkened restaurant. Nearby a couple shared a milkshake. They did not look at me.

My first poetry teacher in college once told me that after reading an essay of mine that my writing made me seem like the loneliest person on earth. “After I read it,” he said in class, “I just wanted to bake you a pan of cookies or something.” During the day, I could attend class and make small talk—the nice kid who smiled a lot—eat my meals and feel vaguely like nothing had changed. Nights hit harder, vaguely more empty. In those late moments I missed people. Not just my mother, but the ones who I had considered friends, too. Matt and Jared from high school, PK, Brian, Pat, the kids from Eagle who knew where Ballantine Lane and Eagle Road led, who rode bikes with me into the foothills when I was thirteen, who called that town home. On the Internet, their pictures and relationship statuses changed. Jared married. Brian moved to Baltimore. Matt attended college in Utah. They grew beards, they cut their hair, they found people to love, they fell away without me trying to keep them. I missed sitting in Doug’s Burger Den with Matt and talking about high scores on Nintendo 64, or the way that we once shoplifted cans of soda from Albertson’s by stuffing them into our socks. Stolen soda made me achingly nostalgic as I sat in my dorm room searching for outtakes from *The Magical Mystery Tour*. Everything was on the Internet. Bootlegs of concerts from 1965, pictures of kittens, streaming baseball games. Those bootlegs were everything to me, but I didn’t like thinking about myself sitting there in a chair for hours on end. I didn’t like seeing myself. One night, I searched for my mother’s name, hoping that I could somehow see a picture of her. There were none, but I could access my mother’s obituary

if I paid \$2.50 to the *Idaho Statesman* website. Hands shaking, I pulled out my wallet and typed in the number off my debit card. After the payment went through, a message popped up, “Thank you for your purchase.”

My hair was grown past my shoulders. I still wore glasses. I had gained twenty pounds since her death and would gain another twenty-five in the next two years. When I stared in the mirror, it was sometimes hard to see her good boy.

I lived in a suite in the Engineering Dorms that school year. Everybody else in the dormitory majored in mechanical engineering, or biological engineering, or architecture. I majored in English and took literature classes for which I didn’t read. Words came easily to me by then. In my spare time, I wrote poems obliquely relating to my mother’s death, even if I wasn’t trying to. Stole Springsteen lines about leaning on Chevrolets, but in the poems, the Chevrolets were rusted by the river and a young man was waiting for a funeral. There were no more poems about romance or making out to The Beatles alongside the train tracks. I didn’t know how to write those little melancholic nostalgia pieces anymore. Instead, there was only my mother, lying dead in her apartment. I tried to stop writing her. I didn’t want to be the Guy Who Wrote About His Dead Parent. I wanted to be a rock and roll writer, funny and thoughtful and gently nostalgic. I could write about Bob Dylan, but Dylan’s music was intertwined with my conversations with my mother, and separating them was impossible in those days. Though I try now, it’s still very difficult. Essays about my high school friends became essays about them not attending her funeral. She was simply there, always, it seemed,

though I rarely thought about her or ruminated on her death overtly. She showed up, unannounced at the door of the blank page, as she did in my prayers. That was the ghost of her, I thought, but the blank page and my prayers were as close as I seemed to come to seeing her. Everything I wrote about her death seemed hopelessly simple. The grand revelation I hoped for did not arrive, even though I couldn't not write about her. She also did not appear in my dreams. It worried me that I did not dream about her. I thought a healthy grief meant dreaming of the dead. I prayed to God for dreams, and when they did not come, I felt wounded and let down. God would not give me my dreams.

My application for housing was a week late, and I just put down the first name that I saw. I assumed that it would just be a name, that the Engineering Dorm was no different than any other. If I wanted to be sentimental, the name reminded me of my father. But really, I just put down the first thing I saw. Long was playing *World of Warcraft* the day I moved into the dorm. He laughed when he asked me, "Why you sign up for this building? You not engineering." That was me, in my floaty little universe. My dishes went unwashed, my clothes piling up beside the bed, and I had signed up for a dorm which was built for people who cared about things that I didn't understand. They worked long hours studying while I blasted Procol Harum and watched movies on the school's television network. I saw *Spider-man 3* eight times. It seemed to be airing nightly. My family had watched *Spider-man* the last Christmas, and while Toby McGuire still struck me as annoying—his face bugged me for some reason—I watched that third movie over and over again, keeping myself from doing anything else. One of the few DVDs I brought with me was David Fincher's *Zodiac*. The serial killer scared me, but more than that, I loved the movie because it was about obsession and letting your

life go, and I could see a little of myself in Robert Graysmith's stacks of papers and dead ends. We were both trying to understand something that was impossible to understand. The DVD player atop the television had been my mother's, and I claimed it while we were cleaning out her apartment. When I inserted DVDs, I did not think of her.

Along with me and Long, two other students lived in my suite. Corey and Alan. Corey moved out by the end of the first semester. Alan liked to talk with me, and eventually we started heading to the recreation center to play basketball. When he beat me, I grew angry and stopped talking to him for the night. He was also an avid jogger and eventually the two of us went about setting up a jogging route on which we would time ourselves. It looped through campus and took us over several large hills. I thought myself a runner, having started it when I was a sophomore at Idaho, though I went through long stretches of inactivity. During heavy snow in winter, I hit the indoor track. My face grew dark red when I exercised, but in the glass of the track window, I could see through myself, out into the larger world. I almost ran into somebody walking because I was staring at myself so intensely. I was fascinated by how people might see me. During phone conversations with my mother, I told her I was jogging even if I wasn't. I also lied to her when I asked if I was reading the Bible. She would worry less about me, I assumed, if I told her these things. By the time of her death in the summer of 2007, I stopped jogging completely. The days were too hot, I was too tired, there wasn't a point until Alan had the idea that we should time ourselves.

Alan worked in a mechanical plant in Boise during that summer and kept at it every day. He was fit, and though I bet him drinks that I would beat his time, initially I

lost. I hated losing to Alan. I hated failing. He handed me a 500 megabyte mp3 player after he bought an iPod in October. It was the best gift I ever received, a sort of liberation from my blank-faced walk. My cocoon of music could follow me everywhere. It was a happy day. I spent hours trying to figure out the right kinds of songs to put on there. At first, upbeat songs dominated my jogs—The Beatles, the slightly less enthusiastic, but still happy enough Kinks, some Herman's Hermits and The Monkees. But it came down to Bob Dylan. I could not run when I felt happy, I thought. It didn't seem right to break out into the night listening to "Can't You Hear My Heartbeat?" My mother might have found the image of me scrambling up a hill listening to "Please Please Me" to be endearing, but she was not there to tell me that.

Nobody saw me run. My best jogging albums were Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* and Tom Waits's *Small Change*. Slower piano and guitar seemed to work, because it fit the night, because you fell into a mellow rhythm. "Buckets of Rain," the last track on *Blood on the Tracks* was the only song I played during the first two weeks of my mother's death, and I listened to it just once, the night she died, before I went to bed. This was something out of the movies—a sad song to set me to rest at the end of that longest day. But it didn't work as in the movies. No flashbacks of watching baseball with her or swimming at Eagle Island State Park while she read Sue Grafton on the beach. The song played and I could not feel it at all. Over before it started, and I felt stupid after that, fake. Like everything I had been doing was an act. Try not to cry, listen to a sad song, nod like your father, speak like your father, tell him it's not his fault, don't cry don't cry don't cry. I did not put music on again until I believed I could feel it like I had before. Since the age of eighteen when I stumbled upon Jackson Browne's greatest

hits after hearing “The Load-Out” on the radio, through The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Springsteen, and most of all Dylan, music had made me feel happy. It was one of the few things in my life that I trusted and truly loved. It reminded me of those days of driving through the foothills and resting on the edge of the hill while the sun set. When I came back to Dylan’s music on a warm summer evening, I listened to *Highway 61 Revisited*. It was a bitter, cynical nasty bit of an album, but in its youthfully burnt creativity it was also my favorite and the best one to remind me that I was still there even if she was gone. I turned up the volume until I could feel it in my bones, until my own singing voice was something I could not hear—I was shouting by then, how does it feel how does it feel how does it feel. I punched the wall, let out a short yell, punched the wall again in time. After the album ended, I thought *I’m back baby, I’m back*, smiling a little.

Alan asked repeatedly if I would jog with him, but I concocted vague excuses like, “I like to jog later than you, I’m not an evening jogger,” or “I wouldn’t be able to keep up with you.” Really, just wanted to be alone while I ran. Me, the music, my footsteps, the night. Each night before jogging, I threw on the same pair of red basketball shorts and a gray t-shirt. If I had not done laundry recently, which was most days, the shirt was liable to be stained with old sweat and throw off a musty odor. By the end of each jog, a U of a sweat stain would drop past my ribs, especially during the late summer and fall runs, before the heat slowly faded. My shoes were a pair of cheap black things I bought from Wal-Mart. They were worn on the soles and did not gain traction well on pavement. Sometimes, they buckled and slid on gravel, but I balanced myself well and caught myself before falling on these occasions. I was crafty that way. Ninja cat jogger, I told Alan after one close call, to which he just gave a slight nod before returning to his

computer screen. I brushed my teeth before each jog, found a song to leave on, and stared myself down in the mirror while making boxing motions toward my face. Let's do it let's do it let's do it. Then I ran.

The jog led up a hill toward the administration building, through sorority row, then toward the Kibbie Dome where our two-win football team lost their games on Saturdays. Down an unlit hill, through a soccer field, onto the Moscow-Pullman trail, back to the dorm. Alan made the dash in fifteen minutes, me in twenty. The time gap slowly shrunk, though it did so without me realizing it. Twenty minutes became nineteen became eighteen became sixteen. On clear nights when I hit the hill by the Kibbie Dome, the stars would spread out, the sky a sort of deeply bright dark blue, and coasting down the hill I believed in God and believed my mother was watching after me with a smile. One man on a hill, breaths labored and ragged, sweat pouring off his face under the stars. It was only me, under God's sky with a sad song playing, me running toward whatever it is that the melody of my life would become. When I returned from a jog, I lay on the bed shirtless and stared at the ceiling, coughing, sputtering out. Alan stuck his head in my room each time and asked how fast. Some nights I told him, and some nights I just shook my head and closed my eyes.

The other dorms had pianos, but as Alan told me, "Engineers don't do that." I saw them through the surrounding windows while walking to eat lunch. My dorm was the only one sans piano. *Maybe I can sneak into one of the other ones*, I thought. I imagined myself a cat burglar, huddling in the bushes and waiting until a student swiped their card through. Then putting my hand in the door before it closed, using my bulky

Beatles Songbook to gain entrance. And then I would become Little Richard, hammering away and possessed by the spirit while the students living there hollered along, offering me beers and wondering about the mystery kid. A cute girl would write her phone number on a strip of paper and ask if I was doing anything later on. *Nah, just chilling, going to listen to some Dylan.* She would then say that she loved Bob Dylan, and the rest would be history. It all worked out so well in my mind. Instead, I took to playing in the student commons at night, in the Quiet Room, carrying a notebook and waiting for the other studying students to trickle out. Around 10:30 or 11:00 at night, the lights dimmed. Then, the only people in the building were the janitors and me.

At my mother's nudging, I started to take piano lessons in the ninth grade. Elsa was a pianist. So was my father, contradicting Alan's "Engineers don't do that." I loved watching him work the keys. He had big fingers, like mine, and he was imperfect. My father stumbled over sections, played in a rough pattern, sometimes repeated himself until it was slightly smoother. In that imperfection, he kept moving, sometimes clumsily, and the songs seemed to take on his life. I admired that he refused to stop. Once, when I was in college and my grandmother visited, I played a song while she talked with my siblings in another room. When she came in to watch me, she told me that I sounded beautiful, that I sounded like my father. It's still the best compliment I feel I've ever received regarding my piano playing.

After high school, I dropped piano—though my father hinted I should take lessons at the university, I faded toward watching baseball and draining hours on online poker. Then I discovered The Beatles. Then I discovered Dylan. His melodies were rudimentary, his playing workman-like and fit for the weathered corners of his voice.

Those were tunes I could tap out at the keyboard without truly knowing how to play. All you needed were the chords. Dylan's songs reminded me of my father in some ways. A song like "Sign on the Window" didn't shimmer with studio gloss. It was all heart in its gruff little vocal and sad yearning. The song started with Dylan singing about loneliness, then about a broken relationship, then ended with him wishing for a quiet family life in Utah. I almost believed I could see Dylan sitting on the same worn red piano bench as Daddy, leaning forward and humming to himself while my father brewed coffee and smoked a cigar. The chords in the Dylan songbook I bought weren't the same ones that Dylan used—someone at Hal Leonard had done a poor transposition job, as I would read later on the Internet—but I hit them as my piano teacher Jules taught me to hit such songs. Chord right hand, bass note left hand, chord right hand. I sang over the top in an out of tune warble.

Disappointing to me, I could not be Bob Dylan, as much as I wanted to in that engineering dormitory, surrounded by architects and geneticists, people who used numbers in ways that I could not even conceive of. I thought I had the soul to be a singer, and for hours I sat at that piano in the commons while the janitors swept out the remnants of the prior day. Once, in late autumn, a man opened the door and watched me for ten seconds. He wore a jean jacket and carried a laptop case, catching me in the middle of Tom Waits's "Down There By the Train." The song shattered me when I first heard it on a Christmas morning, and I sang it well, because I did not worry about time or perfection, only the words and my voice. It was a song about a broken man searching for redemption and salvation, and more than that, about finding the strength to ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness from God, from the people he loves and has hurt, from himself.

The words rattled in my throat, then quieted when I realized I was being watched. With him standing in the doorway I could not regain the rough swagger of alone. I closed the books, pretended to look at the clock, and hustled into the abandoned halls.

In those months following my mother's death, these activities became me. When I was not writing or listening to music, I thought about dribbling a basketball, or singing the blues at an abandoned piano, or donning my jogging gear and running until I was no longer there. I wanted to leave a sign on my door reading "I'm not there, I'm gone." It was a Dylan line. My suitemates might think: Not where? Gone where? Who cares? They dealt with the hard reality of numbers, whereas I wanted something less certain or concrete, something I knew was impossible. I didn't think of it so simply as wanting to see my mother again—more like seeing myself whole, burned and different. I didn't know who I was looking for in my reflection, or in the eighty self-portraits I snapped of myself with my first cell phone. Posing. Poser. Sad Mark. Happy Mark. Glaring Mark. Wistfully Poetic Mark. So many Marks, so little time. I believed I was in there, somewhere, if I just looked closely enough at myself. And, though I no longer cried or thought about her as often as I expected in my quiet moments that autumn, I wanted to see her again.

Five days after my mother's death, on the morning of the funeral, my father tossed me one of his white button-up dress shirts. He knew I didn't own nice clothes—only my small collection of t-shirts and shorts. For months after the funeral, the shirt lay bunched up in the corner of my bedroom. It stayed there after I left for the university late that summer. It remained when I returned for Thanksgiving and Christmas. So did the

sleeping bag from the northern Idaho camping trip. The bag was not washed and the smell of campfire smoke lingered. These little things remained. A bloodstained copy of James Wright's poetry sat on my bookshelf alongside tattered copies of *Salem's Lot* and *The Stand*. Matthew gave her the poems for her birthday.

The blood faded, though. I no longer thought about what it represented. Somewhere along the line, those kinds of stains became a part of the scenery of knowing my mother. In her living room, on the wall where I placed a pillow to watch baseball. On the corner of the bathroom sink. On the inside cover of the books in the wicker basket. And then the scars on her wrists. Once, after picking me up from driver's education while I was in high school, her wrists were crudely bandaged. "The cats startled and jumped at me," she said. Her excuse was flimsy weak, but I laughed. "Be careful about those cats," I said. It didn't enter my mind to press her. There always seemed to be a cat in her life, somewhere. It didn't matter that there were no more hospitalizations following my high school graduation. The scars were an ever-present reminder of that cold razor.

While we were planning the memorial and funeral, my father told us the casket would be closed. We did not ask questions about why—I didn't want to know the answers. The two weeks following her death were a rolling monotony of necessary gestures: Drive with my father to scout out a grave plot, discuss the memorial with the funeral service, write the obituary, wear a dress shirt, help clear out the apartment, figure out who would keep the cats, did her car still work. Her death lasted two weeks, and I thought when those weeks ended I could and would move on. I wanted to be done with it. She had passed on or left us or died or however a person wanted to say it. I could not

kiss her cheek and wish her farewell the way I saw it done in the movies. Only a casket blanketed in white carnations, with the understanding that our mother's body—our mother—was there. The last time I saw her alive would have been the week prior to our camping trip, but I cannot recall the visit or what my mother wore. I do not know if she baked us bread or if we watched baseball together.

Instead, I wore my father's shirt to her memorial service. It was a simple shirt. I closed the door to the bedroom and took a deep breath before sliding the fabric over my shoulders. My skin was pale except on the arms. I was twenty-years old, thin, bespectacled. My hair was beginning to lengthen away from its initial buzzcut of two months prior. It could be brushed aside. The shirt was just a shirt. I knew that, even as I tried to find some significance in it. As I brought the buttons through the holes, the action felt necessary to be proper and correct. I would cry if I struggled with the buttons, if I could not succeed at something so simple. At the same time, each button was closer to a finality. Buttons, and a five-minute drive to the cemetery, and my mother lowered into a grave. Slowly, I buttoned my father's shirt. It took five minutes. By the end, a solitary tear trickled down my cheek. I let it go. I looked very little like my father, but in the week after my mother's death, I refused to shave. The hair on my face came in sketchy and thin, a neck beard without cheek support, a wispy thin "mustache." "Mark, are you growing a beard?" Glen asked, giggling. "That's not a beard," my father said from the front seat. "That's a dirt." We all laughed, and in the rearview mirror my father's eyes were alive. My "beard" was not an attractive look, but it was important to look as worn as I felt. I believed all funerals should be attended by bearded men and young boys trying.

The first dream came in November or December during a nap, while I was back in Eagle on holiday break. We stood in an empty room. She was wearing white and would not or could not speak. Words came to me. “I miss you.” “I wish you were here for baseball.” And then, as she smiled at me slightly—a sad smile I recognized in my own face late at night—I began to sob in the dream, the way I could not cry in my waking hours. “I’m so proud you’re my mother.” The words spilled out. She brushed my hair back from my forehead. She had always liked my hair cut short, my buzzcuts. They reminded her of those childhood days when she could say goodnight to me. I hugged her and cried harder. Breathing hurt.

I opened my eyes to the flicker of the florescent light above me in my bedroom. The pillow felt dry to the touch. I wanted those tears to be real, like I wanted my words to be real. The idea of pride in my mother was one that hadn’t surfaced prior to that dream. She had simply been my mother before, the woman who walked with me into the foothills in the summers of my boyhood, the woman who cut her wrists and took medication, the woman who died behind a locked door with no family to guide her out of life. It felt good to know that maybe I was proud of her for who she had raised me to be. That for all my loneliness, I was still a good person. She was gone, though, could not even speak for me in dreams, and I had never thought to tell her I was proud of her. I thought love was enough. A year and a half later, I saw her again, in a snowstorm. I carried her limp body through the whiteout of a country field, searching for a barn. When I woke that time, there was snow on the ground outside, at the base of a newly leafed tree. It was May. Snow fallen out of season.

There was one other dream, three years later. In it, my mother's voice was craggily and high pitched. She sounded like a witch. We stood on the edge of a ditch on Floating Feather Road, down a ways from Eagle Middle School. In life, I had ridden my bike past this ditch countless times. It was a small thing in life. In the dream, there was no bottom. The edge was crumbling. She swayed over it.

"I could jump, you know," she said.

"Don't jump, Mommy," I said. "Please don't jump."

"I could just go and it would be so easy." She slurred her words. "Just fly like a little birdie." And then she laughed, and though it was a dream and there was no actual sound in this world at that moment from that person, it is still the most frightening thing I have ever heard. I wondered if this was the person who cut her wrists. I wondered if this was the person I hadn't seen. In the dream, I was twenty-five years old. A car was parked down the street. Carefully, I walked up to her and put an arm around her. She leaned against me, this enormous weight. We staggered to the car. After she passed out on the seat, I tried to buckle her in, but she reached out and grabbed my arm with a short laugh, her head slumping backward, her eyes only the whites. And that was it. When I woke, I was shaking. There was some part of myself that scared me, and though I still wanted to see my mother, I rarely asked for dreams after that.

Eventually, I expected something to break in me. Somehow, something, some big moment. I still thought the catharsis would arrive. Then one cold jog in January, an exposure warning had been issued in Moscow, forecasting the dangers of stalled cars and tinges of frostbite. It was supposed to drop to -10. Jogging in that weather was

refreshing, though. My legs burnt, sweat freezing in my hair underneath my St. Louis Rams ski hat, my fingers numbed until I had to tap them against my chest. Just like playing the piano, I told Alan, who was incredulous about me going for a run that night. Apart from the hat, the jogging outfit was unchanged from autumn. Same tattered gray shirt, same pair of red basketball shorts. I did not have the money to buy sweatpants or a sweatshirt, and I did not ask my father for it. I was a tough guy who slept on the floor of hotels when there were not enough beds, so I could say I was “roughing it,” to use my father’s words. Do you want us to get a rollaway, Mark? Or you could share a bed with Glen. No, that’s OK, Dad O, I’ll rough it. I thought myself a western kid. Coddling was for the mythical city boys that I built up in my head.

Six months had passed since my father called for an ambulance. If I was somebody else, I might have started drinking alone at Mingles on weekday nights before wobbling out into the street and throwing punches at bigger men as the bars emptied. A part of me wanted to feel that tangible snap. A bloodied face to match whatever might be going on in my head, to make up for the silent kid that I was. For a time, I did visit the bars, ordering long island iced teas and sitting alone watching football next to old men who were there nightly. The drinking only went to a certain point, though. Knocking back alcohol in a darkened corner made me feel even worse. Everybody else my age played pool and laughed. All of the pickup lines I thought up were song lines. I was not somebody else. I was me, and only me, and so I ran when the temperature plummeted. It was the one way I truly knew how to push myself. It was like those old family car trips—always neither here nor there when you are in the middle of them, your life between points.

A foot of snow fell upon Moscow that January. It was one of the largest snows in the history of the town, and when I prayed that night while witnessing the whitewashing of the schoolyard, I thanked my mother for bringing a real snow, finally. If you wanted to find a sign, then you could—in the sweeping sunset or the rolled boil of a thunderhead, or the smile of a girl as you passed each other on Sixth Street. Anything can be a sign if you convince yourself that there's something driving life beyond the day-to-day. Mostly, I didn't look, but sometimes, with a rueful smile, I thought my mother might be drawing the clouds overhead and bringing the winter down, summer buried as we had buried her. White carnations on her coffin, white snow. The largest snow in the Boise Valley during my mother's lifetime occurred while she was visiting my grandmother in Texas. She returned to find only the dirty remnants piled up at the airport along lampposts. Her favorite Christmas movie was *Meet Me in St. Louis*. She bought me Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* two years before she died. Once, while they were married, my father attempted to teach her to ski. She managed three runs down the bunny hill before pleading failure and returning to the lodge. It was funny to my father, that my mother was not one for roughing it, not even on the ski hill. They laughed about it.

My mother loved walks in winter. During a Christmas morning shortly after our move to Idaho, my mother and I headed down the road toward the foothills. We listened to separate books on tape as we walked, occasionally pointing out sets of decorations hung on barn doors, or the tracks of animals in the snow. Eagle seemed in its infancy, then, just born and beautiful, a thin frost covering the asphalt. She bundled me up in a ugly red and brown coat and a wool hat with pictures of tin soldiers on it. I think it was Matthew's hat, not mine. I wore a pair of bulky skiing gloves. My mother's wrists were

clean of scars. At the age of seven or eight, I probably couldn't truly realize what contentment was, but I see it, now. Though I may be projecting nostalgia onto the memory, I do not believe I am. I felt privileged to be walking with her. Afterward, she told me she was proud that I was able to keep up. She smiled as she said this. Not a medicated smile or a reflex smile, but something genuine and pure. We walked that morning, before I could grow old and she could see her Christmases fragmented to nights in hospitals and eventually mornings alone in an apartment while she called us and asked what our gifts were, keeping the bright voice of a happy mother while we missed her terribly, while she lay in bed with bandaged wrists, her voice quiet so as not to wake her neighbors.

Running across the soccer field and busting through the crusted over layers of snow on my night jogs felt refreshing. The snow helped me know I was moving. Uneven sheets of ice covered the sidewalk. Running on ice was about careful steps, sharp focus, knowing where my feet were landing. The cold kept me awake and aware. I was exposed, a glorious exposure to the world. Frozen sweat collected in the facial hair above my lip. I'm here, I thought. Fuck the cold, I'm here. A car drove slowly past along sorority row. To them I must have appeared bizarre—this kid running as if it was summer. Each breath stung in my lungs. Returning from a frozen jog meant twenty or thirty minutes of coughing, skin tingling and my chest turned red. Cautionary steps. In the past, I had slipped and fallen, skinned a knee at the bottom of the hill, but mostly, I was good at keeping upright. Cat-like balance was the key, as my mother told me. Ten minutes into the run, The Rolling Stones were playing, something off of one of their mid-60's pop albums like *Flowers*, maybe "Ruby Tuesday" or "Ride On Baby." The mp3

device was set to shuffle, and I fell on a pop hit. I think it was “Ride On Baby” that soundtracked my collapse. Near the top of the hill by the Kibbie Dome, the sidewalk was unevenly paved. It sloped upward at an awkward angle, the ice patchier than at the earlier stretches of the jog near the Administration building.

One foot at a time, focused, until I came upon the uneven pavement. I hit a spot without ice and felt my body jerk and the right ankle roll under me. Sometimes when you roll an ankle, it’s possible to stay upright and to shake it off. Sometimes you break. I could feel my weight on the bone and I yelped as I crumpled to the sidewalk. For a moment, I stared at the night sky, completely clear. Then I checked on the mp3 player. Still intact. I gave a small fist pump. At least the music was not broken. Then I laughed at myself and wrapped my hands around my knees, resting. My breathing slowed. The stars were sharp and bright, the night did not seem cold. When I bent over the ankle I expected to see bone, because it was such a sharp, deep pain on the roll, like none I had experienced before. I honestly thought the bone would be sticking out, and that I might faint from shock and freeze to death on the sidewalk while “Ride on Baby” wrapped up. My mind jumped to that scenario. My way to go, and would Elsa or Matthew or Glen say “God bless Mom, and Dad, and Mark,” or would they move on with God in a way I could not?

There was no bone. I gently pressed on flesh beneath the sock and winced. Tried to stand and take a step. Yelping again, I slumped back to the ground. I glanced around for somebody else who could help me back to my dorm, but it was a cold cold night and there was nobody. I laughed again, this time louder, and then continued laughing for another thirty seconds. There was no one to hear it except for myself. *Lordy*, I thought.

What a fucking mess you are. This is fitting. Attaboy. But it wasn't self-loathing that I felt. Life was humorous in that moment, less lonely and quiet than it sometimes seemed. This snapped ankle was tangible evidence of my existence. It was change, somehow, something different. Down the hill I heard voices. A man and a woman in front of a parked car. I could see them from where I sat. They laughed, his arm over her shoulders. She kissed him on the cheek after he held the door open for her. In their moment, I was happy for them. God bless you, I thought. I didn't yell to them for help, as I did not want to interrupt their lives, same as I had not wanted to interrupt my mother or father in their own lives by asking questions about things I felt were beyond me, like a diagnoses, or specifics of suicide. I wanted to let it be, as if letting it be would let the past die.

I ain't scared o' you, world. Give me your best shot. Kill the things I love, whatever. I could almost convince myself that it was true sometimes, except she kept coming back to that blank page, and later I would get drunk on vodka in my dorm, vomit in the suite living room, and then walk to the mirror and begin to scream *Why do people have to die?*, yelling it on repeat for half-an-hour before I passed out in a chair. In the morning, there would be a sign on my door reading, "Clean up the vomit, Mark. That's fucking gross." And then it was harder to convince myself that there was such a thing as "moving on" or being "alright." I didn't know what "alright" even meant. But I tried.

With a deep breath I propped myself up and onto my feet. I did not attempt to put any real weight on the ankle. Instead, it dragged along as I wobbled back toward my dorm. What normally was a five minute walk back lasted twenty minutes. When one of the kids from down the hall passed me, I forced myself to put my weight on the ankle and smile. Alan squinted at me as I entered the suite. "What?" I asked. "You're frozen," he

said. I glanced in the mirror. My face was iced in places. When I attempted to take off the hat, the frozen hair refused to budge. “I think I broke my ankle,” I said. “I doubt it’s broke. Probably just sprained.” “No,” I said, leaning against the wall with each step toward my room, “it takes no weight. It’s broke. I just know it.” After a few minutes, water began pouring off of me. A bruise would spread from the top of the ankle to the toes. In several days, the entire foot would shine purple and blue. It swelled up to the point where I could not fit my foot in my shoe—had to re-lace. The university health clinic was closed that weekend, so I ran a Google Image search for “broken ankle.” The pictures seemed similar. Self-diagnosis correct, I thought, smirking to myself. Two months would pass before I attempted to jog again. On cold days, the ankle sometimes still twinges, though years have melted through my life.

Prior to my mother’s memorial service, we taped up photographs on pieces of posterboard. Elsa, Matthew, Glen and me sat in the living room surrounded by boxes of pictures. Our lives were in front of us. Me and Matthew pushing Elsa in a small car from our New York years. The dinosaur costume my mother sewed for me one Halloween when I was six years old. Those garish coats and shirts that our parents dressed us in—lots of reds and browns and burnt yellows. My mother and father marrying and feeding each other pieces of cake. Her red hair, and walking to the Toyota with a little mathematical equation written on the window that equaled out to a heart. Engineering humor painted on the rear window. My father next to my grandmother. My father, mother and a young Matthew alongside a dock in Minnesota, before I was born. My father with his graduate school beard, holding Matthew as a baby, appearing exactly

how I had always wanted to look when I was twenty-five. Later photos, after the divorce, taken at Eagle Island. She holds a book, I hold the two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew, our grandmother tells us to look tired for the camera shot.

For two hours, we sifted through these photos searching for the right ones. We joked while we searched. “Why are there none of me as a baby?” I asked. “Because you were an ugly baby, Mark. Duh,” said Elsa. “Hey Matt, why are you sitting naked in the barbecue?” “Your mother and I were going to eat him,” my father said from another room. I felt close to my brothers and sister, then, these strange moments when we were together and needed each other. We were the ones who saw her in the hospital, who knew her. She was ours in those moments after she died, because only as a family did we understand what we had lost. From time to time, my father ventured into the room, pointing at pictures, smiling. He must have been exhausted by then, but he tried not to let it show. At the memorial, we propped up the photographic boards. The woman running the service said the Lord’s Prayer and read Psalm 23. And then Matthew stepped up to the podium.

I was nervous for him, because, like me, he did not like reading aloud in public. We both carried the same sometime-stutter. He chose an Emily Dickinson poem. “Hope,” he said in a loud clear voice, “is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul.” During the entirety of the reading, Matthew’s voice did not crack or waver. Then I stepped up to read the poem I wrote the night before she died, titled “Goodbye,” and another, which stole a line from Bob Dylan. “I’m just whispering to myself so I can’t pretend that I don’t know.” Finally, my father stood at the podium. He wore a suit and was the most well-dressed person there, I thought. For thirteen years he had been

married to my mother. Together, they raised four children. Trying to figure my father's feelings out sometimes seemed a lost cause. I didn't know how to see him or how he saw the world, and I didn't know how to ask him. There were words we would never say, about love and death and those things that make us people. I imagine him dying, sometimes, and me never knowing. The thought haunts me. I feel the pressure of his years, and am torn between staring at the picture of my life in its broadest strokes, or asking my father to paint in the darkest corners. I do want to know, I think. I just don't know how.

He and I didn't talk the way my mother and I did, we weren't open. Beyond that, though, I am afraid of what knowledge might do to me. It's easier not to know, but I try to find the courage to have that conversation with my father. I try not to imagine either of us breaking. "I think I'll explain a few of these pictures," he said. For fifteen minutes, my father went around. "You guys know Katy," he said. "She loved to bake. She just absolutely loved it. That was one of her passions in life. She was always trying to figure out how to make the perfect bagel with just the oven. And one day, I came home from work and she was shoveling ice cubes into the oven. And I was like, "Katy, what are you doing?"" he said, laughing. "And she told me, "We need steam, for the bagels." The room laughed. My father had a knack for telling stories. His was a big voice. And then, that big voice cracked and wavered and he began to cry. I missed my mother the most when I heard my father cry that day.

Those poster boards sat in the living room for several months before they were moved to the garage. I don't know where they are, now. All that we have left are the photographs, boxes upon boxes of them. The wedding album sits atop my father's

dresser. I remember Matthew's voice as he read, the way it broke the silence. "Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul." When I think about it I feel less cold in the night. When I remember it, I remember that I am here, still capable of breaking an ankle on a jog or trying my best to search my way through a song in front of the piano. My favorite picture is of my father and mother and Matthew, and a young me in a church. I don't know where it was taken, and I do not care. My mother looks like Elsa in that photograph, or Elsa looks like her. A thin face with a bright smile that I don't quite know how to describe. The photograph reminds me that we are family. My mother smiles and holds my hand up in a wave. My father wears a light brown suit and has his arm around her back. Light hits the stained glass windows behind them and illuminates the lambs, and when I look at it, I can almost believe that hope is a thing perched somewhere in my own soul, and that if I stare hard enough I might still see the boy my mother loved.

IV. EXCAVATIONS

Alongside the cracked asphalt of Ballantine Lane, quicksilver shimmered against the Boise foothills and the snake was dead. We stood by the farmer in front of his driveway and my mother spoke with him for a time while the rattler dangled off the end of a shovel. Water flowed down the cement sides of a small irrigation ditch running into his field. He assured us he had killed it. Just moved from the suburbs of Beacon, New York, we had no way of knowing. Maybe three feet long, it swung back and forth slightly echoing the slight shake in the man's hands. If he was wearing a cap he might have tipped it to my mother when he first saw her. I can't remember. My focus was on the snake, that body stretched out by gravity and hanging limp. I was accustomed to the occasional gardner snake, but this was a rattlesnake. This could coil up in the tall grass in the back of our five acres and wait for me to run past before striking. I imagine the man swinging his shovel in a great arc, one solid blow to crush its skull before the snake even realized what had happened. The farmer is a man whose name and appearance are lost to me, the way so many people become lost in memory, smoothing out until they are nothing more than charcoal outlines. Sometimes I pretend I know his life. He comes from a broken home. He did not attend high school, instead worked his way through farms. He is from the Midwest as my father is from the Midwest. He has four children and a border collie. His wife knows how to fix a car engine. They pray. This is the person I like to think of when I think of the man who killed the snake. I could give him any life, but this is the one I choose. It is an easy life to imagine, and sometimes, though there are no kernels of truth to them, we cherish such smooth impossibilities.

What I know as fact: It was summer, August. I was seven years old. My mother was 38. She was a short woman with red-brown hair who had a gentle, easy laugh. She enjoyed her walks in the low summer evenings. They gave her a chance to listen to her mysteries on her tape player and to relax from the household stresses—the boxes still unpacked, sweat dripping off her nose as she arranged her ornate box collection on the bedside dresser in the oppressive heat of our unairconditioned home. When she invited me to join her, there was an unspoken promise that I would be quiet and good. On that day, we were walking past the intersection of Ballantine and Beacon Light, about a mile from our home. We had only lived in Idaho for a few weeks. Before we reached the hills we came upon the man standing in the driveway. You couldn't tell it was a snake from a distance, but as we closed in and realized what it was, the snake was neither dead or alive. It could have done anything and I didn't know how easily things might die. I am not sure if she explained to him about our recent move to Eagle, Idaho, from Beacon, New York. She might have spun simple small talk while this man held a snake dead. Just a casual conversation like when she was at the corner store in Beacon, chatting with a neighbor about the school alphabet play where I played Black Eyed "P." She had sewn that costume for me, and didn't I look adorable. Perhaps she let a crack of light onto our lives and said a word about how my father liked to kick back with a beer when he came home from work. Perhaps she invited this farmer to come over some time.

More likely, they talked about town—the nice antique stores like Orville Jackson's, or the local haircut place, or the fact that the closest big grocery store was located five miles over in Garden City. This man was the first person we came across on our walk, this farmer with his snake. There were no cars. The road lay faded, washed

out, ancient—or perhaps not ancient. *Primitive*. The next house was a quarter of a mile away, and when we passed it, it appeared empty. Most of the houses were small, sunken into the edges of farmland. We rarely saw people during our walks. Instead, land stretching toward the hills. Upon reaching the foothills we took a right on that t-split in the road, then hiked until the asphalt turned to dirt. We headed back at the dirt. I imagine us testing the dirt road with our toes as if we were children at the edge of a lake. There were no dirt roads in Beacon, and the snake and farmer had disappeared by the time we shuffled past his property on the return walk. I wondered what you did with a dead snake. It felt wrong to simply throw it away. I don't think I ever saw the man again.

We had only lived in Idaho a month or so, yet seventeen years later this is still the one snake story I have to give. I live in Iowa now, in a college town where drunk undergrads throwing beer cans onto the lawn of my apartment building is more of a concern than wildlife. A cougar on the loose made the Top Story of the news. I haven't heard of snakes in Iowa. Our snake story itself rather dull, really, but my mother and I recited it for years after that day, either in person, or—following the hospitalizations and divorce—winding the tale over the phone. We did not exaggerate or expand. The snake was always going to be dead. It wasn't going to slither off the shovel and strike, not even in the crevices of memory. It was dead. We knew that. The story carried with us regardless. We carried it because this was a private moment between the two of us, our snake story. We carried it to remind ourselves there were snakes in our world when we were young.

Over the phone as the years passed, my mother and I told those stories which we both could remember, my voice deepening, her voice growing light on cheap wine and medication. The foothills surfaced again and again and again in our conversations. Sometimes the land was all we could come back to, like it was the only thing that remained constant between us. She missed plugging in a book on tape and walking toward the hills. The only place near her apartment where she could walk was the Boise Town Square Mall. She went there anyway, and it couldn't have been the same. I imagine her walking through the crowded mall during the holidays, trying her best to keep from thinking about everything she did not have the money to buy. She would stop in the music store and scan through albums for me. I see her bumping into teenagers and saying excuse me as she walks past the stores closing one-by-one and then I see her sitting in her Dodge Neon after the mall is dark, sitting at the wheel and thinking about the foothills and the years gone by, shutting her eyes in a near empty lot, finally looping back toward her apartment complex right past Intermountain Hospital and sitting in the dim light waiting for my phone call while I drove back from the Brookwood Subdivision after playing basketball. Exhausted, my face red and my clothes still soaked with the water from the sprinklers that hadn't been shut off, I called her.

We retold our snake story. Each time we ended up laughing and not knowing why. Once she told me I had been *so good* and patient alongside her, listening to my own books on tape. I wondered what exactly she meant by her comment. Did she feel I was good because I did not act like a child? Did she say it because I was good to walk with her? Did she say it because I was willing to retell those stories all those years later and keep them with her? It was our way of defining ourselves without looking at our lives.

We stared at who we had been. That I was nothing more than a boy in this story, somebody whose life was the world in front of his face, did not matter.

This was me as a boy: My hair was a gold-blond, and I had dimples when I smiled. At a McDonald's in Chicago while visiting extended family, I was stopped by somebody who thought I was MacCully Culkin—*Home Alone* had been released recently. When I look at pictures, I like to think my eyes were soulful and sensitive, that in them I can see who I was and who I am now and who I will be in the future. Not a shred of malice in those eyes. I was just a boy in those pictures, holding a pair of dinosaur pajamas. I am just a boy, now, older, who listens to Bob Dylan at 3:00 a.m.. After changes upon changes, more or less the same, as Simon and Garfunkel once sang. I loved dinosaurs back in those days. The first time I heard of *Jurassic Park* was from a newspaper article with a black and white picture of the Tyrannosaur in front of a jeep, staring down Alan Grant. When my mother showed it to me, I thought a rich man really had cloned dinosaurs on an island south of Costa Rica. Only after a few days did my mother explain that this was a new movie that was coming out. Directed by Steven Spielberg, starring Sam Neil and Jeff Goldblum, using elaborate special effects. The dinosaurs were crafted on computers, she told me. She was impressed by this. Computer dinosaurs. Our computer took up half the desk.

To a six year old boy, computer dinosaurs were letdown, though. There was nothing real there, nothing that I could touch. Still, they were dinosaurs, and my disappointment aside, I was excited for the film. I read Michael Crichton's book *Jurassic Park* in pieces when I was in the first grade—skipping over the larger chunks when Ian

Malcolm talk Chaos Theory, keying in whenever the dinosaurs ate people. The book was much, much more gruesome than the movie. The velociraptors didn't do their work off-screen. They split people down the middle and gnawed on intestines. As a boy, I thought that was awesome.

As a kid, you knew what a Pterosaur was, and what a Plesiosaur was, and that those were not actually dinosaurs. That velociraptors were much much smaller than the version shown in the movie, about the size of a chicken. That *Jurassic Park's* title was flawed because most of the dinosaurs shown actually lived in the Cretaceous period. I was like most boys in my dinosaur love, but I still felt smarter for knowing small facts. At a young age, I took interest in random subjects, reading book after book, eventually burning myself out and moving on to the next while my parents indulged me. A bird-watching phase—my father bought me a pair of expensive binoculars, which I used for a few weeks to search for peregrine falcons before I began spying on the neighbors. My mother bought me a pair of baby shark jaws and a shark hat after I saw *Jaws* for the first time. *Jaws* was the first time I remember thinking about blood—I huddled in the corner of the couch as the shark bit Quint in half. “It’s just ketchup, Mark,” my mother told me. I thought she was telling the truth, because she was my mother. This was when her wrists were clean, when we lived in New York, when my father’s financial record was clear. He was a young research engineer who looked vaguely like George Clooney, and we moved to Idaho when he took a job with a small company in Idaho called Santa Clara Plastics.

Before our move from New York, I asked my mother if there would be dinosaurs in this Idaho place. She patted my head. “Idaho,” she said, “has lots of rocks.” Rocks! I

was excited. The suburb in Beacon had no rocks. When we visited her at Intermountain Hospital, she asked what I was interested in at the time, and I told her about how ancient Egyptians mummified the dead, theories about the Loch Ness Monster, what new dinosaurs had been discovered while she nodded her head and laughed. I told her I still wanted to move to Montana or Mongolia—one of the places that started with “Mon”—to find my dinosaur bones. She accepted my little obsessions with a wry smile. I could set the drummer of my heart to whatever beat felt right for me, she said. It was one of her truisms that she held to as the family split. Whatever the drummer of my heart needed. On cold nights, when I am smoking on the porch listening to Neil Young, I miss hearing her remind me of that. It’s a little thing that I miss.

My mother’s nickname for our one-story house was The Red Door Ranch. According to my brothers and sister, my mother started calling it that shortly after we moved to Eagle, though I remembered her calling it the Red Brick Ranch. The bricks were red, it made sense to me. “Most bricks are red,” Elsa said, “but most doors are other colors.” Matthew and Glen supported her memory. I assume she is right about the house, and I am wrong. Elsa is usually right.

After being dropped off after school we would walk past the irrigation ditch filled with rushes—hence the name Rush Road—and run across the front yard, into the house, laughing. Maybe my siblings and I climbed the trees in the back of the field the first afternoon of our mother’s hospitalization. Maybe we leaned off the branches that hung over the irrigation ditch and dared each other to drop while our mother’s lacerations were repaired. These were things we did as children, on lazy afternoons and evenings while

the sun sank low against the foothills, while our father drove home from his job at Santa Clara Plastics, him listening to 94.9 the River with one hand on the wheel. We didn't understand what he did for a living. Matthew took a job as intern for the California start-up company where my father worked in the early 2000s, after my father was laid off from SCP, and my brother told me afterward that despite months running errands—humping boxes and making special delivery runs—he still didn't really know what our father did. As a boy, I simply knew my father was smart, instinctively knowledgeable in carving 2x4s and shaping wood, and had developed patents in his life. The patents were a secret pride and joy for me, something that I always wanted to whip out on the playground if Colt Connors was ever foolish enough to say, “My dad is the smartest dad in the world.” *Oh yeah?* I would respond. *Well my dad developed patented computer wafer cleaning solutions. You don't even know what those are, Colt.* Alas, neither Colt Connors, nor anybody else in grade school, ever made that mistake. Those kinds of things only happened in the movies.

We didn't lock our door at night, and I didn't feel threatened. The closest I came to suspicion or fear was when my father was out of the house and I flipped the television to *Dateline NBC*, or *20/20* on CBS. The specials about serial killers like the *Zodiac* were unnerving. At the end, the anchor always left the viewer with a message to the effect of, “This killer would be older now. Perhaps you know them. Perhaps you've seen swatches of a bloody shirt pressed into a book. If so, give us a call.” Then, I might peer through the windows and see things in the shadows. I imagined what it might be like to see a man staring back, somebody other than my own reflection. Just a slight hiccup of confusion and then me running to the basement for the aluminum baseball bat. But there

was only me staring back, never anybody else. Still, I might lock the door after watching one of those specials, reminding myself that it was to be unlocked before my father returned home.

It was autumn in Idaho, 1995, when my mother was first hospitalized. We played in the back of the field that fall. Our five acres were overgrown with weeds and tall grass, and were bordered by irrigation ditches and low barbed wire fences. It was easy to press down the wire, jump the ditch and cross to the fields surrounding us. Because the houses were set far back from the acreage, we could wander through the low hanging branches and thick undergrowth without fear of being caught by neighbors. Following the irrigation ditch in the back as far as we could, we clung to the muddy narrow sides, occasionally sloshing through the water, mapping our way further and further back into that miniature Idaho wild beyond our house, scattering water skippers as we went. As children we felt we owned it all, even beyond the technical borders of our lot. On our own side of the fence, large oaks grew alongside the back ditch. The only kinds of trees I knew were oaks and pines, and I assumed that ours were oaks, if only because I couldn't think of what else they might be. I still like to think of them as oaks, sturdy and constant, unbending in the crack and roll of summer thunderstorms through the valley. Their branches hung over the ditches for us to climb until we could see Idaho splitting out in front of us, until we felt far from the earth and our own lives. Eagle, Idaho, was wild and open, but a safe kind of wild. From time to time, snakes and skunks surfaced through the grass, and there was a raccoon that I nicknamed Gruffles—like the chip, I told my mother, except with a “g”—that enjoyed eating the catfood in the carport, but those

occasional animals only reinforced my feeling that I was living on the edge of the civilized world, working my way toward becoming a cowboy paleontologist.

On road trips to Montana and Wyoming as a boy, I collected travel brochures at rest stops and local diners. *You'll Never Forget That First Splash Off Exit 245* or *See Dinosaurs Excavated*. It was a game for me, some way to hold onto those journeys and remember. At a certain point, it just became collecting for the sake of collecting, garnering amused eye rolls from the rest of my family. "Really, Mark? More pamphlets?" After returning home, I placed the brochures in the dresser drawer in my basement bedroom. They would sit there next to my tattered jeans and dinosaur t-shirts. Over the years, the pamphlets yellowed and torn, and on one cleaning as a teenager, I stared at them briefly before tossing them into a trash bag along with a year and a half's worth of old *Entertainment Weekly* magazines. My mother had bought me the subscription for my birthday, but I accidentally renewed after the first year and knew she could not afford that. So then I canceled, and then after a moment's pause, I threw away the magazines. They represented me as a teenager, and moving off to college was supposed to change me. The pamphlets followed. Me as a boy, I suppose.

Around the time of my ninth birthday, I sat in front of a different sort of pamphlets as we waited that first night at Intermountain Hospital on the corner of Alambaugh Street. The pictures on the front showed people in various states of distress. A man holding his head as if he had a headache. A picture of clouds and a girl underneath a tree looking sad. A man throwing a pair of dice. More sad pictures. Depression. Eating Disorder. Suicidal Thoughts. Gambling Addiction. Substance

Abuse. Relationship Issues. Ten Steps. Twelve Steps. God. I stared at the pamphlets. There was really nothing else to do except wait. Maybe seeing the world's largest waterslide was no different than being depressed, I thought.

Matthew sat to my right. I wanted to lean over to him and whisper that he should take a few, as mementos. The waiting room was silent and I didn't make the joke. We took our cues from my father, who had said a few words to the receptionist in a hushed tone. As I grew up, I tried to model everything I did on my father, lowering my voice so that I might sound like him. I tricked my mother when I was a teenager, sometimes, when I answered the house phone. "Oh hi Paul," she would say, and I would respond with, "This isn't Paul, it's Mark." "You sound just like your dad, you know? Both of you so deep." She would laugh, and I would wonder if she ever did talk to my father, if when I answered and my voice sounded like him, she ever wished that he had picked up, and not me. The receptionist made a joke, my father laughed.

Everybody had a problem, those pamphlets seemed to say. Our mother had a problem. Our father spoke in an even, soothing voice when he told us about her hospitalization. It was a guarded voice that I grew to associate with him when heavy things happened. When he said "hospital," I thought he meant St. Luke's or St. Alphonsus, one of the big multi-floor operations with a helipad on the roof. A place like the one that Elsa would eventually come to work at. Thoughts of Emergency Rooms and *E.R.* type hospital drama, a young George Clooney at my mother's bedside. My father looked like George Clooney, I thought. When he said "sick," I remembered vomiting on Christmas morning, my mother forcing me to take banana flavored medicine for nausea. There were illnesses you couldn't recover from easily, I knew, things like cancer or AIDS

or Ebola (I'd seen a *Dateline NBC* special about Ebola and was especially afraid of that). No questions came to mind other than when she might return home. I was almost nine-years old and I sat back, listening to him. I trusted my father completely. If he was not afraid, and I didn't think he was, then I was not afraid. His voice was guarded, yes, but that was not the same as fear.

That night we drove to visit her, maybe at 7:00 or 7:30, pulling into the small parking lot in front of a one-story building—Intermountain Hospital. It didn't look like any hospital I had seen before. To the side lay a well-manicured green lawn and a set of basketball hoops. Through the doors, the waiting room and several couches and chairs. The walls were a pale brown. Several paintings hung on the walls. The images were peaceful, maybe of the Boise Mountains or a boat sailing on the sea. Typical waiting room pictures. There was no fish tank like at the dentist office of Dr. Courdial, and as far as I remember it, there were no toys in the waiting room, either. My father told the receptionist we were there to see Katy Lindquist. The woman smiled at us, said that we should be sure to keep our voices down as it was late and some of the patients might be trying to sleep. None of us had said a word since we'd entered the building. This was the first of many trips to hospitals, to institutions. Each time I entered with the same blank face, trying to look older than my years. She was in the hospital—but not the big hospital—and I did not know why. It was night, and even as a boy, nights were my quieter times. I wore a *Jurassic Park* t-shirt.

Depression. Eating Disorder. Suicide. Those words written in bold across the pamphlets meant nothing to me. I knew that they happened, but they were words without a human face to them. I did not know that my mother would eventually come to embody

all those things for me, that when I was teaching at Iowa fifteen years later and saw the word “depression” in a student paper, that I would think about her, think of writing a note on the side of the paper about how sadness and depression are not the same thing, that depression isn’t just a buzzword, that I knew the difference, I knew personally. Maybe at one point in time, when I was a boy, I didn’t understand, but by the time my mother died, I knew. Of course, I didn’t write this note. I was supposed to be a teacher, capital T, professional despite the Bob Dylan t-shirt I wore to class. My life wasn’t supposed to be spun out for the eighteen year old undergraduate who had just broken up with his girlfriend.

The swinging doors opened and a nurse motioned toward us. “Follow me,” she said. She smiled at us politely. Inside the main hospital the walls were a soft white. The building smelled almost unnaturally clean. We were led into another room where we would wait for our mother. Second waiting room! I wanted to joke with Matthew, but again I refrained. Five minutes passed before she appeared. When she appeared, five minutes had passed. We did not speak until she stepped inside. After other incidents, there was occasionally an IV, which she laughed off with a smile. “It’s funny to have to wheel it around,” she said. But this time, only the bandages across her wrists. Very clean, neat bandages, without a sign of blood dotting through. She was careful not to let us see too much. When she entered the room, she acted like the same person I had known my entire life—kind and gentle, with an easy smile.

I could feel the smoothness of the bandages against my back as she hugged me. They were soft and it was impossible not to notice them. If she was in pain, she made no sign of it, and I didn’t ask her. It wasn’t the time for something like that. For fifteen

minutes, she chatted with us about school—I had bought some ornithology books and wanted to go bird-watching—and we laughed and joked. We were in a strange place and our mother had bandages on her wrists, but there was nothing wrong. Whatever was happening, I thought, was something that would disappear. People get sick, people get well. Hospitals fixed what was wrong. There was no indication in my mind that those bandages and the padded slippers on her feet could become familiar to me, that my relationship would consist of telephone calls to hospitals and trying to sound like my father, always like my father, as I asked the receptionist if I could speak to Katy Lindquist, always Katy Lindquist, never “Mommy” or “my mom.” I believed sickness at its basic level was mostly temporary. Even a cut wrist would heal over, as the gash on my forehead I received as a boy in New York after running into the corner of the china cabinet while playing tag with Matthew mended. We might be left with scars—mine was one inch down the middle of my forehead, a little white sheen—but scars were indications of the past, not the future, usually not even the present.

When she stepped aside to hug my father and speak to him, Matthew, Elsa, Glen and I took our cue and played with the toys that sat on the floor. They were no different than the items that sat on the table at the dentist office. Things to keep us amused. I pushed a car into Glen’s toy dinosaur. Dinosaurs were supposed to be mine, but he took it, so I went with the car, convinced it was my battle to win. I made the car fly. Glen told me I was cheating. I made the car fly again. As we argued about flying cars, a nurse walked in and we set our toys down. It was time for our mother to get some sleep, the nurse said gently. We nodded. A firm nod seemed to be an adult acknowledgment of the gravity of that hospital world, though I still held a little Matchbox car. A part of me

wanted to protect Elsa and Glen, as if a nod might be enough to let them see that I would be there for them. I did not think in such terms as a child, exactly, but I felt it strongly, this sense that somebody needed to look after my younger siblings and that I was the second oldest. One by one, we said our goodbyes. I was the last to hug her that night. I told her to get well soon. That's what you told people in hospitals. All of the cards Matthew received when he was in the hospital in New York for a blood ailment said the same thing. She smiled at me and said in a quiet voice, "I'm not sick." The words just sat there. I did not know what to say. I said nothing. She kissed me on the forehead. She disappeared through the doors.

Intermountain Hospital's website lists criteria for Inpatient Acute Psychiatric Services. A person must meet one of the following to be admitted to the program: A recent suicide attempt. Current "real and present danger" suicide ideation. Recent history of substantial self-mutilation or other self-endangering behavior. Assaultive threats or behavior have occurred and there is a clear risk of escalation or repetition of this behavior in the near future. Disordered, psychotic or bizarre behavior such that the patient cannot function in everyday activities. Severe depression with functional impairment. Severe anxiety with functional impairment. A need for medically supervised detoxification for alcohol and/or drugs. Addictive behaviors and/or chemical dependency which cannot be treated on an outpatient basis. A need for inpatient medication stabilization due to history of severe side effects from psychotropic medications or the failure of outpatient medication management.

Somewhere in that list of basic clinical terms, between suicide attempts and psychotropic medications, was my mother, who lay in a hospital bed reading a mystery as we drove home. She had assured me that she was not sick. It wasn't like that, she seemed to be saying, though now, I do not know if she was saying that she wasn't sick, or simply that she wasn't the kind of sick that I was thinking of, that it was different. There was no explanation either way, only bandages and a hospital gown and those three words, "I'm not sick." She did not seem ill as I knew it, but neither did she come home the next day or the day after that or the day after that. I cannot remember anticipating her return, though I must have—I must have gazed from a tree branch expecting her to be standing in the kitchen kneading the bread dough she bought from the King Arthur Baking Company. Sometimes, we baked with her. She let us make pretzels. Mine was in the shape of an "M," so that everybody would know it was mine. Seeing the empty kitchen must have been disappointing.

She was still a person who lived with us, who cooked our meals, who read to us at night. And then she was gone. Several times a week, we visited after my father's work shift ended. Each time we drove home, it was in the dark. We didn't speak in the car. We did not discuss our mother. The mood was not sadness, yet, I don't think, not during that first hospitalization and visits. As would be the case for the rest of our mother's life, I did not discuss her ailment or hospitalization with my siblings or father. At the time, I believed in the temporary nature of hospitals. She was not sick. And later as a teenager, I did not know what good exploring my feelings could do. Later as an adult, I would down vodka and diet root beer and break down, crying, drunkenly talking about my mother's death for an hour with my best friend Thor, and when he suggested I stop

drinking, I would begin to scream obscenities at him and tell him that he had a family and I didn't, that he didn't care, and when he eventually had to kick me out of his apartment, I would stumble down the street letting out screams, as loud as I could—he could hear me back at his apartment as I was down the road—and then text him that she was not out there, that she was dead, that nothing could change that. I was twenty-five, and when I spoke with him in the morning, I tried to make a joke, but his voice was hollow and scared. I had not talked about it with anybody in years, not family or the few friends that stayed in my life, not my girlfriend. The closest I ever came was what I wrote for classes in college, long essays about my family history. After workshops, I would joke that it felt like a good therapy session, and then I would walk back to my apartment alone and cry.

Our mother was in the hospital, a hospital, any hospital. Intermountain Hospital, State Hospital South, a hospital. I was convinced that talking would not change that, that it would only confirm that there was nothing I could do. Worse, talking might reveal that I was less strong or certain than my stoic blankness was meant to convey. During my last year at the University of Idaho, my on-again off-again girlfriend Sarah would ask me what was wrong when I watched movies—I looked like a man deep in thought, or like death. I hated it when people said things like that to me in my moments of quietness. I was self-conscious about it, this default look of mine. I didn't mean to look sad. It wasn't fair for people to ask what I was afraid of, I thought, even if they had the best intentions. I wasn't afraid of anything, I wanted to say. That was the point.

In particular, I didn't want my father to worry about me or see my vulnerability. His wife was hurting. What happened was beyond me, I reasoned. What happened

simply happened, like we were one of those coins spiraling on a cone in the mall. My father and mother were both thirty-eight. Matthew was eleven. I was nine. Elsa was seven. Glen was five. I read books about dinosaurs, tossed leaves, once tossed my cat Crazyhorse off the branch of an oak to see if he would land on his feet (he did not), shimmied up one of the three pine trees in the front yard. The snow fell. She did not return home, or maybe she did. Those early hospitalizations did not last for months. When I spoke with my father at the age of 25, I talked about writing, how the hospitals held a place in some of my most vivid memories from my childhood, but his response surprised me. She wasn't always there, he said. She wasn't always missing. I think I feel those absences more now because she is really gone. There are days I want to call her and give her my review of Bruce Springsteen's latest album or tell her about how much I love my students, but I can't. The absence is permanent, and it colors my memories. It must. In those early days, before her hospitalizations were truly routine, I listened to Christmas carols—the first music I can truly remember loving—these melancholy hymns about finding a way.

At school my friends and I explored the back field near Eagle Elementary during recess. We played Wall Ball, a game where we took a rubber ball, bounced it against the wall, and tried to hit the other kids as hard as we could. Wall Ball could leave welts if it was done right. In the fourth grade I developed a crush on Allison Barber. I recruited my best friend Matt Henretty to spy on Allison and bring back information. Talking to her myself was not an option—I was going to marry Allison and we would move to Montana and have three children. I would be rich, somehow, and at my wedding, my mother

would dance with me and people would take pictures. Allison could not know any of this, though, and I was afraid my puppy love might show on my face. I imagined Matt hiding in the bushes and jotting down notes, but perhaps he simply asked her upfront while I tried to break somebody's arm in Wall Ball. After a week, he returned with two tidbits. Her favorite food was chicken pot pie. She had a dog named Eggo, like the waffle. I did not know how to use this information, but I gave him one of the Oreos from my lunch as a token of appreciation. He later told me that he developed a crush on her during his spying. That was not part of the plan.

Matt was one of my few friends, though. He was a strange kid to me, one of those kids who lived in the suburbs, rather than out on the land as I did. In the fourth grade, he was wearing a tie on the playground and I asked him why. "It has pool balls on it," he said, as if that explained everything. He was my friend after that day. I forgave him for his crush on Allison, because I understood in that moment the power of love. Of course he would feel woozy around Allison. No boy could resist somebody who had a dog named Eggo. "Matt," I told him, "Don't tell anybody this, but I'm going to marry that girl." The closest I came was asking her to a dance in middle school while the two of us dissected a rose. By high school, we ran in different circles—she fit in with the popular kids, and I spent my time with Matt, PK, and Jared, staying up late watching movies like *Gladiator* and thinking about the best way to make glass shatter when we threw beer bottles against the wall.

After Matt's scouting report on Allison, I invited him over to play *Echo the Dolphin* on Matthew's Sega Genesis. When he and I stepped off the school bus, my mother was in the hospital, my father was at work. He did not ask about either. I did not

think to tell him about the pamphlets or the sound the paper shoes made on the floor or what it was like to have to call the hospital and try to sound old. Those were private moments to me that he would not understand. I was afraid he would ask what was wrong with her. I didn't know how to answer that. She said she wasn't sick, which I might or might not have still believed. After Matt left, I walked to the back of the field and waited for my father to return home.

In the times when I was alone in the field, I crafted romantic tales about noble adventurers. Versions of myself, older and bearded, escaping burning buildings and rescuing older versions of girls like Allison. The heroes in my mind were always good, pure people. They didn't drink or smoke, and they only swore when they were confronting my villains. Damn you, scoundrel, let her go or you shall face my gun. I waved large sticks at the trees. From the good climbing oak in the back, our home appeared in miniature. We could look out across the field and see our father pull into the driveway. The front yard was an expanse of dirt and dead grass. We had one of the barest front yards in the area. When she was home, my mother and I looked for worse during our walks toward the foothills. It was a game we played. Find the yard with less grass than our own. We couldn't. But I loved our home for that barren yard, for the overgrown field. There was wilderness for a child living in that house. There was no room to roam back in Beacon, where I lived until I was seven. Nothing to be discovered. It was the same as every yard on our block. At certain points my siblings and I each trekked to the field alone. For me, it was to feel like my own person, apart and unique, to make up these stories and live inside my own universe, if only until I was called in for dinner. Thoughts of the hospital vanished under the branches of the field. I did not

wonder when my mother would return or what was wrong with her while I was out there. Those five acres separated me from that. There was only the land, then, swallowing me. A very real sense that I was just a dot on the expanse, that to sit in the trees meant invisibility. That same sense manifested itself when I walked through the field at night under the stars. The city lights were barely visible in the distance, just a soft orange glow off to the north. A horse neighed from a distant field, twigs cracked under my feet. I first believed in God while my mother was in the hospital and I was walking barefoot down Rush Road under that aching deep sky.

On and off, I prayed that my mother be released. The next day, whenever the next day happened to be, she was not home, and again I called the hospital and asked for Katy Lindquist. What was my relationship with her, the receptionist asked. She's my mom, I said, and when I said that, I couldn't pretend to sound old. She was my mom. She was Mommy. One moment, please. She was still sick but not sick. Whatever needed to happen had to happen within her, and that while God might be able to split the sea and raise the dead, He could do nothing for her, because she did not even know she was sick. I did not feel bitter toward God. I did not think anybody, not even the creator of the universe, had any sway over my mother. We were all good people, I thought. We could not change ourselves.

That sick/not sick was scientific, it was in the genes, it was, as a doctor explained to us after one visit, "chemical." The man behind the desk wore a white jacket. He smiled at us. He asked how old we were and how we liked school. We answered politely. "I like writing," I said, referring to a story I had just written in which a paleontologist in Mongolia was ambushed by soldiers. The paleontologists in my stories

were all badassess. He nodded, smiled again. “That’s good, that’s good.” When he described the treatment our mother was begin given, he described giving her medications “to balance things out.” I don’t remember most of what he said, but it would be the only time a doctor would explain our mother’s situation to us. I am frustrated that I cannot remember what the doctor said beyond those generalities. My father later told me that her diagnosis changed from doctor to doctor, and that she was taking fifteen to twenty prescriptions a day.

Every day, I took the bus to school. I came home and played *Sonic the Hedgehog* on the Sega Genesis. Repetitions. By days, months, eventually years I was older. She had come home several times, she had left several times. Her wrists healed, but the scars lasted, fading to white, crisscrossing her wrists like a map of her past. She was never without the scars after 1995. The thought of her potentially dying had not entered my mind. That would take longer to work on me. At the age of nine I had no concept of death at all. I did not think of my parents as old or young, merely as my parents. Mommy with her quiet laugh and her love of books, Daddy with his rueful sarcasm and his workshop barn. There was no thought of Mommy in the hospital because of a substantial attempt at self-mutilation and recent suicidal ideations and Daddy working a job and raising four children on his own while trying to allow us to do what normal kids did as he slipped \$65,000 into debt after the health insurance failed to cover for her.

After the visit with the doctor, my father drove us to KB Toys in the Town Square Mall. We spent an hour playing with Nerf guns and bouncy balls while he shopped for clothes, then we migrated to the bookstore. When she was with us, she locked the door to

the bedroom and read book after book. She had been called “Ms. Bookworm” growing up. Her books were mostly mysteries, occasionally John Grisham or Stephen King thrillers. Her favorites, by far, were in the Sue Grafton mysteries in the “Alphabet Series.” *A is for Alibi*, *I is for Innocent*, and on down the line. In a way, they’re books that don’t end. “I don’t see how she’ll be able to reach the end of the alphabet,” my mother said. “What could Z be for?” “Zebra,” I said. “You are a joker, Marcus Lindquist.” Though my mother has been dead for four years, Grafton still hasn’t finished the series—she has stated that the final book will be titled *Z is for Zero*, but it has not been written as of yet and there is no set release date. For some reason, I like to think that she will never finish it. I don’t like the idea of things ending. Matthew, Elsa, Glen and I read our own ongoing tales in the *Goosebumps* series. We filled closets with those R. L. Stine books. *The Werewolf of Fever Bay*, *Night of the Living Dummy*, *Deep Trouble*.

Our father was different. His reading mostly consisted of technical manuals and how-to books. His world was filled with the concrete logic that was supposed to lead to an end, though he often started projects which he never finished—spending hours in the evening sanding boards and drawing lines with a pencil, crafting half-finished dressers and skeletons of couches which were destined to gather sawdust as he came up with a new project idea. Those were our father’s obsessions. In winter, he worked beside a small space heater as the snow fell outside, as my siblings and I read our *Goosebumps*. Sometimes, I ventured into the barn to watch him work. He smoked a cigar. A twelve-inch television was tuned to PBS. He wore a hat with ear flaps. His face was scruffy. And he was calm. I can see why he liked the barn—it was a space that was his, in the

same way I felt the back of the field was mine. In the barn, there were no clocks. He worked on the project's time. He spoke slowly, carefully, thinking about his words when I asked questions.

“How do you know so much about cars? I don't know a thing about cars. Did you read books?”

He picks up a board and turns it on its side. After several moments, I think he might not have heard me—he has this habit after certain questions where he continues what he's working on for five to ten seconds before he talks—but then he speaks. “I picked it up over time, here and there. It's not like it was just in my head. I've been alive a while.”

“You're not old,” I say.

He smirks and slides the board through the band saw. “Thanks.” He asks me for a pencil so that he can mark off where to cut next. “It's like with anything. You don't just have it at first. It takes time.”

It was hard for me to believe. He seemed to simply *know* things. He knew how to craft furniture, and how to set-up a sprinkler system. He knew where the irrigation water flowed and which owners were water hogs who took more than their share. He could stare at those math problems that took me hours to figure out and could sketch out a solution without thinking. I knew he was older than me, and that of course he should be able to solve a simple math problem, but that did not make it any less fascinating. Here was a man who *knew* things. And though he tried, he could never really explain how he did it or how he knew. Yet for all of his degrees, his patents, his complicated engineering

work which I did not understand, my mother was in the hospital, and even my father did not know what was to be done about that.

I realized later, when I was older and she was no longer living, that my father did not know how to raise us—I do not mean that in a mean way or a disparaging way. He was married to a woman who was hospitalized after cutting her wrists, who was eventually sent to the state hospital in Blackfoot, Idaho, to be institutionalized until the doctors could figure her brain out. There was no how-to guide to show him what his next move should be or where he should draw his lines to make it right. He was married to my mother, and together they had begun their lives in Idaho with four young children, and then she hurt herself and was hospitalized. Beyond that, a foreseeable end was difficult to imagine. Our existences weren't chairs or couches, which would eventually be shellacked and fit for the living room. A life being lived isn't so easily planned or fixable. When I remember my father out in his barn, working in the dark winter months, I remember that I was a boy, and that after my mother broke, my father could only try to keep my siblings and I as close to the heater as possible, and hope that eventually the sun would break through and we might come out the other side older and alive.

It was October of 2011 as I spoke with my father. Me lying on the futon, asking, "Did she commit suicide?" I was supposed to be a man by then, my father an older man. We sounded like each other.

"That's what the coroner's report said. But I take some issue with it. I think she felt like she was in a crisis. She felt like she had nowhere to turn."

"Uh huh," I said.

“Like I said, she had all these medications from over the course of years, because she kept getting different diagnoses and she would get new meds, and she wouldn’t throw away the old ones. I think she maybe started playing around with dosages, trying to get herself right. She had nowhere else to turn. Her mind was impaired, it spiraled out of control, but I don’t think she was trying to kill herself. The coroner said overdose. I don’t know. I don’t think she was trying to kill herself.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said. “But nobody told me.” Then, after a short silence, “I feel like I’ve written this stuff a million times. It’s still hard to do. I don’t know how to do it.”

That was the truth. I did not know how to write it or to make our lives real. I could not remember my mother’s favorite color or which books she listened to on tape while we walked into the foothills when I was a boy. I cannot even remember her phone number or what we spoke about. I do not know how often my father cried, or if he still cried.

“You know you can call me whenever you need to, Mark. We miss you.”

“Thanks again. I’ll take care of myself,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I waited for him to hang up, same as I waited for my mother to hang up after our last phone conversation. I did not want to let them go. Five minutes after, I stepped onto the porch to smoke a cigarette. *It’s a bad habit, Mommy, I know. I just need it when I’m writing.* The sky was clear as I flipped through my music—something I could not do after my mother died. As each song came on, I was wanted something that felt right. The Beatles did not, Hendrix did not, The Gaslight Anthem did not. Bob Dylan did not,

either. I didn't know what I was looking for. I found Neil Young and put on "Harvest." In the cool Iowa night, his voice rang hard against a shuffling acoustic guitar and soft drumbeat. I imagined my father opening a file cabinet he had not opened in years, looking for the folders and binders that contained the financial information. The song ended. Just a bunch of bills, he said. I pressed repeat. My hands shook. The song replayed four times in a row before I walked back into my apartment. I hit the wall as hard as I could, like that would change everything. My hand hurt. I slept. Two days later, a box arrived from my father filled with two binders and two folders. I would turn twenty-five later that week.

My father sits in his house in Eagle, smoking cigars and watching PBS and *King Kong* with Elsa. I struggle when I think about calling him. I am afraid that after he hangs up, he might weep. I do not want to make my father sad. I do not want Elsa to see him sad or to understand why I am calling. I do not want to be the son who digs up the bones of the past, though I also feel it is my duty to do so, that if I cannot find some kind of beauty in our own lives, even the darkest parts, then I will be a failure. I do not want him to think about the past, though sometimes it seems that the past is all that I think about, that it consumes me, that when I stare in the mirror I can see the boy in the trees. That I am still the boy in the trees, feeling as though I am not close enough to the earth.

I'm years removed from my childhood, now, but I still like to think up stories when I fall asleep. When I was young, I pitied other people, who thought about their own lives before they drifted into dreams. Always stories for me, like little movies I could rest to. All of these gallant heroes pushing onward in their lives. They were me, in some sense, but they were better than me. They were people I could believe in and trust. After

the divorce, the characters in my stories were no longer quite so noble. They thought too much. They sometimes stole or hurt others in order to further their lives. The women in my stories could not understand the men, because the men did not know how to speak or show their feelings. And the stories weren't adventures—no more searches for gold or epic fights atop dams over love. There were no lines between the good and the bad. By my 21st birthday, close to four months after my mother killed herself, there was only one story: An unconscious man with a badly broken leg washes up on a frozen riverbank while another man fishes. The fisherman takes the body to his wife and their cabin home. She nurses the man back to life. And, though the fisherman and the woman do not know why, the man, who cannot walk, urges them that the three must leave or something bad will happen. Late one night, people come to the house. The man with the broken leg hides. The woman covers for him. The three—this mysterious man, the fisherman and the woman—crawl out a window and down to the river. They pack a tent, some supplies, and load everything onto a raft. They leave. The man does not tell them where they are going, and he is quiet, and he is sad and for the rest of the story, he stares off into the dark at night because he is not really there.

There is one other story I think of, but not but not like the others. This one is about my father. I lay in bed and imagine the phone ringing beside me. Elsa would be calling to tell me there had been a heart attack, or a car crash, that he was dead. For the summer, alone in Iowa, I thought about this one almost every night. Sometimes I thought about the fact that if he died, he would never tell me my mother's own story, that it would be lost to their deaths unwritten, and I would be forced to say only that I never understood either of them, that I loved them but did not understand. I hoped that

speaking to my father would change this, but at night, I still think about how he is lying in bed in Idaho, and how there are years between us that I will never touch. I try to go back to my good story, the one about the fisherman and following the river. When I am thinking too much about my father, I tell myself that it is time for the “old reliable,” and most nights, it works, and I can think about people who do not exist except in my mind. Sometimes, the old reliable does not work, though, and I go back to thinking about my father. The thoughts persist, pounding in my head, that he will die in an hour, or a day, or a week, or a month, or a year. It is arithmetic. He is graying in the beard, and he will die. These are facts. I think I tell myself these stories about my father so that if the time comes, I will not cry, though I know I am fooling myself.

V. PLACES IN-BETWEEN

February in Idaho saw inversions settling in the valley, windless days of stagnant air. For several weeks the Boise Mountains were warmer than the valley. You could look down from Bogus Basin Ski Resort and see Boise clouded with smog. These inversions usually did not last more than two weeks, but when they hit, hoarfrost covered the trees, the telephone poles, basketball hoop, and the cemetery where my mother was buried. In the year and a half since her death, I had graduated from the University of Idaho and moved back home with my father. In those eerie inversion weeks that winter, it sometimes felt like we were the only two people left on earth. Everybody else gone missing in the overcast gloom, except for my father and me, him sitting on the couch watch PBS, me in the storage room following basketball games and illegally downloading music. In the restlessness of waiting for my father to return home from work I drove to Brookwood Subdivision to shoot basketball. A flap of the leather slowly peeled off, and the ball lost air quickly, but I didn't buy another one. First shots broke the frost off the rim. The news warned against outside activity, especially for the elderly and the very young, and I was neither. I was 22-years old and had already broken an ankle jogging. Tough guy, me. My lungs felt heavy, but I played until my hands grew red and numb. Basketball shorts and gray t-shirts with holes in the armpits—the wear and tear of a technically unsound jump shot.

I liked to imagine the neighbors watching me from the house next to the court. A boy and a girl lived there, a mom and a dad, a dog. They drove a blue SUV. Sometimes I forgot about the kids and swore loudly after a string of missed shots. *You're a stupid fuck. Make something of yourself. Oh big guy, keep wasting your time.* I wanted to fight

somebody, wanted to talk to somebody, wanted somebody. Mostly, when I was done playing, I wanted to apologize to the family next door for my mouth. If the father ever approached me with his arms crossed, I would look toward my feet, shake my head sadly, and tell him that I was a good kid, really, that times had been tough recently. There was this thing with my mother two summers ago, I wanted to say. He would believe me. I might look like the saddest guy on earth.

And the way I saw it in my head, they thought about inviting me over for dinner. *You must be hungry, we always see you here*, they might say. *It's Taco Night, and we always make too much. Our oldest is in college. You would like him.* They would ask if my mother and father worried about me. No, I would say, my mother is no longer here to worry about me. And like my grandmother will tell me a few months from now, who knows what happens after you die. Maybe you float around up there, or maybe you don't, and maybe the part of you that used to worry doesn't translate after the heart stops beating. *She's not here, I mean, I would say as I ask for someone to pass me the gallon of milk. And your father?* Yes, I know he worries about me. *Have you ever thought of talking to him?* Sure. We all think things like that. *Will you?* We aren't those kind of people. I am scared of him, because I know what I lost but I don't know about him. I don't know if he lost her after the first hospitalization, after her institutionalization in Blackfoot, after the divorce, after her death. I don't know. And that is what I would say—I just don't know, and everybody at the table would stare at me as if I had something more.

The dinner was conjured in the moments that the sweat dripped from my forehead to the ground, when nobody passed. The windows fogged up when I opened the door.

Just five miles across the valley lay the cemetery. Seeing her grave was an option, but her headstone was not her, and my father would be returning home. As I corkscrewed through the parking lot, the blue SUV passed me. I waved slightly to the man on his way back to his children.

Some time between 5:30 and 6:00 on the weekdays, my father pulled into the driveway. If the clock passed 6:00, I worried. My first thought was a car crash, or sometimes a heart attack. Maybe it would flash on the news during Jeopardy! without me realizing it was him. I had a phone call order. I would call Matthew first, then Glen, then Elsa. Elsa would be the hardest call. I promised God I would look after my sister after my mother died. When he did return home, I felt like a bad person for thinking that way. Whose first thought is that their father is dead, I asked myself as I leaned back on a black leather chair listening to Tom Waits. My father stuck his head through the doorway to the storage room. He made a yelping noise to get my attention. I startled, he smiled, I took one earbud out, letting the music play in the other.

“Hey Dad O,” I said. He asked me about what I had done that day. Basketball, tried to write, just listened to Bob Dylan. No, I didn’t hear back from any jobs. Yes, I’m trying. Really. I am. It’s February, the grad schools should start getting back to me. What about Mexican, he asked. Sometimes when he came home, he was too tired to cook. We walked up Cobblestone Lane toward State Street. Ours was a gravel drive, but we no longer lived on the open land from the Red Door Ranch. He sold that house for \$700,000 my freshman year of college, after his near-marriage to Kathy. The house on Cobblestone held a small yard and a work shed in the back. During the move, my father transferred his tools from the barn to that shed. It is in that shed that my father

disappeared after we returned home from discovering my mother's body. He stayed in the shed for twenty minutes, forty minutes, an hour, I do not know. I do not know if he cried.

My mother had been dead for six months as my father and I walked into town. We didn't discuss it, we were not men who talked about the hard past. We were not men who talked that way. The local Mexican restaurant, Casa Mexico, was mostly empty, and we sat in a booth off to the side. For five minutes, neither of us spoke. We stared at our menus, though both of us knew what we were planning on ordering. It was nice to have a menu in front of me, same as it was to be able to stare at a TV when I would go out to bars with friends after my move to Iowa. These things were excuses so that I didn't have to talk. The waiter brought out a bowl of chips and took our orders. As we dipped into the salsa my father looked off to the side of each other. I wished I could talk to him like I could with my mother—just make jokes about the bad players the Yankees had signed and tell him about the music I was listening to—but he and I were different men, or too much the same, in the way that we simply sat across from each other and stared vacantly into the glass.

“So I'm reading this book,” I said, feeling inexplicably nervous. My father looked up. “It's about a boy who grows up on a ranch in Wyoming, who's around horses all the time. It reminds me of you.”

“You know my dad didn't let me have any animals in the house. We never had pets,” he said. He sounded annoyed, but I knew he wasn't. That was just my father's voice, sometimes.

“Oh,” I said, though I wasn’t actually surprised. My father had grown up in suburban Chicago, had been a championship swimmer in high school and loved sailing, fishing, and camping, but he had never been an animal person. On Glen’s 19th birthday, a friend gave him a kitten. Glen laughed about this with Elsa and me. “I tried to tell them that Dad O wouldn’t let me keep it, but they gave it to me anyway.” My father’s reaction was a sort of grunting noise, and then he said, “You can’t keep it, Glen. They live too long.”

Sitting in the Mexican restaurant, I couldn’t articulate what I meant, about the boy being like my father, about the book reminding me of my father. I wanted to say something about how both the narrator and my father shared this generous heart, but I did not believe my father would understand. It would have been a sentimental thing to say, and he would have asked more, and then I would have had to bring up my mother’s absence during my childhood and how I respected him for guiding us through. When we were sitting in the funeral parlor planning my mother’s memorial, the woman running the service told us that times would be hard ahead, but that we’d get through it as a family. Every one of us would reach a moment when we would break down and need to comfort others. We shouldn’t feel embarrassed about crying or asking for hugs. All of us nodded. What she told us meshed with what I thought it meant to lose a loved one. We might talk about the situation as a family, perhaps with an openness that we did not have when my mother was alive. Why did we love her? What was it that made our relationship with her worth the struggle? Where would we move from that evening in southwestern Idaho as my father, sister and I stood upon the steps and the sirens rose?

People were supposed to change after a death. I was supposed to change. When family came to Moscow for my graduation a year and a half after my mother's death, and there was no mention of Matthew's graduation or our mother's visit to Moscow two years before. Honestly, I didn't think of it, either. When the speaker asked for a moment of silence for those we had lost, my mother came to mind, but nobody in that auditorium outside of my family kept the silence for her. Of all the people who had passed away that year, I only knew the one. Snow blanketed the streets that night. As I moved out, I sold my mother's old DVD player to my suitemates for \$75. It played movies, nothing more than that. I would say that I stopped looking for hidden messages from her, but that wouldn't be true. When the snow fell in that moment of silence, I thought she was saying something, even if I didn't know what. "Good work, Mark! Here is snow!" Something.

The inversion set in shortly after my return. As with the summer months prior to my mother's death, there was no girl on the street corner waiting for me to whisk her away. There was only me, working my way back home to a downward acoustic strum.

"I just mean with you and the horses," I said, though that was not what I meant at all. My father gave one of his nods and a small smile.

We ate our food and settled on topics of small talk. Basketball and the start of spring training. My father cared about neither, but he knew I loved sports, and he tried. I asked about his teaching and research group at Boise State. He had been laid off from Micron three days after my mother died, and as we sat in the living room crying, he said that he knew we were going through a hard time, that our mother had done so much to raise us when we were young that we didn't even know about. That living room meeting was the closest we ever came to the cathartic feeling I had been expecting. Crying until

you feel incapable of crying. After several weeks, perhaps a month, he began working at the university lab. Micron to BSU was a monetary step down, but my father seemed happy to coordinate with grad students regarding computer research and wafer cleansing. I imagine it brought him memories of his own graduate school days, working on his thesis at Northwestern and drinking at night. There was something comfortable for him to be back in that environment. In the coming year, I would begin teaching classes at Iowa, and sometimes the two of us talked about our students, the way we graded, what it was like to stand in front of a room talking. We both feared the dead fish look that glazed over a room of students during an afternoon lecture. My classes were incoming freshman, his upperclassman looking for engineering credits, but we both had stand up there and think of something to say.

But that would be half a year later, when I finally moved away from Idaho. Sitting in that Mexican restaurant, I couldn't understand him. There was little common ground with my father beyond our blood. It wasn't that I didn't care, it was that we were only talking because we were supposed to talk. When we finished with dinner, my father paid and I thanked him for the food. He tried. Our feet crunched on the gravel under a starless sky as we walked home. We had lived on Cobblestone Lane for three years, but my mother had not come up with a cute name for it before she died. It was not The Red Door Ranch. It was simply where we lived. Two hours later, he stuck his head into my room, "Movie?" and I nodded. We watched film after film while I lived with him for those months, both of us lying alone in the dark under an inverted sky. His favorite was *The Last Samurai*, in which Tom Cruise's western gunslinger was captured by the

Samurai of Japan and learned their ways. We laughed together, not speaking, but at least in the same room watching the arrows fly.

My father did not grow up with animals, did not particularly have an affinity for pets, but when I was ten or eleven he bought a border-collie. Her name was Allegro, a musical name meaning fast. That was the piano player in my father coming out. When he bought her, she was a mere pup, scrambling through the brush in the field. Those five acres must have seemed like the world to that dog, as they did to my siblings and me. As she grew older, she lived up to her name, nimbly racing about after anything that moved. Border-collies are shepherders, and Allegro enjoyed chasing the horses and my siblings. She once tracked down a slower car outside the Red Door Ranch and attempted to bite a tire, which sent her sprawled out to the side of the irrigation ditch. With a shake of the head, she was back to her feet. Her bite was strong and ripped your clothing if you ran, but I do not remember her drawing blood. Perhaps she was smart enough to know that blood was a bad thing. Seeing her race after Glen was a thing of beauty to me, because he was my baby brother and if I was not allowed to push him, at least the dog could do the work for me.

I think my father liked the idea of filling out the acreage with animals, and later, with his little engineering feats—a sprinkler system here, a freshly dug pond there. Perhaps he hoped Allegro would act as a sort of leveling mechanism for the upheavals in the family. Him at work, our mother lying in a hospital bed, but Allegro, constant on the prowl for the next moving target. When I was twelve, she chased our neighbor, Aaron, after he stepped off the school bus. Matthew had been good friends with Aaron's brother

Patrick when he was younger, and we spent a lot of time with the Lusk kids after we moved to Idaho. While sword-fighting with sticks, Matthew allegedly poked Patrick in the eye. Intentional or not, the friendship ended there. A year later, Allegro hit. Aaron's mother called my father and told him they were concerned about this dog "running free." Afterward, my siblings and I muttered about how the incident wasn't Allegro's fault. It was those damn Lusks again, trying to get back at Matthew for the stick incident. In front of our father, we didn't swear, though. We never did. Punishing Allegro was pointless in our minds. You cannot help your own nature.

But our father needed to do something to placate the neighbors. He tried electric dog collars and fences, before finally setting on a chain-link cage inside the shed where we kept the hay. When we walked in to feed the horses, she stuck her nose through the links and whined at us. If a car pulled into the gravel drive, Allegro jumped up to see it. She could have jumped out if the fence had not reached the ceiling. If somebody came from the big city (a term that encompassed almost every place larger than the 200,000 people of Boise in my mind), they would see a small black and white dog trapped in a shed, her eyes a beautiful brown, her feet skittering on concrete next to a metal water dish.

It saddened me to see her reduced to a cube, but I didn't think about my mother confined to a hospital room. Both of them "institutionalized" beyond their own control. I was too young to draw connections like that. The dog and my mother were separate beings, living in their own worlds. It came down to control and nature, things I sensed only in the broadest terms. My mother couldn't control her thoughts, but somewhere in those days of razorblades on her wrists, she must have realized that there was one thing

she could control—whether she lived or died. We all, she might have reasoned, could control that. I think she tried very hard. I think for as long as she could, she tried to remember that living each day was a conscious choice, until finally, she couldn't stop her own nature. It's hard for me to think of my mother in such basic terms as that. It's hard for me to think about how predetermined it sometimes seems. Though we brought Allegro to Blackfoot on our first journey, my mother would never meet her.

Allegro just wanted to be free to run down the small living specks in the world. That was her instinct, blunted by a choice complaint and a metal cage. She was sold to a farmer in the foothills when I a teenager. My father drove her out there early one morning. I remember traveling with him, but that memory might exist only because I like to believe in goodbyes. I could have driven with him and seen her off, or I could have stayed home, but either way, we didn't see her again. I imagine she lived out her days happily, with horses or sheep to herd and acres of foothill land on which to romp, and in her older days lay in front of a fireplace with a shaggy dog memory of a slow, easily rounded-up boy named Glen.

Though my father bought Allegro, she was our family dog more than she was our father's. I came to think of the horses as an extension of him instead. When I think of my father, he is standing alongside them, a pair of boots on his feet and a cowboy hat on his head. The sun cuts through the morning fog in the field as he stands near the edge of the fence waving his hands and gently herding the horses toward the corral. After they are in, he walks slowly to the corral gate and wipes his brow. He is a steady man out there in the field. Matthew and I journeyed along with him to gather the mustangs from the BLM on a chilly morning in 1995. Heading out with our father in the morning made

us feel older. We drove out toward the foothills on the southern side of Boise, across the valley from Eagle. The traffic was sparse in those early hours. My father drove with one hand on the wheel, one hand balancing a cup of coffee. He could drink his coffee when it was at its hottest, something I couldn't master after I began drinking it. When my father and I went on an extended road trip to Iowa when I was 22, I marveled at his ability to down the liquid so fast. "I don't understand how you do that," I told him. "Just years, Mark. Just years of it." I didn't think I would ever find those years.

We drove a narrow foothill road past the National Center for Birds of Prey. I was in my bird watching phase. I looked for hawks. Birds of prey, raptors, like in *Jurassic Park*. I told Matthew I should have brought my binoculars. We saw several large corrals and a parking lot filled with trucks and men with hats. My father wore no hat, but he looked appropriately grizzled in his shadow of a beard. He parked and opened the door. We followed him as he spoke to a man, or several men. He asked where the horses were from, and was given answers like Montana or Wyoming or northern Idaho. The area smelled of manure, hay, and leather. Eventually, I would just think that combination smelled like horses. That was them. Hay, sawdust, cigar smoke. That was my father.

He bought Matthew and me cups of hot chocolate, and together we waited. I pretended to be interested as the men inspected the horses, but it was a fake enthusiasm, tried on to please my father. Several birds appeared in small outline in the sky. Those are hawks, I told Matthew. The red-tailed kind. He scoffed. What if they're vultures? Coming for you, Mark? I considered this and shrugged. I didn't remember reading anything about vultures in my bird books. I'm too big for a vulture to pick up, I said.

My father spoke with a man near the horses. I imagined him chasing after me if a vulture attempted to pluck me from the ground. Maybe he was fast enough to catch up.

By the end of the day, my father smiled at us and patted us on the shoulder. He had bought three horses, which he named Banjo, Presto, and Coco. The horses ran and bucked through the field on Rush Road. They were wild, truly wild, their manes flowing as they galloped, their hides quivering when we came near. If we walked toward them, they broke fast through the field, kicking up dust and clods of mud. They were my father's horses, and I loved them because they reinforced my self-identity as a rough and tumble western boy. Nobody in our old New York subdivision owned horses. For years after he bought them, my father rented training videotapes. He bought himself bridles, saddles, bits. He spent thousands of dollars to keep those horses. His horses to break, his horses to polish. Banjo was lazy and nosy, Presto was shy, and Coco liked to flatten her ears back and charge.

The wood for the corrals was heavy and splinters drove against our hands as we lifted the poles and helped him construct it. By the time we moved to Cobblestone Lane the horses had gnawed the corral down to a rickety skeleton. Sometimes they kicked my father as he tried to break them. He limped back into the house, where my mother sat him down and asked what had happened, maybe applying a warm cloth to his face while he breathed heavily, the sweat dripping down his back. She had not yet moved out. The horses and the hospitalizations came into our lives at around the same time. They were something for my father to tend to, something outside of my mother's increasingly erratic behavior or the medical bills that would begin to mount. Eventually, the horses let him close to them and as I watched out the window, he placed a strong, calloused hand

against their noses and offered a slight little nickering noise to tell them he was their friend. I remember him standing alongside Banjo for a long time, him staying close and very still, as though there was nothing else in his world.

I bought him a book of horse stories one Christmas. Elsa and Glen warned me that it would be a poor gift. “Don’t get Dad O books, Mark, it’s going to sit there developing dust.” They were correct. *Horse People* became one of our family jokes around the holidays. When I return home, it still lies on the floor of his bedroom, next to cracked CDs of Radiohead Played by Orchestra and Natalie Merchant. He was that, a horse person, not a book person. My mother was a book person who only lived with the horses for a year before she was institutionalized. Her view of them was mostly from afar, when she drove to pick us up on Sundays after the divorce. She lived alone until buying a cat from the animal shelter. She named it Pumpkin. She owned the cat for two years until one day it disappeared. She called me, worried. “I don’t know what’s happened to Pumpkin. I don’t know how she could leave.” A few days later, Pumpkin returned, cut up and mewling. She died in my mother’s apartment. The story was vague in its details, and though I could hear my mother’s fondness after Pumpkin returned, “It was like she needed to come home,” what I was stuck with was this lonely image of my mother sitting in her empty apartment, simply waiting for her cat to return.

The court documents regarding my mother’s institutionalization in December of 1997 read “In the Matter of the Mental Illness of KATHERINE LINDQUIST.” They speak of assigning her to the “least restrictive facility.” My mother, in these documents, is labeled as the Respondent. When my mother was transferred from Intermountain

Hospital to State Hospital South, in Blackfoot, Idaho, I was eleven-years old. My father called us into the living room on a gray, cold afternoon. Family Meeting was what he called these gatherings. Family Meetings rarely meant good things, we had come to discover. They were called on those days when our mother was hospitalized, or two years later, when he told us he was declaring bankruptcy. The closest we came to a happy Family Meeting was in 2003, when he became engaged to Kathy, a woman he met online and had been dating for three years.

The Blackfoot Family Meeting was short. At first, I thought my father was going to tell us that our mother was coming home, but that's not what he said. "They can only do so much for her at the current hospital. That's why she's going to Blackfoot. We all want her to get the best help she can get so she can get better and come home again," he said. He might have explained further why the move was necessary, he might not have. I don't remember. The meeting dispersed. We returned to playing *Sonic the Hedgehog*, Matthew yelling at the game as he lost his rings and drowned. My siblings and I didn't discuss what my father said afterward. We never did. There was nothing to say, or what we wanted to say was too much at that age. We reasoned, I reasoned, there would still be phone calls. It wasn't different. It wasn't. Not really. Nothing's changed. She wouldn't have been home anyway. We'll still get a Christmas tree. It might snow soon. The way I reasoned.

But it wasn't the same. Though I could call her, and though the area code was still 208, she was no longer sitting across the Boise River, a simple car trip removed from us. More often than before, there were days when I called and she couldn't talk to me. State Hospital South was a long-term facility, much more so than Intermountain Hospital.

Just because of distance, there would be no more weekly visits. Now my mother was a voice on the telephone, and as I grew older, that was where I found her most often. Phone calls to State Hospital South, phone calls to the halfway house that she was moved to at the time of the divorce, and finally, phone calls to her apartment. That her illness could not be “fixed” in Boise was worrisome, no matter how I tried to convince myself differently. I no longer believed what she said about not being sick. There was *something* wrong with her. Perhaps it was a state of being more than anything. I, too, had my own times where I wasn’t sick, but was not myself either. They came on walks along the empty ditches in the field, where I didn’t want to be around my siblings or my father. Hours passed and I’d stay there, simply thinking about who I was while Crazyhorse meowed at my feet. Climb a tree, hang from the branches. Pace back and forth as the light grows dim. And you have to return home eventually, and still she will be 250 miles to the west, without possibility of immediate return. The back of the field didn’t change the fact that she was gone. It was 250 miles either way.

When I was eleven, she had not lived with us for an extended period of time. The average age of a resident at State Hospital South is 69 years old. My mother was 42 when she was admitted in 1997. It’s hard for me to think about how young she was, how many months and years were spent removed from her family as she lay in hospital beds and sat in group therapy sessions. Her youngest child, Glen, was born in 1991, and only six years later, she was institutionalized. I was old enough to conceptualize my mother as a person, if barely, but Glen was only six at the time of her institutionalization. The absence I felt might have been more palpable, but for Glen, there was a complete vacuum. By the time he was old enough to know her, she had already been in and out of

hospitals for years. We owned a dog, three horses, seven cats. The heroes I crafted in my stories were good, decent people. They had grown quieter as I entered middle school, though. Less prone to speeches and gallantry. Oftentimes, they spent their time walking across abandoned stretches of snowcapped mountain land, as I walked the back of the field calling for Crazyhorse and running along the irrigation ditches empty of water as the winter set in. The ditches covered with frost. Then, they filled with snow. Summer seemed a long way off.

That December, my father drove us into the mountains with a friend and we cut down a pine tree for Christmas. He bought a first aid kit, bottles of water, extra food, in case we were stranded in the mountains somehow. I had read the book *Hatchet* and liked to believe I was a survivalist who could live on the land if necessary. If a bear came, I would break off a tree branch and impale the animal. I hoped a bear would shuffle along, though it was wintertime and I forgot about hibernation. My siblings and I threw snow at each other and mugged for the camera, and when it came time to bring the tree down, Matthew and I took turns awkwardly using our father's handsaw. The teeth stuck in the wood and frustrated me. My father came over. "Let me give it a try," he said, and the saw bit through and moved. "It wasn't doing that for me," I said. I wished I could cut it like he could. One of us yelled, "Timber!" as it crashed. Back home, we hung up the hand-made ornaments we'd crafted in elementary school. Little pictures on clay bells. Me at eight or nine, my hair puffing up in the back and a gap-toothed smile on my face. I wore an ugly red and blue striped shirt my mother bought for me.

The night before Christmas, I sat with my siblings and crafted a map of the house. I would sneak out to the tree at 2:00 a.m.. I would stay up all night. That night, I woke

my father when I stumbled into a chair in the dim glow of the lights. I stood in front of the tree, frozen, as he squinted at me. After a moment, he told me to go back to bed. His hair was ruffled and he appeared tired, his voice annoyed. I slunk back to my room. Christmas music and darkness and when the light showed the land in the morning, snow had not fallen.

Several weeks after our mother was admitted to State Hospital South, just before Christmas, my father packed us into the car and we set out to visit her. Allegro lay in a kennel in the back of the blue minivan. Even before I fell into Dylan and music, watching the land set to a lonesome harmonica, these trips held their own melodies in the rhythm of my family and the land we rode upon, and more than anything, from the steady hand of my father as he drove us. My siblings and I were children, and we laughed like we were young, but there was also something calmer about us. I believe it came from him, an even man who watched over us—keeping a good face because we were still children and he desperately wanted us to live normal lives, whatever normal lives might mean, and from our mother, who we waited for in hospital rooms. Together, Matthew, Elsa, Glen and I learned to sit without speaking, to show deference to the men and women who kept our mother, who tried to keep our mother well. She deserved our quiet, I thought.

By 1997, she knew that there was something deeply troubled within her, perhaps unfixable. There were things she did to herself that she regretted—her word when I was twenty, “regret,” I sensed she was walking very carefully as we talked—but was able to keep that face of Mommy, asking us about school, books, and our cats. I imagine her

frustration at being unable to control herself, and I try to understand it. I imagine her taking a knife from the block in the kitchen and staring at herself in the mirror. She does not cry or react emotionally. It is just something she does, like when I walk onto the porch for a cigarette. Rarely do I think to myself, “I’m going to get a cigarette now,” and almost never do I think, “this is killing me slowly.” Instead, I simply do it. Cigarettes are an addiction, and I hesitate to call what my mother did an addiction, but perhaps it was. Perhaps it was the only thing she knew how to do that would calm the beat of her heart. Cutting and drinking. Ways to find herself a level. Her knife is one of the bread knives. She cuts her wrist on the horizontal and the blood begins to flow, dripping down her arm onto the bathroom floor, onto the kitchen floor as my father drives home from work. And that’s the last I want to imagine. I am afraid that what I see is more calm than her reality. A tempering of what she did, to make it easier on myself. A passivity. There was a knife, there was blood, there was regret. These things happened to her, she did not do them. It is easy to lie to myself. I feel less guilty when I do.

When I think of my mother from those conversations, and her passivity, I also think of myself. Sitting in those waiting rooms, I thought I was doing good by my parents to be respectful, to allow events to work their course. One of the smallest ways to help—simply to be less of a burden. I do not think that my inclinations as a boy were wrong. As a boy, I had the excuse of youth, of that aspect of myself that my father desperately tried to allow me to keep. In later years, though, the line blurred between silence and complacency. My father could tell me, as he has told me many times, that there was nothing that I could have done to help her. I wish I could believe that. Understanding that none of us—not my mother, not my father, not my siblings, not

myself—could have helped her forces me to think fatally. I do not like the idea of life simply happening. It is better for me to think that there was something I could have done and did not do than to think that there is nothing.

While we were driving to Blackfoot, my mother knew that my father was dipping into retirement funds to pay medical bills that were accumulating daily. \$365 a day, every day, at State Hospital South, with my father's health insurance coverage already at its cap. While we could wait silently for her, the bills continued to mount and our polite quietness would not stop the "laceration repair fees" or the "psychiatric analysis" bills. My mother was like us in that way. The prescriptions and the treatments were meant to heal her and make her whole, to alleviate pressures none of us—certainly not us children—seemed to be able to grasp or understand beyond the phrase "chemical imbalance." She knew my father was nearing bankruptcy, but her wrists did not stop bleeding, and her mind did not stop its fragile wandering. There was some cycle in that—the pain in not being able to cease something that you know is hurting the ones you love most causes you to inflict more pain on yourself because that is the only way you know. Everything was moving in those final years of my father's marriage. My mother from Intermountain Hospital to State Hospital South, the money from my father's retirement funds to the bills he owed, us as a family from Eagle to Blackfoot to visit her, the marriage toward its end.

In the moment, though, these movements happened subtly, gradually, and though moments such as my father crying in a counselor's office and telling my siblings and me about the divorce are concrete moments, remembered with as much clarity as anything in my life, years led up to them. Nothing just happens, even as it is happening. The day-to-

day family routine obscured those other movements. We still ate our meals together at the long table in front of the china cabinet at the Red Door Ranch, though with one less space at the table. This was my father's hand on the wheel. We lounged in the back of the field as he drove back from Santa Clara Plastics, and shared bread when the time came.

I spent many hours packing for that first trip to Blackfoot. Threw books and clothes into a bag, thought long and hard about the books to bring. My father, as he tended to do, did not put together his suitcase until the day we left. A messily methodical man, my father. Our family was not one that exited on time for road trips, which annoyed me when I was older. As a boy, I did not care. Anticipation was part of the game. It distracted us from the rest.

By February of 1998, shortly before he divorced my mother, my father began writing letters to Senator Dirk Kempthorne. It would be thirteen years before I would read these letters. "This," my father wrote midway through one letter, "is what I am faced with: I have been married for the past 14 ½ years. We have four children, 13, 11, 9, and 7. I will no longer let my wife Katy come home because I have no idea how her illness is impacting the children. I am only able to work 4 days per week. We have approximately \$65,000 in medical bills. The state hospital bill increases the balance about \$9,000 per month. Our medical insurance for psychiatric coverage is maxed out. We have approximately \$18,000 in cred card debt. My wife is currently at the state hospital, which is a 575 mile round trip. I have been taking the children to visit Katy every two weeks. I am talking to one lawyer about divorce and another about

bankruptcy. It seems I can not find one to do both.” I did not know the bare numbers as I sat in the car that December day. And though I clearly remember my father telling us he was declaring bankruptcy a year later, it was just a word to me, then. “Bankruptcy” meant my father was poor. That there would not be as many Christmas gifts, that we would not eat at the Brick Oven Beanery quite as often. There was no weight beyond that surface level to me. He cried that day, my father did—as he cried when he told us about the divorce, as he cried when I told him I wanted to drop out of college my freshman year, as he cried the day my mother died. I do not remember him crying in the hospitals. He was my father, then, the man I couldn’t imagine breaking, the man who opened those hospital doors and told the nurses we were there to see Katy Lindquist.

On the road to Blackfoot, he played The Cranberries and other groups like that, ones with melancholy female singers. The Cranberries, Natalie Merchant, a little Jewel. I miss my father now when those songs come on, as I walk home on a chill night in Iowa, separated from home—Eagle is still home to me—by 2000 miles. The music reminds me of my father cleaning the dining room on a Saturday morning, blasting the songs through a pair of oversized speakers he bought at an antique shop. It reminds me of sitting in the backseat and heading toward the horizon.

For me, road trips did not begin until we were out of the city limits of Boise. State Street and Eagle Road were familiar in the places they wound past—the subdivisions beginning to sprout in Eagle, the newly built Albertson’s grocery in town, all those little signs of expansion from the town where I grew up. Same roads we traveled week after week after month after year. What I was looking for was something that I could not articulate as a child. It was the need to be between places, to be neither

here nor there. That moment when you catch two radio stations meshed together in static. In those moments I felt closest to the man I hoped to become—that rambling, gambling outdoor man who lived by his own rules and called his own shots. My mother was not in the hospital in those moments. The hospital did not exist to me. I was a boy between towns, nothing more. I had no past in the car, and my mother's present did not matter until we slowed to a stop that night. My nervousness did not crop up until the sun dropped and the snow began to fall. Only then did I feel as though I did not know what the future might hold. Traveling allows for a strange sort of suspension of time. My father's bills did not disappear, but they weren't on the dashboard, either. We were all between places, except for my mother. She was the one who was always somewhere. A hospital, her apartment after the divorce.

The closest she came to finding that space I enjoyed so much was in her reading and, after her release, in her walks through Katherine Albertson Park. In the park, she could listen to her books on tape and wander the paths for hours, pausing in front of the small ponds to watch the turtles sunbathe on stones. This is as close as she would come to removing the depression from the equation. My father could retreat to his workshop, I could walk the field or, later, play basketball while listening to sports talk, and my mother could find a place in the park where she could sit and simply be. These were our retreats. I sometimes sat and watched my father work, or walked with my mother along the gravel paths of Katherine Albertson Park as we discussed books, but in the end, these places were our own, apart from each other. And while I could find myself in my father's workshop or alongside my mother on a walk, my parents almost never shared their spaces with each other as I remember it. I am sure my father joined my mother on walks down

Ballantine Lane before she was hospitalized, and I am sure that she watched him work as I did, but those memories are not mine. To me, their circles didn't touch.

The winds tugged harder on the southeastern Idaho plains than they did in the Boise Valley. Massive stretches of land mostly devoid of trees and greenery. The color was a dulled brown, broken by lighter sagebrush. Snow did not accumulate well on the ground, caught in the air and blown sideways as it was. Driving at seventy-five (my father speeding slightly), we felt the wind against us. He was the sole driver and navigator. A tattered Rand McNally atlas was wedged between the driver's seat and the gearshift. My father did not slow when he needed to consult it. Instead, he spread it out against the wheel or across his knees, letting the car drift while he squinted at the lines. He still does this, though now it adds to my unease. I sometimes think we will crash and I grip the armrest as he pulls the map out. I can help, I tell him at twenty-three, but he shrugs a shrug of certainty.

The road to Blackfoot from Eagle is an uncomplicated one. It forms the shape of a 'U' on the map, traveling east on I-84 toward Montana. 266 miles, four-and-a-half hours of driving separating us from our mother. For long stretches, we were far from a dot on the atlas. Small homes sat on the edge of the land off the highway. A car coming off the driveway appeared very small, like it was a game board token on the land. I guess we would have looked small to them, too. Nothing dominated the horizon so much as the land itself. This is true of all states, I know, but in my mind it is a staple of western drives—flatlands surrounded by mountains, rivers winding through groves of pine, homes clinging to strips of dirt road as though the wind might break them from their perches and return the earth to a clean slate.

Sometimes when we stopped at gas stations, my father handed us a few dollar bills to buy snacks. We didn't ask him for money, just like we didn't ask him for money for the work we did back on Rush Road. Those chores were things we understood as our jobs and our being and our place. We were our father's children. When he told us he needed our help, we trudged up the stairs and asked what needed to be done. Later, he liked to joke that we were the cheapest labor force in existence—at most, he could buy us off with a few Gatorades at the end of the day. But he didn't sit back when the electric fence needed to be moved, or when he needed to set up the corral. He was there alongside us, his face smudged with dirt and slick with sweat. It would have been different, I think, if he disappeared into the house to watch football or drink, but he did not do that. That was not my father. He refused to hire outside help to fix the truck or plow the fields. Unlike almost everything surrounding my mother, these concrete tasks were things he could control. He set about it himself, with the basic faith that he could figure out what needed to be done. We were our own unit in that way, and only when I hit my later teenage years, when I could drive into the foothills by myself, did I begin to feel a subtle tension with him, as I began skipping classes and shoplifting to fill my empty hours.

That evening, my father rummaged through the shelves of a trading post, searching for random tools and western themed t-shirts. At the store, I spent my time sifting through the piles of Native American arrowheads, fossil shark teeth, and rocks. I wondered if I would be any good at shooting an arrow. I imagined yes, because I was a boy and because I reckoned myself to be wild. Two years later, when I was in the eighth grade, we took a bus to an outdoor reserve near the Snake River and were allowed to

shoot arrows. My arrow clattered harmlessly five feet from me and the woman watching over us yelled “Next!” I stepped to the back of the line. It looked easier in the movies.

With a tug of his sleeve I got my father’s attention. “I’m bored.” Just a few more minutes, he said. I tried on a hat and smiled in the mirror. Before we left, he bought a large bag of popcorn and several Cokes to share, which we passed around. “Don’t get any of that on the floor,” my father said absently as he buckled his seatbelt. He would vacuum the carpets when we returned home, sucking up kernels of popcorn. We were still children. Flurries of snow drifted down in the parking lot. There were few cars on the interstate that night. Mile markers flashed by, but I did not recognize the town names. Fort Hall, Gibson. Matthew, Elsa, Glen and I were silent. Silence seemed inevitable to me. I felt nervous, I touched my fingers to the glass. Cold glass. Drew a smiley face and watched the condensation drip down until the face no longer smiled. My father didn’t like us drawing on the windows—you’ll smudge up the car, he said—but I drew without thinking about it. With my head back on the seat, I watched the land slide past.

This was not my Idaho, my foothills against the mountains or the cracked lanes of Rush Road. This was not my Idaho that we were driving through to find my mother, not my safe wild. She was out there, somewhere, and this was not hers either. I felt lonely for her, then. At night the land seemed somewhat alien. The factory lights glowed orange in the darkness as we drove down I-84, toward Blackfoot, Idaho. A lone truck sat in the parking lot. The air smelled vaguely of grease and metal. A cold smell. A thin coating of snow covered the plains. The lights held for a moment as we curved around the bend of the road, and then they were behind us, and then they were gone, too, and we were left

with only the indistinct shapes of hills and mountains somewhere out there in the night. Matthew, Elsa, Glen, my father, me. The radio was silent. My father flexed his fingers and yawned. He tapped to some beat that I could not hear. I like to think that he rubbed his wedding ring in the dark, for good luck, but that's just what I imagine.

The snow fell harder, hypnotizing in a way, watching it like staring into a flame—felt as though the minivan cut a path through the storm. He slowed, but did not stop. He would teach me to drive a manual transition car the day after Christmas when I was seventeen, on icy, snow-covered roads in the foothills outside of Eagle. “No, that's third, Mark, you need to be in first.” “I'm trying.” “Still third,” “I can't do it if you're watching me.” He was not a man to stop. Sometimes on trips we drove long into the night with miles and miles to go before we entered another town. That was the west, those long empty stretches in Idaho, Wyoming, Montana. We drew closer to her, the roads washed white with snow, my father kept pushing. Some of us might have slept, but I don't remember it that way. I wanted to help her bake Christmas cookies with the cutters she had bought the year before. I wanted to help her set the little snowmen up on a plate. I wanted her to be there to watch me throw snow at Glen in front of the Red Door Ranch. There were songs we could sing if only she was home. Those melancholic Christmas songs that made me feel nostalgic for what my life was becoming, “O Holy Night,” “The Christmas Song,” “White Christmas.”

When we entered Blackfoot, the roads were slick with ice. I could not see buildings beyond our hotel parking lot. We fetched our bags from the back and followed our father in through the doors. He spoke with the front desk woman for a few minutes,

then waved us along. One or two of us might have slept on the floor of the hotel. Perhaps I was one of them. My father snored loudly in his sleep, and I stayed awake wrapped in a blanket, staring at the ceiling. Being in Blackfoot was strange. My father could tell us we were taking a vacation, but we were really only there because of our mother. Nobody, I thought, *just visits Blackfoot*. I wondered if the trip was a burden for my father, or if he was looking forward to seeing her. Blackfoot was a long way to drive for a weekend visit.

That visit, he brought a framed photograph to give our mother as a Christmas gift. She wouldn't be opening presents with us, but she could at least have this one. She could place the photo on her hospital bedside and think of the days ahead, after the state no longer deemed her to be "mentally ill" and the time came for her to rebuild her life in the Boise Valley. The photograph itself has washed out of my memory over time. Perhaps, when our mother died and we sifted through the shoeboxes, that same photo was one which we let slip through our fingers. Or maybe we taped it to a posterboard for the memorial. Regardless, it is not a picture I remember, though I try. I try to see it again. I think it is a picture that would have made my mother happy. Her children made her happy.

State Hospital South consisted of multiple buildings spread across acres of land. My brothers, sister, and I were quiet as we walked through the halls. At the front desk, we waited. My father asked a nurse if the picture would be allowed, if he could give it to his wife. There was a short conversation between the nurses, and then a shake of the head. She might try to cut herself with it, they told him, as I sat in a plastic chair staring out the window. They told him that. It was one of the moments in my life when I wanted

to run, to simply get out. That was supposed to be her picture. It was not the doctor's or the nurse's. It was not my father's or mine. Hers. Everything was broken if we could not hand her that gift. Our understanding is limited when we are young, but there are moments when we see things clearly, when we understand in a way that we had not before. More than all of her scars, bandages, medications, and doctors, the hospital's refusal of that photograph represented her illness to me. It represented the risk and the danger that I either didn't see, or forced myself not to see. In that moment, what I felt was a frustrated sense of betrayal. Not at my father or my mother, but at the people who could write simply and plainly, "In the matter of the mental illness of Katherine Lindquist," the people who could deny that picture—even if it was in my mother's best interest. There wasn't going to be any "better" for her. She would be sick without being sick. She was nowhere. I was nowhere. I was her son.

I could not bring myself to ask the doctors or nurses or my father why the picture wasn't allowed. Staring at my face in the window, I saw a sad little boy. "Be strong, like Daddy," I told myself. The only thing I could control was how I reacted. The rest was beyond me. We were escorted into a large room. On a chalkboard, the twelve steps of recovery had been written out. I thought those were only for alcoholics, but I didn't mention it to my mother. My father later told me that she was a heavy drinker. Cough syrup, boxed wine, whatever. She was sneaky about it, or she thought she was, at least, he told me. She asked us about school. She asked us about the cats. We missed her. She hugged my father and for several minutes the two of them spoke off to the side. I wonder if they discussed finances, or divorce, or my father apologized that he couldn't bring the photo in. I wonder if my mother kept the same face for him as she did for us,

that of somebody who was just a step away from release. Or if she could bring herself to be completely honest with him. If complete honesty was even possible in her state of mind. She kissed us goodbye one by one and told us to be good in school. We promised we would be.

When we drove back along the icy roads, the snow no longer fell. It was winter in Idaho, but we were heading home and I was glad. I didn't like Blackfoot. We celebrated Christmas together, Elsa playing a song or two on the piano, my father singing in his gravel-crushed baritone. My father, Matthew, Elsa, Glen, myself huddled around the tree in the early hours waiting to open gifts. She called us later that day to wish us a merry Christmas. My father spent the day in the kitchen preparing a ham. He had started to watch cooking shows on PBS, and it no longer seemed to strange to see him at the stove, throwing ingredients into a boiling pot of water. After each of us spoke, we passed the phone on to the next until the phone returned to my father, all of us listing what we had received and talking about sledding and skiing while my mother sat in a hospital in a strange town, eating a communal Christmas meal with other residents, still months from returning to the valley. There would be no more walks toward the foothills in the dying light of winter.

VI. ECHOES OF LEAVING

Matt slowed in front of my father's house. He was driving his mother's mini-van and waved as I walked out the door. I had not seen him in years, but there he was, a pale thin kid wearing a Pac-Man t-shirt. His face was gaunt and feathered with facial hair. Sometime after high school, he had grown a goatee. His hair was still buzzed short. It was the right look for him, I thought—a sharp, slightly underfed appearance. I had always imagined him looking like that, even after he disappeared for two years. I couldn't remember him with long hair, though yearbook photos from his junior year at Eagle High School show a tuxedo, a bow tie, and hair touching his shoulders. When we shook hands, his was cold. His voice was nasally.

“Long time no see,” I said, smiling. A little dog jumped around and nipped as I spoke. The dog jumped to my lap.

“Calm down, Dakota,” he said. “Stupid dog. I wasn't sure if I was on the right street. You used to be on the other one.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We moved.”

He didn't ask why. I thought he looked older than me, but when he spoke it was to complain about how he didn't want to go to his sister's dance recital. She's a brat, he said. And his mom hadn't wanted to loan him the car. I'm not fifteen anymore, he said, I shouldn't have to ask. A year before, he wrecked his father's truck, driving 70 mph on a dirt road in the foothills before overturning it in a muddy field. I would have been afraid to loan him a car, too. Matt turned back down the gravel road, then left on State Street, stopping in front of the gas station with the barbed wire bald eagle statue. We had met in the fourth grade. Back then, Eagle had been a smaller town, maybe 9,000 people. There

wasn't even a grocery store. You had to drive a few miles across the Boise River, to Meridian, if you wanted food. My family lived on the outskirts of town, nestled against the foothills. Five acres between houses, lots of farmland and fields. Matt lived in one of the small suburbs a few miles across the river. You could barely see the mountains from his house.

We were planning to see the movie *Avatar*, but first he stopped at the library. For music, he told me. Eagle Public Library, where we had stolen magazines as kids. I liked *Sports Illustrated*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. Matt liked *National Geographic*. He walked to the CD rack and started stacking music. Something techno or electronica. Some 90's band that I didn't think anybody listened to anymore. Five more albums. Also, the soundtrack for *Armageddon*.

"You a big Bruce Willis fan?" I asked.

He glanced up at me and ignored the question.

"The dog's probably shitting all over the van right now," he said. "So we should be careful about that." I nodded and laughed nervously. "She feels uneasy when there aren't people around," he continued. We checked the items out and walked back to his mother's car. When I opened the door, Matthew shook his head.

"Bad Dakota," he muttered. For two minutes he cleaned it up before spraying some Febreze. I shuffled my feet by the passenger door and waited without talking. I pretended to watch the sky.

"Gotta go to the Post Office, too. I'm going to put some music in. It'll get us in the mood for the movie."

"You listen to any Bob Dylan?" I asked.

“Does Dylan have a good beat?”

“No. You can’t really dance to it. Except 80’s Dylan. Disco apocalypse,” I said,

“But you don’t want to dance to that.”

He grunted.

“I mean, I can dance to any of Dylan, but that’s just because I’m weird. And I don’t do it unless I’m alone. And nobody can see me.” I laughed, but Matthew didn’t, so I continued. “There’s nothing better than dancing to a harmonica solo. That’s what all the kids do these days.” Matt grunted. At the red light outside of Albertson's grocer, he handed me three boxes of candy and two cans of soda to sneak into the movie. When we were teenagers we shoplifted from Albertson's, stuffing goods into our socks and our coats.

“I don’t steal it anymore,” he said.

“Me neither.” I hadn’t done that since Matthew disappeared to Alaska when we were seniors in high school.

“Everything seems like so long ago,” I said as we drove up the hill on Eagle Road, and past the Target Matt had worked at when he was fifteen. “You used to be a worker there.”

“But it also seems like yesterday,” he said, glancing at me.

“Yeah. All of it.” It didn't really seem like yesterday to me. I had short hair back in those days. My mother was alive, then. I went through a two week phase where I thought I liked listening to Eminem. Lots of details like that. Matt checked his phone. We were going to be forty minutes early.

“Remember when we were going to make a sequel to Titanic?” he asked.

"We were going to film it in your swimming pool," I said, smiling. "With that big clunky camera. We were going to cast Allison Barber as my love interest. I was going to kiss her before the ship sank."

"Ha, yeah."

"I still have that camera," I said, and motioned as if I was filming him. "It's got a horrible battery life, though."

He nodded and pulled into the parking lot. He pointed at the candy and soda, and I stuffed it into my coat. Each step, I could hear Gobstoppers rattling next to my heart.

That movie theater, the Majestic, south of Boise, along the freeway, hadn't existed when we were in high school. Then, the only movie theater had been Edward Cinemas. We always arrived to movies early in those days, because there was a Game World Arcade and Matt's mother usually gave him \$40. My father didn't give me as much. I didn't have a job. Matt's parents were rich anyway, I thought. Their house had a skylight and a balcony. My mother bought most of her furniture at the Goodwill. My father had piles of my mother's medical bills to pay. By the time I was in high school, Paul Lindquist had a divorce and a bankruptcy to his name.

In the darkened theater, the two of us wore our 3D glasses over our actual glasses. They stuck out at strange angles. In Iowa that Halloween, I had dressed up as The Dude from *The Big Lebowski*, tossing a pair of sunglasses over my scratched frames. At a party, I was pouring a drink when a friend came up to me. "You're still wearing your glasses," he said, his voice all alcohol and accusation, I thought. And I was embarrassed then, sweating a little in my wool poncho, feeling stupid. Matt and I started talking about people we used to know. He kept more connections than me, despite the fact that he had

gone to Alaska while I had stayed in Idaho. Chris Scott was enrolled at Boise State, he told me, but he didn't know what he was majoring in. Chris lived with his parents, same as Matt. Chris was older than both of us by a year. Patrick Kelly (we called him P.K.) was still around, too. Matt didn't talk much with him, though. Ashley Neubrant's brother had recently died. This had been hard on Matt. Ashley and Matthew had dated in high school. I said nothing. Brian Seel worked in Baltimore, something with the Defense Department. Brian was my friend, not Matt's.

“What about Jared?” I asked.

“You know he's married. He has a kid, now.”

“No shit,” I said. “Really?”

“There wasn't really anything in Alaska. We were working at a McDonald's strung out on drugs and living in a bad apartment. And then I took the GED and Jared found God.”

“Just like that?”

“I guess,” he said, looking away. Jared finding God. Just like that. I didn't ask him anything else about Alaska. I wanted to know why he had left without telling me, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. If we didn't talk about it, I could almost pretend it had never happened.

I remembered riding my bicycle out into the foothills with Jared and Matt in high school. We rode until the pavement disappeared at the edge of the foothills, then found a clearing. It was hot and dry, the kind of day that was ripe for wildfire if a storm hit in the afternoon, just everything waiting to burn. Matt and Jared drank cans of beer that Jared had stolen from his father's trailer. He lived in a little house along the side of the

highway, out of the city limits of Eagle. His brother lived in a trailer next to the house—the trailer and his brother smelled like piss, Jared liked to say. I just watched. It would be dark soon, I needed to go home. I needed to call my mother. She was in the hospital. Jared threw a half-empty can at a tree, missing badly. He was talking about how he wanted to light his brother's trailer to the ground. *My fag brother*, he called him. We can lock the door, he said, and watch him burn. He'll be like no no no and we'll just laugh. Fucking hot out, Jared said, spitting to the side. That same Jared was married with a kid, now. I felt old. Two weekends after that hot night, Jared drunkenly wobbling to the thought of burning of everything, the three of us broke into a house. We were fifteen.

In his calloused hand, Jared held a stone. We stood next to him laughing as he wound up and threw it. For a moment, he could have been Randy Johnson, all slingshot arm and mullet. We could have been three teenagers on a baseball field, doing those things that young boys do in summer. But we were not those kinds of teenagers. We weren't idling away our Idaho day being those kids. We didn't want to be them. The rock thudded against the cow's side and the animal took a step to the left as it moored. "We should kill that fucker," Jared said. "Do either of you own a gun?" Matt and I laughed again, but the idea of Jared with a gun wasn't funny. We had ridden our bicycles out along one of the dirt roads by the foothills. Mine was a faded blue bicycle with a crooked handlebar from an old crash. Only three of the eight gears worked. I could feel sweat dripping down my back and legs. Hot, dry Idaho day. Jared's dark red hair was soaked in sweat. Once, he told us, he had punched a jogger along the Greenbelt because the guy had accidentally spit on him. "Just kept apologizing and apologizing and I told

him I was going to beat the shit out of him and then I did.” We never knew whether or not to believe Jared—I bought what he was saying, because he looked that way.

Jared was the kid who took money from his father and didn’t care. He was the kid who showed up to class when he felt like it. He wasn’t going to graduate and we all knew it. I might not graduate either, though only I knew that. I admired Jared’s freedom. To a western boy mentally fashioning himself as an outlaw, as I tried to do in those early high school days, knowing Jared was like staring into a broken mirror. The pieces were all there, but the reflection didn’t quite line up.

I wasn’t Jared, not quite, even if we were both on the lower edge of the grade scale. Early middle school, while my mother was in Blackfoot, I began skipping assignments. It wasn’t that they were difficult. I understood where countries were located on the map, what it took to put together a paragraph, the Gettysburg Address. Canada above America above Mexico, sentences, four score and seven years ago. None of that mattered. I was a dirt road cowboy. Many of the best people through history had done great things without the benefit of much formal education. In the Boise Valley, you could see J.R. Simplot’s house at the top of a foothill, a huge American flag waving overhead. The potato magnate owned that house without attending college. I respected that. It meant he had carved his own way through life. There was something romantic about the lives of the Simplots of the world. Bob Dylan, I would later learn, had dropped out of college after one semester, and by the time he was twenty-five he had already changed the course of popular music history. Those were people to look up to.

My father held a bachelor’s degree in materials science and engineering from Northwestern University, and a doctorate from the University of Illinois. He was on

some plane that I could barely comprehend in terms of education—owning several patents and multiple degrees—and he could see what I was doing instead of those simple assignments. Tapping A, B, A, C on *Ultimate Mortal Combat 3*, looking for the finishing fatality. Riding my bike over to Brian's house. Increasingly, spending weekend hours watching grown men hit balls with sticks. There were books, too, but not the assigned ones. Instead, thick books written about dinosaurs and volcanoes and shark attacks, by men who had doctorates like my father. Books that I had to check-out from the second floor of the Boise Library! I prided myself on walking up those stairs, away from the young adult books that other kids my age were reading. Book after book after book, cycling through my phases, as my mother called it.

Classes didn't offer anything for me to fall in love with. So I didn't. “You’re getting old enough to be more responsible than this,” he said, after seeing my low marks in the seventh grade. I was ashamed of myself when I had to sit down with my father. He deserved better from me. The kitchen counter was covered with bills, his wife was hospitalized and he was finalizing a divorce, though I did not know the last fact yet. He shouldn't have had to worry about me. The only person who I wanted to worry about me was me. After talks like this, I hunkered down in my basement and tried not to flip on *The O.C.* or *Seinfeld*. A book in front of me, my binder open to a sheet for math, and all the numbers crossed out because I couldn't get them to line up right. I was supposed to give proofs, but at the end of the night, there was only a series of half-finished problems.

I told him I would talk to my teachers—which was a lie, I was scared to talk to them. I could be polite and sit quietly in the back of the room without throwing paper or passing notes, but I could not approach them. Sweaty brow, a little nervous twitch of my

cheek, dry mouth, a stuttery lisp breaking through when the moment mattered. I hated the way I talked. Staring in a mirror and seeing my jaw slide to the side when pronouncing anything with an “s.” By the eighth grade, and especially early high school, I knew I was that boy. The one who looked a little different, nicknames like Duck Boy for my full lips, the boy who carries around big books, wears the large glasses, whose hair isn't straight, who doesn't have money, whose mother isn't around to exchange cookies with the class before Christmas.

I was too young to see who I was, even if I could feel it. I was me. That's all I could be, whoever that was. *You people aren't sitting in those chairs waiting for your mother to wheel out an IV. Go . Go on thinking you're better than me. Fuck you. Fuck all of you.* Words could do things. Perceived a certain way, if I used profanity, threw my voice into it, there was something unhinged about that. “You can't,” I told Jared, “be tentative in saying *fuck you*. You gotta mean it.” That's where I had Jared and Matt beat. None of those words changed my basic situation in middle school or high school, only my perception of myself. I saw myself as being harder than everybody, Matt and Jared included. That I was the kid in the back who couldn't find a lab partner, I reasoned, wasn't relevant. But it hurt anyway. I still only had two or three friends—and they were the kids who failed at things. My grades wavered between average and mediocrity, or worse. My father knew this. He started to understand who I spent my time with, too. After middle school, Brian, whose family was decent and hard working, enrolled in a private technology high school, and I went on to Eagle High—designed by a man who designed prisons—with Matt and Jared.

My mother, in her apartment on Alambaugh Street, knew my interests more than my grades. She kept up with what I slipped into, those fleeting obsessions. Diving in, she said. I was a diver, yes. I liked the sound of that. Grades could be hidden from her. She wasn't there. When she asked about classes, answers like, "Fine," or, "I'm doing alright" worked well enough most times. Throwing a specific detail, such as "math test coming up" or "I have a paper due" kept me out of generalities. I felt like a horrible person when I lied to her. Thinking about the scars on her wrists or that she lived by herself. Around her, I was her good boy, her good son, and I took advantage of that. She no longer lived with us, and I knew there was nothing tangible she could do to me. I could live with failing, but I couldn't live with her knowing about it. I didn't want to hear her disappointment. We, her children, were something she could cling to. Us, a cat, boxed wine, a razor, bottle after bottle of medication in a small apartment, a walk in Katherine Albertson Park on a cold clear day, books. She was 44.

She wasn't like my father, who would talk to Mr. White or Mr. Ward if I wasn't turning in my assignments. My mother lived across the Boise River. What she knew of high school was what I told her. She knew Matt Henretty and we could talk about him casually in conversation, but Jared wasn't one of the kids to talk with my parents about.

Matt and I laid our bikes in the sagebrush along a barbed wire fence that lined the highway. We were miles from our homes, him further than me. An occasional car passed by and we ducked as if they might be looking. I didn't know what I was doing as I crouched under that open sky. Jared wanted to pull something on his boss, an old man named Julius. "I'll give you a signal from the hay when he's heading into town," Jared

told us as he walked away. Matt and I did not look at each other. I studied the foothills and looked for rattlesnakes. I had never seen a live one. I saw a dead one at the end of a farmer's shovel on a walk with my mother shortly after our move to Eagle, but never a live one. Some time during middle school, I read that a rattlesnake's telltale sound was unmistakable. That all those times I thought I heard something were nothing in comparison to what a rattlesnake would actually sound like. Just once I wanted to hear that sound. Just once I wanted to feel like that boy who I saw in my mind, living. Signs lined rest stops in the deserted stretches of Idaho, telling people not to step out of the designated areas. Snakes out there. Anything could be a snake on that Saturday. I imagined they were all around us, just waiting. There were crackling noises in the sagebrush. A group of grasshoppers jumped. "Fucking grasshoppers," I said to nobody in particular. Matt grunted. After fifteen minutes, Jared waved, and we ran out of the brush.

The road to Julius's home was cracked and worn. It led across a flat expanse, lined by an irrigation ditch, a few large trees offering shade, a towering stack of hay bales to the right, the houses small and painted poorly. Julius lived in rural Idaho, even more so than my own family. He was miles from Eagle. We met Jared on the road. He was laughing. Julius lived a half-mile from Jared. The mulleted teen did odd jobs for him, hauling hay, fixing fences, keeping Julius's cows tended to. Julius was an old man who had not paid Jared in several weeks. That was fucking bullshit, Jared told us. That old fuck is going to be sorry, Jared told us. If I rationalized what I was doing, which I don't think I was capable of at that age, I would have told myself that entering Julius's house was like the games I played with my brothers and sister when I was young, when we

explored the abandoned sheds down Ballantine. Matt and Jared moved forward, I followed without a thought of turning back. We were out there already. Matt and Jared were the only people I had, and if I turned back, then they would be gone, too. Friends didn't leave friends. As we stood there, I wasn't going to be the runaway. I wasn't going to run. I walked down the road into that house.

The walls flaked on the outside, predominantly gray and speckled brown. Jared took out a key. "If he comes back, I'll tell him that we just needed a drink and that I thought it was OK. He's not going to come back, though. That old piece of shit is slow." Matt laughed. I laughed.

What I remember most about Julius's home is that the air was no cooler than outside. I knew that kind of heat. We didn't have an air conditioner at home, either. That's why I was happy my room was in the basement. Summers were basement days. Julius had no basement. There were stacks of faded Pepsi cans next to a small television, the same kind of TV we owned back home. Push buttons on a side panel covered in a soft cover. Atop a dresser sat several photographs. A young man smiled at a young woman. Matt and Jared were in the kitchen, throwing drinks out the window, but I just stared at the photographs and felt small and stupid. My father had pictures, too, from when he was younger, when my mother's arms were clear and I had not been born. Just as Julius was no longer that dashing smile in a curling photograph, my father one day would no longer be the dashing bearded researcher. He would buy reading glasses. The woman he married when he was a boy would swallow pills on a hot July day like the one we faced, and she would die. These things would happen in less than six years. I stood in somebody else's home and felt sad.

“He'll come back soon,” I said. Sweat dripped down my glasses and I wiped them off with a shirttail. You're not supposed to do this because it scratches the lenses.

“He's not going to come back before we're done,” one of them said. “Find something to throw.”

A stack of mail sat on a wooden end table and I flipped through bill after bill. Some were medical bills, some electric. There was also a hand-addressed letter with slanting print. Jared hadn't mentioned if Julius had any children, but maybe that man did, and maybe he received letters from time to time. His bedroom contained a small mattress covered with a wool blanket. There were no books in the house.

“Man, these Pepsi cans are old,” I said.

“You know what's old? Julius. Old man,” Jared said. He picked up an electric bill and placed it in his pants pocket. “He's going to freak out when he can't find this. I can't wait until he starts bitching to me about his electricity. Fuck his electricity.”

“That's a good idea. Maybe they'll shut it off and he'll die,” I said, proud to be part of the conversation. Slow old man without electricity, yeah, as I peered through the window toward the road. No cars pulled up. When we stepped outside, we squinted in the sun. All told, we were in the house for no more than ten minutes. Jared talked about Julius in the days that followed, still complained about late payments, but we didn't discuss breaking into that house again. Perhaps we knew we had done a bad thing, but more likely, we had no reason to dwell. Jared continued to lift hay for the man. Julius's cows grazed in the field. I learned Matt's school ID number and started stealing lunches off it. Matt shaved his head. I listened to “American Pie” for the first time and spent several hours tracking down the various references. Bob Dylan was the jester. It was the

first time I had heard of Bob Dylan, I think. Though I continued to ride my bike into town with Matt and Jared, I didn't meet Julius. To me, he could still be that young man in the photograph smiling, his house freshly painted, the television a purchase that made him proud.

We sat in a packed theater wearing our 3D glasses and eating the candy we had snuck in. I was tired. I was 23. I didn't even live in Idaho anymore—I was only there on break, to see my family. I lived in Iowa. I taught classes. Matt seemed so unchanged, though, with his movie soundtracks from 1998 and his talk of how his mother should have lent him the car without an argument. We could almost have been sixteen again, except we weren't. We were supposed to be grown men, living out in the world, adjusted past our years of petty theft and break-ins. He was still working on his novel, he told me. It was going to be finished soon. I thought to mention that I was writing a book, too, attending grad school Iowa to write about my life. Matt's novel was going to be finished when we were in the seventh grade, when we were in the ninth grade, going to be finished a week before he disappeared. I wondered if my own book would be like that, too, that I would never be able to write in the acknowledgements *For my father, who refused to quit, and for my mother, who always told me I marched to the beat of a different drummer. I know I told you that the day I became famous I would buy you a mansion, but hopefully this book is enough.* I wondered if all that was simply going to roll around in my head until I could no longer breathe.

After the movie, while we were walking back through the parking lot of Majestic Cinemas, Matt's father called. He needed a hand moving something. Matt turned to me

and asked if I wanted to come with him. It would only take a few minutes, he said. I nodded and climbed into the vehicle. The dog had defecated again.

His parents were going through a divorce, he explained as he drove. It was a long time coming, he told me. My own parents' divorce had occurred when I was ten. My father filed for it while my mother was in a halfway house in Boise, after she had been released from an institution for the mentally unbalanced in Blackfoot, Idaho. My father cried when he told us. Paying our mother's hospitalizations had driven him broke. And she couldn't handle raising kids. Ten years later, after she killed herself, my father put in the obituary that any donations made in her name should go to help raise awareness for mental illness. It wasn't covered by a lot of health insurance policies, he said quietly while we sat in the funeral home. I don't know if anybody donated. I don't think they did.

When Matt told me his parents were separating, I said I was sorry to hear that. I didn't offer anything about my own parents, or about my mother's death. It was easier to talk about films we planned making and abandoned road trips that had never gotten off the ground. There had been days of the three of us sitting in Matt's bedroom with an open map of the United States, one of us tracing our path while the others calculated how much it would cost. Julius wasn't paying Jared enough. Fucking old man, still doesn't get the picture, we should put a dead cat in his mailbox, Jared said. I don't know why he said cat or where he might get a dead one from. I thought to make a *Pet Cemetery* joke. Matt mentioned maybe taking some money from his parents, and I volunteered my father's truck. I knew that he would never let me take that truck, but I offered it anyway.

Maybe I didn't want to go with Matt and Jared. Maybe that was the gist of it. Talk talk talk, but maybe I wanted to stay.

Matt had been born in Maryland, moved to Eagle when he was very young. Younger than I had been when my own family moved from Beacon, New York, to Idaho. His mother and father took the better part of a decade to settle in the valley, always shifting from house to house within a five mile radius. They had lived at their current house for the last six or seven years. The first time I heard from him after high school, I was a second year student at the University of Idaho. He sent an e-mail and told me he was back living with his parents. He and Jared wanted to visit me at school. A week later, he crashed his father's truck. "Just doing stupid things," is how he described it before apologizing that he wasn't going to be able to make it. I responded with a paragraph about how it was OK, that I had plenty of friends in college. It was a Friday night and I stayed in the recreation center until 11:00 shooting hoops until my ankles were sore and my gray shirt soaked completely through with sweat. The automated voice rang over the loudspeaker to tell me it was closing time. When I returned to my dorm, I stripped off my soaked shirt and shorts, throwing on a pair of pants, and laid in the dark listening to The Beatles, thinking to myself, "Oh Marky boy, what has all this come to?" My mother called the next morning and asked if I had gone out that night. "Yeah," I said. "It was fun."

The TV was 52" and sat in the basement game room. His father wanted to move it out, into his new apartment. Sorry about the mess, Matt said. This is what it looks like

when your parents leave each other. But not if Mommy's in the hospital, I thought to myself with a smirk. Then, she just never comes home. Some of my jokes were hard and dark, about my mother's suicide, about overdoses and razors to the wrist. I was afraid that life might grow too serious one day, that I would drink myself to a blackout and break the world. So I laughed. He told me I could wait in his room, or in the kitchen, either way. I wondered if I should help with the television, but Matt was already down there, with his father and brother, and it was blocking the stairs. I didn't want to get in the way. I sat on a stool in the kitchen instead, staring at the refrigerator. I pretended to read a day old newspaper that sat on the counter. Matt's mother walked into the kitchen.

"Mark? How are you?" she asked.

I smiled and brushed my hair back.

"I'm doing good. I live in Iowa now."

She nodded at me.

"Are you hungry?"

I waved my hand.

"No, I'm fine."

She started putting some orange chicken in the oven. I waited for her to ask about my mother and father, but she walked out of the kitchen, glancing down the stairs at the television and shaking her head before heading to her daughter's room. The TV wouldn't fit up the stairs. I stood against the wall and waited. One of his sisters rolled by on a scooter. I waved at her and she smiled. Down the stairs, there was a scraping noise.

“No, no. Fuck. You have to turn it on its edge,” someone said. The television moved up a few inches, then settled back down. “Does somebody have a screwdriver? Maybe if we take off the door.” Then a muffled shout of, “Mom wouldn’t like that.”

Matt stared over the top of the set at me.

"I didn't think it would take this long. We got it down here easy."

"No worries," I said, though my head hurt and I had been standing by the kitchen table for forty-five minutes. The oven beeped. Nobody came out. The oven continued to beep. I glanced around and wondered if I should do anything. There were lots of people in the house, though. Matt had seven siblings. Somebody would get to it eventually. If anything started burning, I would turn it off. His sister rolled past again. I didn't wave this time. I just sighed. I heard somebody say, "Let me go get a crowbar." Crowbars, screwdrivers, a Saturday night on the town with an old buddy. The oven beeped again. Just burn already, I thought, glancing back down the stairs. An hour later, the television was dismantled and sitting on the landing in front of us. Matt's father took a deep breath and extended his hand.

"Hi Mark. How are you?"

"I'm good."

"Sorry about this. It should have taken less time."

I shrugged and smiled.

"OK guys, let's load this thing into the truck."

I drove with them to his father's new house and waited another half-hour while they unloaded parts.

“Help yourself to a drink,” his father said. When I opened the refrigerator, there was a two liter bottle of Diet Dr. Pepper sitting on the bottom shelf, and nothing else.

“I’m still getting moved in, sorry.”

“No problem,” I said, plopping on the couch and closing my eyes. I sat across from Matt’s brother and his girlfriend. The three of us were silent. A loose string dangled off the couch and I toyed with it like one of my mother’s cats might have. Penny lived with Matthew. Quasi with my aunt. I missed my mother’s cats. When the boys finished setting up the television, Matt asked if I wanted to go back and watch a movie. I begged out. I was tired. I didn’t feel like talking to him. We had been reunited, which felt like a formality more than a natural friendship at that point. I asked if he could drive me back to my house. The roads were slick with rainwater. It was past 12:00 and the streets empty. We crossed the Boise River in silence.

“Which way?” he asked at the light on State Street.

“Left,” I said. He slowed, squinting for my street.

“Right. That one, with the dirt road.”

He started to drive down Cobblestone Lane, and I told him to slow down.

“My father was telling me that a few weeks ago, some guy came to his door asking if he knew ‘that insurance woman who is always speeding down here, messing up the road.’ The guy said he had a gun. So we go slow now,” I said. I was trying to make a joke of it, but Matthew didn’t laugh. I sighed. It was weird—he didn’t really laugh at my jokes anymore. He stopped in front of my father’s house and extended his hand.

“Let me know if you want to meet up again in the next few days,” he said.

I did not want to meet up again.

"I'm going to be sort of busy," I told him. "I'm going out of town."

"Just let me know. Like, really. It'd be good to see you again."

"Uh huh."

"You know I'm moving away from here on Monday?" he asked. "I've got school and all. I'll have homework to do again."

"Yeah."

"OK. Well, maybe I'll see you this weekend," he said.

"I'm going out of town," I repeated.

"Just let me know, please," he said.

"Safe travels," I said, already stepping out of the vehicle. He waved once, then turned the car around. I glanced back before walking into the house. My father was lying on the couch in the dark watching a PBS special on polar bears.

"Hi, Mark. How's your old friend?"

I shrugged. "You know. He's alright. I had to help him move his father's television up from the basement. It took like three hours."

My father smirked. For a moment I thought about joining him on the couch, like it would make up for something, but instead, I walked down the hall into my room, put on a pair of headphones, and drifted to sleep listening to Bob Dylan. That was the last night I saw Matt.

Three months later, my father called on an early March evening. I lived in an apartment in Iowa. The ice had just started to melt. I had not talked to him in three weeks. His voice was quiet.

"Hi, Mark," he said. "How are you?"

I had been watching Ken Burns' documentary on the Civil War when he called. Lee had just been defeated at Gettysburg and the Army of Northern Virginia was limping back across the Potomac in tatters. Soon Grant would take the reigns. I liked Grant. He was a man who did not give up.

"I'm good," I said. "Really busy right now. Work and stuff."

"When was the last time you talked to Matthew Henretty?" he asked. His voice was the same as it had been after my mother died. Weary and cautious and a little deeper than normal. I took a breath. When he said 'Matthew,' I first thought it was about my brother, that something had happened to my brother. But this wasn't my brother. It was the other Matthew, the one I had seen the movie with. I had not spoken with him since that night.

"I don't know," I said.

"Is his mom's name Cindy?"

"I think, yeah. Yeah, that's his mom."

I opened up Minesweeper and started playing, because that's what I did when I had nervous energy. Click, click, bomb, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, bomb. Click, bomb. Click, bomb. I closed my eyes.

"There was an article in the paper," he said. Then, "I think it was a few days ago. His mom and sisters were in a crash. One of his sisters was on a learner's permit and overcorrected outside of Mountain Home. Or maybe it was Jerome. Outside of Jerome, I think."

"Oh, wow." I didn't know what else to say.

"One of them's dead."

I leaned back in my chair and tried to remember his sisters' names. He had three or four. I couldn't even remember the number, certainly couldn't remember anything distinct about any of them. They were in grade school or middle school when I had been good friends with Matt. The only one I could remember was his youngest sister, the one who had waved to me while her brother was helping dismantle the television.

"His mom's in critical condition."

"Uh huh," I said.

He cleared his throat. "I just thought you would want to know. You should call him."

"Yeah, I should," I said.

"You can find the article on the *Idaho Statesman* website. It should be up there. But you should call him."

"I will," I said. "Thanks for telling me."

"So how are you?" I asked.

"It's quiet here," he scoffed.

"How's teaching?"

"I'm not good at that," he said with a little laugh. I scoffed. I think our laughs sounded the same. My mother had always confused my voice for that of my father's. Ten seconds of silence passed.

"Well, I just thought you should know about Matthew's mom."

"Thanks."

"OK, bye. Love you, Mark."

"Love you, too," I said.

I set the phone down and stood. I didn't even know Matt's number. When we met up during the winter, we had just exchanged e-mails. The last time I had tried dialing his number had been in July of 2007, after my mother died. The funeral was a few days later, and I wanted somebody there who I had known when I was younger, who knew my mother's history. His brother had answered and told me that he would let Matt know that I wanted to talk. Matt never called me back during that week. I sent him two e-mails, which were returned unread. His e-mail address didn't exist, the computer told me. I couldn't figure that, for some reason. My mother was lying in a casket. How could Matt's e-mail not even exist when my mother was lying in a casket? There wasn't a return call. Nobody called me that week, because the only person I had talked to to any extent that summer had been my mother, and she couldn't call me because she was not alive. It was this tragic loop, I thought, while I sat at the computer playing Minesweeper for hours on end. Tragic fucking loop. That little computer game was just *there* and I kept clicking, because I didn't have to think about it.

At my mother's funeral, generic orchestral music swelled while I sat in the front row, surrounded by empty chairs. Behind me, my older brother was talking with his girlfriend. My younger brother stood off in a small group of friends in front of one of the photo-covered pieces of posterboard. We had spent two hours sifting through photographs of our mother. Shoebox after shoebox of photographs. My father was chatting with my grandmother and aunt. I glanced to both sides and folded my hands, pretending to pray. The rest of my row was empty at the time. In the front of the room my mother's coffin was covered with carnations. It was closed. Several old men in suits stood off to the side. I didn't know why they were there, but they didn't move. I was

very conscious of the fact that I had no friends at the service. There wasn't anybody outside of family for me to make quiet jokes with, to tell me that things would be OK. While I waited for the service to start I wanted to think about my mother, but I didn't. Instead, just those empty seats. The director of the service walked up to me and gave me a hug.

"Don't you have anybody here?" she asked.

"Not really," I said, looking out the window toward the Boise mountains. "All my friends are gone." And I didn't know what else to say.

"Fuck," I said, pacing back and forth. The living room was dim, save for a string of Christmas lights I hadn't taken off the fake birch tree. The kitchen light bulb had burned out. I didn't bother to replace light bulbs when they died. Little things to forget. I liked Matt's mother. She had always been nice to me, even after I stole \$250 from her son's lunch account in high school—I learned his ID number and kept the money my father gave me. She was one of the only people who asked about my own mother, because she knew my mother had been in and out of hospitals and was living alone. She was always so thoughtful in that way. I appreciated things like that. I could vaguely remember her face. On one Halloween, she had given Matt and me money to run through a corn maze outside of Eagle. We hid in the corn and waited for girls from our class to walk by before we jumped out yelling. Somewhere, thousands of miles from Iowa, she was lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by family. Matt would have been there. I imagined him crying.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I said, hitting my forehead. I just wanted to remember his sisters’ names. More than that, I thought *I should really give him a call*, but then I also thought that maybe he needed space. The sun was setting as I stepped out the door. I passed a set of train tracks and crossed onto Highway 1. The spring clouds boiled overhead. Bob Dylan’s “Dark Eyes” played on my mp3 player. It was off of *Empire Burlesque*, Dylan’s 80’s apocalypse album that I had mentioned to Matt. Dylan had written the song when he was in a hotel room and saw a prostitute standing down the hall. I started to tear up. I thought it might rain, but there was no rain, just lightning off in the distance, and the day growing dim. After fifteen minutes, I walked back to my apartment.

I tried to imagine how Matt might have found out that his sister was dead and his mother hospitalized. I wondered if it was from a state patrolman or from his father, or if he was just sitting in his bedroom and suddenly felt it somewhere in his bones. I remembered how I had stood looking out over the railing in front of my mother’s apartment when we found out she was dead, and that I told myself not to cry, then. I imagined Matt sitting in the stale lighting of a hospital room, wearing one of those novelty video game t-shirts he enjoyed, and I had to wipe my eyes. We had been friends, once, people who shared their dreams and ambitions with each other, we were people to each other, once. After two days, I still hadn’t called him, and eventually I just stopped thinking about it. I couldn’t offer that good part of me to him, the compassionate one that could relate to his grief. We were separated by all those miles, and I didn’t know what I owed him anymore. His sister was dead, his mother might well be dead, but I wouldn’t call him and tell him I was sorry for his loss, and that if there was anything I could do for

him, I would do it. I don't know why there's that hard part of me, worn over from the years and broken. There just is. It was easier to sit in my apartment and watch a documentary on the Civil War, microwave a Hot Pocket, and sit in my darkened apartment, alone. Lincoln had found his man and Grant was willing to make the sacrifices to win the war. It was easier to go out for a few drinks with friends and remind myself that I didn't really know Matt anymore, that he didn't know me, that we didn't owe each other anything. It was easier to just pretend.

When we were teenagers, late in high school, we talked more and more about how we would leave Eagle. We were going to pool our money—his money from working at Target, my money from random odd jobs—buy a truck, pack our possessions in the back, and split out on the backroads. It was always the dirt back roads in our minds, because we expected that people would notice we had disappeared and would search for us. We were going to leave Idaho, writing as we went—we both thought of ourselves as writers—and eventually we would strike big and do interviews together on the Today Show. *A pair of Idaho writers who broke out and made it big.* I wanted to be Stephen King. He wanted to be John Grisham. Or something like that. There were millions of dollars waiting for us to retire to before we turned twenty-five. Eventually, they would make movies about us. Maybe we would even direct our own movies. And for all the awards waiting for us, we would live our lives on the road because there was no point in staying put. There was no direction home, as Dylan might have said.

Every time we rode our bikes out of town to the edge of the foothills, we thought there was some small possibility that we just wouldn't turn back toward home. We would stand on the side of the road and find a farmer, and hitch a ride east. We would

reach Montana and feel suddenly aged, like real people, our faces weathered by the fact that we had the guts to get out. We would leave and find the world. That's what we thought, at least what I thought. Of course, we turned our bikes around. We inevitably did—for all of our skipping class and drinking and petty theft, for thinking we were these unbelievably broken and burnt souls, most days we still came home on time, throwing our bags on the table and sitting down for dinner with our families. We rode our bikes back down the dirt trails and through the subdivisions, past the homes of our girlfriends, back toward the solid bases that we still had. Matt had both of his parents, and though he said they would be getting a divorce soon (this was some ten years before they finally separated), he at least had both of them. I lived with my father, who flew to California each week to work at a small start-up company coming up with engineering patents, returning on the weekend. My mother lived in a small low-rent apartment in Boise with two cats. I visited her each Sunday. Her wrists were scarred from where she had cut them. Sometimes bandaged, when there are newer cuts, which she shrugged off as “cat scratches.” I didn't openly question them, but when I came back from a day with Matt and Jared, while I was still sweating and slightly out of breath, I sometimes called my mother and listened to her talk. Because I always thought there would be some day soon where I would call and there would be nobody there to pick up.

Somewhere in my mother's words, and our exchanges about these simple things like groceries and the New York Yankees and how the cats were doing was the reason that I couldn't leave, that I couldn't just hit the edge of those foothills and disappear. She had a beautiful voice. I imagined her sitting on the couch waiting for me to call, and how she would cry if she heard from my father that I was gone. I couldn't shake that. Then

my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer and I stayed home more. This was during my junior year. Matt started showing up to school less and less. Usually I wouldn't see him until lunch. Jared had allegedly met a flight attendant, and she could get us free tickets to anywhere, and we could leave, Matthew told me. I didn't believe him, and by then, I didn't know where I would go or what I would do, anyway. My senior year, I started filling out financial aid applications and thinking about colleges, and during lunch, Matt and I sat against the wall outside the library and he asked me where I wanted to go. Away, I told him. Some college in Oregon or Montana. You should, he told me. You're the smart one. I laughed and told him he was smart, too. He asked if I still wanted to take a road trip with him and Jared. I did, I said. He handed me a hand written card. I called him weird. Don't lose this, he said as he stood up. The inside of the card had no grand message. I threw it out after I finished my meal. I don't know why. It was the last day he came to school.

For the next week, each lunch period I waited in the hall, next to his other friends, while they threw shoes at each other. That was the thing back then, throwing shoes. I thought Matt would show up. Deep down, I didn't think any of us had the guts to leave. Eagle was home. Those roads were ours. After a day or two I started hearing things, though—Matt had gone to the army, Matt was in jail, Matt was dead. These were just rumors that filtered through the hall. It wasn't a loud rumble. He hadn't impacted enough lives for that sort of noise. To most people he was just one of those kids who seemed to filter out, same as from every high school. There wasn't anything unique about Matt to most people. Him, Jared Lewis, Brian Anderson, names that didn't make it to graduation. They were just names, eventually. None of the teachers asked about him

so far as I know. He had few friends, he skipped classes, he didn't have high grades. He was just one of those kids.

After he left, I wanted to talk to his mother or father, but I was scared to do that, so I didn't. Instead, I simply waited to graduate. One night, after picking my father up from the airport, we drove through a steady driving rain. I needed to tell somebody what had happened, and my father was there. My father was always there, I realized.

"So Matt Henretty's gone." My words shaky and clipped as we drove under an overpass.

"What do you mean gone?"

"I mean he's not at school, he hasn't been for two weeks."

"Have you talked with anybody about this?"

"No."

And then my father paused, thinking about what he would say next. Finally, "Do you know where he is?" He sounded suspicious of me, like maybe I had been trying to hide something. Like maybe I knew and that's why I was talking. The sound of my father's voice made my eyes tear up. I didn't know where Matt was, I hadn't earned that somehow. There was only me left. There wasn't anything else.

"I don't know. He just disappeared. I don't know," I said, and I sounded sad, though I tried not to. Rough back road cowboys aren't supposed to cry. My father said nothing else. There was nothing else to say, but I think he realized how much it hurt. After a few weeks, I stopped expecting Matt to come back. We weren't going to cross that stage for graduation, throwing our caps in the air and staying up off of Ballantine Lane until the sun rose, drinking cheap beer in the back of his father's pickup and telling

ourselves that we mattered and were going to make our name in the world and that everybody who stood in our way could go fuck off. I knew that wasn't going to happen, but it still felt like that's what we were supposed to do. I just wanted that moment of knowing that we had made it through together. I had known him for so many years. Instead, I walked the stage alone and left the ceremony early, hugging my father. My mother didn't come to the graduation. She later told me that she wasn't feeling well, same as she wasn't feeling well during my sister's graduation two years later, or during those birthdays she missed, or the week before she died. I accepted that sometimes my mother didn't feel well. When we talked on the phone, I told her she hadn't missed much, that I had accidentally put the tassel on the wrong side, anyway.

Matt and I had been friends for twelve years, but he never told me where he was going. He just went, as I ate lunch along that east hall wall alone, listening to sports talk. Eventually, I stopped eating lunch at school altogether, instead driving back to my father's house and lying on the basement floor staring at the ceiling. I later found out that during this time, Matt and Jared had disappeared to Alaska. That's what Matt told me in an e-mail two years later. They were afraid I would tell if I knew. Thanks for the trust, boys, I thought as I read it. There wasn't any Alaska for me. I wanted to go to school somewhere far from home, but in-state tuition was cheaper, and my father was willing to help pay if I stayed in-state. Most schools rejected my application, anyway, despite high test scores. Low grades. So I ended up enrolling at the University of Idaho, same as my older brother. Idaho didn't have strict admission standards. Those last few months of high school had been bad. Just sitting against the wall, waiting to graduate. Just waiting. To listen to my mother call and tell me that she had just found a coupon for Diet Coke, or

that she had given up on the Houston Astros because they had no starting pitching, or that she missed my father.

She killed herself four years after I graduated, and that's when I finally called Matt. It was maybe three days before the funeral. He knew her, or at least knew about her. He knew that she had cut her wrists when I was in high school, and he knew that she had been hospitalized several times. He knew because I had told him, while we were sitting on the floor in my room and watching the washed out television on my dresser. He was one of only a few people in my life who knew anything about her. The phone rang and rang, and when his brother picked up and left a message, I said thank you and hung up. I lay on the bed for two hours, just staring at the ceiling. Everything was different.

I try to remember those high school years before Matt left fondly. I try to look beyond those things that made me a bad person—the person who could lie to his father and break into an old man's home because he was too scared to turn back on the people his friends some Saturday afternoon—and remember my big dreams and ideas. I like that I was naive and dull to reality, and that I could convince myself that I could go anywhere. That boy was able to imagine this—we're driving along the mountains. It's summer. We are young and weathered. We are seventeen. Gravel kicks up from the truck. "A Whiter Shade of Pale" plays over the tinny little speakers, from one of those oldies stations barely catching static, and I'm singing the words a beat late because I keep forgetting them. We're in Montana, and my mother is still alive, and Matthew's sister is still alive, and all that will happen in the years to come is just this distant melody which neither of

us can place as the road rolls by. I think it's beautiful out there, on the edge. I think we could drive until we are old men and the people we know and love have faded from this earth. We don't believe we will ever break down along the edge of the highway, and sleep scared in the truck while the nights turn cold. We don't believe we will ever be lonely for Idaho.

VII. MOVING FORWARD

At the time of my older brother's graduation, I had not seen her since winter. She didn't have money to buy gifts, then, but we ate chili dogs with her on Christmas Eve before returning home in the evening. It rained that night, as I lay by the Christmas tree in the dim glow of a few strings of lights. None of our childhood pictures or the clay bells we crafted in grade school hung from the tree. Somewhere between the move from Rush Road to Cobblestone, the box of ornaments disappeared. Our tree was covered in dull, generic lights and strings of beads we bought at Wal-Mart for five dollars. Mardi Gras Christmas, Elsa joked. When we visited other families, their trees were stacked with family pictures with Santa. For weeks we rummaged through closets searching for our old ornaments, pushing aside old VHS tapes in the garage. Part of me expected the box to show up eventually. I hoped there would come a time when we would laugh about it years later, sitting around the kitchen table in our middle-age, reminiscing about what we thought we had lost. Though the tree, which Elsa and I nicknamed Freddy, was bare and I was twenty-years old, I stayed awake all night, like I did when I was a boy. In the low blue glow of the lights, I shifted aside presents and squinted for my name. At the age of nine or ten, I used to open the door to Elsa's room at 6:00 a.m. and wake her with a light shake, saying, "Hey Elsa, it's Christmas." We would then walk quietly to Glen's room and knock. Then wait for my father and Matthew.

I no longer woke my family members. They slept normally and did not need me to tell them it was Christmas. The all-nighter was easier at the age of twenty, because I could drink coffee and play Text Twist on the Internet. I was up until 3:00 a.m. most nights, anyway. At 6:00 in the morning the television yule log crackled and I lay on the

couch waiting for my father to walk in. Hypnotic television fire. Sometimes, if I started to fall asleep, I would sing a little under my breath, hoping somebody else would show up. It was always a relief when my father stepped out and waved at me. It was becoming harder and harder to convince myself that there was a point to the all nighters. Just me trying to cling to the happiness my boyhood self found in them.

That Christmas, I received eight albums from my siblings. My sister bought me Tom Waits and Bob Dylan, though she hated both of them. She called Waits Fishman. Every song is about fish, she told me. “Grargh going to eat some fish I'm fishman.” I tried to argue with her that it was just one song. “No, it's all of them. Fish.” Anyway, she bought the albums. They were all I asked for. Album after album in a long list. The Dylan album was *Infidels*, one of Dylan's early 80's albums. I already owned Dylan's best work, but had a compulsion to collect the mediocre ones, too. Otherwise the collection would not be complete and how could I call myself a fan then? My father just gave us money, little envelopes that he put up on the tree. It was less work for him, he said. “You guys like money, don't you?” he asked with a sort of wink. While the rest of the family ate the homemade cinammon rolls Elsa baked, I slumped into bed and fell asleep. When I woke at 1:30, they were watching *Spider-man*. I poured myself a mug of coffee and returned to my room. Toby McGuire annoyed me with his fake nerdy awkwardness.

On New Year's Eve, my father, Elsa and I ate chips and drank sparkling cider in the living room. The three of us counted down. I rubbed my eyes when “Auld Lang Syne” played. The song made me cry. My mother was asleep in her apartment as the clock rolled to 2007. Midnight was too late for her, and there was nobody to celebrate

with. “I’ll just have a glass of wine before I sleep and toast the New Year in my dreams,” she told me over the phone that night, her voice reassuring, rather than wistful or sad. 2007 was supposed to be a big year for our family. Matthew was graduating from college, Elsa was graduating from high school and would be accepted to the University of Michigan in the spring. Glen would start applying to colleges, too. We grew up quickly, my mother told me. She told Elsa to buy a warm coat. Michigan winters were cold. When the tree died and my father and I carried it out, dry branches breaking around us as we shoved Freddy through the door and onto the curb. Two weeks later, I returned to Moscow, Idaho, for the spring semester. I made no resolutions.

In anthropology I sat in the back of the lecture hall sketching out poems based off “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” and “Desolation Row” while the professor lectured about cultures in Africa and Asia. The poems were meant to be funny and depressing, respectively. Lines about Wonder Bread in the first and playing guitar until the fingers bled in the second. I didn’t let anybody see these. I knew they weren’t good. Matthew called the professors by their first names and always seemed to be writing something. Two years older than me, he wrote stories about aliens and time vortexes, plus poetry. I didn’t read much of his writing—secretly afraid that it would be better than mine. I was starting to write meditations on family, though my focus wandered. I wanted to be like him, but then the Yankees would be playing and I would find myself writing on an Internet forum for three hours while the poems developed dust. Matthew’s best friend Brian had died from a brain tumor when he was sixteen. Brian’s funeral was the first I ever attended. I was a freshman in high school. When I walked up to the casket, it

startled me that his face was bearded. I had heard that hair and fingernails continued to grow after death, but to see it was jarring. He looked like he was sleeping.

Matthew was in a long-term relationship with a girl he met when he first moved into the dormitories, Angie, and I would see them together as I walked to class from time to time. I hustled past with a small wave, me in my little world, my music playing. When he knocked a week before his graduation, the door was slightly ajar. The Beatles *Rubber Soul* warbled out of the stereo as I sat at the computer, window open to a New York Yankees web forum. I had 25,000 posts on that forum. Sticky notes hung from the shelves above me. They contained little bits of poetry and the phone card numbers my mother passed on to me, so that we could talk. At night, they sometimes fluttered to the table, my mother's numbers falling.

Matthew asked me how many finals I was taking. I was a writer, I had no finals. “Do you think you could head down to Boise early? I want Mommy to come to my graduation. It would mean a lot to me.”

Coordinating with our father, I was to drive the family Subaru up with my mother while my father drove a rented mini-van with Elsa and Glen. It would be the Lindquist family caravan. My father had booked a hotel room in Lewiston, down the hill from the university. Matthew had found a boarding house where my mother could stay. There wasn't any suggestion that she would stay in the hotel with us. Bus down to Boise from Moscow, drive back to Moscow the next day, then drive back to Boise a few days later. Logically, the plan was circuitous and unwieldy, but I wasn't a logical person. If she wanted to go, if Matthew wanted her to, I wanted it. She was absent from my high school graduation, and that had been ten miles from her apartment. The night I flipped

the tassel, she told me she didn't feel well. I hadn't really expected her there. She seemed to feel sick when there was some event she would see my father at. I didn't begrudge her for it.

After I talked with Matthew I walked down to the cafeteria, turned up the volume on my small mp3 player, and ate a hamburger. I sat at a corner table with five empty chairs. My neighbors laughed and joked at the table next to mine, pulling out cell phones to make their plans for the night. I pulled out my mp3 player and pretended to be searching it intently. Always afraid that somebody might see me the way I saw me. In my family, there was a single cell phone. We didn't own personal ones. I used the landline to call my mother. Though I tended to pace at home while talking, in my dorm room, I could not move more than five feet in any direction. I finished the hamburger and hustled back to my room. After dinner most nights in the spring, I watched the Yankees and searched out the Bob Dylan bootlegs I had scrawled on a few Post-Its. A quiet volume on my stereo was at ten setting. I usually turned the speakers up to twenty or twenty-three, especially for albums that played well at volume like *Highway 61 Revisited* or *Who's Next*. Stepping off the elevator, you would know if I was in my room. The music stretched down the hall. A few semesters before, the guys next door were hanging out with a few girls and I was blasting "Desolation Row." One of them started kicking the wall whenever the harmonica came on. Eventually, she came into my room and asked me to turn it down. I was surprised, "But it's his best album," I said. She gave me an odd look and walked back into the other room. It *was* his best album. People needed to know that, I thought. I didn't understand how it could sound so different for

me than it did for a person on the other side of the wall. On my mother's ring that night, I let the song play for a moment after I picked up the phone.

“I can't hear you.”

I cut the stereo. “I was listening to The Beatles,” I said. “They put me in a good mood.” After her funeral, we would listen to *Abbey Road*, and my father would call a friend and tell him that we were sitting in the living room listening to sad Beatles music.

“Are you looking forward to your first trip to Moscow?”

“Yes.” she said, “I'm feeling great. Just great. I can't wait to see you.”

I had not seen her in five months.

“That's good to hear,” I told her. I opened a game of Minesweeper and started tapping at the keys. Click click click mine click click click mine click. I played without thinking. “That's what matters.” We talked baseball. Houston was not playing well. The Yankees were winning. She wanted to be a Yankees fan for the summer. The season was young, I cautioned her, no reason to panic. She was not allowed to be a Yankee fan just yet. These were our customary roles: Me, the diehard Yankee fan throwing things at the television, her, the Astros fan silently just hoping for a few wins each week. And at some point each season, she always tried to switch over, and I always told her no. She needed to stick with her team. She needed to understand the importance of fan permanence. We both said the right things in the right places. I didn't ask her if she was looking forward to seeing my father, or if she wished she was staying at the hotel with us. After an hour, as we were winding down, she said quietly that I might be surprised by how thin she looked. I responded with, “Uh huh.” Five seconds passed without either of us speaking, “But you're feeling good, right?”

“I’m feeling great,” she said, emphasis on the word “great.” “The cats miss you.”

“I miss the cats. They’ll get lonely with you gone.”

“They’ll be alright.”

The grid on Minesweeper was hard to master, but I was good at it.

“So I found this Dylan song,” I said. “It’s called “I’m Not There.” He recorded it after his motorcycle crash, when he retreated from society. Nobody really knows what happened with that crash. People thought he might be dead or horribly disfigured.”

“Oh, that’s neat. You know so much.”

Her weight didn’t come up again.

These trips all felt the same. I smiled at the Northwestern Trailways bus driver as he took my ticket. I slouched into an empty seat and slung my backpack onto the one next to me, so that other people loading onto the bus would be discouraged from sitting next to me. Then, as the rest of the bus filled, I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. *Just stay away from me. Sit somewhere else. Just let me be.* So far from everything, I thought. We are so far from everything, Marky boy. Somewhere between Riggins and McCall I actually did drift, dreamlessly. With a jolt, I woke to find the bus rolling through the Idaho night. The woman ahead of me cursed her cell phone reception. We were in deep Idaho, along a wooded plain. You couldn’t see it in the dark, not really, but you could feel the even way the bus moved. When we pulled into the station in Boise, I stepped off and shook my father’s hand.

My mother was right. She looked thin. She also looked tired. The skin under her eyes was dark and baggy. Her purple sweater hung loose at the arms, her collarbone

seeming to jut out. She had been shorter than me since my freshman year at Eagle High School, but I could not remember her appearing as whittled to the bone as when I stood in the doorway that morning. Maybe when I was younger and she was in the hospital, but I don't remember her looking malnourished then. This was the kind of shrunken thin-ness you would notice if you saw her in the supermarket. My how spindly that woman looks, you might think. My how much diet cola she has loaded into the front of that cart.

If I asked her how much she was eating or if she was hungry, her answer would be something like, "I had my Grapenuts for breakfast. Very filling." Listening to my mother talk about Grape Nuts made you believe that a person could live on a bowl of cereal or two a day. We hadn't grown up asking her questions about her health, though. There was an unspoken barrier that had been built during hospital visits and Sunday outings when we were too young to understand our mother's depressions or her eating disorder. At least that barrier existed for me. Perhaps it was different for Matthew, who was two years older, or for Elsa and Glen, who didn't talk for those long hours with her like I did. I loved my mother. I didn't want her to feel self-conscious about who she was. I could handle the internal strain of negotiating that relationship. That was easy, I told myself. You've done that your entire life, I told myself. It's none of your business, I told myself. Later that summer, when we were at Flying Pie, and Matthew asked if she was going to eat a breadstick. She said no, she was full, and he told her, "You have to eat." There was a small moment of silence, and I pretended to look out the window. The sky was clear save for a few clouds. What a nice day. I didn't want to see my mother blush. She laughed loudly and tore off half of a breadstick. "How's Houston these days?" I

asked. Elsa pouted in the corner. “You guys always talk about baseball. Can't we talk about something other than baseball?”

I don't know how much weight she lost in those last months. Enough to notice, I guess, enough for my hug to be a careful one. I almost believed I could feel her bones. I could snap her in half if I wanted to, I thought. Next to her was the little suitcase. After she returned a few days later, the suitcase remained half-unpacked for the next two months. When the police entered her apartment, they would ask us if she had been planning a trip. But the thing had been there for months. She was like me, she was like my father. We didn't keep ourselves in order. My father with his Porsche parts lying on the kitchen floor, me with books about the Civil War, Bob Dylan histories, memoirs about death, and papers strewn about my dorm room, my mother with her half-open suitcase. Coming, going, it didn't matter.

I picked it up, she said she was happy she had raised such a nice boy as we walked down to the Subaru. Pulling out of my mother's parking lot didn't feel important or momentous, though it was the first trip we had taken with her since we were children. Same roads, same speed limits, same empty towns as every trip. As we rolled into the foothills, Bruce Springsteen was singing about Roy Orbison singing about the lonely. I was too nervous to sing with him, but from time to time, I hummed a little, as if to show her and Glen I knew the melodies. *Born to Run* was one of my good driving albums. When listening to it, my life seemed epic, each day holding a weight. Springsteen sang about running on the backstreets and racing in the street. He sang about gunfights in the alleyways and drinking in abandoned beach houses while falling in love. I grew into listening to it while in that sixth floor dorm at Idaho, in a trashed room that smelled of

dried piss, on those Fridays when I did not feel I could leave my room, when my hand shook on the doorknob. Staring through the peephole, I saw my neighbors lounging in the hall, sitting against the wall. I lay back down. Years later, it would be the same when I wanted to step out onto the porch for a cigarette. Separating the blinds, watching for neighbors. If they were throwing a barbecue, I smoked inside, though technically that wasn't allowed in the lease. I just didn't want to make that small talk, put on a smile, pretend that I cared.

Those Fridays in college were the ones on which I inevitably called my mother. Her college days included things like five-cent beer nights—but don't you drink before you're twenty-one, Marcus, she liked to say—and it must have painfully clear to her that my college days were a lonelier, more isolated affair. Our conversations were filled with the minutia of baseball, music history, talk of my piano playing or basketball, what dinner might be that night, more baseball, more music, more writing. Rarely mentions of other people, except for when I talked about my roommate, a guy I nicknamed Spidey for his long arms and the fact that he rarely left the room. All those nights filled with the inner bits of my mind. I wonder if she felt guilty for my upbringing or her absences, like she had taken something from me and turned me into that kid who knew more about Bob Dylan than he did his own roommate. I didn't want her to feel guilty. I loved my life, mostly. Music made me feel there was something to live for. Staring through that mesh screen in spring, staring out over Moscow, grumbling to Springsteen's words, I felt comfortable. I didn't know how to trade in that dark swaying for a social existence. More than that, I didn't know if I even wanted to trade in, except when the little twinges of loneliness hit. In the building across from me, I often saw a woman sitting at her desk

with a book open. I hoped that just once she might glance up, see me swaying to the sound of Bruce, and wave. Two people walked into her room. She hugged them.

Minutes later, she was gone. Only me.

When I wanted to I could really belt out Springsteen—this rough Bruce impersonation that hurt the back of my throat and came off deep and out of tune. That voice was different than my Dylan voice, less cadenced and subtle, different still from my Beatles voice, which I broke in with a slight British accent without trying. At night I sometimes recorded my singing voice, and it didn't sound like what I heard in my head. It sounded like me, out of tune and pressing. I tried harder to hit a different voice, but they were all me. Still, I kept singing. Breaking out those voices made me feel like I could be big and dramatic and sad and happy and romantic without having to use my own words. I spoke with an occasional stutter, a little bit of a lisp. I was self-conscious of my voice. For several years in college, I intentionally spoke with a slight southern accent because it was easier for me. At a party hosted by one of my professors, a woman asked what it was like growing up in the south. I told her I was born in Illinois, then moved to New York, and had mostly lived my life in Idaho. She walked back to the drink table confused. Channeling Springsteen or Dylan, I might have sounded like Mark Robert Lindquist, but I sounded like what I thought was a better version of the guy. Nobody was going to ask me what was wrong when I was crooning with Bobby Dylan. Everybody sings. In the shower, in the car, while cleaning. It's normal, it made me feel normal. I kept my best voice for when I was lying in bed, while my father and siblings slept. Or when I was driving through the foothills at seventy miles per hour, the dust draining

behind me in the rearview mirror, the road gone to dirt. In those moments I could feel OK.

Over the top of the music, Glen leaned forward to talk. Atop his shoulder-length hair sat a pair of sunglasses. Glen played bass guitar and occasional keyboard in a band called The First Ladies. Two years from that point, my own hair would creep past the shoulders. I did not know this as I drove, of course, with my buzzcut and glasses, a Yankee hat perched on my head. As I drove, I did not think about the future. I focused on the road as we rounded out of the foothills into Horseshoe Bend through the static-filled radio stretch as my father might have been doing. Twenty miles later the stations would die completely as you entered the mountains. “This is so exciting,” my mother said several times, to which I grunted. “I could make it blindfolded.” “But you’ve done it before, Mark. It’s fun for me,” she said with a smile.

We pulled down the last curves at 45 mph and slowed over the river. Horseshoe Bend was the first town on the way to Moscow. It was like Eagle in many ways, except less. There were no subdivisions sprouting up on the edges, nor Walmarts. A drive through Horseshoe Bend lasted three or four minutes at most. Towns like that in Idaho barely brushed the map. There are many of them—little communities clinging to the edges of mountain roads or valley rivers. The largest town on the road to Moscow was McCall, which stayed alive through summer boaters on vacation and winter skiers heading to Mount Brundage.

“I think we’re stopping here real quick,” I said to her. “If you want to get something to eat or something.”

“Great,” she said, smiling and giving one of her little laughs. She laughed a lot. She laughed at Glen’s bad animal puns. “I can’t bear to see you go,” or the score of the Yankee game, or her plans to go grocery shopping. How much of that was her medications, how much was simply the fact that she didn’t always know what to say—like me that way. Or maybe she just took joy out of small things. That thought comes to me last, and I don’t know if it says more about me or her.

My father waited for us to close the doors of the Subaru. He wore sunglasses, a pair of flip-flops, and a checkered button-up shirt. It was his summer outfit.

“Hello Katy, how are you?”

“I’m good, I’m good.

“I’m really glad you could make it.”

“Me too,” she said, smiling, the wind whipping at her. That was the extent of their conversation for most of the trip. My father would make a small comment, and my mother would laugh and smile. There was no mention of her sudden weight loss. Before the funeral my father said it was one of the things he had most noticed about her from the trip, but he didn’t talk about it with her, and neither did I. We all noticed. It was impossible not to. In the gas station, he bought Twizzlers, trail mix, and a bottle of Dr. Pepper—his road trip foods. My mother bought a Diet Coke—her every day drink. At Fred Meyer’s, she loaded case after case of diet cola into the cart, varying her brand according to the coupons for the week. It was too heavy for her to lug up the three flights of stairs to her apartments, so we did that work on our Sunday visits. She also bought boxed wine. She carried that up by herself. The boxes stacked in the corner over time, empty jugs accumulating under the sink. I never thought of my mother as a drinker, but

there was always wine in that apartment. Springsteen was singing about barefoot girls drinking beer in the rain. The long Clarence Clemens solo broke in. “There goes Big Man,” I said quietly. Nobody heard me. Glen readied an album to put into the CD player. At the stop sign my father waited for me.

The drive to Moscow lasted seven hours. Loosely, the route followed the curves of the river. All along the way we passed small towns. Horseshoe Bend, Cascade, Meadows, New Meadows, McCall, Riggins, Whitebird, Grangeville, Lewiston, Moscow. We slowed to twenty-five for two minutes to pass the gravel parking lots of diners, the faded lettering of *Paul’s Market*, a bait shop or a hunting store, a faded billboard asking us to come again. Thanks for visiting! “You are welcome, town” I said as I pulled past. My mother laughed. The largest towns were those with recreational industry. Tourists stopped in McCall and Cascade to ski, boat, and camp. They came to Riggins to launch rafts down the rapids. I had gone rafting once, with my father’s fiancé when I was in high school. She was a good person for me and I was sad when the engagement fell through. My mother existed through phone calls and Sunday visits, but Kathy was *there*, asking me about school, sitting next to me as I popped the clutch. My mother sipped at her Diet Coke and stared out the window as we passed another green metal sign counting down the miles. She had been to southeastern Idaho when she was institutionalized by the state, but this was her first time visiting the northern part of the state. “Pretty trees. I like the river.” She watched my father's SUV disappear around a corner.

We were out of the mountains as *Bringing It All Back Home* played. Out in the flats, I did not care if my father drove fast, if he sipped his coffee and passed cars right before the solid yellow line. *Highway 61 Revisited* was a tighter album—harder, more cynical, all dark swirling blues bleeding from song to song, but *Bringing It All Back Home* was more fun. It was Dylan at 24, gleefully screwing with the conventions of the folk music he had helped bring to the forefront in the early 60's. "Penny's Farm" turned to "Maggie's Farm," I told my mother, taking a fact I had learned from the Martin Scorsese documentary on Dylan. It was an important album, she needed to know this, so I talked and talked and talked. About Woody Guthrie and Dylan's folk beginnings, about the Newport performance in 1965 when they booed Bobby. About why *Highway 61 Revisited* was the peak of Dylan's mountain and how years down the road he had found Christianity and freaked people out all over again. Riding with me must have been like having a little jabbering encyclopedia that reads entries without asking you. There was a book-ish quality to everything I was saying, but I just wanted her to know. Glen smirked in the backseat.

"I like "Mr. Tambourine Man,"" she said after the album ended. That answer made me feel like everything I had said had not mattered. Everybody liked that song. "Imagine" was her favorite John Lennon song, too. Predictable Mother, always taking the easy answer. Not everybody was going to be me and willingly buy an album like *Sometime in New York City*, even if I wished that they would. There was no revelation in her thoughts, and that frustrated me. She said what most people who don't listen to Dylan say.

"He sounds sad on it," I said, trying to get more out of her. "He sounds lonely."

“I think Dylan sounds happy and carefree. Like a little hippie farmer.”

I had never heard it that way. We passed a busted shed at the foot of a hill.

“But he's weary.”

“I thought it was a drug song, Mark. They were all loopy back then.”

“No, that's what everybody thinks, but Bob was just big on the pep pills to stay up for his concerts, and some marijuana,” I said. My mother smiled a little and murmured in acknowledgment. Sometimes you couldn't win with me.

We stopped in McCall for dinner at 5:00. It was the first time my mother and father had eaten together in almost a decade. I cannot remember the family meals from my boyhood, cannot remember what my mother liked to cook or my parents' conversations in the evening after my father came home from work. I can remember running through the back of the field and the feeling of tall grass against my legs, what it was like to pull the legs off a water skipper (Elsa set up Skippy Hospital while my brothers and I toyed with the little bugs), or the evening walks that I took with my mother as we walked toward the foothills on the broken asphalt of Ballantine Lane. I can remember some things, if I try, but when my mother and father speaking is only what I pretend, conjured out of my relationships with both of them separately, and what my mother said about my father when we talked on the phone years later. He didn't talk about her.

The details I can remember are small, anecdotal, and don't add up to what it was to be married to a person for thirteen years. They don't add up to love. I wish I had written it all down as it happened, that I had had the foresight to understand that things

were changing and that as I grew older, I would not know what love meant for them. Maybe love was in my father spending his retirement fund to pay my mother's hospital bills. Maybe it was the desperation in the letters he sent to legislators. Maybe it was him crying at the funeral as he tried to explain what each picture meant. I was a boy when my mother was in the hospital, and I was still a boy when my parents divorced. That boy wanted to play video games and climb trees. He didn't want to see blood. He didn't want to feel like life was happening. I should be kind to that boy for shielding me from those hard things. I should be kind to that kid, even if as he grew older, he forgot what was in his parents' hearts. Once, they had a Date Night and went to see the movie *Tin Cup*, starring Kevin Costner. It was sold out. That mediocre Kevin Costner movie is what I remember. Mostly, their relationship exists in my father's memories and stories, not mine, forged when I was too young to comprehend the two of them as anything more than my parents. Those are not stories that he shares often, though she has been buried for four years and his beard has slowly grown white. I imagine that some nights, he might sit out in his workshop smoking a cigar, NPR playing low while he slides a board through the band saw, and he remembers my mother as a person I didn't know. And I want to tell our family's story, but I don't want to take from my father, or my brothers, or my sister. Their memories are their own, and writing them is harder. In the end, I am mostly left with my own scattered pieces of glass, hoping for a reflection that is broken, and unfinished, and still true.

In McCall two months before my mother died, my parents sat at opposite ends of the table, and I somewhere in between, trying to pretend nothing was different. She ordered a salad and picked it through. I was conscious of everything she said and did,

and it made me feel uncomfortable. I wanted her to talk to my father, but she did not. *Just be normal.* It was a big family meal, and though she smiled and laughed in the right places, she also wasn't part of our family unit anymore. Not the unit that sat there eating, laughing at the fact that I couldn't keep anything over the plate or Glen's story about how somebody at the store confused him for a woman because of the hair. My mother could smile with those things, but in many ways, it was like a meal of inside jokes. I had been a messy eater for years. Glen's hair had always caused some small bit of confusion from time to time. I wished she could know us the way I knew my family. I wished she could be part of that. When my father asked us if we knew what Matthew planned on doing after graduation, my mother perked up. She had talked with Matthew about this. "He's going to work for a cleaning company through the summer," she said with a smile. When I saw the light in my mother's eyes, the little spark, I was reminded that she cared about the simple aspects of our lives—what we ate for dinner and the menial jobs we were applying for and the latest book we had checked out. It's hard for me to reconcile that caring with what she went through mentally, all of the pressure I couldn't begin to understand. That she still cared was beautiful to me, beautiful and painful. They're small things, but those are the same things that add up to a life eventually.

The sun was slanting low into the mountains as we left. *Exile on Main Street* was almost over, Jagger singing about shining a light, and we were quiet, because I was a little shaken by that dinner—seeing my mother and father together for the first time since I was a child, and the song seemed to be saying everything, anyway. Breaking down from the mountains and hitting the flat before Grangeville, the sky split wide in front of us. A truck rolling in miniature along a dirt road toward the one house on the horizon. In

that view, I could be anybody, do anything. That view sums up Idaho for me, it sums up everything. In the distance, a thunderhead billowed upward. We were between systems, not quite in one place or the other, not close enough to be pelted with rain and so the sun shone upon us. Few cars, fewer homes, abandoned mine tunnels and trestles that have not seen trains in decades, ghost towns, towns losing themselves to ghosts. After a while, it seemed like the music and the land were all that ever existed, that people were just on the edge of things. The Cascade and Boise Rivers, the Sawtooth Mountains, they would be there long after *Exile on Main Street* stopped playing, and beyond that, after my family had passed on to history. The land would still be there as I grew to be old, my hands arthritic, my hair thinned, my face almost unrecognizable beyond my baby blues that I inherited from my mother. And then I would die, too, and still the sun would break upon the water of the river and the wind would sweep the dust from the plains. It's a peaceful image to me, Idaho following my death. Just to know that something I love will continue.

Eventually, the music ended, Elsa, who was riding in the Subaru after McCall while Glen rode with my father, offered up a new album. I claimed that I didn't like their music, but that was a white lie to make me feel unique. Really, it made me happy that we did not talk and that something played, regardless of whether or not it was mine. Elsa put in *Death Cab for Cutie*, a Seattle band. Elsa also made road trip mix CDs. *Road Trippin'* or *Jurassic Jams*, which ended with the *Jurassic Park* theme song. Elsa might have hated Bob Dylan and Fishman, but at least she was clever. After the trip, my mother remarked to her sister Andrea that she was impressed by how orderly we were with our music, how there were no squabbles as to who was next in line. We simply passed one

album out and placed another in, our way of harmonizing. The only time any complaints would be voiced was if I played Dylan while Elsa was in the car. I learned not to play Dylan around Elsa. My way of harmonizing with her.

Matthew's dormitory building was the same one I had just packed from days before. I hoped to see somebody I knew, so that I could say hello and my family would believe that I did, indeed, have friends. Matthew knew better. He saw me eating those dinners by myself. It would have been nice to pretend, but I didn't know the names of most of the guys who had lived on my floor. A month and a half later, I would find my mother's journal wedged in a storage closet in her apartment, flip to a random page, and see *5:00—talked to Mark. I'm worried about him.* I thought I was the only person worrying. But that was down the road, when my hair had begun to grow out and I had stopped crying, when my siblings and I were mired in those days of trying to settle into our lives without her. At some point as I think it, there are no lines or breaks to any of the stories in my family. Matthew's graduation, my mother's journal, the funeral, those long walks into the foothills with her when I was a boy, they all edged in together. My thoughts work in loops, returning to moments again and again until I can almost no longer tell what the difference is, or if it matters. But it does matter to me, because if it doesn't, then it's easier to define my mother by her death, or myself by my reclusive album gathering, or my father by the distant way he sometimes spoke. I want there to be some delineation in there. She was worried about me. That I didn't read it until later seems inconsequential, but I want to think there was a time when she didn't see me that way.

Matthew's room was filled with boxes and a scattering of loose items. Matthew kept everything. Books, movies, empty video game and computer boxes, little hand-drawn pictures of aliens (the Bouncilians, which were the main villain in one of the stories he was writing), a collection of yo-yos, several bouncy balls, a toy shark. We weren't a family who threw much out. In the nearest box was a stack of books written in the 1800's.

Matthew's face appeared no older than when he was seventeen. When he was younger, he looked like Joe Talbot, the teenage actor who played the dog's owner in the PBS series *Wishbone*. Like Glen and me, Matthew couldn't grow his facial hair out. He looked more like Glen, both of them with brown eyes, like our father's. I sometimes called Matthew "Skeletor," because he was all bones and angles. Elsa and I had blue eyes, like our mother's. Matthew liked to wear shirts with retro video game characters on them. He was wearing Pacman that night. People told me that he sounded like me, and my mother told me from time to time that I sounded like my father. Like me, Matthew wanted to write. Sometimes he sent my mother short stories, or read aloud to her on the phone. He called her Mommy. I did, too, though I started to become self-conscious about that when I entered college. What twenty year old man called their mother "Mommy." It felt so, so childish, like a way of clinging to that distant distant life where she had lived with us. But I called her Mommy anyway. I only called her Mom when I was joking with her, or if other people could hear me talking. Calling her Mom felt fake. She was Mommy to us, and our father was Daddy.

When Matthew saw our mother, he put down his books and walked over to give her a hug. She kissed him on the forehead. He told her that he was happy that she could

make it, and she smiled. Matthew, born two years before me, was the oldest in the family. He and I both carried a childish streak, growing angry when we lost at video games in the basement, easily annoyed by small comments, like when his girlfriend, Angie, asked him not to open a bag of chips during a camping trip and he sulked for the next hour, hanging around in the woods collecting firewood, steering clear of the world. When we were teenagers, one drive with our mother we started fighting. This was after Brian died. I don't remember what started the argument. At one point, I was mocking him for watching cartoons (I had stopped watching TV with the family at that point, I thought I was unique) to which he responded, "I don't care, they're good." After my mother parked her car in her lot, she asked us to calm down. I began to scream and cry. I threw my glasses across the car. She reached to the back seat to pick them up, carefully brushing the dirt off. My mother had not seen us fight in some time, because her visits were on Sundays, and we tried to behave for her. It was a moment when she had to act like a parent, and when she said that we should go upstairs to cool off, I screamed, *No, I just want to go home*. My mother's face was sad, and I regretted my outburst afterward, because I had made her sad and reminded her that her home was not mine, had never been mine. It was the place we went on Sundays instead of church, but it was not home.

Matthew was the first child in the family to graduate from college. He met the honor roll his first year at Idaho. My first year met academic probation, I thought about quitting, I was seventeen. Only after my father found out about my grades did I return, and that was after we yelled at each other for an hour, him saying, "Mark, you're one of the smartest people I know, but you have to have common sense." Later, he told me I should start taking Concerta again, as had been diagnosed for my ADHD while I was in

high school. My mother took prescriptions. I didn't want to be her. One prescription was a step down the road, and how long before I would be in a hospital with my wrists bandaged, too? That I thought of an ADHD medication as a sort of gateway prescription amuses me, but I was terrified of becoming her. Never told him that, certainly never told her that, but in the dark moods, after I was done smashing a chair against the wall in my dorm room following a Yankees loss, I cried long and hard on the lower bunk, wondering if this was what she did in her empty hours too. I felt completely and utterly alone. The prescription went unfilled, and that spring I discovered The Beatles and *Rubber Soul*, and scraped by with a C- in math. I was OK with good enough as "In My Life" played, and when the piano solo came on in the middle, I imagined my whole life in miniature, and I promised I would listen to the album every day until I died.

For my own graduation, whenever it might come, I hoped my mother would attend. She hadn't seen me graduate from high school. That time, she said she was sick, the same way she said she was sick when Elsa graduated. After Elsa's graduation, while my sister was at a party, I sat in the living room with my father and watched television. I liked watching TV with him. We didn't have to talk, and we were together. At a commercial break, he spoke up suddenly, looking at me in the shadows. His face was rigid.

"I don't know what I can do," he said, referring to my mother. He sounded exasperated. "I can't drag her to these things," he said. "She has to choose to go." My father spoke in a stern, wearied voice. It wasn't often that he let on how much our mother frustrated him. When he did, it was jarring for me, because I didn't think about her that way. To me, that absence was just Mommy. She was the person I talked to the

most in my life, but I didn't count on her to be there for my milestones. Just the way things were.

"You do all you can," I said. I did not know how to talk to him about her, and I hoped what I said was enough. Five minutes later, I left the room and my father to lie on the couch alone. Not that there was anything better to do than watch television with my father, but I didn't want to talk. Talking about her was pointless. He was right, there was nothing we could do. There would be other times, I thought, when she wouldn't feel that unease about stepping out of her apartment, where she would drive to meet us and see us move on. Or those times would never come. My high school counselor asked me if I was also afraid of getting prostate cancer, like my father, and I told him that I was not. My mother's illness was different to me. There was this nagging thought that we can't change who we are, despite the best of intentions. Or as she said during Thanksgiving Break the year before, after reading an essay I wrote about growing up while she was in the hospital, "We all have things that we regret." I didn't know what I would be regretting when I was 52. I feared that I couldn't change who I was, anymore than my mother could change herself, that after everything we try we still are basically the same. I wondered how a person came to accept those parts of themselves that will not budge or if there was even a point in trying.

My mother leaned against the wall and watched us pack up Matthew's boxes. Her eyes seemed a little vacant and when somebody called to her she startled and let out a small, "Oh!" By this time most nights, my mother was curled on the couch in her pajamas reading a mystery or relaxing with a glass of wine. My father said, in his calm,

quiet way, “Mark, your mom’s had a long day. Maybe you should drive her to her place.” After he said it, my mind moved through thoughts about what it might have meant—her medications were wearing off, she wasn’t healthy. Nothing was simple, there was always something behind something for me. Now, after years of mulling over that little statement, I think what he meant was that she had had a long day and needed to sleep. I think that’s all he meant. Matthew told me where we needed to drive. The house was up on one of the old town roads, in the hills on the edge of Moscow. My mother hugged Matthew once, kissed him on the forehead three times, before stepping toward the door. Together, my mother and I walked out into the parking lot. The moon was full. The sky was clear. It was a comfortable spring day for Moscow. No wind, no late thunderstorms. Just still. In the darkness, she appeared even smaller, more frail. We drove in silence. There was no music. It was late and headlights broke and glared through my scratched glasses.

“I bet your brother will look so handsome in his cap and gown tomorrow,” she finally said. A street sign flashed in our headlights and I nodded, though she was not looking at me.

“It feels like just yesterday that he was a little tot,” she said. “You grow up too fast.”

I laughed, barely.

“You always say that.”

“You guys are still my babies.”

I was 20. Matthew was 22. Elsa was 18. Glen was 16. I didn’t feel old, I didn’t feel old, but I was driving my mother up the hill into the dark silent night and I was

afraid. Her words were just there, and always with that laugh, too. Someone once told me that people who laugh a lot do it to keep themselves from crying. I wondered if I laughed a lot. Down the hill Matthew was packing his boxes and Elsa and Glen were sitting on chairs and talking about his video games and my father was asking if there would be room for everything in Matthew's friend's car. That was the family I knew. I did not want to be alone with my mother on top of that hill. I didn't want to be driving her or thinking about her. She was 52-years old, lived in a one-bedroom apartment, owned two cats which she neglected. Her furniture was bought at the local Good Will and she sometimes couldn't afford to take us out to eat on our Sunday visits. That was her. The couch at my father's house cost \$1200. My mother could barely afford \$100. She was also my mother, though, and I knew it wasn't fair to list these aspects of her life as if she was a piece of furniture. I could list myself, too—almost no friends, an awkward stutter, a crooked pair of glasses, lying in my dorm room cocooning myself in music, afraid to talk to other people. One of the houses had its porch light on. She smiled at me as I slowed. "Thanks for driving me. You're a good son."

It was quaint, old-fashioned house. Family photographs stood on the mantle above the fireplace. We didn't keep photos out like that. Our photographs were piled in shoeboxes in the closet. The television in Rebecca's home was large and blocky, with push buttons on the side. It reminded me of the one that had sat on my dresser in my basement bedroom when I was in high school. The local news ran quietly. Rebecca and I talked about the drive up from Boise. I asked how long she had lived in the house. She said something about her husband. I talked in a deep voice, mimicking my father. I said

things I thought my father would say and asked questions he might ask. My mother nodded politely as we made small talk, but didn't speak, other than to tell Rebecca that she would enjoy coffee in the morning if it was offered. "I would like to take advantage of that offer," was how she said it. Rebecca asked her if she liked cream or sugar. Cream. We stood in the little room where my mother would sleep. I wondered if my mother would feel lonely in a new place, having seen my father earlier in the day. Rebecca said she'd let her get settled and walked up the stairs. My mother pointed next to the bed when I asked where she wanted her bag. She took out a small travel pouch that contained her medications and set it on the bathroom sink. I pretended to study the pictures on the wall. She returned. Her face was creased with lines, her glasses slightly crooked on her face.

I yawned, then she yawned.

"You're making me yawn," she said, laughing, "yawns are contagious." I smiled. She liked that joke. I told my mother I would call in the morning when we were heading back into town. She hugged me and kissed me on the forehead three times. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said. "Have a good drive back." I waved once, and watched her disappear into the house. Something crackled in the sagebrush, perhaps a rabbit or a deer. I paused, then opened the door to the Subaru and turned around. I could see the lights of the university below. I felt empty and too far from home.

"I'm not comfortable driving at night," I said to Elsa as we wound our way through the hills of the Palouse. I squinted for the lane lines and went slow.

"Don't say things like that. Seriously," she said.

“Sorry.”

When I glanced at her, her face dark.

We ate at the Waffle House in Lewiston. Lewiston smelled of sour milk, because of the paper and timber factories across the Clearwater River. People who lived there long enough stopped noticing the smell, a girlfriend told me two years later. *You just get used to it, I guess.* With a population of 30,000, it was the ninth largest city in Idaho, and the original capital of the state—founded in 1863 during a gold rush. A year later, as the gold rush waned, a resolution was passed to have the capital moved to Boise. I couldn't imagine Lewiston being the capital of anything. It was a rundown, depressing city to me, with old buildings and that smell clinging to everything. On the drive to pick up my mother, I slipped *L.A. Woman* by The Doors into the CD player. The album would play on loop throughout that day. It was my favorite Doors album. Jim Morrison's voice was croaky and deep. He died three months after its release. This was the one time in the trip I would drive alone, and I pounded on the ceiling in time, growling along with The Lizard King as I drove to the top of the hill. It was 10:00 a.m.. For my own graduation a year and a half later, Moscow would receive a record snowfall, but during Matthew's, the sky was clear and the day was hot. The rest of my family was already in the Kibbie Dome, seated, by the time my mother and I found a parking spot on the side of the hill. We were forced to stop on a dirt road, behind a long line of other cars.

“We're going to need to cheer so loud when he comes up,” she said. We walked briskly, both of us looking forward. In the crowd of people, a bearded classmate from

one of my writing courses tapped me on the shoulder. He had not read about my mother. In that class, I had not written about her yet. I introduced them.

“You must be so proud of your son,” he said.

“Oh yes, I am,” she said, but her words were awkward and forced, like she hadn’t expected to have somebody other than me talk to her. I felt a little panicked. For an instant I saw what this other man could see. This starved looking woman with a pair of scratched glasses, whose voice had a sort of floaty sound, like she wasn’t completely there. We said our goodbyes and promised to keep in touch. I never spoke to him again, though he seemed like a friendly, genuine person. My mother and I took a seat near the front and stood while the graduating class entered. My attention wandered during the speeches. At one point, we held a moment of silence for those in our lives who had passed away. Nobody in my life had passed away at that point, other than my grandmother from my father’s side. As I bowed my head there were no feelings of foreboding or unease.

The Kibbie Dome was overheated that day. The rest of my family was somewhere out there, but in that little corner of the bleachers it was just my mother and me. After sleeping in a Lewiston hotel, I owed it to her to stay with her and to see her through that day. I cared. It mattered. When Matthew’s name was called, I stood and cheered. My mother stood, too, several seconds later. I glanced at her. She seemed like she had just been caught out in the open. She clapped and smiled, but also furrowed her brow slightly. Finally, after he was gone, she said, “I couldn’t see him well, but I am so proud of him.” She sounded tired and she didn’t smile. For a long time afterward, she stared off toward the stage as if he might cross it again for her, before she sat back down

on the bleachers. After I sat down, I put an arm around her and gave her a short hug. This was her son up there. To me it might have been a tedious wait, but for her, it was something beyond formality, something that mattered so much that she had ripped herself up from her comfort zone for the first time in years.

We would not return to Moscow until Matthew's birthday in early July. He mentioned something about wanting our mother to come up for that trip, too, but my father responded with a little scoff, and I knew that she was a burden in some way to us, that we were a family unit without her, that though she was my mother, she was not necessarily part of us. She never came back to Moscow. The next time Matthew saw her was in the middle of July, after she died, as he read her favorite Emily Dickinson poem aloud at her memorial service. "Hope," he read from the poetry book he had given her for Christmas, "is the thing with feathers." He sounded like my father.

Three deer huddled on the side of the road, frozen in our headlights. My mother yelled, "Look, deer." They were dropping back into the dark as we passed them. You mostly saw deer by the rivers on those drives, if you saw any life at all. In the dark, though, it was hard to make them out. The mountain cut a hard outline against a clear night. We slowed for the deer, because we didn't want to hit them, because that is how people died on those roads. Curves a beat too fast and the deer freeze. Hit the brakes an instant too late. Break against the railing and the airbags don't deploy. Spin, flip, fall miles from Horseshoe Bend. In the little shack on the side of the hill a light flickers on and a man bolts from bed at the sound of it all.

That's how it happened to people, I thought. That's how it went down. My mother pointed at the deer and I smiled, though she could not see me, and though I mostly missed them.

"Yeah," I said.

"I didn't see them. I'm trying to drive," Elsa said. She had been at the wheel for several hours. Her voice was strained. In three months she was going to the University of Michigan to study nursing. Elsa was more logical than me, more practical. She drove the speed limit. She didn't make mistakes. My father was a practical man, too. He sat out in his workshop measuring and crafting. Using numbers, making adjustments. There was a hard logic there. And me, I had no plan. Instead of working during the summer, I stayed in the little room in my father's house writing on internet forums about the New York Yankees under the name Md23Rewls, listening to ESPN radio, downloading Bob Dylan bootlegs. During high school, I always imagined meeting up with old friends for a beer in Eagle, and reminiscing about our days, like they did in the movies or in songs. That whole glory days beat from Springsteen. I thought that was going to be me. Matt Henretty and Jared Lewis were gone to Alaska, though, and had only come back long enough for Matt to roll his father's truck on a rainy night on the foothill road. Somehow, they survived, but we stopped forming plans to meet up. There was nobody else. I didn't know what had happened to Allison Barber or Calli Ellis or Annie Curfman. Those people were gone to me. I wasn't going to settle down with one of them in a small town, raising a family, like I imagined I would in those days in high school.

Few people really thought about me. I was four years into college and earning a degree in English. I wanted to be a writer, but in my life—no jobs, no money, not even

any cheap publications to talk about to my family. The best I could say was that I won a small award for an essay I wrote for a nonfiction class, but only my father and my mother had read it. I didn't want to send it to either of them. I thought my mother would hurt herself if she read it, I thought my father would weep. None of us wanted to relive those moments, certainly not them, not me either, though I was the one who wrote it. Those memories were past, dark past, and we were beyond that, or tried to be. She would have to die for me to be pushed into truly trying to figure out who we were as people, why good people can be put through hell even when they are innocent. Two months later that evening would come, and I would hear the sirens rise, and I would realize I understood nothing. In the Subaru, my focus was on river off to the side and the music as it played. Each song came on and I tried to hear them like Elsa and my mother might. The Who played softly in the background. It was a good night to watch for deer. Nobody spoke again until we were through Horseshoe Bend, and then it was my mother.

“Did you ever see the movie of *Tommy*?” she asked.

I raised my eyebrows and said no.

“I watched it when I was younger,” she said. We drove over the river and the road rose. “Not the best movie ever.”

“I imagine not,” I said. I liked when my mother talked about her own early years. It reminded me that she had once been somebody else. Then, we were in the hills on the other side of Horseshoe Bend, and I felt like I was almost home, before remembering that our mother no longer lived with us. She had not lived with us for eight years. I gave a little wave as I watched my father turn the rental away from us, toward Eagle. The outer streets of Boise were mostly empty. I couldn't remember the last time I had been with

my mother that late in the night. Most of our outings ended before 5:00. The Subaru clock read near midnight. We were tired, my mother, Elsa and I. When we pulled into the parking lot, my mother opened the door and stepped out. “Thanks for driving, guys. I had so much fun,” she said. She hugged Elsa and me, kissing us three times on the forehead for good luck as she always did, then walked with her little suitcase up the outer stairs to the third floor apartment landing. We watched her for a moment, and she gave a small wave. At the top of the stairs, a figure in the shadows just waving in the dark to her children.

VIII. DANCING IN THE DARK

It's 7:20 on a Wednesday evening as I sit in the middle of the Java House at one of the awkward little middle tables, listening to George Harrison and updating my Twitter account. *Currently being stood up on a date? This isn't depressing at all.*

#enjoyingthecoffee I wonder how long I'm supposed to sit here before I can leave. I'm 24 years old. Two minutes later, a woman walks past me, turns. I squint at her. Her online profile picture showed a picture of woman throwing a snowball. Now she's wearing a tank top. We stare at each other for a second before I say, "Laura?" She smiles, "Mark?" I stand up to give her a hug. She puts her hand up and turns to order a coffee. It's a date. The woman and I met on the online dating website OK Cupid. I had been on the website for a month. Unlike sites like match.com, OK Cupid was free. I had already sunk \$120 on match.com. The site charged my credit card for two sessions because I forgot to cancel after the first.

When I first joined the website a month before, I sent out ten e-mails the first night. Three were returned. Redhead84 was not moving to Iowa City until the autumn, catlover6 was only looking for friends, and michelle responded with a series of misspelled sentences and four smiling emoticons. Then jmaffe—this Laura, who I have just met—e-mailed me, told me she liked my profile. I like my profile, too. The_M23. When it asks what kinds of music I listen to, I refer to Bob Dylan as "Bobby D." Then I list thirty-three different bands. I don't know why I do this—I don't particularly think that anybody's tastes in music are inherently sexy, though I do think they say something about the person. The site told me to fill in the box, and so I just kept typing until I couldn't think of any other bands I liked. I also write that I enjoy "three songs by Green

Day and one by The Counting Crows.” I think it reads sort of clever. What’s the most that I’m willing to share on my profile, OK Cupid asks in one box. “I like kittens and the movie *Titanic*,” I write. What are six things I could not live without: Family, friends, my music collection, the word processor, books, futons, my ability to circumvent OK Cupid’s “six things” section by adding a seventh thing. The site also wants to know “What I Think About.” After trying to come up with an interesting answer—I think about how my fantasy baseball team is faring this season, I think about wishing I knew what other people listened to on their iPods, I think about how much I hate humidity—I leave the box blank. It’s hard to describe what exactly I think about, but my profile picture is snazzy enough. There’s also a picture of me pretending to take a bite out of a cat.

Her initial e-mail told me that she has a blog, that she can relate to me writing nonfiction. Everybody thinks they can relate to me writing nonfiction. A woman who charged me \$30 on Craigslist for the use of her truck when I was moving told me that she fancied herself to be a writer, too. This girl on OK Cupid stresses that she doesn’t mean to demean what I do by comparing it to blog writing. In my empty apartment reading the e-mail, I shrug. It’s not demeaning. I don’t care if other people think that they can write. When I ask her what her blog is about, she responds “Work” and leaves it at that. She doesn’t ask what I write about. I don’t tell her. My stock answer is that I write about growing up in Idaho. That’s my book, about my childhood in Idaho. If pressed, I will tell somebody that it’s about “dark family stuff.” If pressed after that, I will say that it is about my mother’s mental health issues and her suicide when I was twenty years old. It

rarely reaches that point. I don't like being pressed. After a few exchanges, I ask if the woman wants to meet up for a drink. She agrees.

How about Wednesday at 7:00? You choose the place so I can judge you based on your selection.

I respond with *Bahaha, I hope I don't screw it up! I don't know what a seedy bar in Iowa City would be. I guess some of the writer bars like George's and Foxhead are dark and depressing. Old men and writers drink there. Depressing. How about Joe's Place?*

Five minutes later, she writes back.

Not a joke. I'll give you a HINT, because I like you: I would feel much much more comfortable if the first date was NOT in a bar. Something like coffee, or some place with food.

I do not like that she writes "hint" and "not" in all caps. Joe's Place has cheap drinks, free popcorn, pool and Big Buck Hunter. Joe's Place is fun. I am weary of this girl who will not go to a bar, who is judging me for selecting it in the first place, who puts stresses on certain words. I settle on the Java House, because I do not want to be roped in for a dinner if I don't have to be. Food is expensive. My best friend Thor and I like to joke about me being cheap, and he's right. I check my bank account every day, do calculations in my head. How much is left after an energy drink? The only paying job I've had in my life is the teaching job I currently hold at the University of Iowa, which I got without an interview. On some days, I wear shorts and flip-flops to class. I am not used to having money.

Thor calls me from Minnesota two days later. That night he will go out drinking with hometown friends. I don't know where most of the people from my high school have gone or what they have done with their lives. I was the kid with glasses who sat in the corner and wrote bad poems while flunking out of biology. My two best friends disappeared to Alaska four months before high school graduation. They didn't tell me they were leaving. They just left. I sat in my father's Toyota at lunch after that, listening to ESPN Radio and trying to pretend that I had somewhere to go. The few people that I still keep in contact with are different, now. Jared, one of the two who ran away, is married and has a daughter. His pictures on Facebook are all smiles. I can't imagine myself married. Recently, I traveled by bus to Chicago to see my cousin's wedding. I wonder when I will marry. I wonder if my father will still be alive to see a grandchild.

I am in Iowa City as Thor talks. I have not left my apartment in a week and a half except to buy groceries. We call it The Summer of The M. It's just me sitting in my apartment watching Netflix, mostly, and trying to write this book. He asks me about my strategy for the date. I say that I have none.

"No, you have one," he says. He is straight and to the point. "Your strategy is to get laid. Don't think about anything else. And Jesus, why a coffee shop? What is it with you and coffee shops?" My date off of match.com was a coffee date, too. That night it was pouring rain. I wore the green Jackson Hole, Wyoming, sweatshirt my father bought me, same one I wore almost every day through winter. The woman wasn't as attractive as in her profile picture, but that's the case for most everybody on the internet. We all know our best angles. We made fun of Lady Gaga for coming out of an egg on stage. At the end of the date, I gave her a hug goodnight and walked back in the rain. I feel

friendlier when I am drinking coffee, I think. I put two pieces of bread in the toaster. My kitchen has half a box of spaghetti, five pieces of bread, a nub of cheese, and multiple expired containers in the fridge. I shuffle them aside as I reach for the jelly. Thor continues.

“Be aggressive. Drink your little coffee, then tell her that the date’s going really well and ask her if she wants to move things to a bar?”

“Even though she said she hates bars?” I ask. Then, “What if the date’s not going really well?” I ask.

“Goddamnit, The M, stop being so pessimistic.” Thor’s yelling into the phone. He calls me The M. I call myself The M. It was a Facebook joke originally, now that’s just who I am. We yell at each other a lot, but it’s friendly yelling. We yell about sports, about the people in our writing program, about each other’s neuroticities. He has an obsessive mind, and I don’t have a life or make many social efforts on my own. Somehow we’re friends. There have only been a few times in the two years we’ve known each other that one of us has legitimately snapped at the other.

“I’m too nice,” I say. “That’s my problem.”

“Girls don’t like nice guys,” Thor tells me. “Fortune favors the bold.”

“But I am nice. I’m the nicest guy I know. And I am not bold. But I can’t just think of her as a way to get laid. My mind doesn’t work like that.”

“You need to make it work that way. You have too many excuses. You just have to go in there and do work,” he says.

“I know.” I do know. It’s easy to make excuses, to keep on keepin’ on the same way. Netflix on a Saturday night is comfortable for me. Gory Cult Horror Films From

the 80's and Dark British Psychological Films and Tender Sentimental Children's Movies, Netflix recommends. It doesn't bother me that that's my life. That's what I try to convince myself. Every now and then, I see myself from afar and I feel lonely, though. I miss people, sometimes.

"I just want this to go well, man," I say. "If it doesn't, I think I'm going to lose my faith in dating."

Thor cracks up at that, says, "You're really pinning your future on whether this date with this girl on OK CUPID you've never met works? You could be The M."

I laugh, too, but I'm not exactly joking. The toast I'm making pops up, I jump a little. Sometimes I forget.

The girl and I sit on the bench outside Java House and she talks about her job working with the mentally disabled. My sister just graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in nursing. I think people like her are better than me—I admire that they try to help improve the world. I ask this woman if she enjoys what she does, and she says yes. She apologizes again for being late. I say I'm not bothered, though I was, at first. She seems nice. I wonder if I seem nice, too. She talks about playing this game with her friends called 'Hipster or Not,' where they just sit out and watch the denizens of Iowa City walk past. I tell her she could make a killing if she watched anybody in my program go by. She talks about her long hours, then says that she's glad she has her weekend job—it takes her mind off of the rest of the week. Then she says that she's currently taking a pole dancing class. *That's not normal, normal people don't do that. Do they?* Is it offered at the recreation center, I ask her. It's a joke, she sort of

laughs. I smile and nod. I'm good at smiling and nodding and making little laughs in the appropriate places. She's rambling, something about knowing everybody in Java House. She waves at a couple walking past and they ask where they should eat. I wave, too, feeling very polite.

I have not been on a real first date in several years. When I moved to Iowa, I was dating a girl from Moscow, Idaho, and that had been going on for two years. And now it's not. I try to remember our first date. It was a coffee shop one. She spilled my coffee when she sat down. She was quiet, and I talked a lot, on that date. Her tastes in music were horrible—she listened to Third Eye Blind. We dated for two years, anyway. I try to think of all the advice on dating I've gotten in my life. Thor's advice: Be aggressive, you're trying to get laid. My father's advice: He never really had any. My older brother's advice: On Christmas, I was going to throw out the carcass of the turkey, and my brother asked why I was doing that, told me that we should save it. Then he said, "When you have a girl over, sometimes it'll be useful, you can use it to make soup." He's dating a farmer's daughter. I have no turkey carcass in my apartment at the moment.

I refocus myself. Paying attention is hard, I think. All these little details keep hitting me. *Why do her eyes scrunch up when she smiles? She talks a lot about herself. I wish I could talk about myself a little more. I have lines and jokes ready when I talk about myself. Working as a writer, working toward homelessness, hahaha I am charming. Am I saying, "Yeah" too much?. But there's nothing else to say, Marcus, other than yeah. Because you don't actually care. You don't even want to be here. She*

was twenty minutes late, and you were going to ditch in five minutes if she hadn't shown up. Maybe I should try to care at some point in time.

It's warm out and I am in one of my three nice shirts—one of the ones that isn't just a plain color and doesn't have a picture of some sixties rock band. My Bob Dylan t-shirt was from that last girlfriend, but I don't think of her when I wear it. I don't think of her at all, anymore. It's been a year since we broke up. For a month and a half, I moped in my father's house, watching the Yankees at night and staring at the computer hoping she would log onto Facebook. Then I moved back to Iowa and one night decided it was a bad relationship. I told myself I was happy to get out of it. She blocked me on Facebook for several weeks after I moved back to Iowa, said that she kept checking my page and needed to give herself a break. It's hard for me to believe that anybody could be hooked on me like that. I'm not anybody, I think.

In her profile, this new girl mentioned that anybody she meets from the site should dress up. I went with the nice black button-up, but I'm also wearing a pair of khaki shorts. Before leaving I stared in the mirror for thirty seconds. Then finally shrugged and just walked out the door. On the way over I watched my reflection in store windows. I do this a lot. I like to remember that I still exist, I think. It's like when I got my first cell phone. I took picture after picture of myself, something like eighty pictures. I can't see myself well. The look for the date doesn't work, but it's warm out and I don't want to be sweating like an idiot. Her voice is scratchy and several times she is wracked with coughing fits. She mentions that after a recent trip to the doctor, she was given antibiotics. I try to make eye contact but it distracts me when she smiles and her eyes scrunch up. It's unattractive. She looks like a dying toad when she laughs. Not. Nice.

Mark. But it's funny to me. She reminds me of a cartoon character somehow. I try to stare at her face, not at her chest. I sort of try to care.

I spent the afternoon cleaning my apartment, because Thor said I should, because there was a chance I might invite this mystery person over to watch *The Mothman Prophecies*. The dishes have been washed for the first time in five days. I even did laundry. Because I spent the whole day cleaning, I have not eaten and I am famished. I want food. I suggest that we move someplace that has meals. I am changing the venue. I am taking control of this thing. Yeah. But then I'm stuck. I can't think of any place to eat at. I don't like choosing things like that. I joke about being indecisive. She gives me a disapproving look. Well, I think, I'm sorry that I don't care about stupid things like that. I am not a details man. I am a minute-to-minute man. Eventually, I just say that we should eat at The Mill. We're walking in the general direction of the Ped Mall. I have no preference for The Mill or their overpriced food, it was just a place that came to mind. I wonder if I'm supposed to put an arm around her as we walk, or if that would be too forward. She walks faster than me. I don't put an arm around her.

We sit outside. I would rather sit inside, where it is air-conditioned, where I will not sweat quite as much, and where the waitress is less likely to forget me. *What is it with liking to sit outside? What is it about liking nice weather?* The waitress is going to forget about me, it is guaranteed. I don't push the point, though. The woman remarks on how lovely the day is, and she is right. It is not so humid, not bad. "I sort of wish it was winter. Summer is depressing," I say. She gives me an odd look and I return to the menu. I already know that I'm going to order a meatball sub, but staring at the menu is

something people do. I order a meatball sub. Half-an-hour later, the waitress walks out to ask what I ordered again. I smile and talk to her nicely. I'm very polite. "No worries. I got the meatball sub."

"Sorry again. We'll rush that out."

"I should get a discount," I joke after the waitress leaves.

"Yeah," the girl says, "or just don't leave a tip." But I don't undertip, because my mother taught me to be generous with such things, and it is course of habit. I start talking about music. I will hit my groove talking about music, I think, because my choices in music are fucking great. I'm never more myself than when I have the volume up and am shuffling around my apartment making scrambled eggs while a harmonica solo is blasting out the stereo. Nobody sees that, but I am good at dancing in my apartment to Bob Dylan. It's a very useful skill. She says that she, "listens to a little bit of everything," which in my mind means that she listens to nothing. The only band she mentions specifically is a local Irish band whose name I immediately forget. Local bands suck, I think. There's a pause in conversation. These are the places where I panic. I don't like filling pauses. Those times are when I am most apt to say something awkward. Finally, she talks.

"So you have to guess what my second job is," she says.

"Will you judge me if I don't?" I ask. I smile and hold eye contact. Good work, Mark, I think. You are doing it.

"Yes," she says, without returning the grin. Well that's annoying. I keep grinning. I feel a little dumb.

“I’m not going to guess,” I say, because I am bashful and am pretty sure that she is a stripper—the pole dancing class eliminated most of the guesswork—but I would never just outright say that on a first date. What if she just works at a gas station or something? If I suggest stripper, I will look like a fool. I had not met a stripper before that day. My entire mental concept of strippers was based on movies like *The Wrestler*. But this one does not look like Marissa Tomei, and I am not Mickey Rourke. The waitress comes over and asks if we need anything else. I want to order another drink but fear judgment. I thank her, say no. She walks back into the restaurant.

“You have to guess where I work,” the girl says, then pauses, says, “OK, I’ll tell you, but then you tell me your guess.”

I nod, but feel very flushed and jittery.

“I work,” she says, “as a stripper.”

I want to slap the table and yell *knew it!* So that’s that. This is weird. I smile and laugh because I have no clue what else to do. . .

“So what was your guess?” she asks.

“Pornography store worker,” I lie. I don’t know why I do that. I just can’t say what I was actually thinking.

“See, that’s sweet, that’s nice of you,” she says, though I have no clue what she’s talking about.

The food arrives. For the last ten minutes, she has talked about stripping, how she enjoys acting as a sexual conduit for the customers. I nod like that makes sense, that the girl I’m dating—do not think about it as dating, though, just try to get laid—should

naturally enjoy acting as a sexual conduit for other men in some random town in Iowa. I keep glancing at the other tables to see if customers are hearing us. Calm. Down. I'm not good at handling curveballs. I even feel nervous driving unless I've known about it in advance. Without advance warning that I'll be taking the wheel, I sometimes go into my dark place. That's what Thor and I call it. My DP. After my mother died, I thought every car trip was going to end in a wreck and that I would crawl out and the rest of my family would be dead while I sit wrapped in a blanket, bleeding from the forehead on the side of the road. I never died. It was always everybody else. My father drives too fast, brakes too slow, sometimes reads the atlas and steers with his knees. Other drivers hit people. People die. It took three years for me to ride in a car without gripping the armrest at yellow lights or when changing lanes. I know where drivers are more reckless. Coming out of subdivisions or parking lots. When the lights change from green to orange. Switching lanes on the freeway. Sometimes, the old nerves crop up. People die.

It would be easier if she was just a med student, like all of the other ones on these dating websites. I could date a med student. We would have smart children. Stripping, pole dancing, exotic dancing, coked out dancers, customers asking for blowjobs, lap dances, she's good at lap dances she says, she describes one of the pole dancing classes, talks about something called a "stripper phone," which I do not ask to see. The sub tastes good, the fries taste good. I need another drink. How can she judge me for drinking? Isn't there some mass hypocrisy in this whole thing? She talks about her job like she works in an office. I am not focusing very well. Finally, the subject shifts. We're talking about family, now. Hers lives in Missouri. I make a joke about being a St. Louis Rams fan. She approves. We officially have common ground.

“So earlier,” she says, “you mentioned that your father has horses. What does he do?”

“He works as an engineer and a teacher at Boise State. It’s funny, because both my older brother and I graduated with degrees in English. He probably wonders what he did wrong with us,” I say with a smile. My father is one of the best people I know.

“And what about your mom?”

I knew the question was coming, because it inevitably comes when I make that joke about my father. For the last twenty minutes, as she talked about stripping, I kept eye contact, more or less. Not perfectly, of course, because I think people can see through me if I look at them for too long. But mostly good eye contact. The four-year anniversary of my mother’s death is two weeks away. My mother killed herself by overdosing on pills. I look down at my glass.

“My mother passed away four years ago,” I say. My face feels tight. I keep talking to the glass.

“Oh,” the girl says. I can’t see her reaction, but her voice is flat.

“Oh,” is not the reaction I expected. Most people say they’re sorry for me. “So that’s what I write about,” I say, though I know that I shouldn’t be saying this on a first date, that this is off-limits, that I should just shut the fuck up and let her go back to describing her pole dancing class. I’m still talking, though. I am on the verge of tears. I hope not obviously. Sometimes, it’s hard for me to even remember my mother was a person. It seems like she’s been dead longer than she was alive. I don’t talk about it with friends, I don’t talk about it with family. I don’t talk about it, but I’m talking about it with a woman I met two hours ago.

“It’s real tough,” I say, trying to look up, then back down, my head doing this little shifty bob, “she and I were real close. But she was real supportive of my writing and I try to think that she’d be real proud of me.” I use the word “real” four times in the span of seven seconds. I am real stupid, I think.

“The writing must be cathartic,” the girl says. It’s not. You think it is but it’s not. When I first started working on the book, I thought that one night, perhaps on page 48 or possibly 67, I would be at the keyboard and suddenly think to myself, “Ah, so that’s why everything happened. This is so cathartic.” I’m past 48 and 67. It hasn’t happened. Writing it isn’t cathartic at all, no matter how many times I’ve told myself that it should be. Just 2:30 a.m. and seeing the same things again and again and again. Bandages, dried blood, my sister crying. This woman’s stripper blog did not teach her the bare facts. She’s just trying to say something, of course, but I am tired.

“Not really,” I say, shrugging, leaving it at that. “Anyway. Want some fries?” I ask, pushing the plate toward her. It’s not the smoothest transition.

I try to change the subject. I ask her what she’s done during the week. It’s lame, but it’s all I can think of. I don’t want to talk about her stripper job, and I don’t want to talk about my mother. That is all I know.

“The other day, I was listening to NPR. They had a segment about what not to talk about on first dates. Politics, sickness, religion, those topped the list. So I guess I probably shouldn’t have mentioned being sick.” I want to joke, *Dead mothers did not make the cut, so I’m in the clear. Did NPR say anything about exotic dancing?* But I keep it to myself, because it’s a little mean. And it’s not really funny. My mind keeps beating. *You don’t listen to NPR. Stop lying. Just be quiet, squinty woman. I just want*

to date a normal girl. Is that too much to ask? Normal. Like just strips clothes when going to bed. I am an idiot.

“Did you know that Sarah Palin graduated from the University of Idaho?” I ask, immediately.

“That’s politics.”

“No, that’s just a fun Idaho fact,” I say. I have no clue why I brought up Sarah Palin. Sometimes I just say things. “Do you consider yourself a Republican or Democrat?”

“We’re killing NPR,” she says. We both smile. “I am conservative on some issues, more progressive on others. Like I don’t approve of divorce.”

My parents were divorced in 1998.

“OK,” I say, pushing at my sandwich. I need another drink. We should have stuck to making fun of NPR.

“And I think welfare is just a social crutch for people who probably shouldn’t be around, anyway. Like I think suicide is nature’s way of weeding out things. The government’s role shouldn’t be to step in to mend the problems of the underbelly,” she says and then she trails off, because she sees my face go rigid.

“Did your mother commit suicide?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say, staring back down at the table. “Oops,” I say, smiling a little. It’s a reflex, my sad, poignant smile. My voice has wavered. The air feels thick. I have forgotten about eye contact. I want to leave.

“I always shoot myself in the foot,” she says, and she looks genuinely sorry. For a moment, I can see how people don’t know me, how nobody knows anything at first.

And then I think of my mother, who took my siblings and I out to eat at Taco Time when she had no job, who loved the Houston Astros but gave up on them too early, who was a good person who couldn't control her own depressions and mental jags, who was dead because the hospitals could only bandage her—"laceration repair" is what they billed it as—and prescribe medications that didn't work and doctors couldn't save her, because my father couldn't save her, because I couldn't save her, because she didn't know a way out and didn't know how to ask for help. And then I want to go home. It's not even anger, really. The stripper is just sitting there, and everything she's saying is inadvertent. She's not trying to do this to me, I know, even as my hands are shaking as I think about what she's saying.

I shrug, because I don't know how else to react. "Don't worry about it, I'm a big boy, I've got a thick skin." I'm lying again. I say this all the time when people inadvertently say something about my mother or mothers in general. I am a big boy. I've said it a hundred times. And maybe it's true, that I am just a boy. There's a deep ache in the pit of my stomach. I want to stand up and walk away and be dramatic, but that's not who I am, and I am frustrated by it. I want somebody to finally see just how much this thing sits in on my life. I want somebody to see those nights in Moscow, when I went jogging in -10 degree weather in December because I had nothing else. I want somebody to see me listening to "Ride On, Baby," by the Rolling Stones as I broke my ankle on one of those jogs, want them to see me crying during every single movie whenever there's a sad piano soundtrack, want somebody to see me at 4:00 a.m. listening to Bob Dylan with the lights off, shirtless, lying on a broken futon. Want somebody to see my mother's headstone other than just family, that inscription of a cat and a stack of

books *She filled our hearts with love*, see it other than just the eight of us who attended her funeral. Want somebody to know what it's like to stand in front of that door and be completely certain that your mother is dead. Want somebody to see how beautiful her life was in the way I do. I want somebody to see, to see me. That's all I want. I head to the bathroom. I am wearing one of my three good shirts. My hair is short after the previous day's haircut. I got it cut just for this date. Shed my John Lennon look. I am too young and childish, or too old and jaded, can't tell which, but if I am in the right lighting I look hopelessly young, like I haven't aged in a decade. Water splashed on my face, I tell myself to stick with it. I also tell myself that I will never see this girl again. I am no longer thinking about my mother. What's left is this dark feeling. The world will never be good again, or it is perfect in its own broken way, I think as I leave the bathroom. I don't understand what I just thought. I don't understand myself. I pay for her drinks. I tip more than I should because that's how I was raised.

We meander through the edges of Iowa City. A couple across the way laughs, smiles, does happy people things. I bet that one doesn't have a stripper phone, I think absently. We walk past the Old Capital. I wish I was with somebody else, because it really is a beautiful night. I feel sorry for myself. For the first time in several months, I am hit by this intense urge to call my mother. I just want to hear her voice. I'm not thinking about the stripper or her job. I just want to call my mother and talk about why I think Bartolo Colon and Freddy Garcia will fade down the stretch for the Yankees.

The woman's talking about stripping again, because the date is supposed to come down to whether or not I approve of it, I'm realizing. But I don't know how I feel about it, it's not about that to me.

"I get into the work. I just do," the woman says.

"That must be easy," I say.

She gives me an odd look. "No, it's much easier to just zone out. Most of the other girls do. That's why so many of them use drugs. To pretend they are not there."

"So why don't you?" I ask. *Is it because you don't have a moral core?*

"I just want to enjoy what I do in life. Isn't that the point for everybody? Like when a businessman tells me I give a great lap dance, I appreciate that. It makes me feel good."

She says that guys ask for her time and again—for the lap dances—like that's a point of pride, which I guess makes sense. We walk past a large, aging church.

"Are we going some place specific?" I ask. I don't want to wander around forever.

"No, just walking in the parts of town I know are good," she says. *It's Iowa City. There is no Iowa City ghetto, I think.*

"I gotcha," I say, though I do not have her, I do not have her at all.

"So I guess I'm wondering if you would have a problem dating somebody who does what I do. If you do, you should let me know now."

I hold eye contact with her for the first time in half-an-hour.

"I mean, I would respect that decision. Let you move on with your life." I want to laugh at that. I haven't moved on in my life in the last four years. I'm just somewhere else.

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable dating somebody who did what you do,” I say, because it is my window out and I’m taking it, even if I look like a shitty, judgmental person, even if I am exactly that. “All of my previous girlfriends have been more conservative than you,” I say, which is true. They bought me Bob Dylan t-shirts and worked at the library.

“You don’t strike me as conservative. More middle of the road,” she says, her voice rising a little.

“Come on,” I say, “you’ve been talking to me for three hours, don’t you have the sense that I’m not that kind of person?” I ask. What I’m saying is not nice. I’m too good to date a stripper, is what she’s probably hearing, because it’s what I’m essentially saying. I remember that she’s just meeting me now, that she doesn’t know me, that her sense of me was based on what I said—I laughed at her jokes, I smiled when she told me she what she did for a living, I acted nicely, I chimed in with my own cracks at this and that. She probably has been thinking that I’m interested. I gave no indication otherwise, not after the stripper unveil, not after she called suicide a weeding out for society, called my mother’s death good for society. She doesn’t know me. Her sense of who I am is just what she sees. I forget that about people, that they don’t view me the way I view me. That when I look in the windows and see my reflection, I don’t see what other people see.

She stops walking. Extends her hand.

“I believe this is where the evening ends, then,” she says briskly. “I had a nice evening. Good night.”

“Good night,” I say. I don’t know what to think. As I turn, I flip through my mp3 player until I hit Bob Dylan, turn the volume up loud so I cannot hear the cars passing me. It’s a clear night. I don’t look back.

I call Thor as I walk through the park. “Uh oh, The M’s calling a little early in the night,” he says. There are people playing catch under the lights in College Green, there are voices in the background on Thor’s end.

“Yeah.”

“Why is The M doing that?”

“Date didn’t go so well,” I say.

“I’m sorry, man,” he says. He is at a bar. I am heading to my empty apartment. My voice shakes as I tell him about her suicide comments. I stutter, the words come out jumbled. It is hard to breathe. “What?” he asks. He asks how that became a conversation. I try to explain it, but it doesn’t make sense as I’m talking.

“That’s none of her business. That shouldn’t be brought up on a first date.”

“She would have been easy, too,” I say. “You know how I know this?”

“How?”

“Because she was a stripper,” I say. *You are a coward, Marky boy*, I think. I am back in my apartment. *She was a stupid girl*, I think. Thor tells me that people don’t think before they speak, that she was just some dumb stripper, that I should have tried my best to get past it, which I know I didn’t. That she was probably trying very hard to come across as smart and interesting. He is rationalizing the night, and he’s right. Maybe not about her intelligence—I have no clue if she is smart or dumb or anything, because I was

too busy thinking about myself. Thor is good about people. Neither of us are logical, really, but he has a sense of social dynamics and why people do what they do.

“I didn’t want to fuck her,” I say, sitting on my sleeping futon and punching at the air. “I didn’t want to have anything to do with her.”

“But Mark,” he says, “you can’t have it both ways. You can’t say you’re lonely and then say you don’t want to be around somebody who’s interested in you.”

“But there are circumstances,” I say, my own voice rising, “it’s not like she was just some girl who was nice to me. She said something that hurt.”

“Again, Mark, you know I think it was a horrible thing to say. There’s no defending what she said. But if I was in your shoes, I would have tried my best to shrug it off and move on with the date. People are going to say that stuff. They’ve said things about suicide to me at parties. You’re going to have to get used to it.”

Thor attempted suicide the same year I graduated high school. Thor and I have talked about suicide, about his thoughts on the night he did it, about the anvil that is my mother’s death and how I couldn’t have stopped her even if I tried. That when a person is convinced about something like that, they act on it. Thor understands this better than anybody I know.

“But it’s the first time anybody’s said something like that to me,” I say. A tear trickles down my cheek. I am angry at myself for crying. I’m not supposed to cry.

“But people say things. You can’t be so sensitive all the time,” he says. “I’m just telling you what I would have done. Tried to make the best of the date.”

I snap back, “Yeah, but your mom’s not dead.” Emphasis on the word *dead*, hard and sharp. I say it spitefully, bitterly, more bitterly than anything I have said to anybody

in a long long time. The moment after, I hate myself. I know that I went too far, that it was a mean thing to say, that it was the one card that I never played with anybody because it shouldn't be a card at all. Thor is my best friend. He spurred me on to lose thirty pounds in a month and a half for a weight loss bet. He convinced me to trade in my scratched glasses for contacts, to cut my shoulder-length hair. Those weren't things I would have done on my own. I can hear him breathe in for a moment. My words settle. I wince, shake my head. In the four years since her death, I've always been self-conscious about it. I don't want people to pity me. I don't want people to know that I'm thinking about it, I don't want it to define me. Some people have parents, some don't. That's just the way it is, I try to think. She was a good person, I think. Things happen, I think.

Thor repeats, his voice even. "Like I said, it was a horrible thing for her to say. She was a stupid stripper, man. You don't know her. You don't have to see her again."

"But you're talking down to me just because I didn't sleep with her," I say. I am defensive and snap at everything. I am sad.

"Mark. I don't think any less of you. I'm just saying what I would have done. We're all different. If Freeman was on that date," he says, referring to his childhood friend, "he would have called her a horrible person and walked out. We're all different. I'm different than you. Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and make the effort. People say shit. The world isn't nice. People are shitty sometimes. That's all I'm saying, Mark."

After twenty minutes, we end the conversation. He returns to the bar, tells me he will call me back later that night. He hangs up. I stare at myself in the mirror. "Yeah,

but your mom's not dead." I hear myself saying it again and again and again. I think my mother would be ashamed if she knew I said that. I am ashamed. The refrigerator is covered with pictures of my family. I didn't believe in putting up photographs for years after her death. Then finally, I did, and it made me feel better somehow. Her holding me when I am a baby. Her, walking me and my siblings to the bus on a winter's morning. My father and her in a church with my older brother and me. That is my favorite picture, because she looks like my sister in it, because my parents are young and smiling and the light is coming through the stained-glass. I stare at the pictures for ten minutes until I feel nothing. I am no longer crying. There are few things I truly consider myself good at in the world—writing, Minesweeper, Jeopardy depending on the category, knowing things about Bob Dylan. But mostly, I am good at steadying myself. I've needed to be over the years, when my mother was hospitalized for cutting her wrists, when my parents divorced, when she eventually killed herself. It is necessary to remind myself that when I open my eyes the world is still there, that I am still there, that I can still be there. I can steady myself. I walk to the gas station and buy a pack of cigarettes. This is the first pack of cigarettes I've ever bought. The smoke fades into the night as I lean back on my front porch. I feel calmer. "Sorry, Mommy," I say to the sky. Someone on the sidewalk glances at me as they pass, but they don't stop.

The four-year anniversary of her death passes. I talk to nobody in my family that day. On Facebook, my sister writes a quote as her status: "The best way to honor the deceased is to keep living." I click 'Like' on it, which feels infinitely small. Yeah, I like that. My own status, from 4:23 a.m. on July 7th, reads "It's been a long four years. Still miss you with all my heart. ☹️ #statusupdatesjustdontconveyemotionwell." Nobody

comments on it. Nobody clicks 'Like.' I'm OK with that, though. I don't want people to like my self-pity when I don't even like it myself. My sister said it better than me. That night I am awake until 5:30 a.m., working on an essay about my brother's graduation the month before my mother's death. I have reached the page where my mother will die. She's behind that door as we walk up the steps. She's in there, lying on the floor. We're walking up. It's a good Idaho summer day. I write myself up to the edge, my hands shaking, and as my father knocks, says, "Katy, it's Paul," I cannot write anymore. I know she will not answer. I turn off the lights and begin to cry in long, painful sighs. My chest hurts. I pray to God to forgive me for who I am. I pray that my mother is watching over me and is proud of me. A small amount of light spills in as the sun begins to rise. I say "Amen." Then, there is only me.