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David Nolan April 8, 2019

Go

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Creative Writing

2019

Abstract

Go
By David Nolan

Go is a collection of four stories that look at the interaction between physical and emotional place. The characters in the collection project meaning onto space, imbuing the physical landscape with personal conflict. These stories find characters at transitional moments, and deal with themes of progress, of transgression, and of forgiveness.

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Big Bend

In the car the air conditioner churned to keep out the heat. We drove from Houston all the way across the state, ten hours to Big Bend. Dad pushed the car up over 80 and Benny sat in the front seat and I sat in the back with the packs and gear for the hike, and not much was said over the humming cold air.

It was a graduation present, the hike. My parents asked what I wanted and that's what I said. Mom said okay. That's it? Dad asked. Three days, one big loop in the heat? Yes, I said. Mom said she couldn't leave work for three days. Dad said we would go just the guys. When Benny graduated three years ago they sent him to Vietnam for a week. It was supposed to be transitional, and that's what I wanted. Some sort of moving on. When Benny came back he looked for a job and couldn't find one. I had something lined up in Dallas starting in August. I wouldn't be coming home more after the summer and wanted to feel like it, too.

In Marathon we spent the night at a cheap motel. Train tracks ran east to west at the southern part of town forming a frontier. Past that it looked like all desert, all empty space. We went to a gas station that night and bought water, nine gallons. In the motel me and Benny slept in the same double bed and Dad was in the one across. I could smell the cigarette Benny just smoked. "Early start tomorrow," Dad said. He flicked off the lights and Benny rolled to face the wall.

At the Visitor's Center we told the ranger we wanted to do the outer mountain loop. He asked how much water we had and we said nine gallons.

"Caching?" he asked.

"Yes," Dad answered.

He looked us over. “It’s no joke in this heat.”

“We’ll make it. We’ll finish,” Dad said.

He told us to take a map and to follow the cairns when the trail got murky. He took our pictures against a blue backdrop. He wrote down our tent color. We each had to take off a boot so he could photograph the tread. “We lose people every year,” he said, flipping Benny’s boot in his hand. “People get hot. People get lost.”

Dad showed on the map where we would be setting up at nights and the ranger wrote the locations on the permit. Dad paid him the fee. We got in the car and drove down the road to the old farmhouse where we’d store the water. We walked down the slope from the road to the ranch building. Already the day was hot and bright and dry. “Bensons 6/22,” we wrote on three of the water jugs. We put them in the metal locker and climbed back up the grade, then drove into the basin of the mountains and parked the car at the trailhead. Sitting in the bed of the truck we pulled our boots tight and each tied two gallon jugs to our packs. Dad’s was the heaviest with the tent inside. We stood up and shouldered it.

“Let’s go,” Dad said.

I knew Dad was capable of it. He used to hike a lot, left one summer me and Benny were in high school to do the Colorado Trail. Then his knee started hurting. He woke up three days a week before the sun came up to go swim laps, too. He took us with him for a whole winter once, Benny and I bleary-eyed in the back of the car on the way to his gym, then changing in the locker room that smelled like mold, then the cold blue shock of the water and the sting of chlorine when your head popped up. We tended to fall asleep on the way back to the house, both slumped in the back seat going to see Mom. “Tired boys,” she called us, when we got home and

leaned against her legs. Her “tired, watery boys.” It felt good to be that tired, to be that tired and have someone to fall into.

It was hot. The trailhead swung quickly into an incline. Our feet crunched on the red rock below, loose gravel and hard stone, and on the side of the path grew yellow shrubgrass with stunted mesquite and oak farther in. The early trail was cut and shaped like long stairs, switchbacking forward and up. Dad said a few words when the going was flat – “Ten miles today,” “We have to be moving” – but soon our dry mouths went quiet.

The switchbacking stopped at the top of the mountain rim where the path flattened. My legs were burning and I was sweating. The path wound around the lip of the mountain, everything falling off to the side. We could look out over the short trees and see the whole canyon we had risen above. Jagged brown rock shooting vertically from down below framed the valley. Everything was a muddle of brown and green. In the distance other mountain peaks chopped upwards into the haze of blue. All tinted, surreal, overly exposed in the bright sun. We moved back off the trail into the shade of a juniper to drink water.

“My feet hurt,” Benny said.

“Blister?” I asked.

“I think so.”

Dad was sitting next to Benny, looking out over the rim. “We have a way to go,” he said.

“Okay,” Benny said.

After a while Dad stood up and we did the same.

“It’s downhill from here,” I said, mostly to Benny. He was staring at his feet.

That first night we pitched the tent down in the valley below where the ground had flattened. The trail narrowed to a foot wide through the yellow shrubgrass, and we put our bags

down in a dirt patch cleared by people before us. The sun was setting and shone light only on the scraggly mountain behind, glowing orange and jutting out of the ground like an upraised fist. Our tent was in the shade and the temperature was finally dropping as the sun continued to fall and the light shifted to blue.

Dad set up the tent and I took the camp stove from my pack and attached the kerosene bottle. I pumped and the burner hissed and spit short blue flames.

Dad moved three stones around the stove and we sat. I put the pot on top of the burner. We all poured a little water from our jugs and it felt foolish, using it, but we had brought pasta. Benny used the last of his day's gallon. We sat and waited for it to boil, and by the time it was rolling the sun was down completely and the night sky was emerging.

"We did ten miles today," Dad said. "That's good."

I watched him break the pasta noodles in half and drop them over the pot, then stir with a spoon. My body ached. I was tired, the kind that came after long, physical days.

When we were little we used to spend weekends camping at Brazos Bend. The campsites were already established, numbered dirt clearings in a field with water hookups and picnic tables and firepits, and we'd park and walk the short distance from the visitor's center to our lot. First thing we'd do is set up the tent, and then we would eat lunch and set off on long hikes, following the trails circling lakes set among the hardwoods. Benny and I carried our clothes and bugspray and water in our school backpacks. Signs stuck up all over the trail with the silhouette of alligators, saying warnings and their frequented spots. When Benny and I tried to run ahead on the trail Dad told us that gators were faster than they looked. They could outrun people. But he said they were predictable. He said they liked sitting in the sun. If you got too close to one, you'd hear it hiss. If you saw a little one there was probably a bigger female nearby, and she might

charge at you to keep the little ones safe. It was all predictable, he said, and if we had all the information we could make the right choice, and then everything would go right. There was always a right way, he said, and then he asked, like the whole speech was leading up to it, whether we really thought running ahead and screaming and playing was the best decision in November, when the little gators had just hatched.

"Oh, let them go," Mom said. "Let them live." She was always like that, letting us decide, make our own mistakes. We ran ahead but stayed within eyesight, knowing that she was there if anything were to go wrong.

When the pasta was done Dad split it into three plates. The stars were out. We ate slow. "Well," Dad asked me between bites, "is this what you wanted?"

"Yes," I said. I wasn't sure yet.

"It's a big step, the job and everything,"

"I know." I could feel the vast space around me, the darkness, the nighttime. It seemed like the shrubs and the mountains could go on forever, and all of it – the hawks nested somewhere and the rodents and the snakes, and the endless amount of empty space above and around – was part of the black dome.

"It is nice to get out again," I said.

"It might be the last time for a while. But the job, everything, will be its own stage, its own journey. An important step." In what light was left I thought I saw him turn to Benny.

"Yes," I said.

We sat quiet for a while, finishing the food. Benny coughed. His coughing picked up speed like a tumbling rock, and it built until he hacked and spit.

After it went quiet again Dad said, "You have to stop smoking."

"Sure," he responded, and then the silence resumed.

Eventually Dad pushed off his knees and said he was going to bed. I followed him after a while and he was asleep, and I got in my sleeping bag next to him. It felt like nothing was changing. I waited a long while and heard a lighter click outside, and saw through the nylon door of the tent the red glow of Benny's cigarette. When I finally heard his footsteps and then the zipper of the tent I closed my eyes and felt him crawl into the bag on my other side, sweat and tobacco smell on him.

The second day we woke up and Dad had coffee going on the burner already. The morning was still cool, the light bright but weak, and we rolled up the bags and folded the tent after drinking coffee and pissing in the grass and we loaded the packs on the same sore stretches of muscle.

The sun grew hot and we were exposed on the rock. We stopped frequently for short breaks to sip from the day's gallons, then kept walking. The trail fell and washed out into a basin like an old riverbank. The grass was gone now and large and small stones all shades of gray rolled in every direction. We followed the main vein of the basin between offshoots stretching on both sides. Everything blended together. Someone, the rangers, had stacked rocks into skinny cairns a foot high to mark the path. Benny and I fell a few paces behind Dad, and then we stopped to drink and we were further behind.

"It's hot," he said. We kept walking. I told him to keep drinking. We fell side by side on the trail, and I looked over and realized he was limping slightly to the outside leg.

"Your foot?" I asked.

"It'll be fine."

"Hurting?" I asked.

"Mm."

We said nothing for a while, the only sound the shifting rock underfoot. I could hear the imperfect rhythm of his steps. We followed Dad's pack bouncing ahead.

"He's real happy," Benny said, "about your job."

I looked at him. "It'll be a good gig."

It was quiet again for a while. "You know," I said, "once I get the place set up you can come stay. Move out of Mom and Dad's, find something. There's work in Dallas."

"There's supposed to be work in Houston, too."

Ahead a blue roadrunner sat on a rock. As we got close it turned and ran off, perpendicular to the trail. Finally it flapped its wings and flew away. "You just gotta make the effort," I said.

"I'm not following you to Dallas," he told me. "I'm not going to weigh on you."

"You wouldn't be weighing," I said.

The sun was bright and reflected off the gray stone. I had to squint to see. The whole basin was washed out and the heaped rock looked like paths going in all directions. We kept following Dad's pack.

"It's supposed to be your trip," Benny said. "Yours and his. I'm supposed to be off somewhere." It sounded like he was going to apologize, but we walked in silence again. I stopped to drink water and he kept going and I fell behind him. I was wondering what he was wondering, the way he felt at my graduation last month. Then I wondered what Dad was wondering, if anything at all.

When I caught up to the two of them they were stopped and Dad had the map extended. Benny drank more from his water. He leaned on one foot.

"I haven't seen a cairn in a while," Dad said. He kept looking at the map. Neither Benny nor me said anything. "We'll turn back until we find the last." We followed him as he walked over the rocks. Some were high or uneven on the ground and we had to clamber up and around. Benny was favoring the leg. After a while he said he needed to stop.

"We're losing time," Dad said, his back still turned.

"We'll catch up," I said.

"You go," Benny said to me.

"No," I said.

Dad turned around. "We're losing time."

"We're taking a break," I said. Dad and Benny both looked at me. Dad looked at Benny. "Alright," he said. "Alright, drink up."

Benny sat down on a rock and I sat next to him. He drank and his gallon looked low. "Okay," he finally said. We got up without a word and started walking. Dad went ahead. Eventually he pointed and we saw the small pile of rocks marking the trail, the main vein of the washed basin. He pointed again and we walked and saw another cairn. The confrontation ran through my mind a hundred times while I walked. We kept going.

The trail started to move out of the basin again and we climbed up and down small hills covered in the same yellow shrubgrass. The sun was behind us, burning our necks. A pencil-thin trickle of water cut between the crease at the bottom of one hill and the start of another. Wasps piled buzzing on the banks, drinking, and we stepped over them.

"Another few miles to the ranch," Dad said. "We can go faster as the sun goes down."

The trail continued a slow incline. By the time Dad pointed ahead and said, "There," the light was fading and the coolness falling in.

The gray cinderblock walls were darker now. I flung my pack down against the wall and rubbed my face. We had been going fast. I was tired. I looked at Benny and he was pale. His jug was empty and I tried to hand him mine, but he shook his head and pointed to behind the building to the locker where we had stored the extra gallons. Somewhere, uphill and away from the ranch, the black tar of the road and the neon yellow lines stretched across the landscape. Benny headed towards the lockers.

"We should stop here for the night," I said to Dad.

He had the map out again. "Can't do that," he said without looking up.

I watched Benny reach the steps and limp up them. "We can just make up the lost ground tomorrow."

Dad kept looking at the map. "We can't camp within a mile of the road," he said. "And we told the ranger where we'd be staying. It's only another mile and a half."

Behind him Benny pulled a jug from the locker. It was dark enough for the shape of him to almost be a silhouette. I watched him tip the jug up and drink. "It's gonna be pitch dark soon," I said.

He looked up at me. "We're going," he said.

"Benny's limping."

He lowered the map. "I know," he said. "I know." He turned and looked at him up on the steps drinking deeply from the water jug. "Do you think he can keep going?" he asked. I can't think of a time where he'd ever asked me something like that before. But before I could say anything he cleared his throat. "We have to make up for lost time," he said. "He's going to have to move. A mile and a half, then we set up."

I was tired, angry. I couldn't stop myself. "Where," I said, "is your goddamn sympathy?"

"My sympathy," he said, "is making sure the two of you get to where you need to get to." When I turned to reply Benny was standing there beside us. "Follow the trail," Dad said. His voice had something final to it.

He walked up to the water locker and came back with his gallon and mine. He handed me mine and walked past me. Benny stepped in line behind him and I followed. The sun was completely down and the light left barely showed the path's two outlines. We walked slow. I was dead tired. Tired from walking all day, tired of having to say these things. I wanted nothing more than to be out, I realized. To be done hiking. Maybe that was it, the meridian I'd crossed. If it was, it didn't feel like any kind of celebration.

I was thinking of stuff from when we were kids, from baseball games, from Brazos Bend, from afternoons at home. I thought of them while I listened to my own feet crunching off the dark rock and looked down and out so as not to lose the outline of the trail. In all the memories it's just me and Benny running together. Never having to think about stuff like this, about who leads and who follows. I thought it was strange, to remember not thinking about something. Maybe when things are right you never have to think about what happens when they're not. I let the memories loop and loop.

The sound of gravel sliding out snapped me back. Something hit the ground. I thought, *Benny.*

I ran ahead and caught up to Benny limp-running, too. We ran forward together and found Dad sitting on the ground, holding his foot.

"My ankle gave out," he said. He looked around wide-eyed at the dirt as if it was his first time seeing it.

"Bad?" Benny asked.

"No," he said. "Not bad at all." He extended his arms up and we each grabbed a hand and pulled him to standing. He put weight on the ankle slowly. Benny picked up the water jug he had dropped and handed it to him, and when he drank his hands shook and the water ran down his chin. He cleared his throat and wiped his mouth. "Jackson," he said to me, "you take the lead."

Another command. "Fine," I said. I was still angry.

"I'll be behind you," he said.

I stepped in front of him on the trail. I paused. Everything was dark and I didn't know where to go. All I could see was the stars. "Walk," he called out from behind me, and that was it. I started going. I took big steps, steps he couldn't match. I heard him grunt once behind me but I blocked it out. It was almost impossible to make out the trail but I didn't care. I would leave him behind. I kept going in loping, blind strides as fast as I could. I would have run, I would have ditched the pack there on the ground and run, not knowing where I was until the sun came up, and even then I probably wouldn't recognize a single thing, no mountainside or cairn to tell me. They'd find my bootprints.

"Jackson," Benny called out. I turned and he was behind me at an angle. He had his hand under one of Dad's armpits, holding him up. I stopped. "Come gimme a hand," he said. I went back to them.

"Where were you going?" he asked.

"I don't know," I told him.

"You were off the trail," he said.

"I couldn't see."

"Gimme a hand," he said again. I slipped my arm under Dad's other armpit. I followed Benny's pull as we pivoted around and started back towards the ranch. "Let's just rest there for

the night," Dad said. With his head next to mine I could feel the locked tension in his jaw, could hear his teeth gritting together like rubbing rock. My frustration was gone.

Sweat glinted off Dad's forehead in the starlight by the time we got back to the ranch. Benny led to the thin wooden steps that went to the water locker and the road above. We had to lift Dad by the shoulders for each step and set him down soft. With each landing he let out a breath. His head hung down between us and I couldn't see Benny. My back burned and the pack pulled me in the opposite direction. I'd never been so tired. When we got halfway up Benny started to cough. I leaned in front of Dad's head to look at Benny. He was pale as the moon. He shook his head and kept going. On the last three steps Benny doubled over and I had to hold Dad up while he hacked and hacked. I just held dad upright. I felt spent, empty, useless. When Benny straightened up he grabbed Dad again and led us up the rest of the steps.

We stopped in the gravel pulloff and put Dad sitting on the ground. The black road cut across. On the other side the land dipped again and well beyond was the black outline of mountains in the distance, stars hovering low to their peaks and taking up the whole sky in front. I wanted to lie in the road. I wanted to lie still and let everything else swirl around me, watch the stars cut huge arcs in the sky. I sat there and listened to myself pant.

When headlights came swinging from the left Benny ran into the middle of the road. He didn't let himself favor one leg. He put his arms out to a T and the car stopped. The window rolled down and it was a guy and a girl. "He's hurt," Benny said. The girl was driving and the guy hopped out and helped us load Dad into their car. Benny told them where we were parked and told them to take us there.

"You want us to bring him to the hospital?" the girl asked.

"I'll get us there," Benny said.

"Whatever you think is best."

I put my head back on the headrest. "You three look like you've been through the ringer," she added.

At the parking lot the guy helped us load Dad in the back of our car. "Good luck," the girl called out. Benny got behind the wheel and I sat passenger. The clock said it was ten. Dad had his eyes winched shut in the back.

"You alright?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he said.

Benny pulled off his right boot and threw it in the back. From the light above I could make out a dark red stain where his big toe was. He turned the key. My body was shutting down. I could feel myself falling asleep.

The last thing I remember thinking about was Mom, ten hours away down a straight cut of highway. I shivered from the drying sweat. I didn't feel good. It was inevitable, having to pass my old man, but I didn't feel good about it. I realized I might never have to lose the tie that pulled me back to my mom.

The last thing I heard was Benny. "We'll be okay," he said. He was hunched over the wheel with his eyes lazered onto the road. He turned and looked at me for a second before locking in forward again. "We'll be fine."

Port Gibson

Noah and Kayla ride their bikes through town to get to the ruins, as they had every day that summer. Noah waits at the top of Kayla's drive and she joins him, and the two pedal languidly down Highway 18 against a thin breeze. Noah rides in front as they cut through the center of Port Gibson, past small houses on small lots, down Church Street where the First Presbyterian dominates. The church sits on a tight, green yard, and they each turn to glance at the steeple, rising to a narrow point topped by a golden statue of a hand, the first finger extended upwards. Behind the hand the sky is swirled gray; it will rain in a few days.

They pedal past the church and through the opposite side of town, turning onto Rodney Road west towards the river. The flat, sun-bleached pavement is bumpy with patches of black tar, and the road snakes back and forth through woods thickening the farther they go. No cars come and they ride down the middle of the lane. They pedal wordlessly on the flat and familiar surface, until the trees give way to a clearing and the surrounding landscape emerges.

The earth stretches away from the road and falls into ravines, the large box-like paths cut by old drainage patterns of river overflow. Now dry, the gullies are covered in grass, and they wind under and around the level of the road. The ravines run to the far end of the field, meeting the edge of a circular dirt driveway. Noah and Kayla pedal the length of the clearing and leave their bikes in the drive. They step into the ruins.

They found the ruins at the start of the summer. They spent their days biking around the town, following winding roads, dead ends. They left in the mornings and went back when the mosquitos came out, exploring without any hurry. The town and the spidery roads leading away grew repetitive, empty. Summer would stretch, they knew, and they had endless time. They

began to think they wouldn't find anything, would explore and explore and see the same things, and time in its lethargy, weighed down by the heat and humidity, would trap them. Then they found the ruins.

The columns are all that remain of the house, gray mortar pillars reaching two stories high with thick square bases battered and charred. When they walked into the space the first time they craned their necks to see the height of the columns. Now, at the end of summer, they walk comfortably into the middle of the space. The columns frame out a hollow "L," the floor covered in thick grass like the land around it. Everything else, save the twisting black balustrade from a second-floor balcony, is gone. Kayla looks out between the pillars to the woods behind. She imagines that the gullies, stretching to the side and behind the ruins to the tree line, look like the bottom of the ocean.

"I wonder if we'll get any visitors," she says. She sits against a column along the back.

"Dunno," Noah mumbles. He wanders in the space, distracted.

The first visitor that summer was a woman who came in a car with a license plate from a state up north. Her mouth formed a pink-lipsticked circle when she walked around the columns, saying over and over again, "Oh my God, oh my God." She looked for a flash at Noah and Kayla, then walked around ignoring them. "Imagine it," she said to herself. Her reaction was funny to the two of them, and they mimicked the shape of her mouth and her amazement at something that by then felt so familiar.

When Kayla asked, her mother said it was just a once-nice house belonging to a once-rich man. "Sure seems funny to me," her mother said, steam rising in front of her face from her coffee mug, "going to look at something so gone." But to Kayla now, sitting with her back along a column, it has the feeling of a cathedral. A castle of air. She imagines she could walk along the

second story supported only by the atmosphere. She builds it in her mind, imagines high ceilings, hangs mirrors on transparent walls.

"Where do you think the staircase would go?" she asks Noah, picking at the grass between her feet.

Noah leans against a column opposite her, his hand down by his waist flat against the pillar's black bottom. "We have to move up schools next year, Kayla," he says finally.

"I know," she says. She pauses and he doesn't continue. "If the door was there," she says, pointing, "then I think maybe it would have been just left of that."

He closes his eyes. "I just don't see it," he says. He won't look at her.

Kayla doesn't reply, only looks at him with her head cocked. She leans back and breathes the humid air.

The second visitor came halfway through the summer and approached them directly, unlike the first woman. It had rained the night before. Salamanders lined the dirt drive, and when they dropped their bikes they picked up two of the small lizards. They sat down and put the salamanders on the grassy floor of the ruins between their open legs. They watched their awkward scuttling, their attempts to burrow down away. They heard a car door close. A man walked up to the two of them.

The man laughed and said that it was incredible, using this as a play place. His skin was grey. He asked if they came here a lot, two kids on their own. He asked if they had seen or heard anything unusual. "Bumps, cries, wails," he said.

Noah stood up while the man spoke. "No," he replied. He folded his arms across his chest.

The man laughed again. "Don't get defensive," he said. "You don't own it."

He said he was on his way to Rodney, the town, anyway. It was purely abandoned. Not like here, he supposed. He smiled. It wasn't kids playing who much interested him. He was looking for some sort of activity, something out of the ordinary. Residual traces, he said. He leaned around Noah and smiled at Kayla. Noah frowned back. The man's teeth, his pale lips, made her think of the deep sea.

"Rumor has it," the man said, "that the family owned the property all the way to the river. You could see it, the river, from the balcony up top."

"No getting up there now," Noah said.

"Sure," the man replied. Then, "You know what brought it all down?"

Noah didn't say anything.

"A cigarette." He looked one last time up and around at the columns. "Dropped, flicked."

Noah didn't respond. The man turned to go, and on his way past a column patted the charred black base. "Alright," he called, and he walked to his car and drove away.

Noah exhaled and sat back down. When they looked again at the grass in front of them the salamanders were gone.

A crane is parked in the yard of the First Presbyterian Church when they bike back. The light is beginning to fade behind the steeple and the crane. One man holds a camera pointed at a woman with a microphone at the front of the lawn, and a small crowd mills behind. Noah slows down ahead of Kayla and she slows to match him, and they watch the crane lift the hand off of the steeple and lower it to the ground, where a truck is waiting. On the ground it's the size of an adult, and Kayla watches Noah pedal slowly with his eyes fixed on the statue, looking even as they move beyond the church with his head turned almost completely over his shoulder.

Steam rises from Kayla's mother's coffee cup. Kayla eats her cereal looking down into the bowl, unable to meet her mother's eyes she can feel on her, landing like insects crawling on the top of her head.

"Out for repair," Kayla's mom says, her words rising, drifting, like the steam from her mug. "I wonder if they'll have the statue back by the end of the summer. Maybe it won't come back."

Kayla doesn't respond.

"It does or it doesn't, anyway. I think it's out of our control, " her mother says. She sips her coffee. "Time's passing," she says. Kayla looks up. Her mother is looking at her with her head tilted slightly, as if seeing her for the first time, a stranger. It feels like she is on display. The house feels like that sometimes, like an aquarium she is in. "Hm?" her mother asks.

"Yes, momma," she says. She wants to be outside.

Her mother looks at her watch. "It's time for me to go," she says. She stands up. She moves to the door, then turns and looks at Kayla again. Kayla can tell there is something sitting on her tongue, something she wants to say. She doesn't say it, settles instead. "Have a good day," she says. And, as she walks out, "Be safe." She feels distant, and when Kayla hears the car start and back out of the drive she goes outside into the humid air and grabs her bike to get Noah.

The summer before, after a rain, Noah and Kayla gathered salamanders from the road in front of Kayla's house. They filled a cardboard box with dirt and mud, then pulled grass to layer above. On the blacktop cars had already flattened many of the salamanders into small wet patches. They picked the living that scurried among those and put them in the box, five total.

Once inside the box they burrowed down into the earth, and Noah and Kayla left them in the garage. The next morning Kayla could see the dirt trail from the bottom corner of the box to the edge of the cement. They had dug as deep as they could and then squeezed their way out, Kayla thought, or clawed out, to get outside. She imagined they waddled their way back to the road they were so set on for some reason, only to be rolled over by a car tire. She winced at the thought and threw the box out in the back yard.

At the door Noah's father looks Kayla up and down. She'd been at the door before. She'd been at the house before. He looks at her now, though, like there is something different about her, something stained, marked. He turns to get Noah and Kayla goes to wait on her bike in the driveway. Noah comes out and gets on his bike and Kayla leads the way through town. When they pass by the church Noah stops, and when Kayla doesn't hear his tires rolling behind her she turns back to him.

"What?" she asks.

"I wanted to see it without the point," Noah says. He holds his gaze on the steeple. Without the statue it ends in a flat top. A thin breeze cuts the air. Kayla feels the sweat in her armpits.

"Out for repair," she says.

"My daddy read about it in the paper," Noah says. "It's the first time it's ever left town. He said they have to bring it to a specialist in the city. 'Buff out the callouses,' he said."

"It'll be back. It'll be back to normal."

"He got upset with the paper. The paper said that now we're not being told where to look, the town can try to see opportunities for growth. Daddy said it's a bad sign. Putting growth first. 'Godless times,' he said."

"You believe that?"

"I don't know. I guess not."

"I don't," Kayla says. "If they're repairing it, it means it'll come back."

"Sure," Noah says, his voice conveying his disbelief.

She pauses. "Your daddy doesn't much like me anymore," she says.

Noah drops his kickstand and looks at the pavement. "That's not true."

"Then what is it?"

"What's what?

"Don't do that." She holds her gaze on him.

"There's just things I have to do, ways I'm supposed to be."

"What does that mean?" she asks.

"I don't think it concerns you, Kayla."

A silence. He lifts his eyes to meet hers and his eyes are watery and he shakes his head. She breaks contact, looks at the sky. "It's going to rain," she says. "Maybe we should turn back."

"I think that's a fine idea," he says. He turns his bike around and they pedal through town again, she following, looking at his shoulders pulled back and his legs churning. At Kayla's driveway she splits away from him wordlessly and leaves her bike in the lawn.

If you hold a salamander too long in your bare hands, its skin absorbs the oils from your fingers. You let it walk over you, putting one hand always in front of the other. It is cold and wet

in your hands and you can feel its belly and tail drag across your palm, and you can imagine the pads of its feet gripping your fingerprints, the little ridges substantial to its tiny digits. You count once. They have four digits in the front and five in the back. It walks along a straight line and you rotate your hands over and over, and your mind starts to wander. All the while it's absorbing your oils and salts. When it moves in a different pattern and you look down again you see its skin turning blotchy white, and its movement – legs splayed, like running on water – is frantic. You put it down in the grass and, when it burrows, wonder what will happen.

Kayla's mom is tired at dinner. The room is dark save the small light over the table and they eat in silence. The work hangs on her mother. Little strands of hair stick out like vegetal shoots. Her skin bows down from her cheeks. "They don't let us sit behind the register," she admitted once, and Kayla realized why she was always sitting at home, on the couch or at the table. Now she seems burned, spent.

"Kayla Jo," her mom says.

"Yes?" She looks up.

Her mom gives her the same look as that morning, like at a stranger, but now tinted with frustration. "It's getting time you stopped riding all over town," she says. "You're getting old to be out all day. Just with that boy. It isn't right anymore."

Kayla swallows. "Okay," she says. She is shocked but unsurprised. Hurt.

Her mother shifts. Her voice softens. "Besides," she adds, "I need help around here."

"Yes, momma," Kayla says, her voice almost a whisper. She doesn't want to think of it; her mother's long days, aching feet, waiting responsibility when she gets home. She pushes her plate forward on the table. "Excuse me," she says. She gets up and walks down the hallway into

her room. She hears her mother say, “It’s okay,” behind her, before she closes the door. An apology.

The low ceiling feels like a lid. The room is small and square, with one window off of the foot of the bed. She sits on the bed and thinks of the ruins off in the dark, pictures ghosts flitting through the columns. She thinks of the hand from the steeple out in some factory for repair. She imagines it on a conveyor belt, at one station all the paint power-washed off until the grey underneath is uncovered. Then a sander drops and smoothens the whole thing down. Maybe it was cracked and chipped from the weather. Maybe when they sand it down to where it’s all even, it comes out miniscule compared to what it was. They would put it back on the steeple and it would be barely visible. Like not being back at all. No, she tells herself. It will be back the same.

She closes her eyes and sees everyone else looking at her. Noah’s father’s eyes, startled, aware. Her mother’s, confused, frustrated. Noah’s, diverted. Unknowable. All somehow closing in, boxing in. Pushing on her, like being buried. She wants none of it.

The light patter of rain outside the window draws her out of her thoughts. It’s soft, barely a drizzle. Listening she hears the TV through the wall, then her mother’s gentle snoring. She puts on a raincoat. She goes outside.

The road is damp but not yet slick under the bicycle. She pedals out. The gas station is the only building in town still lit, the tall sign yellow against the dark sky, the building itself casting out an artificial white glow. She passes the church and can’t make any of it out, only follows the white line on the side of the street. She pedals fast down Rodney Road, on the edge of her vision in the blackness, realizing turns are coming when she is in them. The rain holds at a

gentle drizzle, like falling dew. With her hair and face damp she makes it to the ruins, leaves the bike on the drive, and walks in.

She stands a moment in the center of the space. The air is cool. There is no wind pushing back as when she rushed through the streets, there is no humidity, no closeness. The space above and around is endless, the sky extending above the pillars and the earth falling lower into the ravines around the ruins. She moves to the back and sits against a pillar, again facing the road. She can't see past the columns in the darkness. Her chest, heaving from the ride over, slows, steadies. The pillar is cool against her back. She sighs and closes her eyes and imagines placing the staircase, finding the entry. In the dark night, though, with only the pinprick starlight overhead, she finds it the same to just sit with her eyes open. The ruins are the same. Everything is still the same.

She sits a long while until her breath flattens and a thin layer of chill settles on top of her skin from the misting rain. She feels okay now. Tired. The rain picks up harder, and she decides other nights can be like tonight, waiting for the sound of snoring and then coming back alone. Her eyelids feel gritty now. She can go home. She pushes herself to her feet.

Headlights cut through the darkness past the pillars. They sweep the rain and shine on the tar, and they turn into the dirt circular drive, facing her. She moves behind the column and leans her head out to see. The car vibrates with loud music muted by the doors. Muffled yells. The car stops. The lights and music cut.

The doors open and three boys and two girls step out, all talking in voices unhindered. Words about the space, the columns, the rain. They walk to the center of the ruins and put down a box of something. They brought a small speaker and the music starts again, and Kayla sees their silhouettes reach into the box and pull out clinking bottles. They yell to each other to be

heard over the music. Deep voices calling out curses, high-pitched laughing. They fill the space with their bodies, their sounds. Kayla sees the starlight reflect off their teeth and the necks of the bottles. She's not supposed to see this.

She moves back away from the pillar and rests her forehead on it for a moment. Behind her the ground slopes into one of the ravines. She moves back to the lip and kneels down and lets her body edge down the wet grass, lowering until her head is just below the flat. If she lifts her neck she can see the base of the ruins and the feet walking inside.

The rain falls in thick drops on her back. One of the girls asks whose bike they thought was on the road, and a boy answers that it doesn't matter. They don't speak for a moment and Kayla smells the dirt loosened by the rain. "Port Gibson's main attraction," one of the boys says. "The best this town has to offer on a night like tonight." Sarcastic. The others laugh. They curse about the end of summer, the start of school. They curse about the town, their boredom. They laugh in between each one.

"A long time ago," one of them says, his voice somber, "there was something here. A hell of a long time ago." The others hum agreement and go silent.

Kayla shifts, thinking they must leave soon, and as she does a bottle smashes above, thrown against a pillar. Above they yell in encouragement. More crashes come, the glass now landing just over her as they aim at the columns along the back, the pops coming after and on top of another. So close by, just overhead, they sound like fireworks, like a stove clicking before catching. She presses one side of her face flat to the grass. She closes her eyes. The glass explodes, rains down. She doesn't know if the girls are throwing, too. The rhythm of grunts and shatters swallows the air.

It stops. “That’s it,” someone says. The noise stops. Slowly the air moves back in, above and around her. She shudders in a breath. Now they will leave soon. After a moment she hears footsteps, two boys walking past the last pillar and towards her at the edge of the ravine. The click of a lighter, tobacco smell.

With the rain falling on top of her she hears two boys exhale through their teeth. She imagines the smoke blowing across her body. She pushes herself down against the earth, feels every inch of herself burrowing.

“Crazy,” one says, between pulls of the cigarette, “that one guy owned this whole thing. Miles of it, maybe to the river.”

“I don’t know,” the other says.

“Crazy that someone could ever have that much at all.”

“Sure,” the response.

“Imagine it like it was,” he says. “Imagine going back to when it was as big and full and gold as it ever was, and stopping it there. Imagine what it would look like. Not some shell in some empty town,” he says.

The other exhales. “You can’t just stop it,” he says. “It’ll always be moving. Anyway I’m sick of standing in the rain. And I can’t see it other than it is right now.” A pause, a slow, hot exhalation. Finally, “Let’s go.”

Kayla opens her eyes. She hears them cough and then the soft flick of their fingers, and she sees their cigarettes flip over her one after the other, the red ends tracing parallel arcs as they turn over and over against the black sky. They land somewhere beneath her.

She wonders, listening to their footsteps and voices gathering again in the center of the ruins, if Noah will become like them, if he is even far off at all. She hears the speaker flip off,

their shoes connect with the dirt driveway, the opening and closing of car doors. The engine starts and the muted music begins again, and she hears the tires roll on the gravel then turn on to the cement. It is inevitable, becoming.

When the last traces of their noise leave she waits for the stillness to return. She stands in the center again, letting the rain run down her hair and over her face, but their traces remain. Their glass shards glint in the grass. She can smell the cigarettes, the beer. Their voices are etched in the cracks of the pillars. She thinks of building it all back, of fixing it, sweeping the bottles, gluing the chips. But it wouldn't make a difference. The space holds them.

She goes to her bicycle. She hopes the salamanders don't come out until the car is long gone, parked somewhere still so the tires won't roll them into the blacktop. She has no idea where she will go.

Still Water

I'm standing there looking at my kid facing the water and I'm thinking please dear God don't go in. He's twelve and from the back I can see him looking over the edge of the pond, looking at the murky bottom. He looks older than he's ever looked and impossibly young. I'm thinking we could just go home now, we could get back in the car and drive back out to Pittsfield, and when we have to come back to pick up his mom from the airport we can take I-90 like we were supposed to and never drive back through Concord again.

We came to see the house. We dropped his mom off at the airport for her London trip and I plugged our home address into the phone and we're driving back along MA-2 when I realize we're passing right through Concord, we're in the rotary right in the center of town. We were supposed to take 90 way out west but there must have been an accident. The phone lady said "updating route" and I just followed along. But when I got to the rotary it was like a different kind of autopilot. I knew I had to see the house. I have a million things going through my mind, driving, stuff about last night and nights before. All the memories of the place start coming in, and I start thinking of Laurie and all, and then I switch off the phone and take familiar turns until we're on my old road. I drive slow and Liam in the passenger seat asks me what I'm looking for and I tell him the house I grew up in.

I almost pass by it, it looks so different. I park on the side of the road opposite. I get out and lean against the car, looking across the street and at the little building. It's almost autumn and the leaves are starting to drop. It's still warm out. The leaves gather in the space between the lawn and the paved road. The road wasn't paved before. The wind comes cool and brief,

suggesting that it'll get colder soon, that soon there'll be snowbanks piled high and the days will be darker than they are bright, the sun rising so late and setting so early. For now, though, it's still alright.

The house is different. They changed the siding on the house. It used to be yellow siding and now it's white. Someone inlaid a little stone walkway from the edge of the driveway to the front steps. There's landscaping, flowers all around the steps. Smaller, nicer. Like wild hedges trimmed or something.

Liam gets out of the car and leans next to me on it. "This is it, huh?" he says, underwhelmed. Trees stick up like a fencepost along the back edge of the half-acre lot.

"This is it," I tell him. We stand there looking in silence.

"You want to knock?" he asks.

I think about it. I imagine some lady coming to the door, me telling her that I grew up here, that I used to live here. I'd tell her I'm curious to see how things changed. Oh, and this is my kid, I'd say. My boy, Liam. Say hi, Liam. I imagine that she was sitting there a long time before, this lady, sitting in a recliner in the living room, and I can't shake the image. "No, buddy, I don't want to knock," I say. "It'd be a little ridiculous."

"Your call," he says.

I stand there looking, just reflecting on things, everything coming back.

The night before was a bit of a train wreck. Laurie was packing all her stuff for this trip the night before. "I never go on trips," she says. "I don't know what to pack." It's a big deal for her, going to all these bookstores to try and sell the books her company publishes. She's throwing a bunch of clothes in a suitcase in the bedroom and I'm cleaning up the dishes from

dinner and Liam's sitting there watching TV. It's something about explorers or a treasure hunters or something, I can't tell. It's scenes of a bunch of haggard-looking guys sliding around a rocking boat. They look like they've been to war. I've got my hands in a sink full of hot, soapy water.

"Man," Liam says.

"What?" I ask.

"It'd be cool, you know. Being on a boat, sailing."

"No thanks," I say. "Motion sickness." I put a plate in the drying rack.

"Or deep sea fishing."

"You really think?" I ask. His mom is whistling in the other room.

"Maybe I'll do that. I'll finish high school and go to the docks and I'll jump on a boat."

I put down the next plate. "You haven't started high school," I say. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Look at this." he says. "Look at those guys."

"They look like they were the catch, not the catchers," I say. "They look like those angler fish with the huge teeth and the lights in front of their mouths."

He turns back to the TV.

"You think they'd take you?" I ask. I don't want him running off on some boat.

His excitement dies a little. "Everyone needs a hand. Someone to do the hard stuff. Someone to squeeze in and tighten stuff in tight spaces. Pull fish. I don't know."

"I think pulling fish is the good part," I tell him. He turns back to the TV. "I had a buddy growing up, went off to fish commercial. Didn't do good in school or anything. Went off to fish. Next time I saw him you know what? You know what he was in?"

"Let me guess," Liam says. "A coffin." Now he's upset. "An obituary. An ad on TV about the dangers of deep sea fishing."

He's being a little shit. "Don't be a little – " I stop myself. I'm better now at stopping myself. "No," I say. "The way he said it, they do a lot of the hauls at night. The nets are so big you can't pull them up with your hands. It's all lit by big, industrial lights, but half of everything is dark anyway. He slips on the wet deck and when he gets up one of the hooks they use to pull the nets is swinging like crazy, right at him. He tries to jump out of the way and slips again, and the hook goes into his knee." I look at Liam and he doesn't say anything. "A wheelchair. That's what he was in."

He turns off the TV. "I'm going anyway," he says, his voice all bitter. "You can't stop me from doing it."

"I'm not telling you you can't do it, I'm just – "

"You are," he says. He's getting all worked up. He can blow up on a switch, now. I forget about that sometimes, how boys can just blow up on a switch all of a sudden when there's something in the way. It makes me scared and sad. "You're trying to keep me pinned here."

"I'm just saying think of the risks," I tell him.

I know he's pissed. "I'm getting out if I want to," he says. "You can sit still. I'm going to catch tuna. How's about this? I'll send you gifts. I'll send Purina, tins of tuna, cat food, for you to remember me."

Jesus, I think.

I try to lighten the mood. "With you out to sea and your mom in London, I'll be the only one here," I say. "I'll go crazy."

"That's the risk of doing nothing," he says. He gets up and goes upstairs, and I'm left holding a soapy plate above a sink full of soapy water.

After I finish cleaning up I go to the bedroom and sit on the bed. Laurie's on the ground organizing her clothes in her suitcase. I sigh.

"We might want to revisit the retirement budget," I tell her. "I don't think Liam's planning on setting us up with more than a scratching post."

She doesn't look up. "I heard the whole thing," she says.

"And what?"

"I have to get ready for this trip." she tells me.

"He just goes crazy out of nowhere."

"This trip means a lot," she says.

"I know," I say. "Let's just move past the fishing. You're right. We should forget about it."

Now she looks up at me. Her head is tilted and she gives me this look that sticks with me, like she knows something I couldn't know. "I'm worried," she says. "I'm worried that you're where you started, still scared of the same things from all those years ago."

"What does that mean?" I ask. "The kid? I'm not scared of the kid."

"It means if you're going to sit like a rock in the current, Stevie, I don't know how much longer I can keep pulling you along." I try not to think about what that implies. "I need to pack," she tells me.

I go sit on the couch. In the morning we drive to the airport and say sparse, empty things, eyes on the road.

After we drop Laurie off Liam hops in the front seat. I decide we're going downtown. I decide I owe him a little. I don't like fighting crowds but I figure I owe it to him. I get us lunch by the waterfront park. Fish sandwiches. We walk out on one of the wharfs. There's still a decent crowd milling around, the end of tourist season. On the edge of the wharf the wind is stronger. We're standing there looking at the water chopping and the boats rocking soft. Behind us there's a huge blue and white compass inlaid on a red background made into the pavement. When the sun comes through the clouds it's warm. Liam is looking out and around at the people walking by, at all the cement, the boats and bricks and walkways. We're looking out east. West, behind us, is downtown, everything. The wind is blowing his shirt around.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"It's okay," he says. He keeps looking out while I look at him. His voice is quiet, like he doesn't want the people walking around us to hear.

"Okay?"

"It's different."

"Yeah," I say.

Eventually he turns and we go back to the parking deck. I fight traffic getting to I-90 and we make our way out of the city.

"My buddy told me about another guy he knew, back when he was fishing," I say. Liam's on his phone and I can't tell if he's listening. My eyes are stuck on the road and I'm hunched over the wheel, trying to get through all the cars flying by. I tell the story anyway. "Guy who used to be in the Coast Guard. Name was Tattoo, believe it or not. A real winner, there. Anyway, my buddy asks Tattoo how he ended up fishing, and Tattoo tells this story of how the Coast Guard won't let you get tattoos on your face because it's government property." I don't get any

sign he's hearing me but I keep going. "Tattoo was a drinker, he told my buddy. He didn't much like the Coast Guard, so he'd get blitzed every time he could. One day he wakes up back on the ship after a night they were docked and he had a new tattoo, a skull and bones, right on his cheek. He said his officer found him in the head, the bathroom, looking in the mirror, trying to scratch and gauge the ink off with a wire brush. Blood running down his face, ink staying in place. Dishonorable discharge."

"Jesus," Liam says.

"All I'm saying is I don't want you to end up like my buddy. Or like Tattoo."

We go quiet for a while. I'm trying to merge into the right lane and then take an exit four lanes over in a thousand feet, the phone tells me.

"It wasn't even the fishing," he says.

"It's alright," I say.

"I think I just like swimming."

I make the exit without getting obliterated. Thank God, I say to myself.

We've been together since high school, Laurie and me. We used to run all over town, driving the beater truck I fixed up. Bonfires, swimming, all of it. We'd sneak into my room in the old house through the bulkhead door – my room was in the basement – and we'd load our backpacks with beers, and then we'd drive out to a bonfire with everyone else and look at each other over the necks of our beers in the firelight. It's electric, looking at someone like that. Then I'd drive us back to my place and we'd sneak in the bulkhead again. It was dumb, when I think about it now, driving like that. Someone in school, somebody at one of the bonfires, his brother died like that, driving that way, ending up with his mom's car up against a telephone pole and

him crushed by the collapsing metal, but even then we kept doing it. I think that guy, whoever's brother it was, probably stopped, but it took the rest of us a long time, I think, to realize our mistakes.

That's the way I feel looking back on all of it now. Like the whole time I was looking over the neck of a beer at a pretty girl lit up from the glow of a bonfire, and in the background it's just accidents and accidents piling up, and all kinds of fires.

The phone thing reroutes us and we end up at the roundabout, driving through Concord. We haven't said much and I'm sitting there thinking of Laurie, thinking of what she meant, of what was going wrong.

"You got a girlfriend?" I ask Liam. I think I'm mostly kidding.

He's looking at his phone and doesn't look up. "Yup," he says. Just like that.

I wince.

We used to fight a lot, Laurie and me. I will say that. She always came to my place since she had trouble with her mom. Her mom was a drinker, she told me. Her mom had a new guy every month. She said she was scared of ending up like her and I never much wanted to hear it. A lot of times we'd just sit in the truck in my driveway before we made plans for the night, and in that moment of waiting, when there was nothing clearly in front of us, we'd get into it. I remember her teeth shining in the light coming through the windshield when she talks. Big and white, like die.

"You never tell me about your folks," she says once. Outside the cab is dark, humid.

"There's not much to tell,' I say. They worked late, mom at the hospital and dad tending bar.

"I never see them," she says.

"I don't ask you about your parents."

"I was just wondering."

"What are we going to do tonight?" I ask. "We should do something. We could swim." Back through the woods behind my house is this little pond at an empty house. No one's ever home so we use the pond.

"We always swim," she says.

"Yeah," I say.

"I'd like to meet 'em," she says. "Your folks."

"Oh, Jesus," I say. "There's nothing to my folks. I just want to swim. I don't want to sit here and talk about moms."

"Doing the same things over and over is like doing nothing at all," she says. "It's doing less than talking."

"Well, what do you want to do?" I ask. I'm already angry. It's scary, how quick I could explode.

"Call me crazy, Stevie, but at some point I want to do something. I want to get out of Concord."

"I know what you want," I say. "You want to meet my parents and for them to fall in love with you, and then you want to move in. I'm not interested in talking with my parents. I don't want to sit with my folks. I sure as hell don't want to sit with your ma."

"And why's that?" she asks. She says it like she already knows the answer, like she's trying to get me to admit something.

I think of the worst thing I can say and I say it. "Because she's probably just like you," I say. I get out of the car and slam the door shut. Outside it's dark, dewy. I go to the bulkhead and I hear her behind me. She's yelling something about me I think and I open the bulkhead and clop down the stairs. I grab a beer from the fridge in the unfinished half of the basement and she's behind me, pissed and telling me what a piece of trash I am. We're standing there in the yellow light from the fridge and she knocks the beer out of my hand and it pops on the floor. Fine, I say, fine, okay. I go to my room on the other half of the basement and sit on the bed and she follows me in there. Finally I just yell at her. "Leave," I yell. She's standing over me. "Go home," I say. She reaches back and claps me across the face and she starts crying.

"You bring me all the way here," she says, "get me involved, and then tell me to go home."

It hit takes everything out of me. I'm involved, too. I just have a harder time saying it. It's like all the noise outside and inside is gone. "Yeah," I say. "Yeah, you're right. I'll drive you home," I say.

She sits down on the bed and ends up spending the night.

I'm looking at the driveway and the bulkhead and I can't stop thinking about all that stuff now. When me and Liam are leaning up against the car across from the street it's all I can think about, the way I used to be. I used to be a real piece of garbage, I know. It's like looking in a mirror and seeing someone that just makes your stomach sour. I used to get angry all the time.

But I don't do that anymore. I don't scream or yell or anything anymore, and I'm confused because I don't know what she was talking about last night, all that stuff about me being the same, being just as scared. The sun bounces off the windows and the meal of the car we're leaning on and it's warm. I can't stop looking at the bulkhead, at the driveway, at the woodline behind the house with the pond somewhere through there. I know I've got to see the pond, too. The pond was the worst of it.

"Why are we here?" Liam finally asks.

"It was on the way home," I say. "We dropped your mom off at the airport and it was on the way home."

"You're just going to look at it?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, I am."

He must know the look is hollow. "It's not particularly interesting," he says.

"Be my guest to look at something else," I tell him. "You're not beholden to this image. Your eyes aren't stapled."

"I don't want to look at anything," he says. "I want to do something."

I try to see it the way he sees it. A small house on a small street.

I don't want him to see the pond but I need to see it. I think he would want to see it. I make the compromise. "There's a pond," I tell him. "We could go there."

At its worst with Laurie it was bad. Irredeemable, I thought, when I looked back on it. We went to my house to get drinks from the basement before heading to one of her girlfriends' houses for the night. We're sitting in the driveway and it's already late and the house looks dark, and I say, "We can just go in the front." I'm thinking it's completely empty, my parents fast

asleep. It's summer and the stars are out, and we walk up to the front door and I open it and go in, her right behind me.

My ma is up, sitting in the recliner in the living room. It's dark except for the lamp above her. She's got one sock off and is bent over, rubbing her foot. She starts when we come in.

"Stevie!" she says, all excited. "I just got off my shift. Who's your friend?"

"We're only here for a minute, ma," I tell her. "We're just grabbing a few things and then heading out again." Laurie's still standing behind me.

"Who's your friend?" she asks. "Don't you want to sit and eat a minute? I'll get you something." She stands up.

"We're not staying, ma," I say. I got like that so easy, incredibly pissed, like my whole body was just full of something hot whenever there was something in my way. "We're going now."

"I'm Laurie," Laurie says. That upsets me. It's something in the way. "It's nice to meet you."

My ma moves towards me and Laurie. "I'm Stevie's mother," she says to Laurie. "Come on, sit a minute." She turns to me. "I never see you," she says. Her arms are out like she's going to guide me to the couch. "Sit a minute."

I grab Laurie's hand and move around my ma to get to the basement door. No," is all I say. I open the door and go on the steps and pull Laurie behind me, and I close it on my ma's voice asking Laurie if maybe she'd like something to drink.

We're standing there on the top step in the dark, and when Laurie talks I can see her teeth glow white. "I wanted to stay," she says, and I flip the light switch on and go down to my room.

We go down to the bedroom and I grab my bag and bring it to the fridge on the other half of the basement. I open one beer and start loading more into the bag.

"I don't want to go to Karen's," I say, my head in the yellow light. "I just want to go to the pond or something."

I pull back and close the fridge door and we're standing there in the dark. I expect Laurie to ask why, to fight about it, but she doesn't. I can see her eyes in the dark and I know her head is tilted as she looks at me. "Okay," is all she says. I go to the stairs up the bulkhead and we walk through the yard to the woodline, and then through the short stretch of trees to the pond. Halfway through I finish the beer and toss the bottle, then flip the bag around and grab another and start drinking it.

We get to the other side. The stars are out. Everything is black-blue, quarter-lit. The grass at the bank of the pond is overgrown. Cattails lean out of the far edge of the water, the white fuzz drifting back and forth in the slow breeze. I sit down and put the bag between my knees.

"I know you probably wanted to sit and talk with her," I say.

Laurie's standing next to me and she steps out of her shoes. "That's alright," she says. "We can just swim." She reaches over to peel her socks off.

I keep sipping the beer and she slips out of her pants and shirt and bra. She steps into the water, the dark surface parting around her. She gets in and goes under and I watch the water ripple out. She pops up and spits a little water.

"She would have just sat there and said the same things over and over," I say. "She would have talked in circles, burned from the end of the shift. When she got done talking, asking the same questions, she'd have just looked at us sitting on the couch like we're something on

display, like we're a painting, stuck, hung. And finally she'd get sleepy and go upstairs and we would escape. That's what it would feel like. Escape."

"It's alright, Stevie," she says. She's sitting in the water with just her head over the surface, facing me sitting with the beer dangling between my legs. "We didn't have to stay."

We don't say anything for a while, and she dips under again and comes up and pushes her hair from her face. "Do you want to come in?" she asks.

"In a minute," I say.

When she talks again her voice is careful, like she's talking to a kid. "My mom," she starts, "my mom – "

"Let's not talk about moms," I say.

"Alright," she says.

We sit there and I keep drinking. She ducks under. While she's down I look around at the grass, the weeds, the trees. When we're not talking I can hear crickets above the small whine of the other bugs. All just layers of noise. I wonder if crickets can hear the other bugs when they're chirping, or if it all falls away until they stop, too.

She bobs back to the surface, moves her hair from her eyes again. Just the floating head. "At some point," she says, "we have to go somewhere."

"Here this comes again," I say.

"It's stuff I have to think about it."

"Then think about it. Leave me out of it."

"You want me to leave you out of it?"

"That's not what I mean," I say. "Don't take it the way I don't mean it."

"I'm not getting stuck here," she says.

"Then don't."

"What's wrong with you?" she asks. All her patience, her caution, is gone. "I'm getting stuck if we don't do something about it, and you're getting stuck, too, if you don't. You're so afraid of it you won't do anything at all."

I stand up. I can't listen to this. I don't want to listen to this.

"Stevie," she says, maybe to apologize, but I don't care. "I – "

I take the bottle in my hand and throw it in the water next to her floating head. She yells and covers her face. I pick up her clothes and bring them to the water's edge. I hold them above the surface and she's yelling questions. What am I doing, what kind of person does this. Who acts like this. I tell her I just wanted to have a quiet night. I just wanted to swim and have a few beers and not do any of this, and she had to go and bring all of it up. I grab her shoes from the bank and throw them underhand into the water. I turn my back and grab my bag, and I say if she's so good at not getting stuck then she can get herself out of here. I put my bag on my shoulder and step to the woodline. I stop once I'm in the trees, expecting to hear her yelling something after me about needing a ride, but all I hear is the crickets.

I'm standing behind Liam and he's peering into the water. He walks around the banks and I stand still, watching. He bends down and picks up a pebble and throws it in, and I wince and look at the ripples. I wonder how she could ever forgive me. I tell myself that's not me anymore. I'm not some angry boy anymore. I think I should forgive myself. But that doesn't solve anything with Laurie.

"I'm going in," Liam says. He slips out of his shoes and bends to pick his socks off.

I swallow my words.

He lifts his shirt off and pushes his jeans down, then steps into the water. The surface parts around his thin legs, his waist. I watch with a sad fascination. His clothes are in a pile next to me.

He dives under and does a few laps and I watch his shoulders churning with his head down. I think of how similar we are. I shiver. I think of all the people he could hurt. I get this sick feeling he's going to make every mistake I made.

I think, what's it going to take for me to stop it? Seeing him swim around, I know I can't keep him dry, inside. I think how in the world did I not end up like that forever. I think, how was it possible for me to change?

Then I remember what happened after I tossed all Laurie's clothes in. I remember I'm sitting on the bed with a beer on my lap and the door opens and she's standing there, soaking wet, dripping onto the floor. I see her and I start bawling, crying, and she tells me that we're getting out of this town eventually, that we're moving. I tell her I'm sorry, I'm sorry, and she leaves her wet clothes on the floor and goes to my dresser and grabs a shirt, then takes the keys to the truck from the table. She drives herself home. All that night I thought about that, that act of forgiveness. The next day I heard the truck pull into the driveway and she was back, and I asked her what I needed to do.

I look at Liam and think maybe it'll be okay. He's moving. I have to let him move. When he gets out of the water the breeze comes back and I can see the gooseflesh rise on his skin. He picks up his shirt and dries himself off. "You'd be a good fisherman," I tell him. He looks at me. When we get in the car to drive home I ask him about his girlfriend.

A Dying Deer

Carlson's grandma was always home but she stayed in the trailer. She kept the blinds pulled so whenever he came in from outside it was like stepping into nighttime, the dim red light from the lamp and the blinking television screen the only things cutting darkness, silence. She sat on the couch and didn't speak, and he would go to the fridge and get whatever glass of milk or leftover food he wanted and head back outside quickly. The air in the trailer felt heavy, like a cave. He only stayed in to eat or sleep.

Not that Cherry Creek, Nevada gave much for other options. But at least outside he had space. He had the pinkish brown dirt extending far back behind the trailer and out to the hazy outline of mountain, he had the vault of air above and around. He would throw rocks, picking spaces in the ground for targets – a shrub brush, bigger rocks – or rummage through scrap wood and stone, or walk as far out as he could. Sometimes when he turned to look back the trailer was just a speck across the flat distance, and he knew that even if he walked to the point where it disappeared completely, if he just turned around and walked straight he would run into it, or into South Road running in front, and always end up home where he started.

When his mom came back at night the three of them would eat dinner. In the red lamplight they sat in front of the TV, his grandma still in her chair and he and his mom on opposite ends of the couch. Outside the windows late summer nights the whole dome seemed taken over by dark. His mom was skinny, tired.

"Carlson," she said one night.

He looked at her. Her spaghetti was untouched and the watery sauce was going to run off the plate. "Yes?"

"Remember one thing. Always count what you have." Her eyes were fixed on him. Her plate was tilted and the sauce was hanging on the lip.

"Ma'am?"

Her words came out jagged, stilted. "You never know what's yours until its not."

"Yes," he said.

They turned back to the TV and his mom straightened her plate. When he finished eating he went to his room at the back of the trailer. He had to duck under the doorway. He went to sleep.

Carlson didn't know much about Will's family and he never asked. He never went inside when he went to meet Will. They spent their time outside. Their companionship was built off long hours talking, drifting, off shared laughter, off an unspoken understanding, it seemed, that they were in the same position. Often they would walk down South Road to Main Street in Cherry Creek from Carlson's house. The gas station stood out bright against the brown and red. The glass looked clean, almost out of place, against the wooden buildings next and opposite. Inside had air conditioning.

"What do you got?" Will asked.

"Thirty-two cents."

They pooled their money for a sleeve of Life Savers. They sucked them on the way back, eyes squinted against the sun.

"Woulda liked a Coke," Will said.

"Me too."

"A Coke and some chips or something."

"You hungry? Have another Life Savers."

Will laughed. They walked over the cracks in the pavement and the dust blown onto the shoulder. Will had big teeth, white. They showed when he laughed. Carlson wondered what would happen when school started up again in the fall. What Will would do in two years after graduating. "You been back to the mechanics?" Carlson asked.

"Naw. That old man had it out for me. He said he had a town full of kids just like me woulda loved to work in a shop. 'Shop with overhead fans,' he said. Like those overhead fans were the best things anyone'd ever felt." He snorted. "Like that was excuse to pay me fifty cents an hour."

"Fifty cents?"

"It was better'n that. Not by much, though. Not worth it. 'Supply and demand,' he told me when I brung it up. 'Job's in high demand.' And then he says that some kid on his second week on the job shouldn't be inquirin' too much about the pay."

"Better that you left, then," Carlson said. The words felt falsely sweet.

"Let some other sap from around here take that gig."

It was dry and hot and they walked without any sense of pace. The day would stretch on and on and then it would be tomorrow, and tomorrow would stretch the same. There was no use in rushing. School would start and most days Carlson would go. But the classes seemed to move with the same languid, almost limp feeling. At least now he was outside. No ticking clocks slowing down as they counted the seconds, a cheap reminder of nothing time. He could talk now, he had that. Talk is cheap, they always said. His grandma said that when he talked over the TV at dinner. He didn't agree.

"Coke woulda been nice," he said.

In San Diego years later Carlson found work quickly, first washing dishes and later as a laborer at a construction site. Will was right; there were plenty of jobs in the city. He swept away the remains of others' work with a power broom, gathered the fragments of drywall and loose screws and dust and pushed them all into a pile. If someone needed something – a flathead screwdriver, a water bottle – he would get it. In the beginning he talked little to the other workers, who called out to each other in Spanish and English. Soon, though, after the first house was completed, they invited him to the cantina.

"What are you doing working a job a high schooler would have?" they asked him, sitting around a table. "You're a grown man."

Their beers sweat in the heat. Trumpets played over a radio from the back. "Work is work," Carlson said. "Money is money."

"You could make more washing dishes." It was Marco, spoken as fact. He was tall and slim and leaned back in his chair.

"I don't know," he said. It was hard to explain. There was no satisfaction in cleaning dishes, nothing gained, nothing changed from the repetition. Here he cleaned to build something, to put something there, even if it was just sweeping. Building up. "Better than stuck in a kitchen," he said. "And I don't have any real costs, besides."

"No woman at home?" It was the one directly across from Carlson. He was smaller than the rest, sat up straight.

"No."

"No debts?" His eyes were fixed on Carlson.

"No."

"No one to send money home to?"

He thought of the trailer, the blue glow of the TV cast now on an empty couch. His grandmother died two years ago. The TV stayed on. When he went home the week before the funeral his mom's eyes were glassed over. She couldn't get the queer half-smile off her face. She was making dinner, she said, and gave him cold pasta clumped together from the fridge. He asked her what the joke was and she said, "What?" like she really didn't understand, and then the man standing behind her in the kitchen got angry. The one time he had gone back. He wouldn't do it again. It seemed like another world away.

He shook his head.

"Sounds like we've got a rich man, then," the one opposite said. While everyone laughed he held his gaze on Carlson. "And white to boot," he added. From the side Marco watched, leaning back.

In the mornings Carlson rode his bicycle to the offices, and then drove to the worksites with Marco. His own car had broken down on his second day in San Diego. Marco steered the truck with his left hand and held a cup of coffee in the air with his right, and Carlson hung his hand out of the passenger window, his palm against the metal. Marco warned him about Carlito, the one at the bar. A cousin of a cousin, Marco explained. He didn't lift his eyes from the road when he spoke, and his voice interrupted the warm, tired feeling of the cab, the fabric of the seat worn and bunched into little balls of fabric, the still air that smelled like ash. Carlito was a fragile and angry man, Marco said. He felt less-than. A dangerous feeling. He tried to carve out space for himself with his teeth. When Marco's voice faded the cab returned to stasis, the only sounds the squeaking suspension over potholes, the faint radio, Marco's slow sips of hot coffee.

Carlson didn't ask why Carlito was still hired. Marco was in charge of the work, hired everyone on the projects, most of them distant relatives.

"He's family," Marco offered after a while, anyway. "And all everyone wants is to be left alone and to fit in."

"Why," Carlson asked, "Did you hire me? I'm the only one that doesn't speak Spanish, the only one that doesn't know anyone."

"I could tell you wanted to work," Marco said.

Marco would sip his coffee and try to swerve around potholes, and at the job sites he would frame off rooms while Carlson pushed the shop broom around collecting dust and trash. When he passed Carlito Carlito spat into his pile and grinned. "Clean, *perrito,* clean," he said, as long as no one else was there to hear. Carlson pushed the pile out the door.

"I'm gettin' out of here," Will said. They were walking along South Road, heat radiating from the pavement. The road was cracked and cut through empty desert.

"Yeah?"

"There's nothin' here for me. Nothin' to do." His skin was a tight brown from the sun.

"I don't want you to go," Carlson said, and he was surprised he said it.

Will laughed. "Everybody's gotta go at some point. You either go or you die here, havin' done nothing."

Carlson watched how his feet hit the pavement. He stepped off the low shoulder into the sand. The sand was soft, crunched underfoot. On the tar his feet slapped and bounced.

"End of this summer," Will said. "Reno."

Carlson stepped on the pavement. He felt the sun on his neck.

"I'll take that old beater and head to Las Vegas at least. Pull up to the first mechanic I see and tell 'em I'm lookin' for work. They'll take me. They'll pay me right if they see me work."

The air was still. The road looked like it ran straight to the base of the mountains far ahead, rising out of nothing and domed low and flat at their tops. In the winter they would be capped with snow. In the winter the sagebrush on the side of the road, the sand, the pavement, would be dusted. Everything would be white and brown-white. And then summer. The world felt like a vacuum.

"There's something on the road," Carlson said.

"I'll save some money and get myself an apartment, a little TV."

"There's something lying on the road."

Will lowered his gaze from the sky to the brown lump ahead. "An animal?" They walked faster. "It's a deer," he said. They approached until they stood over it. "A fawn. It's been hit," Will said. "It's still breathing."

The deer lay with its back half on the sand, its front on the road. It looked spindly, fragile. Its tan side heaved and pulled air, then shuddered. It opened the eye facing up to see the two boys when they approached and it convulsed, trying to lift itself up. But its small legs were shattered, the front two bent at odd angles and the back two limp. Blood pooled by its knees and its mouth, a wet spot on the gray cement under the snout.

"It's a doe," Will said.

"I want to take it home." Carlson's voice was soft.

"You want to take it home."

"It's still alive. You grab it down by the waist. Home's not far."

"You want us to carry it," Will said.

"Grab it around the waist. It's small. We're carrying it to my house." Carlson looked up and their eyes fixed. His eyes stung but he didn't look away.

Will spat into the dust. "Alright," he said. He moved to the back of the animal and squatted, his hands poised just in front of the hind legs. Carlson moved to the front. The deer started convulsing. They slid their hands under the soft hide, the warm soft fur, and the deer spasmed.

"Wait," Carlson said.

The animal shook. Its neck snapped up and down, eyes wide. But then a breath, a deep pull and a shaky release, and it stopped, exhausted, hurt.

"Now," Carlson said, and they lifted the deer in the air. Its legs hung towards the road.

"This is somethin' else," Will said. His face was set hard and away from the animal in his hands and he wouldn't meet Carlson's gaze.

"It's only a quarter-mile."

They carried the animal awkwardly between them. When they got to Carlson's house he led them around the back. He walked until the house was barely visible, until his fingers burned from the weight of the deer. Its eyes were now closed.

The property was never fenced, he realized. All of this emptiness for nothing. "Set it here," he said, and Will, his forehead damp, obeyed. The deer didn't move, just lay with the crinked rising and falling of its side as it was when they found it.

"This is somethin' else," Will repeated. He looked towards the road.

"You did good. We got it here. Thank you."

"I don't wanna know what you're gonna do with it." He shook his head to himself and spat again. "I'm going. I'm walkin' home."

When he was gone, Carlson went to the scrap pile and found a splintered piece of wood. He stepped inside the trailer and went to the closet and found a rope. Outside he cut a rough hole through the top of the wood and fed the rope through. As he walked he tied a knot, tested its strength by pulling. He could follow the thin drops of blood now dark brown in the dust to the animal but he knew where it was, could see its outline like a flat bush. Time had passed and the air behind the deer was turning blue. He got to it and crouched down, lifting its head. The eye facing up opened and he looked into it. A dark brown ring around the black pupil staring up, staring away. Carlson wrapped the rope under its jaw and tied a knot. He drove the stake into the ground just behind its head and stamped it down. When he got up he put a hand on its belly, patted it once. Then went inside.

When he went out the next morning the doe was gone. The stake lay a few feet from the hole but the rope wasn't there. It must have gotten got by something, he thought. A coyote. It would have died quickly, or it died before whatever it was got there. It didn't matter much at this point; it was gone.

He decided then that Will was right, that there was nothing here. His grandma and mom, maybe. But then the silence of the trailer, the swallowed words. The man his mother kept bringing over, the distance. He was convinced. He would go. He wouldn't see Will again. Will might as well already be in Reno. Carlson would work long days for low wages and save money and buy a car, and he would drive until he made it somewhere with people, with things. He would get a job there and establish himself, get a place to live. And when he drove in to San Diego, saw the first high-rise off the freeway and realized how far it went, just how much there could be, he knew he would stay.

At work they talked about women. They talked about women between the whirring table saws, between hammers pounding. They would drop a chalk line to get a straight edge to cut against, and while one pulled the red line taught to snap back against the surface – while the line was held at tension – they called comments to each other. Their voices drifted from corners of the half-done house.

"You put a ring on it yet, Carlito?"

"None of your goddamn business." The line snapped.

"You better do it soon, the guys are looking hungry."

Carlito called out a reply that got lost in the table saw. Soon they included Carlson.

"You don't have a sister or anything?" Carlito asked one afternoon, when Carlson walked past. He reminded Carlson of a proud, small dog. He talked loud enough for the others to hear.

Carlson stopped pushing the broom. "No."

"Too bad. I bet she'd be pretty. A white girl, small and skinny." Carlito was standing at a table saw behind a square of drywall. He was smiling at him. "She'd know how to sweep, too," he said. Around, like echoes, like a house of mirrors, laughter.

"I'd bet a week's pay Carlson's giving it to your girl who you won't put a ring on," someone called from around a corner. "'White Lightning,' she calls him. 'The Best Garbage Man in Town.' You ever get home and go quick to the back window, Carlito, you'll see his white ass booking it across your lawn, broom in hand. Give her a ring and he'll sweep it off her finger, throw it in the dump with your drywall. Hey, Carlson?"

Carlito shook his head. He took the thick pencil behind his ear and pointed it at Carlson. Only the two of them were in the room. "Don't say anything, motherfucker." His voice was quiet.

Carlson could hear the men above him and around him shifting their weight, waiting for him. “I steal his shoes, too,” he said loudly. “Every time. I make myself a bowl of cereal and head out with a new pair of shoes.”

The men upstairs laughed and stomped the floor. Carlito shook his head at Carlson, his lips pulled tight. He put his head down and measured spots on the drywall, drew sharp slashes with the pencil. Carlson pushed the broom outside. From upstairs Marco called and asked for a bottle of water. It felt good, he thought, to talk.

At the end of the day Carlson got a ride back to the offices with Marco. Marco whistled while he drove the truck, his arm out of the window. It was a nice truck. Carlson would like to have a truck.

“Alright, partner,” Marco said when he parked. Carlson grabbed his bicycle leaning against the wall of the offices and rode it home, south of the city five miles to his apartment. There was no one else there, not ever, and he turned on all the lights and the small television, and he turned up the volume all the way and sat on the couch covered by the light and the voices.

A girl was at the other end of the cantina facing the table, but watching the TV over the bar and never looking at them. She seemed alone and Carlson knew that meant lonely. Her elbows were on the bar and her hair fell forward over her shoulders towards her hands. If she would look then maybe. But if she would look and they saw then no.

Carlson drank his beer. The sweating bottle left rings on the table and he put it down inches to the right each time, making connected circles. Five so far. Carlito buying the first, and then everyone else getting rounds for him. Why did she hold her hands like that? What was on the TV?

"Anyway, now she's saying it's not enough," Carlito said. He talked to the table while he drank. "It's never enough for them."

"And the fix?"

"I said to her, 'What do you want me to do?' I said, 'You want me to stop giving you money for the kid? Do you want me to work longer days, work harder?' I said, 'Look at my hands, tell me I can work harder.' 'You're vain' – that's what she said to me. 'You're vain and proud and I don't want to be stuck.'"

"Stuck." The man next to Carlito pushed air through his nose, shaking his head at the unbelievable. "Sorry, Carlito. Women."

Carlson looked away from the bar and the girl and looked at Carlito. Carlito's face was red and his chin was thrown forward. Carlson couldn't let him know. Marco came back with more beers for everyone, holding the necks between his fingers. Five of them sitting at the table.

"To pride and vanity," Carlito said. He barked a dry laugh. Carlson drank his next beer and when he sat it down the wooden table had already sucked up the moisture left by the other bottle. A fresh circle.

"I do everything, you know?" Carlito said. "I'm the one working, the one paying. I come home and all she has to do is stay there. Doesn't want to be stuck? She'll be stuck without me, stuck without someone to pay for her crap and stuck without someone to listen to her bullshit and stuck without someone to take care of her."

"You still have the ring?"

Carlito glared at the speaker. One of the other sheet rockers. His shoulders were rolled forward and his head leaned past his chest. "Of course I have the ring. You don't just give up on what's yours."

"I didn't know if the chimney sweep over there had taken it, was all."

That was him, Carlson, the chimney sweep. A weak grin from the one speaking. Carlito pivoted to Carlson and again Carlson pulled his eyes back. If Carlito knew she was there and that Carlson was looking he would do something, say something.

Carlito shook his head, eyes fixed on Carlson. "Laughing about taking someone's wife. My girl, my shoes, my ring. It's all funny, all one big show, these little people's issues, to the white knight."

"I'm sorry," Carlson said. His face felt hot and he wanted the cold beer. "It's no joke."

"You know what kills me about you? What I can't stand about you?"

"What?" Carlson asked. The air felt saturated.

"You could have anything you wanted. You have every opportunity. If I had your opportunities I'd be on top of it all. You have everything we don't have."

"No," Carlson said. "No, that's not – "

"You could have any woman in this bar and you joke about taking mine."

Softly, eyes on the table, "No, Carlito."

"I'll get her back, asshole."

Carlson kept his eyes on the table. "I hope you do," he said. With air, with space between them, it would stop.

"You know what, *perrito*? You want it so bad? You want the ring?" Carlito reached into his pocket and threw a silver ring on the table between them. "Take it. Go ahead, *perrito.* Yours for the taking."

Carlson could feel him watching. To his right Marco leaned back in his chair, watching. All watching.

"No, Carlito."

"Really. I want you to really have it."

Carlson felt the sweat on the base of his neck. He couldn't take the ring. He shook his head in little motions.

Carlito leaned forward. "All talk," he said, his voice now soft. He leaned back all the way. "Exactly what I mean." His mood shifted and he laughed.

Air filtered back in like animals to a pond. Bodies shifted and Carlson drank more. The other sheet rocker spoke again. "Not right, the shit girls put us through."

Carlito laughed again and lifted his head. "You ever notice how Latinas just get worse with age? They start off so fine and all end up like their mothers, and for some reason their mothers are all fat and sad."

"I don't think there's any girl in here worth getting," the sheet rocker said.

Carlito shook his beer bottle. "I need another, anyway," he said. "I'll look around, see what's available." He scooped the ring into his palm and pushed back from the table.

"I'll get the next one," Carlson said, standing up. If he went up to the bar he'd be directly across from her, would see her leaning forward and her hair falling over her shoulders and her eyes up at the TV, and Carlito wouldn't.

Carlito glared at him. "You wouldn't buy me a beer."

"An apology."

"Well, don't expect anything in return."

On his feet Carlson could feel his forehead hot and tight, stretching the skin. His underarms were sweating and he had to focus on a point of the bar, the joint between two wooden pieces, to walk straight. He stole a glance and saw her. He wanted to talk to her, but not

here, not with them. He couldn't say why but he knew it would go all wrong. He would pretend he hadn't seen her. He would wait and leave with everyone and come back tomorrow by himself, come back Sunday, too, until he saw her again. He ordered five beers and carried them the way Marco did back to the table.

"I found one for you," Carlito said, now sitting. "At the bar. The blonde girl. Watching TV."

Carlson's chest thumped when he turned to look. "Oh," he said. "Oh yeah."

Carlito was jovial now, easy in victory. "'Oh yeah?' That's what he comes up with? Jesus, man, go over there. You're the rich white one, anyway. Get yourself someone so you can leave my girl alone."

He knew Marco and the other men were watching him. He knew this was a test of some sort. "I'll stay and talk to her when you all leave."

Carlito shook his head. "Everything dropped into his palms and he's too scared to close his fingers."

She was alone, at least. Carlson made his way to her with all of them watching. He didn't know what he was going to do but she was pretty. He put an arm on the bar next to her and looked once over at the table. All four were laughing, pointing.

"What are you watching?" he asked.

"It's soccer," she said, turning to him.

He swallowed the words that would come out slurred and made them sound clean. "You like soccer?" Her skin was white, white. He felt red next to her.

"Yes," she said.

"Can I buy you a beer?"

She looked him over and said, “Sure.”

He could feel the warmth of her arm on the bar next to him. He glanced at the table and they were in their own conversation. She got the beer and drank big gulps from it, and Carlson drank too and felt it pulling him down into his own stomach. His head felt like a record playing in the moments before the music, the needle reading bumps and scratches.

“I want Mexico to win,” she said. She opened her posture towards him, eyes on the TV. “I just came from there. I was living there after school.” She was looking up at the TV and her eyes were brown and wide and rimmed in red, and he wanted her. He felt himself leaning forward.

“I’m sorry you miss Mexico,” he said. “I’m not from here either.”

“Here’s dogshit,” she said, “but thanks.”

He swallowed a belch. “What makes a place dogshit?”

“Dogshit people.”

“What makes a man dogshit?” he asked

She glanced at him, then back at the TV. “Let’s not go into it,” she said. She drank the beer.

“What do you do?”

“I come to bars and watch soccer games and talk to strangers.” She laughed at her own joke. “I just got back.” She had nice teeth. “Most of the people I used to know moved out of here.” He could see the bubbles from the beer on her tongue. He could feel the warmth from her and now she was standing with just one hand resting on the bar and her whole body turned towards him, and she laughed and smiled at her own joke.

He thought of pretty words, of sweet words. “I hope Brazil loses,” he said. “I hope they lose, and wherever you’re from and I’m from wins.”

They didn’t come out right. She pulled back.

“I’m in construction,” he said.

“What do you build?”

“Houses,” he said. “We go out in the suburbs and take an empty piece of land and we put something there.” He could feel himself rolling, tumbling. “We turn the dust into a foundation and put up walls and put in windows, and then landscaping comes through, and by the time we’re done we’ve made something real on top of nothing.”

But he said too much again. The static kept spinning in his head and he knew his face was flushed red. She leaned her head slightly and looked at him. “I’m just here to watch the game,” she said. “Thanks for the beer.”

“Wait.” He couldn’t stop, couldn’t watch her turn away. His last chance. “I could build you a house. I’d make it the strongest house you’d ever seen and the lights would never go off. It would be your own space. And every day I’d come home from work and you’d be there in the house.” He wrapped his arm around her waist and turned her to face him again. Above her hip was soft and he pushed his fingers in. “A house with windows and doors that would never fall.” He wanted to put his other arm around her, to hold her completely. “We could leave the TV on and watch whoever lose every game and – ”

She pulled away. She had been pulling the whole time. “Let go of me,” she said, looking directly at him. He couldn’t meet her eyes.

He put his other hand out to her wrist. “All I need to do is explain.”

She twisted away. “Stop touching me,” she said, her voice louder. She shoved down on his elbow and broke his arm’s hold and she walked past him. He knew in the back of his mind others at the bar were starting to notice, but in the front was all static, all empty sand, and he spun around and reached out and said, “Wait.”

She turned and looked at him, and he froze leaning forward towards her. She shook her head. “What a small, sad animal,” she said. He reached again and his feet slipped. His back hit the bar. His legs buckled.

He felt his head roll back and he looked up at the ceiling. He was drunk, beyond drunk. All he could see was the blue light of the TV cast out over him, and he felt a drink poured over his face and people picking him up by the ankles and wrists. He was carried past the table where they had all sat and it was empty. He was dumped outside the bar on the sidewalk with his feet hanging into the shoulder of the road. He lay there on his back. All around him was space vast and reaching everywhere he had ever been, but he had nothing.