ANY PORT IN A STORM



DICKIE

ANY PORT IN A STORM

Dickie

When William Paulson returned to his school after a noticeable absence, there were very few weeks left until commencement, and there was an expression about his eyes which informed his fellows that something had happened, something tremendous. He could hear them speak at the lunch tables as he passed, himself now just a rumor, they trying to establish some truth out of the mirage of notions circulating. The extent of their knowledge was that there was now a black spot on his brain.

Anywhere he looked, he saw skulls. Skulls adorning the lockers, skulls unveiling the face in the chair beside him, skulls where previously he hadn't understood that skulls belonged. Very occasionally, say once per hour, he was granted the capacity for thought.

Here, today, on March 15th, 2005, William Paulson rode with his head against the darkened glass of a window in a vehicle gained by the sale of marijuana, occupying shotgun, a position claimed even before the evening had begun. By his own count, his blood held

alcohol, lortab, an unfathomable amount of marijuana, a single hit of crack taken in the early hours of that morning, also the powdered form of dextromethorphan, also an enormous gob of 2C-I. The night seemed more real than any previous.

They passed through the suburban evening. A year ago, in that spot right there, this girl Ashley Simms had gone out relatively early in the proceedings, had overdosed herself away while her car collapsed against a concrete embankment. Now graffiti spilled over its face. Will recalled that she had been a fragile idiot beyond his understanding.

Because he had not been scrupulous, he sensed an anointment. He'd been raised in the Catholic schools, the Catholic churches, but he couldn't recall what the word meant. By the window, he was conquered, and also indicted. Usually he resented the whole of humanity for not treating him as his librarian mother did, but earlier in the day she had been hitting at him while wailing, How could you? How could you? Analogous to this, he now wondered how the sky could be doing this to him.

William Paulson had only once had a natural hallucination, and that of an aural nature. It had taken place in the 6th grade, when a voice, not by a long shot his own, commanded him to go west.

It was on Wexford Way, among the homes of lonely wealth and the spotless and gleaming motor vehicles, that the pantheon began to show themselves out of the pink sky in the moments before nightfall. One in

particular was terrific and confusing. Its face showed all the characteristics of those members of his family that he hated, such as his father, and his uncles, and his grandfathers, and his brothers. No movement disturbed this deity's expression, of which there was just the one, a look that was nothing more than displeasure.

As he noticed that no one occupying the car was sharing this vision, his companions became aware that he was shaking. As his seizure became full-fledged and apparent, he heard, for an eternity,

"Fuck. Fuck!"

"Drop him in his yard," Mooney said.

"Let's drop him at the ER."

"Drop him in his yard."

"Guys. We could just put him out at the hospital."

"I've got warrants."

"Christ."

"Drop. Him. In. His. Mother. Fucking. Yard."

Even before his body lay fitfully in the night grass of Celeste Lane, he himself had plunged upward into a space of light and whiteness. Beneath his feet, the light of the stars throttled the marble emptiness. Before him, a figure was seated on nothing. This person Will took to be his guide. He was white but not Caucasian, and

William Paulson had the felt sense that he was incapable of speech. The light around the both of them didn't appear to have a source, but it nicked in the white and seemed to foam.

He followed his man, thinking, "Hell yeah, I'm in heaven, awesome." They were in a city without walls, without a populace, and with just the smallest bit of time.

The figure turned to him, gave him a smile, and William Paulson intuited that he had been deceived. From the heavens he fell, very slowly, into the sea.

Lobbing around: here was the difference between something big, as seen from the craft, horizon to horizon, and something enormous, engulfing, mind erasing, seen only in series, swell after swell, too absolutely filled with itself to admit any mercy, to know its name or take any thought. It was as if, having found himself all wet, he'd taken an astonished breath to say, "Look what happened!" but was stalled in the astonishment and couldn't exclaim or even exhale. He was half-submerged with other souls, other pilgrims, neither lost nor saved, neither live nor dead, but only here. He believed all things, now. The sea bore him afloat. This could be endured, a hope could be discovered, was discovered. His faith was telling him that he was blameless, despite the fact that after this night he would never again be able to express love, give out love. The sky, amber and violet and everlasting, bled in a profusion the pink of Eden; the sea, green as prairie, was endless. He'd never again be able to think, to not nod in and out of a burned intelligence as the place beyond thought swam back in

his eyes.

The scope of it was unfathomable. He was borne up and down, over and over, as the waves rose up and then fell into themselves. When aloft, the horizon made itself visible. Up in the heavens, something was edifying itself, he could tell. And there was no confusion left.

Bunning, 6'6", bottle-caps in his lobes, was out there in his bare feet on the porch in the five o'clock cold. His defiance extended even to the weather. They raced across town, passing through a fog so thick it was like cannon smoke. In the distance past the parking lot, you could see the reclaimed land. They rape the earth to death and have the baby anyway, Samuel Declan thought. Clandestinely, Sam slipped a lortab onto his tongue.

In the high school corridors, Schroeder and Bunning and James congregated in a loose body while Sam drifted over to Janie. She sat against a locker, waiting for her sweetheart. In that interval, she hoisted Sam onto her shoulders and galloped down the hall. Later, Sam was gathered back to Schroeder and Bunning and James, who were being herded by themselves into the lunchroom. He followed them. They squeezed into a table occupied by BJ.

"Rumor has it that you know how to bypass ____," Bunning said.

"Yeah," BJ cleared his throat, glanced around. "But I can't discuss it here."

Bunning draped his enormous freckled arm over the booth, around Samuel Declan. He'd given himself a Mohawk over the weekend. It was green, spiked sharply. He observed Sam with interest. He said,

"If I knew you better, I'd do something that would greatly disturb you."

Whitesides passed by with a group of skaters in erroneous fellowship. He looked like a young Max Von Sydow who'd been pummeled about the face. "Quasimodo," he yelled when he saw Sam. He grabbed for his nuts, searched out his testicles, and brandished them at Sam, passing raucously out of the lunchroom.

"Yeah," said Schroeder, "they're looking for weapons. They went through my McDonald's sack."

James laughed. "They confiscated your McDonald's."

"I know why, but I can't say," Schroeder said.

"You know that Carey girl that works at Kroger?" BJ asked. "She was being rude to me when I was in the checkout line, so when I was walking off, I called her a Nazi. She said, 'I can't hear you!' To which I replied, 'I never said Nazis were deaf.'"

"What'd she say?" Sam asked.

"She called me a woodland creature."

"There is a resemblance," Bunning said. "I can see that."

“Where’s Lon?” Sam asked.

“His mom took him out of school and put him in some Christian academy in Indiana,” James said.

“Are you kidding me.”

“Yes, Sam. I am kidding you about my best friend being taken from me.”

“That’s why they’re looking for weapons,” Schroeder confided.

“What?”

“Carey. Somebody heard something and passed it on to someone.”

“What, cutting?” Sam asked.

“That, and she was making threats. And they were saying she had a knife. The tea is damn fine today.” He looked at Sam. “Damn fine. Did you ask her yet?”

“No.” Sam Declan wasn’t ready to change the subject.

“You know she’s going to say yes, right?”

“Give me one more day. One more day.”

“God, Sam. Sometimes I hate you. When will your balls drop?” James looked at Sam Declan with exasperation. “If you don’t ask her tomorrow, then goddammit, I’ll either beat the shit out of you or embarrass you so

bad you won't show your face for weeks. Come, Sam. This is important. Look: have you ever seen this look on my face? This is serious. Follow me. Now, you fucking pussy. Follow me."

She was across the lunchroom with the other scene kids. Sam made no move to get up.

"I'm glad this is being talked about," Bunning said. "Now I know he likes girls."

"Oh shit. You don't know about his virginity."

"Squeaky squeak." This from Schroeder.

"Call me Ishmael." This from James.

"Oh! Cause he impales big. Skanky. Whales?" Bunning surmised.

Sam lay his head on the table.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," BJ said.

"Fuck you guys." But Sam's mind was elsewhere. It occurred to him, as he looked around him, that he had taken more psychedelics consecutively in the past year than everyone in this room had taken from birth till death.

"How could you do it? How?" BJ considered Sam for an instant before shaking his head conclusively. "Crimes against god."

“You’re funny. You’re one of those friends I have who is funny,” Sam said.

William Paulson appeared at a nearby table, looking very much like an apostle of another realm. It was his fifth day back. He looked half-extinguished.

“He’s got a black spot on his brain,” Sam said.

“You want to drink with me and Sam this weekend?” James asked.

“Depends on if I give a shit,” Schroeder said.

“I asked him, do you ever think you’re going to recover? Yeah, he said, if they keep me on the respirator,” Sam said. “‘Huh?’ I asked. ‘Until they pull the plug.’ ‘They?’ ‘Paducah.’ ‘Paducah?’ ‘They put me in a hole in Paducah.’”

Regal Carey and poised Janie came up in tandem. Carey was the only one capable of pulling off the whole goth thing; the other wore a skate hoodie, her neck stately, cloud colored.

“Thought they sent you home.”

“Fuck them. Fuck the principal, and fuck the liars.”

Carey looked about her. Her face was nearly translucent. As she rolled her eyes, her violet irises went up into her head. “But I mean, it’s just some fucking people.”

Janie and Carey were his dearest people, as far as being able to speak freely, and at various times he wondered if he should be in love with one or the other of them. But Carey was the same height as him.

“What are we doing tonight, guys?” Schroeder said.

“I don’t know about you all, but I’m staying home disgruntling myself in my own pathetic solitude,” Carey said.

“Can that be conjugated like that?”

“Fuck you. Stop looking gloomy, Sam. It distresses me.”

“I’m basking. Let me bask, woman, let me bask.”

“You’re my oldest friend, Sam, but every fucking day, you perplex me more.”

Carey saw Mr. Clark go by, pen in mouth, stack of ungraded papers shuffling in his arms.

“Hey Mr. Clark, can I see your false leg?”

“Why, Carey, I hardly know you,” he said, unoffended, not looking up from his continuous work.

“Thomas Burden tried to kill himself this morning, apparently,” Carey said.

“He’s a catastrophe,” Janie said, tears on her black eyes.

“There’s a reason his last name is Burden,” James said. This was an Elmira High tradition.

“Over a girl. Unbelievable.”

“No doubt.”

Sam and James slouched through the hallways, skipping class. In a classroom, Tim was sobbing among the consolations of various teachers.

“Some fucking thing is wrong with everybody today.”

“Oh, you noticed,” Sam said. “I’ve decided that from now till three, there will be something wrong with me and you.”

The two of them went to the darkroom till lunch and drank gin. An element of peril appeared to course through the day. Lately, Sam had been noticing how his circumstances had been deteriorating faster than he was able to lower his standards. He’d taken up lortab, given him by one of the two people responsible, at the time, for keeping him in drugs.

Sam’s hands smelled like developer, his breath like gin. Mozart cried softly in the slight red light. Shara and Natalie came in, and before long James Durbin and Sam had abandoned their trays and canisters. Hand in hand now, they were dancing in the black, a landscape of sinks and dark apparatus and eyes coming out of faces back in the cusp of visibility. Shara and Sam danced. She offered her hand, and Sam complied. Her eyes were kind and scandalous as Sam grasped the

fabric attending her waist. He placed his hands under her shirt, her meadow-down skin electrifying the darkness, her dandelion hair taking on a darkening agony. I love you, she whispered. She was 4'8" and weighed seventy pounds. Scoliosis had carved her into what she was.

Another time, Schroeder and Sam wandered the parking lot, plying everyone for quarters. They bought 15 balloons for Carey's birthday, profoundly pink. Schroeder dragged them in a bobbing clump above his head. They found her in the art room. She was delighted, embarrassed. "You guys suck."

Schroeder laughed while she assured the two of them that they were dicks. She returned to constructing her piñata, all the while muttering various profanities. "What am I supposed to do with these?"

"You have to carry them with you all day. And you can't put them in your locker."

"Jesus Christ," she said, happy.

Denny's, in the mornings they went to Denny's. Or they went early, to sit in the parking lot, riding with proud Schroeder, tossing along the hilly roads where the fog was so thick it was like sailing through cannon smoke. At night, bathed in starlight, they careened on boards into and out of the mists of the cul-de-sac valleys, sliding over slick stone. They skated the community college, the windows like sheer crystal in the pink light slipping out of our world.

Right before lunch, Schroeder and Carey flirted around the vending machine beside the cafeteria. Schroeder was rattling the machine, and then kicking it.

“Damn! My Funyons!” he said. He tossed a sip of tea in his mouth. “You buy me that right now.”

“Fucking nope,” Carey said.

She came up during lunch. There was a cop trying to do something about a crying goth. Sam asked Carey what she was getting him for his birthday.

“Nothing. A gibbon. A gibbon and a horse. They’re sending me home. So I’m doing this,” she said. Blue-haired, milk-complected, she made her way calm across the cafeteria and pounced on the police officer, howling like a wild thing.

Later Janie came in, crying, and still later she checked out of school.

But before that, in third period, they were together in the companionship of Physics class.

You’re a bad person, Sam said.

How so?

Because you won’t give me your first born child.

I already told you, I’m giving you my first fetus.

Thanks, that means so much.

If I was receiving a fetus, it would mean a lot to me. How could it not?

You're right.

It's such a symbol of respect and love. And…

I must be bipolar.

I think so.

Today is my manic day. So tomorrow I'll probably be depressed and whatever.

Probably. You'll be all

I'll be contemplating suicide.

Nooo. Then I'll have to shed a single tear.

I'm going to film you when you give birth, Sam informed her. They were up above the stadium with their physics class, dropping down eggs protected in little wooden ribbed contraptions. Sam's fell with a popping sound and yolk clotted the green.

She pointed. "I think there's something wrong with yours."

Schroeder and Sam passed through the corridors. The principal had given Schroeder a pass to do "whatever the hell he wanted."

There was little Scarlett cross-legged in a doorway.

“One of these days, I’m going to fuck her,” Schroeder assured Sam.

“I find that hard to believe.”

“I heard what you said about me!” she exclaimed in her shrill voice, clearly complimented.

They rounded the halls a considerable few times. Outside the principal’s office, you could hear Carey saying, “What am I going to do for a job? When I graduate, I’m killing myself, as a matter of fucking fact. Yeah. Make sure you guys write that down. I wouldn’t want you to leave out anything. Make sure to smear my permanent record with the truth.”

They were in the car after school, headed to Kroger. Sam was coming out of a blackout.

“How is it that Carey jumps on a cop and gets to go to work?”

“Extenuating circumstances,” Schroeder said.

“Do I look fucked up?” Sam wondered to no one in particular.

“You look like collateral damage.”

“We should break Lon out of the Christian academy, like in that movie. Here, drop me off after this so I can get my car. I have to pick up Whitesides and Will.”

“Why the hell would you want to fool with Will?”

“I just have to.”

They went into Kroger.

“I miss my car,” James said. His mom had discovered a cigarette and given the car punitively to his uncle.

“Dude,” Schroeder declared. “If you would steal your car back, I would find a way to get you down there. Vegetable aisle.”

They traversed these aisles, scouring for the oddest purchases. Giant cabbages and eggplants were gathered into arms, as well as a wizard’s hat beet and a single pea pod. This was Schroeder’s spectacle, designed to infuriate black Carey.

In the checkout line, Sam said, “I’m cooking my parents’ dinner with all this.”

“Mhhm-hmm. What are you making them?”

“I happen to be a customer, like everyone else.”

“I’ll bet,” she said. “I refute you guys.” She stood there in her employable incarnation, an incurable oddity.

Right after he picked up Whitesides, he heard him say “Aw shit” about the same time his car buckled into the one in front of him. The policeman at the scene, Officer Poe, scourge of all skaters, was saying to his colleague, “They’re drug people, and you know it, but you can’t do anything about it.”

But Sam got away scot free.

Whitesides queried the tow-truck guys:

“So what do you think’s wrong with it? Hit a raccoon, or something?”

Somebody’s older brother had rented the house out on Hartwell for the summer and somebody’s older brother didn’t care what happened to it, so it became the place. There was a keg going flat in a kiddie pool of half-melted ice, and upstairs someone had found a box of Christmas lights and strung them wall to wall so the whole room breathed red and green like a held-under fever.

James had brought two hundred dollars worth of nitrous canisters in a duffel bag, like a war criminal reporting for duty. Bunning stood sentry over them, doling them out by twos, saying, “This is a controlled substance and I am the control.”

Schroeder found Sam by the sliding door. “You seen Will?”

“Not since the thing.”

“He’s here. Somebody said he was here. He’s not saying anything, though. Just sort of present. Like a lamp.”

They found him on the back porch steps, looking at the yard like it owed him money. Carey had her hand on his shoulder, not talking, just keeping it there the way you’d keep a hand on a dog that had been hit by a car

and hadn't figured out yet whether it could still walk.

"You doing okay, man?" James asked him.

Will looked up like the question had traveled a long way to reach him. "I keep seeing things," he said. "It's fine. I'm managing it."

"Managing it how."

"By not telling anybody what I see."

Nobody had anything to say to that, so Bunning handed him a balloon instead, and Will took it like it was a sacrament, and breathed it down slow, and when he came back up his eyes were wet and nobody asked why.

Inside, Janie had gotten into an argument with a girl none of them knew about whether the moon that night counted as a supermoon, and the girl kept saying "it's called perigee, actually," and Janie kept saying "I don't care what it's called, look at it," until they were both just standing at the window, quiet, looking at it.

BJ arrived an hour late smelling like a car fire, already crying about something, already laughing about the same thing thirty seconds later. He found Sam in the kitchen. "I love this house," he said. "I love everybody in this house. I want you to know that if any of you ever need a kidney." He held up one finger, like he was about to specify which kidney, then seemed to lose the thread and hugged Sam instead, hard, for a long time, saying nothing.

Somebody put on music too loud for the room and then somebody else turned it down and then it got turned back up, and this happened three or four times over the course of the night, the volume rising and falling like something breathing.

Much later, the keg long dead, the Christmas lights starting to look less like a fever and more like a hospital hallway, Sam went looking for Carey and found her out by the cars instead, sitting on the hood of somebody's Civic, looking at the black shapes of the trees.

"You good?" he asked.

"I'm always good," she said, which they both understood to mean the opposite, and which they both let stand.

"Where's Will?"

"Somebody drove him home. He kept saying he had to be somewhere before it happened again, and nobody knew what he meant, so somebody just drove him home."

Sam sat down on the hood next to her. The grass out past the driveway was full of things none of them could name yet: the years that hadn't happened, the funerals, the buses out of town, the whole unlaunched weight of it. But for now it was just grass, wet with early dew, holding nothing but the ordinary dark.

"I don't want tonight to be over," Carey said.

“It’s not over,” Sam said. “It’s just quiet for a second.”

They sat like that a while, not saying anything else, while behind them the house kept breathing its red and green light out into the yard, and somewhere upstairs somebody started crying, and somebody else started laughing, and it was impossible, from where they sat, to tell which sound had started first.

Lon Mercer returned in the March of 2009. At the treatment center in Minnesota, they took him off methadone immediately, and for two weeks, at the age of twenty-two, he went about with a walker.

As so often happened, Sam woke up in another city. Sometimes it was in a county jail, sometimes a detox facility, twice in a hospital after attempting suicide, twice it had been a homeless shelter, once a tent in a woodland behind a community college, but this time it was in Richmond with his brother’s ex-girlfriend. He recalled showing up on her doorstep and her saying, “Hey!”

“Are you crazy? You’re crazy,” she’d determined. “Where have you been?” He’d said, “Hiding.” “A good place to be,” she’d said. They slept head to toe, and considered one another brother and sister, although Sam had once or twice imagined the possibility of her naked body. But she was dating Lon now. He came to Richmond to both sleep with Warren and to take Sam home. He’d transferred to the school there to take up with Warren, but he kept an apartment in Evansville, and worked in a church in Elmira, and took a few classes in Paducah. He raced around the two states and was all

over the place.

They lay in the bed in the morning.

“How much have you been drinking?” Warren asked.

“The answer to a question like that depends on who you’re lying to.” Sam had first taught himself to lie at around the age of four, when, coming home from school with his girlfriend Samantha, his parents had noticed a look of worry playing about his eyes. Sam wasn’t troubled that day, but they sat him in a chair, and wouldn’t let him up until he told them what was wrong. Finally, he devised something about some manner of bullying. Sam had never been subject to bullying, only misunderstanding.

“Tell me more about the breakdown. Lon said you turned yourself in to the police.”

A few days previous, she’d called him to let him know, in a whisper,

“Sam. I’m having a bad time, and I think I might have a schizoid affect. I’m hearing voices. I’m hearing voices of people I know. I cry at the wrong times, I cry all the time and my body shakes. Do you sweat when you cry? I do bad things I know I’m not supposed to do. I climb on roofs. I don’t want to have a disease, I’m so scared that I’ll have a disease. There’s been a bogey on my ceiling when I try to sleep.”

But now she laughed. “No, I just asked them to stop surrounding my apartment. They said they didn’t mean to. I’m doing so much better though. The breakdown was spiritual in nature. I’m pretty sure it was a physical manifestation of something on a higher plane. Sam, please stop drinking. You have great depth of feeling and that matters more than doing the right thing at times, because morality is formulaic for some people and they can suck my dick.”

“So I heard you sometimes moonlight as a roller skate at a tea party in London, what’s that all about?”

“I didn’t know I did that, actually. Do thoughts of god make you want to cry?”

“I was worried about you last week.”

“I’m fine. Trust.”

“Right on.”

“Even if I get delusional at some point.”

“I’m going to stow myself in your trunk. I’ll emerge when you’re on the parkway.”

“I’ll swerve into oncoming traffic in panic

And we’ll die in each other’s arms.

Beautiful.”

“Did I ever tell you about my friend Will?”

“Sam, you have told me that so many times. But I don’t mind. You can tell it once more.”

Later they were all sitting around with the hippie/ hipster contingent of Richmond. Warren was saying, “I should have been in charge of the whole world.”

She said, “Your momma was a bitch, and she cut off all my sticks, she hid them in the basement and she made them into tricks.”

She said, “Sam is more stupid than me, cause I can outrun a bear and he can’t. Have you ever outrun a bear? I like to sing! It’s my favorite thing to do.”

They sat back to back while she sang for a short spell, a verse or two. Sam hadn’t known, before, that she could. She held a microphone close to the proximity of her words.

“I’m afraid if I sing I’ll mess it up.”

“I’ve never messed anything up in my life, but I can understand the fear,” said Lon.

“Same boat,” somebody said.

“Okay, I’m going to go sit in the other room with my back to the wall and do it.” After a minute she poked her head out.

“I don’t think I can.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I do. Why do I want to do this so bad?”

“It’s not going to happen, guys, sorry,” Lon said.

“What I was going to show you was this.” But then she did a headstand.

They were all drunk. Sam had drunk perhaps 30 beers, although he’d noticed that without the assistance of pills, he couldn’t really get drunk at all.

Warren was perched on the desk beside the flung-up windows. “Sharon, you look so sexy.” She was crying though.

“It always does me.”

“What song did you say?”

“I don’t remember the name of it.”

“I was gonna win this shit till you jumped in.”

“I don’t care! I repeat, I do not give a shit. Come here, come here.”

“Don’t ever mention tonight after tonight.”

“I’m trying to keep the cats out,” Warren told Sam. “They’re sneaky bitches.”

“Did I tell you guys about this kid I knew?”

“I didn’t intend it as such, but it came out as such.”

“Like a volcano?”

“Vesuvius, or any?”

“Any.”

“Warren, what’s your wish?”

“I’m not going to tell you. It’s a wish.”

“I already know what it is.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not going to tell you, it’s a wish.”

When they were leaving town, Warren said, “Sam, promise me you won’t get drunk.”

“I know my limits.” But then he popped his head back inside in correction. “I don’t know my limits.”

“Just be careful. I’m just trying to look out for you, brother.” She was kissing Lon goodbye. Over his shoulder, head nestled, she said, “Make sure and tell your brother hi.”

Lon stood there talking of solipsism, with cigarettes. Warren listened intently, in brown cords, with wild hair, exhaling backwards.

“I was like, woman! Get in the car,” Lon said. They were on the road, bound for who knew where, Sam didn’t keep track of such things. “But it turns out it

wasn't Warren. Then I saw her at Quarters and smiled and she looked at me like, you fucked up."

"Yeah, what do you say? There's really no way to recover from that. You should have been like, uh, you're not a feminist, by any chance?"

"I knew there was a reason I kept you around," Lon laughed.

They rushed to Lon's place in Evansville. They sat in green chairs on his deck, overlooking a sunny lake, majestic in the light. They both cried together. Lon was crying about Sam and Laci. Lon had given Sam klonopin, which allowed him to cry. "I've been trying for four years to bring you to this."

"But I don't get it."

"Sam, you bring me peace. Sam, your soul is so good. And now we walk the same path.

"I remember Laci in a sundress in a field dancing around being silly, tying flowers in her hair. She knew I liked that. The pieces of my heart are so scattered. Am I destined to write sonnets for the rest of my life for her? Or whatever the fuck? You know what the fucked up thing is? I never told her I love her, she looks up at me and my heart just stops. When I'm with her, all the mountains in my life turn to sand. And then fucking her and Jack are married, and they can't even have sex cause he's got herpes, and he spends all his time in fucking Nashville doing meth and heroin.

“I saw a butterfly the other day, so I followed it, cause every time I think of her, I see a butterfly. So I followed every monarch I saw, I swear to fuck there was one at every stop sign, and guess who I run across? She’s there outside arranging flowers at the church.

“Every time I think of you, I see a hawk. That’s got to be your spirit animal. And this is basically all I’ve got going on right now. With me, it wasn’t real, cause I was fourteen and just getting into pills and shit. But you’re so real. I see a lot of Paul in you.”

In the June of 2009, after a party, before the Saturday service, Sam Declan walked through the fields, cutting to church. He bumbled through a briar patch. In the vestibule, an elder said, go to the bathroom. In the stall, all of a sudden, he saw that he was going to shoot up Dilaudid. He’d been to the dopeman the previous afternoon, who he hated and feared, and would just as soon rob of his wares as look at, which he later did. But Sam Declan put his principles before his personalities.

Blood covered his face. His pants were soaked through with mud and ditchwater. Someone had written “penis” on his face. His hands had been cut by the briars. He washed the blood from his face, but the blood from his arm got over the mirror.

Fuck the repent: here was the love of Christ, undoing and quieting his heart. Mercer found him. “Come to my car.” He put Sam in new clothes, wiped him off. “What are we going to do with you? You’re so preposterous.” Before the bathroom door had closed, he’d heard myriad voices murmuring as they agreed with them-

selves: “Boy ain’t right.” But they were wrong. And they were all of them, despite their backwoods or professorial stupidity, they were all of them right.

“It’s for the sake of my posterity,” Sam said.

During the service, Sam Declan, now inviolable, sang along with the hymns. This was even more beautiful than kissing a girl for the first time or trying to bring a cigarette to your mouth while deep in an oxycontin nod, because you could cry about it while it was actually happening.

The following day, Sam and Mercer’s cousin sat on Mercer’s back deck, from 6 to 11, eating Xanax and lortab. Sissy came home and there were blue lines over the floor. Sam was on the phone, slumped against the wall, a hollowed-out pen before him. Lon Mercer’s cousin was slumped on the floor, and Sam thought he appeared dead. He almost got up to check on him. He looked up at Sissy and gave her what appeared to be a smile. She looked slightly distraught, and called Mercer, who rushed home through the night.

“Oh my god, is that what they use to snort coke, Lon?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Sam came up to Lon. “Fuck you.”

“No, dude. Fuck you.”

“Why don’t you fucking hit me,” Sam said over and over and over. Therefore Lon judo-kicked him down the

stairs, and Sam slept.

Lon woke Sam up early for church. Ferried him to White Rose Baptist. Sam hadn't been able to drive for three years. Mercer gave him twenty dollars, because Sam was without employment, always.

"Did I ever tell you what Will told me? About how he fell from heaven?" Lon asked.

"Yeah."

"For a while there, his mom kept trying to get me to take care of Will. She offered to pay me."

"You didn't?" Sam wondered.

"Nope. I told her, Marie, I just don't have the time. I felt so bad." He seemed sad. Or thoughtful.

"You remember how afterwards, he would slap himself in the face? And how Mooney would hit him when he nodded out, trying to bring him back?"

"Fucking Mooney."

"He told me he couldn't remember anything that came before it. Said sometimes snatches of memory came, and that was all," Sam said. Lon Mercer drove with the radio low, listening to the music of his mother's life.

Sam sat in the sun-flooded pews. A sight up in the front occurred to him as an impossibility. "That's not Chris Victor up there, is it?"

The lady beside him said, “Honey, I wouldn’t know.”

“Because if it is, they must have let him out of jail. Because he killed a kid with his car last month.”

Sam sat next to Chris. They leaned into conversation like old confidants, although they weren’t, not at all.

“Yeah. I can’t remember most of the last four years. I mean, I remember you, because I’ve known you forever. But yeah. They tell me I forget my new memories like every ten minutes.”

“Everything erases itself?”

“I can’t remember the accident. People have been telling me I’ve been living wrong. I don’t want to get high anymore, because I can’t remember what it’s like to get high. They’ve got me on pain pills for the pain and stuff.”

The barefooted elderly pianist played, and the beautiful overweight women sang hymns.

Later he gave his testimony. Beside Sam, Lon was trying his hardest to abstain from laughing, which was not proving to be a successful endeavor. “Weed? Motherfucker, come see me when you’ve been on methadone for seven years. And Sam, this is a house of God. Stop dropping sweet tarts.” A little too loudly, perhaps, as several of the ten-year-olds in Mercer’s Sunday school class looked up at him, confused.

“It’s okay, guys,” Mercer consoled. “The adults are

discussing the prodigal son."

The youth group was composed of just four people: Lon and Sam, then Isaac, a boy of 14, and Lana, his sister, a girl of 16. At first Sam had thought she was 9. Now he thought he was halfway in love with her.

Lon, at the behest of the church elders, was trying something new today in the youth room. With just a candle going, Sam, Mercer, Isaac, and Lana sat in a circle in the near-dark. They each had to go around to one another and say one thing and pray one thing for the other. When her turn came, Lana placed a hand on Sam's shoulder and said, "I used to think you were quiet, Sam, but now I think you're a pretty cool guy." Lon burst out laughing.

Sam adored the value of it now that he had seen it, although it wasn't a thing that he had learned. But he didn't know how to tell these kids about the people who no longer slept indoors. He didn't know how to tell them about lying up in his girlfriend's bed at the age of 19, sick from drinking Listerine, or no, it wasn't Listerine, it was off-brand mouthwash, remember, because he couldn't afford Listerine at the time. His ex, Channing, had a beautiful laugh. People liked to say funny things around her because her laugh was so fantastic. For a month he was sick from it, and towards the end of that episode, right before he was invited to a detox facility, a vague religious figure had arrived to hover in mute idiocy, assuming the purpose of an incorporeal sentinel. Now these figures came and went during the most critical moments, but he'd learned to barely pay them mind.

He didn't know how to tell them children's stories. Fairy tales. To Samuel Declan's way of thinking, there weren't any.

Sam and Lon were the last two to leave the vestibule. Lon went before him, vanishing for a moment in the blithering sunlight before the day replaced him over a parking lot smeared by rainbow.

"This motherfucker. Man. What can I say?" It was early afternoon.

"In my book, you're one lucky son of a bitch," Lon continued. "I'd kill to forget the shit I've done. I might try some vehicular manslaughter myself, if I hadn't already calculated that approximately eighty percent of what that fuckface said was bullshit."

"Calm down. I think he's just trying to stay out of jail. Shara was telling me he actually was forgetting things every few minutes."

"I offer no concession. He's one of those people I don't like on sight, on general principle. You should know better than to try to dissuade me of my hatreds."

"Cigarette?"

"I'm in shock."

"I bum no longer."

"You'll live to bum another day," Lon laughed.

“So tell me about the inquisition.”

“Oh yeah. I thought I’d throw a little Buddhist theory into the study. Shake things up a bit, right? No harm, no foul, right? Boy, was I fucking wrong. Plus, on top of that, that Judas Megan is going around telling people I’m back on pills, I’m neglecting my job, that type thing. Anyway. I don’t know. They’re just mad because the church is dead. Because the pastor’s not engaging and the church hasn’t grown in five years.” The pastor had the eyes of something that had spent eons in a deep valley.

“So yeah. They brought me up before the, like, church elders, and I had to plead my case. I wriggled out, somehow, verbally. But I’m still quitting.”

“You’ve been saying that for a while.”

“And I’ve meant it. I just have to find a replacement. You think I like getting paid 80 dollars a week to drive back from Evansville for this crap? Shiiit. Let me see your lighter. What are you doing the rest of the day?”

“Max said he had a few pods left. Or else I could buy a box of Wal-Act and he can go trade it for me for like six tens.”

Sam Declan had been mute as a child, because he didn’t understand how the world worked. He didn’t get how the other children knew each other from the churches and from the general cousinhood of everyone in Elmira, and he didn’t speak the language for a long time, as Sam Declan was born far from Kentucky. He felt this

ache as a life and death matter, and therefore he found himself obligated to pharmaceuticals and alcohol.

That was one reason.

“He has a connection like that?”

“Yeah. Apparently dude is like, burying 50 boxes a month in his backyard. Going to retire on it.”

“Yeah. To prison.”

“So haha okay, the other day I’m walking home from church and I was going to cut across this field. The cops stopped me, almost popped me for criminal trespass. But! So I called my brother from the cop’s phone, for a ride, and he sees on there where the cops are calling, and he thinks it’s because he’s been ordering all those poppy pods. So he ignores the call and, in a panic, frantically paints three of them red and nails them to a board, so he can claim they’re for decorative purposes.”

“Right, like somehow he needs one hundred of those bad boys a week for decorative reasons.”

“Right, but so I get the bright idea, here’s three pods, okay so they’re painted but all I have to do is scrape the paint off, free drugs, right?”

“Right.”

“Turns out I grossly underestimated them. Seldom have I been that. Fucked. Up. I walked to Walgreens to grab some smokes and I couldn’t make it back, I ended up

seated against a stop sign, joyously puking on myself for six hours. It was better than heroin."

"When was this?" Lon Mercer asked, squinting, a question lodged in the way he drew from his cigarette.

"Five days ago, maybe."

"But check this out. I'm in and out of a nod, and this old lady comes up to me. It's her yard I'm in, and she ushers me into her home. Her and her husband. They're being very nice, and I'm trying to wonder, why? Somehow or another, I glean that they think I'm their long-lost grandchild or grandnephew or something, their like terribly, fatally ill grand-spawn who apparently quite routinely shows up at their place, puking on all surfaces."

"Jesus Christ."

"There's more. They haven't seen me since Christmas. They give me gifts."

"You wanna do a trade? Do you have any Adderall?"

"Thirty-three."

"Oh snap! I've got exactly fifteen left, so that works out almost perfectly, the old two for one deal. Yea or nay?"

"Yes."

"How long did you live in the woods?" They were seated against the church wall now.

“Like four weeks.”

“Man, that’s so fucking silly.”

“It was good, after the withdrawals ended. Woke up to deer nudging my tent, lapping water.”

“You see anybody lately?”

“Nope, not really.”

“Not even James or Bunning?”

“Bunning thinks I’m insane. Me and James talk on the phone a couple times a week. Me and Carey go for walks in the park sometimes.” He had robbed Carey’s parents a few years back, and spent a season in jail because of it, but they were thick as thieves once more.

“Dude. I miss everybody.”

“You just think you do. That’s what I thought too. But once you see them, you realize you didn’t. You were missing something else entirely.”

“You’re a seer now that you quit drinking? No, but I guess that’s probably true. Speaking of which, how long has it been since you had a drink?”

“Man, it’s been a minute. Three months or so?”

“Dude, I’m proud of you.”

“Which makes what we’re doing here ridiculous.”

“They’re klonopin. They’re Adderall. It’s not like this is meth or heroin.”

“Agreed. I choose not to judge myself quite so harshly in regard to our arrangement. Although I’ve been taking a lot of opiates lately.”

“Better than alcohol, in your case.”

“How long’s it been since you took an opiate?”

“Fucking forever, Jesus. I still want to every day though.”

“I miss alcohol as well.”

“No you don’t,” Lon Mercer laughed. “You just think you do.”

Sam ate one more klonopin. The first three were just now making themselves felt. He felt instantly like he’d been given access to the day’s entirety, to gorgeous instances the day had never before shown him. He desired, suddenly, to be in a large crowd of people, carried along by the element of momentum. The sun was catching in the very tall trees shadowing this house of worship. Leaves hung unturned even though an enormous wind blew, and very soon it would be full summer. The skate rats were across the parking lot. Among the detonation sound of boards popping in air, you could see them fish in their pockets for cigarettes. One of them was screaming,

“If you’re ever down and feel like killing yourself, do it!”

“Insane fucking person,” Mercer said.

“Have you ever had two testicles within your grasp!” the kid continued his screed.

“I know that kid. He’s unique.” Sam remembered him clearly: Whitesides, ingrained in the slipping-away light as the clouds formed themselves out of the swirl above Christendom.

“I guess they let him out of prison. There’s a couple parts of him that are sociopathic, you can probably tell.”

“You think,” Lon laughed.

“I haven’t seen him in years. Used to skate together. I remember his first day of class, he was like a lion thrown in a pit. He didn’t want any attention, and whenever he got it, he’d be like, ‘Fuck! Yeah, whatever, Christ.’ He’s never not in rare form. His mom’s a sweetheart. Anyway, question.

“What do you think went wrong? With Will.”

Lon broke open an Adderall capsule, investing himself in wakefulness. “Water? Thank you, kind sir. This do in remembrance of me, and all that good stuff.”

“I always thought it was maybe he was abused or something as a kid?” Sam said.

“What made you think that?”

“He just had that feel about him.”

“I don’t know about all that. But okay,” Lon said.

“Okay. I can tell you exactly. This is pretty much where Will sealed his own fate. Okay. So. Will, Erin, Rebekah all came over to the house in eighth grade. The arrangement was, give Will a makeover. He’s running for student president. Will sees this as his moment to redeem himself from what he thought was his terrible first impression at Christ the King. He was a dork, man, then, he really was. I told him it’s a bad idea, Erin’s like, no, no. So they all came over. At this point, I’m basically just, well, maybe it’s a good idea, people will see his funny side. While I’m down there in the basement talking to Rebekah, they’re dying his hair. It came out horrible. People made fun of him in school for it. One year later, he’s smoking pot. Two years later, he’s doing dope with Mooney and Dave. Everybody sees the same thing for the rest of their life all the time.”

In the summer of 2004, Sam Declan, pizza delivery boy extraordinaire, had occasion to notice, making a run, a boy and girl fighting on a lawn. He was just drunk enough to know, somehow, that he was desirous of an ass-beating, so Sam ran out with the intention of knocking the fuck out of the guy’s face, but before he knew what was happening, the girl was on his back, whereupon she proceeded to stab him with a pen knife.

“Jesus CHRIST,” Sam said.

“Go the fuck inside,” the guy said.

“He was coming for you, Will.”

“Man, just go inside, Ash.”

William Paulson helped Samuel Declan off the ground.

“She stab people a lot?”

“She always starts it. You want a few lortabs?”

“For free?”

“Never heard of those. Let’s go inside, in case the cops are coming.”

Inside, Ashley Simms was taking tabs up her nose. “We have biology together.”

“How about that Mr. Clark?”

“Right! Mother fucking pedophile, yeesh. How’s your back?”

“Once you let me in on that, it’ll be better.”

On the couch, Will and Sam sat side by side.

“I’ve seen you around school.”

“Same.”

As nightfall approached, the horizon had a hint of predestination to it, seemed to hold the promise of some awful prophet. They sojourned to the car. Sam had some nails in his pocket, proffered to himself long before from one of the churches' several crosses. He was leaving town with just a sack of clothes.

"Lon, I feel like I don't know anybody anymore," Samuel Declan said.

"Me either, man. Me either," Lon Mercer said. He ate another Adderall. "Except Christ."

Getting dropped off in his driveway, Sam said, "Anyways. All right, man."

"All right, Sam."

Two months later, Sam had just boarded a bus out of Elmira, Kentucky, and already felt like he'd been gone forever. The fields of sloping bluegrass ripped past his window in their shoreless sweep. It hadn't rained in this county in quite some time. Everything was still vibrant and surging with verdance though. He was telling people he was going to see about, aww, a girl. He was going to see about a methadone clinic.

His companion was just insane. An older girl, seated beside him, she'd been on this bus, apparently, for something like two weeks. A variety of buses, taking her there. She liked to talk about it, there.

"If something exciting doesn't happen in the next ten minutes, I swear to fucking Christ I'm going to cut off

my fucking ear and give it to the next person who pisses me off."

"Paint me a picture first," Sam said.

"Shit. I wouldn't give you my ear, not even if you asked nicely," she said. "I've been drinking from this flask for sixteen fucking days. There's exactly zero fucking blood in my alcohol content. I'm dying and it is beautiful."

"When I get to Carolina, I'm getting a black lab," Sam said, endeavoring to change the subject. He was trying hard not to forget to entertain strangers.

"You should get two and hang yourself." She looked out the window while Sam reinterpreted the state of things.

"What a fucked-up reference."

"What, a girl on one of these things can't be familiar with postmodernism? And hate herself for it, and for every other fucking thing?" She looked down. "I've been drinking from this thing for sixteen days. It refills itself automatically. It's my magic flask. It's the genie's lamp, the light in the darkness. No, but, I used to be on meth real bad when I worked at the library. This is what I'd do. I'd read all night, trying to find my answer. Then I'd get scared of the things in my head. I'd make my son hide under the bed with me and read to him. He thought we were hiding from thunderstorms." She took an enormous swig. "I've calmed down substantially."

“I lack all ability to respond.”

“You’ll learn, honey. I’ll teach you, don’t you fucking fret. Miles to go before we sleep. I cleaned up till 2005. Alcohol this time.”

“Where are you headed?”

“The coast. I’m straight from Ontario. I want to see the sea again, before I die. This flask is my mother. Guess how long they gave me to live?”

“I’ll bite.”

“They said I have to go on like this forever. They said I will never stop, nor relent, nor die.”

“I died one time,” she continued. “I was dead for thirty-two hours. A medical mother fucking record. But you know what it was. I can’t be allowed to stop. They put me in a room on the 6th floor, where they proceeded to perform their evil shit on me. Now dogs cower before me and birds fall dead in procession as I pass. That kind of thing.”

“The entire animal kingdom fears you.”

“You bet your sweet ass they do.”

Samuel Declan felt affection for her, not only because she was beautiful and wasted and dying. He had been precisely as insane as her at times. Like her, he had spoken just because no one wanted to listen, just because he didn’t know how to give names to things.

Eventually she went into something like a coma, her hair fallen between her knees, chin to chest. She had her hands propped up on her knees, elbows out at right angles, and resembled a Raggedy Ann collapsed in some forsaken lawn, where the children had long ceased their play.

Sam himself was clean now for something like 28 days, from three substances. A path is found again, the one you thought you stepped from long ago, thought was lost, didn't even exist, when all along it's only been gently out of sight, hiding behind that copse of trees. You've been stalking this wilderness, this wide, wide desert, and all along, there was a lamp-lit path, just yonder, lighting the way home.

His companion was a classy blackout. She looked peaceful, at rest. Sam couldn't recall the last time he'd known anything even approaching peace. Even sleep. Blacked out, he had fucking nightmares, and for the past four weeks he'd slept maybe, maybe, an hour a night.

Sam's hands shook, had shaken every morning since he was eighteen, and for the past week he'd been borderline epileptic. And tonight he would have his first full night's sleep in four weeks, here on this bus, leaning into his companion, how sad, how beautiful. He would sleep through the bus's all-night clatter, would sleep despite everything. In the morning his companion had vanished, taken the next number in her long sequence of buses. She'd left him the flask, and true to her word, it was full. He left it in the sea when he got off in Briarcreek Acres. He'd known even rarer guardian

angels.

In the Indian summer of 2011, Sam was back in Elmira, off a bus, in the early morning. First thing he went to see his brother and father. His father was naked on the computer, so Sam had seen enough. On the couch before the clear window looking out over the cul-de-sac, he talked to his brother's girlfriend, Joanna, who cradled her tiny child in her lap.

"He got very attached to Charlie this morning. That's why he's crying. That guy looks a little like Charlie, huh, Oliver?" Sam could tell by her jaw that she was on methamphetamine.

"Don't pay her much attention; I'm a poor substitute."

"Charlie!"

"Is the coffee on?" his brother asked, sauntering in on bow legs.

"Not to my knowledge." He always yearned, when away, to return to brotherhood, but when he saw his brother, he suspected he hated him. His brother was like himself.

"Ah. Fuckin' bah-humbug," his brother said.

"Are you guys going to James'?" Sam wondered.

"Maybe. I don't even know what it is."

"It's just James and everybody."

“Lance was trying to get us to go to that big thing in the air, from which you can see the whole town,” Joanna said.

“He told me that too. But I think he’s headed out to James’ instead.”

“What is that thing in the air? He was drunk, and his girlfriend was trying to explain it, and he was like, no. I got this. He silenced her and said, it’s something that you sit on and do stuff on top of.” Her voice was similar to the drawing of bathwater from behind a closed door. Six months later, she’d lie to Sam’s brother and tell him that he’d contracted AIDS from her, and he’d attempt suicide.

In the kitchen, his brother, the tenor of his voice promising that he was on opiates, was saying, “The babies just plopped out! Two, three, four of them?”

“Does Lon’s mom have a white car?”

“Yup.”

“Yeah?”

“Joey, can I, never mind.”

“It’s my last one. I’ll share it with you since it’s so nasty.”

The cat purred up beside them.

“Hey, Dosie!” She scooped him into her arms. “I saved

you from Billy, a crazy man in Chattanooga. Aren't you proud? Is Lon home? Does he know where to get anything?"

"I haven't talked to him."

Sam walked to the square to visit Scarlett for a while at the downtown festival they conducted some Fridays. They sat on a hill before the courthouse and watched the citizens go by. Her father was tending a booth.

"Isn't my daddy awesome?"

"I think he is."

"He's so much cooler since he had his stroke. Now he's just like, I don't know. Daddy daddy daddy!" she hollered, her voice carrying shrilly through the air. Her dad looked up with friendly, clouded eyes.

"Why'd you tell my mom I was drinking?"

"Because she asked me." Scarlett was royalty, of a sort. She was descended from the Larkins, that clan involved in the trafficking and distribution of meth, very much at the center of things. On Christmas breaks, in between visits with the Declan brothers, in between visits to her mother's place in the country, she had been taken up by the old gang, which had become the new thing, and down through the years had left behind and added on, and she didn't notice the shift in power, or didn't care. She was not a newcomer. She found herself an old hand, on the graceful outskirts of that contingent. There were instances where, in a car in the sunlight of a gas

station, all of them loaded on ecstasy, she beheld the gas station's parking lot and thought it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever laid eyes on. In between all that, she mostly occupied the den and watched the Harry Potter films in succession. They were beneficial and still and without nuance, and she understood that, if you were quiet enough, this was the state of the world. She'd look at herself in the mirror in intelligent hypnotism, and then return to the dorms where she worked behind the counters as an RA with the afroed girls behind the outlandish sunglasses. She'd go to the jam festivals and take molly and LSD and love everything, everything, every second of every shining thing, which in her experience was all things, while the kids clamored before the stage, at the cusp of that realm, where sometimes that other world shows itself.

"I don't know, but I hope it is. But I just really want it to be."

But now she was examining her hands with fascination.

She walked her shape around the household. Outside it was the season of whatever, of an encounter with the pantheon, of a materialization beyond the swirl of soon-to-be-fallen leaves kicking down the street like coins, the peppermint of wind, the boughs kicking golden, ghosts just being ghosts. She was what she was, she was sure of her place, she was glad to nurse her sad family. She died, sure, but she got her time. She sat cross-legged as tree limbs dribbled shadow, and under that dancing she played with her fingers.

"You going to James'?"

“Probably not. No, I doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t feel like it. Because I’m tired, I have to study, and I have to see my mom on Saturday. She just got out of the halfway house.”

“I was thinking about going to rehab again.”

“I don’t think that’s a bad idea.”

He nodded like he hated to hear it. He lay there in the grass, fucked up as could be, very nearly a cipher, pressed out under his painful thoughts. He gave her a large amount of the scrimlings of some psychedelic mushrooms. She could see that he was looking within himself with a suffering insight. He sought, he endeavored after some form of amnesty. They lay for a while. They just lay there. They were close enough to where, “Hey. Take care of yourself. Hey,” she slapped at his arm. “Be okay, okay?”

“See you,” he said. “See you, friend.”

He traversed the ten minutes to Blackwell’s, a bar owned by an AA person, go fucking figure. Walgreens wished him a happy holiday by way of a revolving sign; in the leaping gleam of the evening-lit filling stations, the lesser intoxicants shone. He felt unspecific, and the day seemed flabbergasted about what to do with its own ending self. Sam was coming off mushrooms. He saw Carey and them pooled on the veranda, and across the road, crows leapt from one swaying pine to another.

“Sam! Get out of the meridian. What the hell are you doing.”

“Why shouldn’t I be allowed to saunter about with my hands in my pockets as me and these pines agree that we belong to each other?” He’d come back to see James, and to sell off a large quantity of mushrooms, although by this point, he’d eaten most of them. The effects were dulled, anyway, by the opiates he took day in day out.

“You’re back in town?”

“I’m back in town,” he realized. “James is coming in. You guys going to the party at his place?”

“Yup.”

“How would you like to buy me a margarita?”

“I’ll buy you one margarita.”

“I accept your offer.”

Inside they looked at one another in the mirror.

“How’s Charlie?”

“I have no idea. We don’t speak much.”

Wardtrip and Nathan appeared.

“He’s Charlie?” Sam added.

Wardtrip wrapped him in arms from behind, and they swayed together.

“You’re Sam. What’s up, buddy? Where you been?”

“Missing you. I heard about your mom,” he said to Nathan.

Nathan shrugged.

“It happened like a month ago.” He said this as if he had never had a mom, which in most ways was true.

The signs for Budweiser caused certain spots in the mirror to burn unbearably and made the lower portions very dim.

He and Carey and Janie played pool.

“Told you I’d play with you.”

“Yup. You get them all now.”

Carey was awful at pool. “Did you just see that bull-shit?”

“I wish I hadn’t. It pains me to beat your ass.”

She looked up at the ceiling, plainly concentrating on the truth of the music. “I feel like this was a song played in my car more than a few times. By the asshole whose name we shall not speak.”

“You can see where Schroeder’s got hit, in the picture. I was like, classic.”

“Fair enough. This bullshit I got to hit around this shit all the time. Oh god, I’m a fucking terrible human being. Shit is retarded.”

“That didn’t work.”

“Dammit, really?” She considered her friend. “Shut the fuck up, Janie. You have nobody else to hang out with tonight.”

“Everybody hates me cause I’m pregnant.”

“That’s so not true.”

“I’m sure of it,” Janie explained.

“Hush. When you going to fence in that fucking yard? Course, then again…”

“Once that little dude starts to run, you aren’t going to be able to catch it, given the father.”

“Thanks, asshole.” Her arm strayed while the pool cue wandered in the air as she laughed.

“You love me.”

“I do love you. That’s my point.”

“Growing up’s not about staying home lying in bed with the person you’re not supposed to be with.”

“I fucked it all up,” Carey conceded.

“We all did. But, just saying, okay? You are the one having sex with him.”

“There you go. Nice shot. Because seriously, I just want to be angry for a while. I don’t think you could hinder my anger. It makes me who I am,” Carey said correctly.

“God, you really do suck at life.”

“I tell people this.”

“God, how did I really just do this?”

“You do realize we’re going to be doing this all fucking winter, and it’s going to be cold.”

“You want to fight?”

“Let’s fight, sure. But no, man, it’s just not for me. Serial monogamist, here. It would be nice. Actually, god’s honest truth, you’ll be all right. You’re coming with me.”

On his third margarita Sam found himself perched on the veranda wall. As traffic murmured past and the music filled him up, he danced with Ginger. They kept telling each other, I missed you. I missed you. She was removed from Sam by whatsherface, and they fell to kissing. At the sight of their loving, Sam’s heart clenched and fathomed. He looked around and saw he was only one of two or three out of those gathered without red hair. Somehow this was pertinent, but it

was beyond his power to marshal a sentence that could make this fact anything other than a sad comprehension.

At some point, Fish sat across from him. “You’re so beautiful,” she said. She was Channing’s best friend.

“That doesn’t help me, not at all.” She was tiny and a queen among the drug set. Quick to sting and horrifying to Sam, her stature and beauty and searing way worked in concert to make her larger than she first appeared. In another age, it would have been appropriate for him to rape her.

“You’re worthless,” she said. Then she spelled the word out for him. “Love you, kiddo. Miss your face. Real talk.” She looked exhausted and returned to tending bar, while Sam consulted his memory, trying to discover whether he had enough evidence to call social services and have her kids taken from her.

Carey mimed a boogie and Janie said let’s make this night happen, and everyone mustered their cash all at once as they crowded before the bartenders. They went out to the backroads, to James’. Schroeder was the caretaker. James was returning from the navy. Carey worked at a bank; Janie worked as a radiologist; Sam labored to not die. They stumbled across and down the deep night lawn to the house with the dock and the river, a loose body that sorted out its confusion as it gained momentum. Sam looked about himself at where he’d drunkenly passed his formative years. “I love you, Ginger!” he cried. “Sam Declan, I missed you,” she hollered back. Inside, Schroeder sat vigil on the couch. Sam was distracted by the refrigerator’s sure promise of

beer. He sat next to his old friend.

“Long time no see.”

“Yeah. You drinking tonight?”

“Tonight? Yeah.”

“All right,” Schroeder said, squinting his eyes. “I’ll allow it.”

“I’ve got it under control.”

“Say no more. It’s my ruling. It’s my house.”

“I’ve calmed down a lot.”

“I’m not mad at you. You had a drinking problem. You never were an alcoholic. You had a drinking problem because she fucked with your head. That’s why I didn’t go over to Michael’s the other night. He called me and was like, you want to come over? I was like, not if that bitch is there.”

“You still working at Carhartt? Mind if I get a beer real quick?”

“Get me one while you’re at it. James should be here in a while. You working anywhere?”

“Doing roofing again,” Sam fibbed. “You know I thought you were half-Indian for the longest time?” Schroeder laughed.

“It was pretty hard for me to accept, when I found out.” Sam laughed. But he’d wanted very badly to believe in the ethnicity of his old friend.

And just when you were, nope! Not at all.

Nope. Absolutely not.

This will probably give you some idea of

Dropping truth bombs.

What, the blank, or the fact that I referenced it?

Yeah, he said he had already decided to relapse.

What a go-getter.

There’s just something about blank that does it for me.

Taint, chode, what have you.

Are the taint and the chode the same thing?

But didn’t you just hear my justification?

I was gonna ask you, could you ask him

I’ll just talk to you when you get here.

BJ was regaling everyone: “He’s got. Holy god. He’ll betray you the first chance he gets, but then you do something to him and he acts like he’s been wounded like Christ. There’s a reason he’s named Burden.”

“I can’t remember now why I hated him so much,” one of BJ’s followers admitted.

After a bit, Sam and BJ fell into conversation.

“So that fell through.” He was trying to make other plans. He looked off at the evening which was declining to open up for him. “But we’ve still got moves to make. It’s a weird world we live in, Sam.” They stepped together into the night to smoke a cigarette. The porch light cast its light down like a veil, the light and their conversation infiltrating the nighttime, mingling with the distant radio sound of the river. BJ kept looking down and saying, it’s a weird world we live in, Sam. There was a curl about his mouth. Sam understood that he invoked something that refused to be understood, but could nonetheless be known.

“I used to get these panic attacks. Because I was the dark, funny bully back in the day, the dark clown, and it was so, so difficult to maintain that front. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Sometimes I literally could not breathe.”

Sam didn’t know how to respond to such a confession.

“At first, I thought ours was a five-day friendship. But I’m glad to know you, Sam. Although you look kind of like my dad did before his liver failed.”

“Your ex, she’s been talking to me. And I don’t know. She’s very conducive.”

“Dude, how shall I put this? You can go ahead and fuck Ann if you want.”

“Ah,” said Samuel Declan. “I don’t think I can take you up on that.”

“Oh god, this girl. She was my first love, guys. Christ. Joey! She’s older than time,” BJ was crying later. “You don’t understand, you just don’t understand. Dude, will you call her for me?” He laughed in order to admit his fright. “Sam, you have to call her for me. I can’t do it. Do me a solid, bro.” Sam acquiesced, and later BJ said, “Don’t you wish every night could be like this? I have to go back to law school on Monday. I’m leaving, though. Joanna’s coming to get me.”

“Love you, brother.”

“You too. I’ll see you soon. Sooner than you think.”

Later they were sitting on the shore. The moonlight was inside the marbled waters. Sam was grateful to be able to keep up a conversation without the encumbrance of thought.

How’s Shara?

I don’t talk to her, Nathan said.

I saw her. I saw her a couple times, Sam said.

Yeah.

Could I get a drink of that whiskey?

Yeah.

After a few moments, Sam requested more.

I'll dole it out. Every 30 minutes.

Right.

You know I worry about you. His forehead creased with anxiety on behalf of Sam. When drunk he turned sensitive. He'd just missed being a midget by a couple inches.

All that's past, man. That was all that relationship.

I just worry about you.

I know, said Sam, although he didn't. He squinted to see the surrounding faces, but clarity refused to settle down. For the space of a second he intended to declare something tremendous, but whatever the nature of the impulse, he failed to summon words. His thoughts strayed for a moment to how come he was alive. Lance came up, and they embraced, long-lost comrades.

"Where has my friend been? Has he lost memory of me?"

"I'm still in the world. I'm still on the face of the earth. It's usually impossible to call you, cause of where you live."

"That makes a lot of sense. My village doesn't get reception. But where's Charlie?"

“High somewhere.” He and Janie sat alone on the dock, later. She was crying.

“Sam, I’m so glad you’re not crazy anymore. When I see you, I feel home.” He teared up too, and they wrapped their feet together. It was two years since they’d been around one another. The last time he saw her, he’d been drunk. Carey had been screaming at him and tearing his basement apart looking for his pills and booze, while Janie had said, “Sam, can you not even see me anymore without being wasted?” He’d relieved himself of the situation by retiring to the bathroom, swallowed everything he had, and was in the process of prying apart a razor when his brother knocked the door down. The ambulance came, as it was wont to do, and the paramedics stood there with the police inside the blue light of the pines.

“Here are your choices. Guess what, there’s two. You go to the hospital, or you go to jail.”

Before his sight he relived the travesty of the past, and then he kissed Janie on the cheek. Afterwards he went inside in order to take oxycontin more efficaciously in the bathroom.

Schroeder had drawn a bath and now wafted, eyes closed, his preferred method of refraining from vomiting. With the help of James, he was hoisted out and laid upon a couch. “Sam, man,” he said. “Sam!”

James was saying, “The whole time you and Channing were together, I thought she could do better. With me. I always saw her as hilarious and a little weird and perky

and just a good mix of it all."

"You know she's pregnant, by the guy that beats and chokes her?"

"At least that's straightforward. I don't remember you ever once telling her the truth."

In the mirror, Sam caught a glimpse of himself. He was yellow. He opted to take a shower. Every party a fucking holocaust, a Tunguska event. Liver failure. Okay then, okay. Outside he could hear Dlamb saying to someone,

"Everyone's a thieving mother fucker, man. Thieving motherfucking fiends. You're from Florida, right? How many fiends have you met since you been here?" His cries were outstanding, full of plea. "Thieving, man, thieving. I like you, man. I like you and you're a cool guy, but I got to piss, man, but you're a cool guy and I like talking to you."

It was at about this point that Sam collapsed on nothing in the shower and snapped the faucet off with his forehead. He woke up to see his blood perishing into the drain. He got up and went back into the living room, where he found himself on the phone.

"I thought you were a decent guy, man. But I'm not a snitch, I don't know who would have told you that. If I don't get my crank or my money back, I'm taking my eighty dollars out in blood. Because, man, we ended up having to smoke crack that night instead of those shards you promised. Because why? Here's why, PAL:

I thought you were a human being."

At dawn, he was awake, still, by the shore. He was involved in a remembrance of a time that was gone. In days past, all the summer's jump-started by the sympathies of revolving companionship, to map the elaborate incarnations of friendship would have been to connect, using one line only, an over-twenty-pointed star, when within a jam-packed Toyota they were helplessly known as themselves in the heavens of one another's laughter.

Blood caked Sam's eyelashes. Carey wandered down, fierce and polite and savage and honest.

"Christ, Sam." It was the season of whatever, some season past the four Sam was aware of.

What?

You know that you're bleeding, right? Here. She ministered to his face a while. Her eyes were green coins.

You remember how in high school, Sam, I told you that if it wasn't for you, I would have killed myself?

Yeah. You remember.

Shut up. The point is, you're killing yourself.

I'm trying.

No you're fucking not.

What happened to you? To Janie? What happened to the Janie that wore skate hoodies? Who the fuck clipped your wings? Fuck you. I work at a bank.

She was washing the blood off his face.

What happened to me is what you should be asking. Why do you do this to yourself?

You're asking the wrong person.

Fuck you, Sam.

I'm fucking sorry.

No you're not.

How many times do I have to have this conversation?

Not much longer. Because you're dying, Sam.

Why didn't you abandon me?

Because I'm a Taurus. Because I remember when you weren't like this.

Will would go up on his mother's roof and look into space and at the star-studded heavens, and then he'd walk all about town all night in his revenant sphere. He had violet eyes and black hair that curled and an old man's face and he didn't speak to a soul and he sat on the benches in the town square of Elmira. James and Lon and one or two others would come see him some Christmases. He didn't have to speak because the fact

that he couldn't speak made him who he was. He wavered in and out of a loll those Christmases like a candle.

He died in 2033, and James Durbin and Lon Mercer and William Melton and his mother and his sister bore his body into the ground. He was buried in Odd Fellow Cemetery. Sam Declan came later, a few weeks or so, tucked under his wife's arm, and replaced the tombstone. He'd changed it to read, it takes all kinds.

And there lies William Paulson.

In the 2012 nights, outside the bars where nameless musicians played the music of the plane-crashed dead, when Sam had enough money left over from the disability check for a payphone, he'd call Lon, who would never answer, and say, "Man, sadly enough, we were both there when he had his moment of doubt and pain."

And in the Carolina mornings, Sam would make his way away from his brothers and sisters at the methadone clinic, to the beach, whereupon he would sit in the sand, and, until four in the afternoon, cry.

One afternoon, about five, Sam looked up out of his tears and saw a lady in the surf. Even as the lightning dashed the waters far out, her black hair veiled her face as she waded about, sussing in the pools for what Sam didn't know. Women continued to be outside his understanding. She was intent in her venture, continuing to scoop her hands down into the unseen. Sam had had just about enough of his adventure, but he still found himself able, arguably, to live through it.

She sat cross-legged as the surf soaked her knees. Shortly she padded over the muffling sand, bearing a starfish, while the lightning flashed her hair white. Her body was blemished by sunburn, one hand on a hip. He took the last out of his Budweiser and didn't care that he was crying. She placed the starfish in his hand. Above, seagulls wheeled. She looked like rain.

"What's this for?"

"I was actually looking for a jellyfish. That would have been more effective."

"Oh. Well. How are you?"

"I think the better question is, how are you?"

This made him cry more. She unstuck her bathing suit with a pinching finger. Her nose peeled above a smile. Sam couldn't distinguish between what was a pointillism of freckle and what was sand-speck. Sam began to understand some inkling of something, some burden being put away. To either side, the beach slung itself along the ocean, as if there was no difference between the land and the sea, although there was still light.

"Want to go in the water?"

"I don't go in the ocean."

"Afraid of water."

"It's not that." But he was.

A crowd of seagulls had come around to see what was happening through eyes too tiny to hold any questions. The seagulls walked back and forth at the border of the water, all bellies and beaks, throwing out their chests with an air of flat assumption like little teachers. The girl, who was religious, looked back and forth between these seagulls and Sam Declan, and she guessed what he was seeing.

She was, it turned out, a marine biologist. A few days later, it wound up he went home with her, and before he knew it, he was in Georgia with her, and before he even understood it, he had a son, a sincere-faced boy by the name of Sol.

Sarah sat at the table with him while he did his homework. He was taking a degree in the mental health field. He was entirely shocked to find himself in college. As a young man, he'd gone to a community college once for two semesters, and he had read widely, just not what he'd been told to. He'd failed out, as he had only been able to keep about one eye open during the lectures.

Sarah helped him with the math part of it. He was horrendous at simple algebra. He showed her a problem he'd worked out.

"How'd you do that?" Sarah Adlon said gently. He thought it was a tone better suited for Sol. Speaking of which. He looked around for his boy.

She was usually right, whereas he was generally wrong, which he liked.

Sol came in later. By this time, he was 15.

“Hey stranger. Where you been?”

“Just out skating, Dad.”

“Young Ripper, your mother has me working on these math equations.”

“That’s good, though.” The boy smelled of smoke. Sam chose not to remark on this. When Sol had been younger, Sam would pat his hair as he slept, as he was shy about that kind of thing and a little afraid of having a boy who might end up as he had.

Three times a week, Sam went to certain rooms where he and others shared the legends of their lives. They were all trying to get past the misapprehension of their apartness, their separation from one another, the wound from which the ache first rose. The tiniest of places where the fear had first commenced. He had been without alcohol or opiates for twelve years.

Christmases, he’d go home to Elmira for a day or two. His parents no longer lived there, or anywhere, and his brother lived in Arizona. Sol was the last remnant of his father’s people.

Sam worked as a hospice nurse now. He was sitting with an elderly woman on the cusp of her final moments.

“Nurse Declan, I see angels at my bedside. Mr. Declan, when I see that angel, do I see that angel?”

“I see it too, sometimes.”

One night, at a meeting, as some crosstalk was going on, while Shawn said, “Maybe we ought not listen to the outlaw biker on this one,” and Kathy said, “They’ll probably strew my body parts all over eastern Georgia, except I’m not that lucky,” Sam got a call.

Somewhere among the years, Sam was amazed to realize that there was enough complicity for all involved parties. In the well where the wound misapprehends all things, doesn’t know itself as wound, and whoever died for us that one night where there was just the one star and the three fools under a catastrophe of sky.

In March of 2005, Samuel Declan, along with three others, was in a car on Celeste Lane.

Once upon a time, William Paulson returned to the world of the living with a hole in his brain.

But before that, in the summer of 2003, William Paulson, accompanied by Ashley Simms, a profoundly beautiful girl, truly, just a little off, in a delicacy of remarkability, and not as much of a whore as everyone said, passed with her down the lit-up aisles of the supermarket. It kept recurring that two nights ago, they had taken LSD together for the first time. They had decided that night that they were man and wife. It kept coming back that he was still on acid.

They padded down each and every aisle over and over, taking confused pleasure in the vision of innumerable

goods becoming conscious and announcing themselves as sentient. Afterwards, they would date for a year or so. She often talked about how important it was to treat every moment like a pregnancy. He never knew what the fuck she was talking about, for the most part, but today he understood all there was. The light was clearer than either of them could account for.

“Do we, so, we have kids?”

Ashley considered this for an age of man.

“Two daughters, yep.”

“Daughters!”

“How did I know you would be happy about our girls?”

“So let’s get diapers?”

As who she was rose out of who she appeared to be, she said with joy:

“Diapers are an absolute must.”

Then she let him know.

“Later. We’ll have more.”

Appendix: 2006-2007