

Vivian

She pulled to the shoulder, felt the violent beat of a semi through the open window, up her nose and in her hair. She reversed along the shoulder fifty feet, opened the door of the pickup and got out. Blood, gummy from its mouth, its insides hanging out, she slid her shovel under a rabbit, placed it inside a plastic tub with the mangled fox she'd already collected.

The vulture stood on a hay bale in the barn, its leg tied with plastic twine to a length of iron pipe she'd arranged next to the bird on the floor. The vulture peered at her in the dim afternoon light, ruffled her feathers, stood from foot to foot. When she emptied the animals from the tub onto a blue tarp, the vulture hopped from the bale, peered at her once more, and began to eat.

Her husband was in the kitchen, drinking coffee at the table. She good? he said, tossing his head in the direction of the barn.

She nodded. Thank you for getting rid of the puppy.

Sure, he answered. She imagined the unwell of his face as he scooped up what was left uneaten of the dog, found smashed on Route 4, from off the tarp. It's becoming quite the potter's field, he said, out behind the barn.

I know, it's a grim business. Thank you.

He shrugged. Well, he said. Do you think, he added, she's getting any stronger?

Every day.

Every day?

She smiled. Every day.

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Within another week, two weeks after she'd rescued her, flopping gruesomely in the roadside ditch, the vulture had become vocal. When she entered the barn, the bird would hop foot to foot, grunting and hissing excitedly. She'd stretch her wings and flap, a breeze the woman could feel from ten feet away. She noticed too how the bird would pick at the length of twine attached to her leg.

Hello, Vivian, she said. The name was preposterous, her husband had inveigled against a name at all, but she could hardly address the bird as Hey You. She'd never had a cat, a dog, a gerbil, a fish, a bird in her life. The thought of an animal in the house, anywhere nearby, had filled her with distaste.

She approached her captive. I see you've dined, she said. The hides of two squirrels, turned neatly inside-out, the ridge of their spines, were tossed about the tarp. You'll eat us out of house and highway.

The bird grunted, held out her wings.

She moved nearer, put out her hand, bare of the heavy work gloves in her pocket. She braced for the ivory hook to tear into her fingers, to scissor away the flesh like paper, as she'd seen it tear into the skins of the roadkill.

Rather the bird looked into her eyes, at the hand, away at the sunlight from the open barn door.

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Within another week, her husband was on strike. I'm tired of digging graves, he said. I'm done.

I'm not strong enough, she answered.

He threw out his hands. And my back is killing me.

She'd googled animal rescues, of course, from nearly the first day. There was one not 40 miles down the way. She'd passed it, in fact, on her hunt for squashed meat. Why she hadn't called was her husband's best question.

Well, she said, I'm off to the prowl. Wish me luck.

May you be blessed with a hundred rotting raccoons.

She left the house, retrieved her shovel, got in the truck.

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The vulture, a different one, was at the center line. As the traffic raged by, its feathers fluttered and she wondered for a moment if it were alive. If it had been, the wheels of a jeep made sure it was not. When she reached it, it was less animal than gravy.

She was closing the liftgate to the truck when a station wagon flashed past, leaning on its horn. A hundred feet ahead, the wagon hit its brakes, the hot smoke of asbestos leaking from the fenders. The car pulled to the shoulder and sped backwards in her direction.

What're you doing? said a young man from the passenger side. His eyes were bleared with alcohol. Another young man was behind the wheel and a third in the back.

Collecting roadkill, she said, matter-of-factly.

What? the young man said. Why?

Well, she said, for my vulture.

The man grimaced boozily. You got a vulture?

She nodded, one hand on her shovel. I do. And I'm collecting her food. She gestured toward the plastic bin in the truck. That good with you?

He put out his hands. Darlin, I don't give a rat's ass. The other young men were at the windows, looking at her. But it's a little...pardon my redneck...fucked up.

She smiled. She leant forward to look into the car, eyeing each of the young men. You fellows are going to be careful, aren't you? No accidents? No decapitated heads rolling down the highway?

The young man in the back nodded austerely. No, ma'am.

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In five days, they were in the yard in front of the barn. Her husband had one glove around the root of Vivian's legs, the other at her lower breast. The bird was watchful, calm, the dark gravity of her eyes.

Are you ready? he said. T-minus ten seconds?

Sure, she answered, T-minus ten.

He counted down, and when he got to liftoff he released Vivian's legs, pushed gently skyward on her breast. She opened her wings, caught the air, and in a moment was off, somewhere towards the creek and its low stand of trees.

Phew, her husband said, we're done.

She nodded. The longest four weeks of my life.

Her husband went into the house, and she went to the barn. The bales of hay where Vivian had lived were covered in shit, the air was a sweet bitter tang. She dragged out the hose and began to spray, a fine mist covering her face. She said to the string that had tied the bird's leg, The longest four weeks of our lives.

An Adventure for Chloe

Chloe got a dog. She was the type to have cat dreams—cats of all conceivable colors—but the day before, she'd picked out a dog. He was a black thing, of medium size, wiry, gray flecking the sides of his muzzle. His eyes were round and inquisitive and he was already silly with love. He would bite through razored wire for her, walk into forest fires, fight elephants and lions, all with the same silly look of love in his eyes.

Chloe lived on the beach—two blocks away anyways. Her house was the color and texture of a peach milkshake. An arched front door like a castle, before it a gate to clang shut, an outer foyer best for collecting sand, from her feet or blown in by the wind. Here, the fog rarely lifted.

Chloe was pregnant. She'd been pregnant for two days. She didn't know yet, of course, and this story will be done long before she does. But the fact is important. It's important to the dog, both for the shape of his future and for the fact that his arrival was some kind of prefigurement. And it's important to our setting, this place always gravid with fog, how it tumbles down the streets in white bellies.

It was Sunday. It was two days since she'd met and slept with the boy. It was one day til she returned to work. The day then was perfectly poised. There was time enough for her adventure, and in the suspension of time in which the boy had been met, the dog had been procured, and nothing needed to be done, adventure was likely. Adventure was imminent.

Her first trial was frightening. It happened in the tunnel, one of those tunnels between the last street of the city and the beach. One of those tunnels that smells like salt, a little bit like urine, and a lot like the drip of stale water.

Buster—the new dog—trotted by her side. He was unleashed. Already, just a day in, he had let Chloe know that he would not be leashed. Could not be leashed. Only moments from the shelter, the day before, as the two of them walked down the block, he had tumbled through the air, twisted a half turn while alight, and came back down on his feet, the collar on the ground neatly behind him.

He trotted by her side. He sniffed the scents of dogs and put his nose into the fog. At the lip of the tunnel he stopped, one foreleg in air, pointing into the gloam.

It's important to know that Chloe was giddy—so remember. It was the feeling of just having had sex, new sex with someone new when you're young enough not to have had much sex at all. Chloe had a secret, this new boy, as inside her uterus grew a surreptitious cluster of cells.

C'mon, Buster, said Chloe. In the tunnel, halfway along, sat a woman on the cement. C'mon, Buster, she said again, when again the dog paused. Chloe was not then, nor any time in her future, to be stopped in her rounds by her fear.

Hello, she said to the woman.

The woman held out to her a plastic bottle of red Mountain Dew. Get some, said the woman.

Nooo, said Chloe.

I said get some, said the woman. The woman stood and extended toward Chloe the bottle again. The woman was about 50, hair in a gray braid down her breast, nose ring blinking in the gloam.

Chloe took the proffered bottle. She unscrewed the cap and put the bottle to her mouth.

I wouldn't do that! said the woman.

Chloe lowered the bottle and wiped the sugar from her lips. Why's that? she asked.

Give me that! said the woman, and snatched the bottle from Chloe's hand. You don't ask why when someone says to not drink from their bottle.

I'm sorry, Chloe said.

The woman shook her head. She crouched down then to look Buster in the eyes. He want some? she said, extending the bottle now toward the dog.

No, she said, and Buster sat on his haunches, his warm side against her leg.

The woman nodded. Good dog, she said. She eyed the dog strangely, lids narrowed and mouth in a funny smile. Can I have him? she said.

Chloe reached down and touched the top of the dog's head. No, she answered, he's with me.

The woman stood up in a rush. For a moment, Chloe's blood fell to her shoes. She raised her hands into fists.

As you were! said the woman. She stepped back on one toe, swept her arm toward the far end of the tunnel in a flourish. You may pass.

Chloe stepped past her. Thank you, she said. Buster trotted one length behind, holding the space between his mistress and odd woman.

Chloe was 23. She was small and thin, her eyes were dark and shaped like a bird's. She was pretty. That's what people told her, that she was pretty, like a bird. She believed what they told her, but she wasn't sure what it meant. Birds were prettier than people.

At the far side of the tunnel was the beach, wide and rushing with fog. Nearly a hundred yards distant was the ocean, all the gray waves crashing to shore. To her left, a different hundred yards distant, three men lay about a fire. The smoke had no time to lift from the flames before it was rushed away by the wind.

In this account of five trials, Chloe is searching. She's looking for treasure. She did not yet know she was pregnant, and not yet for a long time, but there was a growing inside her. A growling inside her. She was giddy with new sex, a happy and uncertain thing. She was growling with fear, a fear for the shape of her life. She could not let it deter her.

She and Buster stood at the edge of the ocean. Offshore, on the rise and fall of a wave, a sealion, brown and gray and splayed with whiskers, watched them. It blinked its doe eyes across the intervene of water and then it began to bark.

One of the men had approached from the fire. His hair was the color of sand, his eyes sparked like his fire, yellow and touched with green. He was the age of Chloe and his hands were long and fine.

They say, he said to her, that the sealions sometimes come to shore to mate with dogs. He looked down at Buster and grinned.

That's not true, she answered. In fact, it's preposterous.

The man shook his long hair. I didn't say it was true, he said. I said that it's said.

She regarded the man in his long hair. There was salt in the corners of his eyes. By whom? she said.

The man shrugged. My grandmother. He reached down to touch Buster on the head, though the dog stood and went to Chloe's far side. The man narrowed his lips with displeasure. He was exceedingly handsome.

You're telling stories, Chloe said. I don't believe your grandmother said that.

He ignored this. Do you want to come to our fire? It's warm. He pointed toward the flame and toward the two other young men gathered near it, now raising themselves on their elbows to look at her. One was as pretty as this man, while one was more plain.

I would..., she said and fell silent. She could kiss the pretty man. She wanted to kiss him.

You would, but what?

But I don't like you, she lied.

Suddenly, Buster was snarling. He was barking furiously and charging toward the water. The sealion had ridden its wave into shore and stood in the crash of the surf. It too was furiously barking.

Buster! she screamed. The dog and wild animal were nose to fang in the surf.

The man dashed forward then. Before Chloe knew what was happening, he was running with the dog under his arm up the beach. She thought he would stop but he did not. He ran and ran with her dog under his arm.

This was the second of her trials.

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The fog was thick and lay close to the sand. In such fog, Chloe had lost sight of the man. She had been running but her legs could not keep up with his. If only she were a bird, she thought, and cringed at her simple absurdity.

She walked along the beach for some time, heading toward the south, the ocean in all its gray to her right. The ocean crashed and crashed and crashed, the tiny shore birds flickering just out of reach of the waves. In the waves, the bobbing heads of the kelp.

After some time, she approached a strange bunker lying on its side in the sand. It was made from concrete, the size of a small room, its doorway at 30 degrees. From its insides leaked the sound of a guitar and the singing voice of a child.

She stood listening to the song, a fairytale about a giant toad, her eyes on the miscast door. After a while the music stopped and a young girl appeared in the doorway, a guitar strung over her neck. The girl shaded her eyes in the sudden white light, saw Chloe standing in the sand.

Can you help me? said the girl. I don't know where I am.

Where you are? You don't know where you are?

My father left me here, said the girl. I can hardly tell what I'm doing here. The girl stepped from the concrete doorway onto the beach in front of Chloe. Her face was wide and flat, about nine years old, angled sharply at the cheeks.

He left you? Chloe asked. How long ago did he leave?

The girl shrugged. Maybe a day? I slept here, she said, and pointed at the sea.

Chloe looked at the waves, falling to shore. You slept *there*? Or here?

The girl shrugged again. I don't know! she shouted. I don't know. The girl's little fists rose in the fog. Will you help me? she said.

I'm looking for my dog, said Chloe. Did your father take my dog?

The girl shrugged. The wind sang hollowly in the hollow space of her guitar, lifting the girl's pale shoulder-length hair. The girl was about nine. Does it matter? she asked. Wouldn't you help me if he did?

Chloe approached the girl. Who should we call? she asked, taking the phone from her pocket. The phone had no signal.

Take me with you, said the girl. She poked a small thumb over her shoulder, at the bunker behind her. I'm tired of being here. The girl started to cry. And I'm tired! she said.

Chloe regarded the girl. I don't know what to do, she thought. What do I know about small girls? Look how young I am! she thought. Look how young I am!

She took the girl by the hand, which was small and cold and damp, like a small strand of kelp.

What's your name? asked the girl.

Chloe.

The girl nodded. If you don't help me....

Chloe brushed her hair behind her ear, her hair, her ear, not the girl's. What? Chloe said. What will happen?

The girl shrugged, then pointed at the sea.

The two walked down the beach, the girl's hand in hers. As they walked, the wind moaned in the guitar, and the guitar, the belly of it, thumped softly against Chloe's stomach. It felt like a man's hand pressing her there in rhythm, one two, one two, and one two.

I'll get you somewhere, Chloe said to the girl.

I'm *already* somewhere, the little girl said. I need something else. Can't you do something else?

I don't know, thought Chloe, I'm not sure. Yes, she said to the girl. This was of course Chloe's third trial.

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The boy was so gentle, so soft. His hands were soft, his face was soft, his belly on hers was even softer than hers. He moaned with pleasure as he put his penis inside, thrusting softly in the tangle of his bed.

You won't break me, she said to him. The boy smiled, flushed with embarrassment, and began to thrust harder. He moaned with such pleasure.

Chloe, 23 years old, had never had a boyfriend. She had never had a girlfriend. She was young enough, even younger than she actually was, that most of this was new to her. It was new to have a boy inside her, thrusting. Not brand new, no, but still new. The boy's condom had slid from his penis. It's ok, she told him, my period is tomorrow.

They found themselves, the little girl and she, in front of a grocery. The grocery was green, the color of green chalk, its stucco walls and an arched doorway like a castle's. The grocery was small, its aisles gleaming through the front window, under a green-bluish light.

The police had said, There is a grocery. Meet us in front of the grocery.

What was Chloe in search of? Adventure. It was Sunday and the day was poised for anything. She'd been frightened three times: The woman in the tunnel, the sealion and the man who took her dog, the little girl and her guitar. Chloe bloomed like a white rose, billowing upon the white streets.

When the police arrived, her dog was on their front seat. The officer opened his door and Buster sprang from the cruiser and found his way to her side. He kissed her offered palm and sat on his haunches next to her left foot.

Is that your dog? the officer said.

Yes, she answered. Where did you find him?

The officer frowned. Never mind that, he said. We'll get to that.

Did the man still have him? The man with long hair?

Never mind that, the officer said. Never you mind that.

The little girl stood up the curb, her small shoulders at rest against the grocery window. The guitar hung from her neck. She hummed to herself, which sounded to Chloe like the sound of the wind in the guitar, though much higher in pitch.

Is this little girl related to you? the officer asked.

No. I've never seen her before in my life.

The officer scowled. Hmm, he said. Are you sure?

What? Of course. Of course I am. Chloe looked at the girl. Ask her, she said. Ask *her*.

The officer ignored this request. What's your name? he asked the girl.

The little girl turned to look into the grocery, her small pink hands cupped to the glass. Linda, she said.

Linda *what*? asked the officer.

Linda.... The little girl shrugged. Linda Glass.

The officer turned his attention back to Chloe. Is that right? Is this Linda Glass?

Chloe put out her hands. Well, how should I know?

The officer scowled. Ok, he said, Linda Glass, let's get in the cruiser.

The little girl looked at Chloe, then looked at Buster, then looked at the officer. Ok, she said. It's your funeral. She went to the cruiser and the second officer opened the door. Linda climbed in.

What does that mean? the officer asked Chloe. What's "my funeral"?

Well, how should I know? said Chloe again.

The officer went to the cruiser, opened the driver-side door. You wait here, he said and pointed at her. There's still the matter of that dog.

He's my dog, she said. His name is Buster. At the mention of his name, Buster looked up at her and wagged.

The officer scowled. You wait here and we'll get to the bottom of this dog. He slid into his seat, started the engine, and he, the other officer, and the small girl left the lot of the grocery.

Chloe waited for 20 minutes. Then 35. She looked down the road, the direction the cruiser had gone. I'm too young for this, she thought. This is much too old for me.

Heart patting her ribs, she left the lot, Buster trotting by her side. In three blocks, they were back at the ocean, the waves all falling on top of each other. But wait a sec, she said to her dog. What did she mean?

Buster looked up at her.

She said something would happen. Chloe looked at the water. If I didn't help.

Buster barked.

What? Why are you barking? She looked at the water. What could she mean?

The dog danced in circles about her, silly with love in his eyes.

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The fifth trial happened near sunset. Oh yes, of course, the fourth was the police.

Chloe and the dog had stopped in at a deli. They hadn't eaten all day and though the dog did not complain, he had begun to droop. Along the beach Buster would flop himself to the sand,

put his snout to his paws. His nose had stopped strumming the air for the smells of seagrass, urine, and beach mice.

Chloe opened her sandwich. She handed the ham to the dog, who took it down in two gulps. For her, the bread, the vegetables, and mayo. The wind had picked up off the water and the air-born sand stung her ankles and elbows. The dog turned himself away from the waves, the sand collecting in the curls of his tail.

After they had eaten and rested, the two decided to make their way to the south, to the high bluffs and the narrowed beach. Some gliders spun overhead. There were even fewer people out then than there had been all day—the chill wind and the fog, an occasional rain distinguishing itself from the mist.

Chloe found the huge trunk of a tree tossed on the shore in some storm and sat on it, running her hand along its sand-etched bulk. The water was frothy here, turning up a brown silt that scrimmed the damp edge of the shore. This might have been a warning. This might have said something to her.

Another young woman, with another medium-sized dog, stood with her bare feet in the surf. Buster watched the other dog with interest. Chloe watched the woman with interest. The woman was small and thin, like Chloe. She exuded a vigor, her small feet turning red in the cold water. Chloe admired and felt jealousy for her. The woman, Chloe thought, was probably admired for her vivacity.

The wave caught the other young woman and the other dog first. It came sleeping up out of the sea, no announcement of its arrival. A sleeper wave—that's what it's called. It came up out of the water and took the legs from under the woman. It swallowed her dog. It took the woman's shoes with their tongues hanging out.

All of this was a matter of one moment. Chloe saw the woman disappear into the wave and then Chloe was taken as well. It was only one moment, and she was underneath the sea and everything was upside down.

Chloe sensed herself being dragged toward the depth. She tasted the water in her mouth, leaking into her lungs. She was going to be dragged into the depth. Around her was the slosh of brown water—she was going to be taken and drowned. She was going to be stolen and killed. There was no way out of this now.

Somehow, she lay in a pile in the sand. The pile was her and her dog, the other woman and her dog. They were a pile of arms, legs, paws, and bodies, just there on the sand. All of them were breathing the water out of their lungs. Each one of them coughed the water from their bodies.

Did you make it? said the woman. The woman had sat up and was looking into her eyes from five feet away. Did you make it? she said.

Yes, Chloe answered.

Good, said the woman. That's good. She pointed at Buster, who was licking his feet. Your dog did as well. The woman pointed toward her dog, who was watching them both. My dog, she did as well.

The sky over the ocean was turning pink. Pink and blue green. It was very cold as Chloe sat in her wet clothes. She concentrated on not shivering. The woman across from her kept rubbing her face, which was the color of pink ice.

Did you think we would make it? asked the woman.

No, said Chloe.

The woman rubbed her face. We might not make it still. It's too cold.

Yes, said Chloe. The beach was going dark. The sky was turning green over the ocean.

It was then that the women found themselves following their dogs. Their dogs led them along. The two women held hands and like that they climbed the steep bluff. The dogs led them up the bluff and they held hands, struggling to the top. One would pull and then the other, the shared force of their labor.

Chloe was pregnant. She didn't know what she'd do with the baby. She didn't know there would *be* a baby. She wouldn't know what to do with her baby, even when she found out there was one. I'm so young, she would think. I've barely begun to live.

Maybe she'd go to the boy's house tonight, she thought. It would be so warm in his bed. Chloe was so cold, and her breath burned in her lungs. They had come to the top of the bluff, the two women and their dogs. There were a few cars in the parking lot. Somebody could help them.

Did you think we would make it? said the woman, hands on her knees, struggling for breath. She pointed down the bluff and at the water below.

Buster sat at Chloe's side, his warm flank against her leg. This was her last trial for the day. I did, she said, and she smiled for the woman. The woman smiled in return. Chloe didn't know if she believed what she'd told her. She hadn't had time to think about it.

Out of the four of us, Chloe said, wouldn't one of us have taken us to the top? She smiled—uncertainly—for the woman. The woman smiled back. It was dark then, in the parking lot, and the day's undertaking was done.

Old Cole

The fisherman brought his fish into the house. Cole had hooked five—two stickleback, two yellow perch, and a burbot, known as the freshwater cusk. The fisherman's wife would be happy, particularly with the cusk. It tastes of cod, she would say, the pleasure of her Welsh forebears in her smile.

Of the other item he'd hooked, she wasn't so happy. The darling thing! she said. What did you do to her?

Cole hung his head. It wasn't my fault, he answered. I felt the tug, and when I brought it up, there she was.

The loon lay on the countertop next to the fish, her speckled wings, clean black head, carnelian eyes. The eyes were as red as sunset, swirled with jet black. It was the eyes that bothered old Cole the most.

Should I bury her? he asked, his head still down. Or should we....

His wife, Seren, looked up from the bird, who'd been peering into the loon's open bill. Should we what?

Should we eat her?

Eat her? Seren pointed toward the bird. Who would eat her? We don't eat loon.

Well, yes, I know. I just thought.... He shrugged.

What?

That it would honor her.

His wife shook her head. Take her around back and bury her, Cole. I'm not dressing a loon for supper.

He picked up the bird, cradling her head gently with one hand. Yes, he said, you're right. He looked at his wife, her brilliant green eyes, the green brooch she wore like a talisman on the breast of her sweater. Loons and magical wives—why did it seem, all the sudden, that he lived in a fairytale?

I hope we're not cursed, he said, with a laugh. As he hoped, his wife gave him her beautiful smile.

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Cole settled the bird into the hole he dug next to the potting shed. After he sprinkled soil on top, then finished the job, he thought about watering the dead bird like a plant. It seemed like the fairytale thing to do.

He'd heard of it before, loons taking a hook, swallowing the silver minnow used as bait. The tale, as told by the fishermen who told it, was typically accompanied with a furrowed brow, a lowering of eyes. I sure am sorry about it, the fishermen would say.

Cole took a drive to the river mouth, the white clapboard bait shop that stood back from its banks. He needed some new line. On the porch he found a gathering of two other fishermen and Gail, the bait shop owner.

Cole, said Gail, a nod of the head, how are we?

Well, he answered, I'm fairly well. There was a look to Gail that was unusual, a pinch to the face rather than her customary rough humor.

We heard about your bad fortune, she said.

Oh yes? he asked. How did you hear? Cole wasn't sure which fortune she referred to.

Old Jim here was out on the lake this morning, she said. Gail gestured toward the fisherman on her left, who nodded at Cole at the mention of his name. Cole was familiar with Jim, as he was with most fishermen, though they weren't good friends.

That so? Cole said.

I was, said Jim. And I happened to see the business with the bird.

Oh? Old Cole was surprised. He hadn't seen any old Jim on the lake that morning. He hadn't seen anyone at all.

Jim shuffled his feet, a momentary embarrassment. I was behind that stand of cattail. He shrugged. You wouldn't have seen me.

Cole was about to ask why Jim hadn't called out to him, as was customary among fishermen in those parts, when Gail interjected.

In any case, Cole, she said, we sure are sorry to hear it.

I was sorry myself, he answered. He was too. He was thinking of the bird, its keen and beautiful eyes. Beautiful animals, he added.

They are, said Bill, the third of the fishermen. Beautiful animals.

Were you on the lake as well? he asked.

Oh no! said Bill, a color just then to his cheek. Just...just old Jim here.

In any case, said Gail, we were wondering how you were.

He shrugged. Well I—

No new coughs? she wondered. No unusual aches? She thought a moment, one finger in the air. Seren is well?

Old Cole was put back on his heels. Well yes, he said. I mean, yes Seren is fine. No, no new coughs or unusual aches.

Very good! Gail said, the usual humor back in her face. You lucky old dolt!

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That evening, Cole and Seren were at the supper table, eating the fish he had caught. Seren's green eyes were alight; she feasted heartily on the cusk. Mmm, she exclaimed, among other noises of delight.

Are you not hungry? she said, between forkfuls of fish.

I am, he returned, though he hadn't yet had a bite.

The strangest thing, he said.

What? What's that? The green brooch on her sweater reflected the light of her eyes.

Well, I.... Cole wasn't sure how to begin. I was at the bait shop, to buy some new line....

Yes?

Oh. Well old Gail....

Yes?

Well, she was asking about the bird. He gestured with one thumb toward the back of the house, where that noon he'd buried the loon. She, well old Jim, well, he'd seen me this morning on the lake. He'd seen the business with the bird.

He saw you on the lake? Seren's eyes moved from his face, to her fish, back to his face.

He did. He was behind the stand of cattails. And well...well that wasn't the strangest part. Though it was strange he didn't call out, but what was strange was....

Cole! said his wife. Get on with it, now.

The strange part, the odd part, was Gail asking how I was. She asked, and this was odd, had I developed any new coughs, any new aches. She even asked how you were!

Seren set down her fork. The color had risen to her cheeks. She was flush with some small embarrassment, much like old Jim and old Bill down at the bait shop. Cole didn't know what to make of this. What was she, never mind the two fishermen, one of whom *should* have called out to him on the lake, to be embarrassed about?

When his wife had quite recovered from her blush, she peered at her husband. How *are* you? she said. Any new coughs? Unexpected aches?

No, said Cole, delicately exasperated. I'm quite fine.

Seren smiled, went back to her cusk with aplomb.

**

Cole had a dream that night he was a schoolboy again. He had left his mother at the doorstep, she had kissed his cheek, and he was walking spritely to school. It was only when he was in sight of the redbrick schoolhouse that he remembered he'd forgotten his rucksack. In it was his homework, his pencil and eraser, the small book of poems Miss Cummings had passed out at the end of the day before.

Cole woke feeling cramped. His limbs were heavy. There was a fine mist in his head.

He was on the way to his coffee, filling the house with its scent, when he remembered the dream. He remembered the feeling of shame on having forgotten his rucksack those years ago. He remembered the book of poems, and the long poem they'd been assigned by Miss Cummings to read.

Samuel T. Coleridge, he recalled, and the small swell of pride when Miss Cummings had said to the class, Just like our old Cole here.

He recalled reading the poem after supper, how difficult it was for him, a young boy, to understand. There was something about a sailor and how the sailor had stopped a man on his way

to a wedding to tell the man a story. The sailor, it seemed, had killed a seabird, and for this the sailor was very sorry. As Cole sat in the corner the next day at school, punished for forgetting his bag, Miss Cummings explained to the class that the sailor felt great shame, great guilt, for his crime of killing the seabird.

**

It was late morning before Cole had his boat on the lake. This was unusual, for Cole, for most of the fishermen of those parts. It was too warm on the lake, the sun too high, and the flies were biting his neck.

After pulling in just one sunnie and one blue, the fisherman decided enough. He brought his small catch into the house and placed it on the counter.

Seren looked at the two fish, small where her husband had put them. I guess it will be potatoes, she said, to fill our stomachs tonight.

Why don't we drive to the market? said Cole. It's been fish, anyway, every night this week.

Sure, said his wife. That will be fine.

It was a glum ride the whole way. Seren leant against the frame of her door, as Cole steered the car through the mist in his head. How are you, dear? he asked his wife, to which she answered she had a headache. Cole couldn't be sure, but he sensed it was something other than that.

Neither of their moods were leavened as they drove by the site for the new shopping center. It was meant to replace the supermarket they were on their way to just then, as well as the movies closing on the far side of town. The center was meant to have fountains, food from many places, a grand courtyard to sit in.

The construction site was a wrack of root balls thrust into the air, the trees, the walnuts and maple, languishing miserably on their sides. The green forest where they'd had sex as young lovers was now the graveyard of rabbits, caught by the dozers in their dens, the jack-in-the-pulpit trampled under work boots and tractor treads.

Oh, Cole, said Seren, a hand to her eyes, Oh, dear old Cole. She said that and nothing else as they bought their steaks and drove home.

**

A few evenings later, Seren was out at her book club. Whatever had been ailing her the day of their trip to the market had lifted. She'd left the house happily, pecking his cheek, her eyes green and bright. You are a witch! he said. One fetching old witch!

Cole, after watching part of a movie, decided he might use a beer.

A Capstone, he said to Linda, the owner of the bar. And give me a shot for a chaser. An Old Gull, if you like.

Yessir, she said. As she placed the drinks in front of him, she said, a note of concern in her voice, How you doing, Cole?

Haha, he said, I'm fine. No new cough, no unusual aches.

What's that? Is there something going around?

He had his beer and chaser, a second Capstone for good measure. Hitting the head, he told the bartender.

The bathroom was at the back of another small room, off to one side of the bar. He was surprised to see Seren in one of the booths. She was huddled close to a woman, Deborah, the wife of old Jim. The pair were laughing together, looking at something on his wife's phone.

Cole, said Seren, when she saw him. What are you doing about?

Having a drink. He nodded toward Deborah. What are you two doing about?

She shrugged. We decided to skip out from book club, said his wife. Neither of us thought we could take old Leslie and her eczema tonight.

I see, he said. And a drink at The Cat was your plan?

She shook her head. We decided on the fly.

He stood looking at the bottles on the table in front of the women. Alright, he said, when nothing more was said. I'm hitting the head and going home.

Good thinking, Cole, said his wife. She and her friend returned to the phone.

When she got home that night, frazzled and smelling of smoke, she was in as good of a mood as that when she'd left. Old Cole! she said, a second peck on his cheek.

He went to bed, a bit buzzed, a bit puzzled, happily enough.

**

The day the EPA closed down the lake, *an abundance of caution* the officer had said, the fishermen gathered in front of the bait shop. They say its only for a day or two, said old Bill. Until they can do more tests, give us the all-clear.

Gail was not so sanguine. I dunno. They said that about Lake Walleye two months ago and still it's closed. I got bait to sell, boys.

Old Jim hacked into his fist. Lake Walleye is fine. I was up there two weeks ago. It's your typical EPA bullshit.

Jim, you dolt, said Gail. It's not *fine*. None of this is *fine*.

Jim shrugged. He hacked into his fist.

Without the lake, the fishermen had little to do. They went bowling at noon, as soon as the alley opened for business. They spent time at The Cat, too much time. They bothered their wives, who were too busy running the town.

Cole took long walks. There was a patch of wild field, a forested stream, a half mile from the back of their house. As it was the ending of summer, the field was ablaze in yellow grass, a white-petaled flower with a bright yellow eye. The forest was yet green, as were the stones under the trickle of the stream. Cole came upon a deer browsing the undergrowth, her brown eyes deep and aware. Had it been in season, Cole might have been hunting her. Instead, he looked upon the animal with great feeling in his chest.

Home from one of these walks, he was surprised to see old Jim's wife on his couch.

Hello, Cole, said Deborah.

Hello, Cole, said his wife.

He nodded to the two women and went back outside to sit in the yard. He thought of his wife with a great feeling in his heart.

**

It was now fully into fall. The maples had turned their full reds, the walnuts their yellows. As anyone had feared, the lake was still closed. They were threatening to close another, 40 miles southwest.

The cold weather will help, said old Bill. Whatever that stuff is, the poisonous slime, dies off in the cold.

Gail had turned to selling tumblers of liquor out of the shop. It was not legal, The Cat didn't like it, but no one was going to tell her to stop. Bill, you old dolt, she said.

Where's Jim? asked Cole. Where Jim would stand, to the left of Gail, another man named Carl now stood.

Gone, said Bill.

Dead? asked Cole.

Gail shook her head. No, no. You've never heard? Old Jim, he split up from Deborah, packed up his gear and went home to his people.

Oh, I see, said Cole. He left the bait shop, parked outside of his home, alongside Deborah's pick-up. Without heading inside, he tromped off to the field, where the yellow flower was now gone, to the wood that bordered the stream. He looked for the deer. He wanted the deer. She was not to be found.

**

One night in December, old Cole woke from a deep sleep. There was an unfamiliar weight about his middle. Not an unknown weight, but one it seemed a lifetime since he'd felt. Seren's arm was thrown about him, the warmth of her front against his back.

He shifted his wife's arm so he could turn in her direction. Seren? he said, softly in the darkness.

She was asleep but at the mention of her name, she opened her eyes. Hello, dear, she said.

What's happening? he asked her.

What do you mean?

You're asleep.

Well, yes?

Here. You're asleep next to me.

Yes, old man. She took a deep breath, smiled in the darkness. It was the thing he'd hoped for, her beautiful smile. She closed her eyes then. It will be ok, she said. In the spring, the lake will be open.

How do you know? he said.

She shook her head. I don't. But it will be open. It will be ok.

Old Cole could not breathe, for the feeling in his chest. The old flame was burning, the unnamed incumbrance of his guilt nearly gone. Yes, he'd wait for spring, the lake and its waters, the cattails and birds.

The Wild Man of Cockeysville, Maryland

My name is Bill, I'm 21, and I live in my parents' basement. The reason for that is I don't talk, I haven't for 4 years. One day when I was 17, working at Jiffy Lube, I quit talking. Nothing happened, so to say, it's just my tongue got locked up.

Except, this isn't the total truth. The total truth is I don't talk to people. I talk to dogs. I talk to the squirrels and bunnies. I'll talk to a flea if one happens to hop by. We have conversations, the dog, bunnies, and me. No one seems to know. No one can hear, not my dad or Mom, not the doctors, school counselors, psychiatrists, etcetera.

That's by way of introduction to myself. My dad said to always introduce myself, to the other dentists at his practice, to Mom's lady friends. My dad said to make it a habit, and I did, back before I stopped talking. This way, nobody had to talk for me.

That out of the way, I'll tell you about the Wild Man.

The first time I saw him was at the Exxon. I was 9. My dad was unscrewing the gas cap when this man comes up to him.

Get your gas for you, sir? says the man. Only one dollar.

My dad looks straight through him, unhooks the nozzle, clunks it into the car.

The man is left standing there. His face and hands are dirty, he's got bits of leaves and dry grass in his beard and hair. The man says, Hello? Don't you see me? I'm right here!

My dad looks straight through him, goes on pumping the gas.

Who was that man? I ask my dad later, when we're eating supper. It's me, him, Mom, and Charli, the cat.

My dad picks green bean out of his tooth with his fork. What man?

The one at the gas station, I say.

My dad shrugs. Don't know what you mean.

No matter what, he won't come clean. He won't admit he ignored the man. He won't admit there even was a man. To my dad, the man does not exist.

The next time I saw the Wild Man, I was 11. Mom and my dad were finishing their barbecue sandwich. Out back of the barbecue place is a little chunk of land. There's a little bend in a river, some cattails and long grass, prickerbush and trees. Everywhere else is Arby's, Home Depot, and Jiffy Lube.

The Wild Man is up to his thighs in water and muck. He's sloshing along in a bog, next to the bend in the river. The dragonflies seem to be circling his head, purple and green, purple and green. He's even dirtier than last time and he's whistling a song. He's cursing, I hear *fuck* and *shit* and *damn*, and he's whistling too.

Back under the big plastic pig, Mom tells me, He's a homeless man.

No he isn't, I say.

Mom says, Yes he is. There's a lot of them here, because of the Light Rail.

I don't know what the Light Rail has to do with homeless people, and Mom never explains. But it doesn't matter. The Wild Man is not homeless, not in the way Mom meant it. And he does exist, even if my dad wants to pretend that he doesn't.

The heck with them, I say. And with you too, whoever is reading this. You don't know, and it's all your fault. The whole thing is your fault.

#

Let me give you a little history of Cockeysville, here where I live.

In the early 1700s, Thomas Cockey settled down in the area. He first lived in Taylor's Hall, where the big-wig tobacco farmer, Joseph Taylor, built a big stone house. Taylor came to America from England. This is because Pocahontas, who lived near him in England, said America was awesome.

After Thomas and his kids built up Cockeysville, with businesses, a hotel, and railroads, the Confederates came in and really went to town, destroying the telegraph, bridges, and whatnot.

For a while, our town was known for pig iron. Molten ore is poured into molds, with one central channel and lots of little side channels. When they take it from the mold, it comes out looking like a mom pig feeding a bunch of her piglets.

For the next hundred years nothing much exciting happened, at least not enough to put on the internet. You can probably guess: a bunch of houses went up, first for well-off white people, then a shit-ton of apartments, mostly for a whole assortment of brown people. New businesses came in, first owned by like Jeff or Dave or Linda, then Walmart, Precision Tune, and Burger King.

Which brings us to me.

I was born on September 13, two days and a year after the planes. It was happy enough, with my dad and Mom, a cat named Charli, and after her a dog named Charlie. I went to the library a lot, just down the street from the almshouse, where they used to put poor people.

The kids at school didn't like me, which was pretty much ok. I liked the bookstore and books, Charli and Charlie. I used to snoop around the neighborhood, behind the Giant and the stacks of plastic milk crates. There was a little swamp surrounded by chain link, under which I

could shimmy. My dad would take me to the railroad tracks and along I'd ramble, look in at the scrap and lumber yard.

I was weird, they said. They said I couldn't tell the difference between fact and fiction. That I believed in things that were untrue. It wasn't true, not then and not now. When I saw things that were fiction, I knew what they were. When I saw ghosts shimmering in the air, I knew they weren't actually there.

When I was 7, they put me on meds. The ghosts and the voices were gone. They thought I no longer believed they were there. But I miss them, the ghosts and the voices, who were so awfully beautiful.

#

I saw the Wild Man a month ago, first time since I was a kid. He was sitting on the sidewalk outside of the Holiday Inn with a paper bag of popcorn. Next to him was one of those gold carts, loaded with suitcases. He was ragged and dirty and the starlings all hopped around his outstretched legs.

#

At the Jiffy Lube, you work down in the pit. You might be under there for 4 hours, doing one car then the next. They give you a little flashlight to look for things that might be wrong beneath the cars. Once I found a gray mouse up there, sitting on one of the struts.

Did you know that Jiffy Lube used to be headquartered in Baltimore? That's Cockeysville's big sister, just down to the south.

I took off my glove and reached up to the mouse. It didn't scamper off like I thought. It sat there with its tail dangling over the pit and it let me touch it.

Hey, mouse, I said, stroking its back, this is Bill. Its back was a series of tiny sharp bumps.

The mouse turned its eyes to me, down in the pit. Where are we? it said.

I was surprised by this, it was the first time, but not so surprised. Jiffy Lube, I answered. You're getting your oil changed.

The mouse laughed. It's not my car, it said. I don't drive.

I nodded. Oh, right. Where do you live?

The mouse thought for a moment. At the edge of a forest, close to a big lake.

Loch Raven? I asked.

Yes, said the mouse, I've heard it called that.

Did you know, I said, that beneath the water is a whole little town? It was drowned when they let in the flood.

Yes, said the mouse, I've heard that.

When the Jones Falls River got too polluted to drink, I said, they had to make the reservoir. Nine hundred people lived in the town. Three whole churches.

The mouse had become impatient. It nipped me on the finger, and I drew back my hand. On my fingertip sprouted a small bead of blood. Are you going to help me? said the mouse.

I squeezed the tip of my finger and put it in my mouth. Help you? Can't you just ride back home where you are?

The mouse sighed. Don't you know, I could fall to my death? I'd be killed on the instant.

Oh, I said. That sucks.

It'd be your fault, said the mouse. The entire whole thing.

I scratched my head, then looked at my phone. I'll be down in this pit for two more hours.

That's ok, said the mouse. Put me in your pocket.

I started to reach out, then pulled back my hand. Will you bite me? I said.

The mouse nodded. I might. It's in my nature. I don't mean anything by it.

I put up my hand and the mouse climbed into it. I brought it down to my chest and it sat there quietly, white and gray. Its whiskers wobbled and it let out one black turd.

It's only right, said the mouse, for you to help me.

I put the mouse into the pocket of my Jiffy Lube jacket. When my boss called down what the hell you doing down there, I didn't answer. It wasn't anything, so to say, it's just my tongue got locked up.

#

Mom wants me to go to college. Online college, she says. You don't have to talk, just type.

I write down in my notebook, *What would I study?*

History, Mom says.

I go out back to smoke a cigarette. It's middle-fall and the sky is as high and blue as it could be, a hundred miles high. There's the red shed with the rakes and the mower, the swing set where the teeter-totter has been broken since my dad put it together.

I get sad by it and decide to take a walk. On the street Halloween is over but there's still sometimes a Frankenstein or inflatable witch that someone hasn't put away. The houses are chunky and clunky—they remind me of horse's teeth.

By the time I get to York Road, I'm extra sad. Five lanes of traffic whine by, sending exhaust up to the sky. Everyone is going to Mattress Warehouse, Wendy's, or Music Go Round to look at the guitars.

I feel like lying down. If I nestled in close to the curb, the traffic could rumble by and send me off to sleepy land. I could sleep until it started to rain, the fat drops turning my shirt dark where they land.

It's inside this quiet sad that I see the Wild Man on the far side of the street. He's shuffling along, carrying something in one hand—a plastic hubcap. His beard is as gray and as long as his chest bone, dirty and wild.

He makes a left turn so I have to hurry to the other side of the intersection, where there's a crosswalk, and wait for the lights. By the time I catch up, he's past the failing shopping plaza, near the church. I follow him, just a little behind, and he goes into the cemetery, the hubcap still in his hand.

Did you know this was Texas? I bet you didn't. When Irish immigrants arrived in this part of my town, they had come up from Texas. So, that's what they named it, Texas.

Let me tell you about the ghosts. I was five or six, before the meds, and I would lie on the couch. At first the room would go bright, like someone lighting off fireworks. The room was so bright, so full of white light, that it hurt my eyes. I wanted to close my eyes against the light, but I knew what was coming.

I wanted to see what was coming. I knew it would be beautiful. So beautiful and sad. Already even before they came, my eyes were full of beautiful thoughts.

The room seemed to fold open, like the top of a pie crust. Can you see that? Out of this opening the brightness receded, while in came a twilight. Then, like rising up out of the floor, the ghosts. Coming up out of the floor, the shimmering ghosts.

They were blue and pink and on fire from inside. They looked like the color of funerals. Do you know what I mean? Like the funeral of your grampa in blue and pink fire. The funeral of your grampa in white-silver tears. The last day of your grampa, and then they took them away.

When I get there, the Wild Man is lying against a gravestone. It's one of those slanted kinds and his shoulders and head rest against it. Behind him it says Murphy, with the name of an Irish town. The Irish came here when the English took over their land.

The Wild Man looks up and he tilts his chin, to say hello. A smell comes from him like mud and oil, grease and swamp. He's very dirty and his eyes are dark brown. The hubcap leans against another stone, just next door.

I tilt my chin too. I also raise my hand. He raises his hand too. He's grinding his teeth in a funny way, around and around.

Are you alive? he says. He looks at me through squinty eyes.

For a second I stand there, but he's looking, so I nod my head.

Good, he says. I wasn't sure.

Not knowing what to do, I point at him.

Me? he says. Yes, I'm alive. Last I checked. There's an orange ant crawling up his cheek. He puts a finger to it, waits for it to climb aboard, lowers it to the grass.

He tilts his head then—his long, dirty hair slanting to one side. Don't you talk? he asks. He's smiling in his eyes.

I shake my head.

Wow, he says, that's rad, and sticks his tongue out at me. His tongue is so small, round, and bubblegum pink, just like a cat's, and for a second it's the scariest thing I've seen in my life.

#

Something sad happens in this story. I'm telling you now so you'll keep reading. Thomas Carlyle came up with the word, *foreshadow*—like, your shadow goes out in front of you. A shadow falls on the Wild Man, and it's your fault. You should have done something to help him.

I'm out here raking leaves, and it's kind of crazy. Did you know how many bugs live in leaves? A thousand. And they're all shouting at me, Hey! Stop!

Millipedes, luna moths, bumble bees, fireflies, lady bugs, fritillaries, pill bugs, and walking sticks.

I say, I'll put you in the woods. I'll put you in these garbage bags with the leaves, then take you to the woods.

They say, Which woods?

I say, Does it matter?

They say, Of course it fucking matters. Some of us need one type of tree, some of us another.

I spread the leaves back on the lawn. I'm not dealing with all that.

I go find Charlie, who's snoring under the piano.

Go for a walk?

Charlie wags his tail. He hardly ever talks.

On the way out, I meet my dad in the hallway. He can't get around me and Charlie, and we can't get around him. We dance for a sec until my dad moves Charlie to one side, careful so as not to spill his coffee. Sometimes, my dad hardly ever talks too.

Out on the street, the squirrels are doing their crazy fall things, chasing each other, digging holes for nuts, dashing in front of cars. It's like each one is on Adderall.

Me and Charlie are looking for Kenwood. That's the Wild Man's name, Kenwood. I don't know if it's his first name, or last, or some kind of nickname. I don't know, maybe it's Ken Wood.

Me and Charlie are headed for the lake, the one with the fountain. It's a weird thing to do to a lake, put in a fountain.

It doesn't matter where we go, to the lake, the golf course, the cemetery, the bog, or the woods. That's what I've figured out. If I go out looking for Kenwood, I'll find him. You might think that's proof that I'm crazy, long-gone squirrel-crazy, or that he's the crazy one. But that's wrong. You're wrong.

Charlie and I are coming into the park when there he is, Kenwood, on a rusted red bicycle. He's going fast down the road and he's got his legs out wide, riding like a little kid. Call me nuts if you want, but on top of his fisherman's hat is a dove. Or maybe a pigeon, gray and blue, its feathers all fluttering in the breeze.

Kenwood sees me and Charlie and he skids to a stop. The pigeon loses its footing and lifts into the air.

Bill, he says, my man. One time I saw him he wanted to know my name, so I wrote it down. One time he wanted to know about Cockeysville, Texas, and Jiffy Lube, so I wrote down some sentences.

I raise my hand to say hi. Kenwood smells worse than usual, so I put my fingers to my nose. He shrugs, like to say, What are you going to do?

We head into the park and Kenwood leads the way. He knows the best place to go by the lake, just like he always does everywhere. Kenwood says he's napped or drunk Old Crow or shat just about everywhere in this town.

We get to a bench, I take a seat, and he starts talking. He paces up and down in front of me, his hands behind his back like a professor, a serious look on his face.

To be perfectly honest, a lot of it is nonsense. He talks about grocery stores and fluorescent lights and tarantulas in the bananas. He talks a lot about the "End of the Turnpike," whatever that means. He talks about someone named Gloria Steinem dating Barney the Dinosaur.

Except now and then I come to attention.

He takes me by the knees. Did you know, he says, that moths are dying of heartbreak?

I shake my head.

Moths, as you know, are in love with the darkness. Your average moth steers her way across the world by way of the moon. The moon, says Kenwood, is her beacon, her lighthouse, her signal. This is why the moth turns in circles about the light on your porch. Because she misses the moon.

With the invention of electric light, he says, the moth lost her way. She bumps from porch to porch, streetlight to streetlight, confused and alone. This is the terrible truth. Moth populations are at an all-time low. For some, they are catastrophic. Decimated. On the verge of no more.

The moth makes love in the darkness, he says. We've taken her night away. Moths are falling and falling, and there's no one to blame but us.

He stops talking for a bit, looking sad. Then he says, We're assholes. We're fuck-ups, he says. We're shit stains on the seat of the toilet.

#

Mom is yelling at me. Look at the state of yourself, she shouts. You look like a bum. Feeling bad, she adds, Unhoused person.

I put out my hands. What can I say—she isn't wrong. I haven't shaved, haven't bathed, my pants and jacket are smeared with mud.

Where do you go? she yells. I know you wander, but you aren't home from morning to night.

I write down in my notebook, *I'm hanging out with my friend.*

Your friend? How does she stand the smell of you? Mom thinks it's a girl. That might make me cry. What a sweet thing that she could think.

I shake my head. *His name is Kenwood*, I write.

Mom stares at the sentence. Kenwood? she says. What kind of a name is Kenwood?

I shrug. *German???*

Bill, will you please take a bath? Now she's almost crying. She hasn't been this worried since I stopped talking.

About that: it's like inside my brain there's a big electrical switch. You know how Dr. Frankenstein has that big, black-handled switch, there in his lab? He pulls it to turn on the electricity. Except my switch is either you can talk to people or you can talk to animals but you can't do both. That's the weird monster I am. I wreak havoc in the heart of my mom.

I go to my bathroom and come back with a towel. I show it to her, point towards the shower behind me.

She nods. Ok, Bill. Thank you. The tiniest bit of worry is gone off her face. Just enough that she can smile and go up the stairs.

At the almshouse, just down the street from our branch of the library, they called the people who lived there inmates. That was the people who were poor, the people who were sick, the people who had nowhere to live. There were fields behind the almshouse where the people had to work. In the 1950s, it finally closed.

I put the towel back in the cupboard and go to the patio door. I can slide open that door and go into the backyard. I slide it as quietly as I can, hoping Mom won't hear. What she won't hear is the shower, so it really makes no difference.

Whenever Kenwood finally stops his talking, he asks things about me. When I wrote some sentences about the ghosts, he leaned over and hugged me. They took them away? he asked. What a terrible thing to do. He hugged me for a very long time and told me he loved me.

I walk to the downtown of Cockeysville. What was once the downtown of Cockeysville. Now it's just York Road and five lanes of traffic, though there's still some old buildings there, some of which have antiques. There was a fire there not too long ago and some of those old buildings burned.

Not so long ago, in the 80s I think, York Road was still two lanes and there was a railroad bridge you'd drive under. There's an Asian restaurant now and a fur shop close by. There's an old-school café where you eat eggs and toast with strawberry jelly.

I go around to the back of the old buildings. As I knew he would be, Kenwood is there, except he's sitting in the middle of the parking lot. When he sees me, he tries to stand up. He wobbles then lands back on his butt. The leg of his pants is slashed open, where I see blood and his flesh underneath.

Help me up, he says. I've acquired a new kind of leg.

I get his arm around my shoulder and we start to walk. He wants to go to the busted-up railroad tracks by the lumber and scrap yard, except he's too heavy. We make it to the back of the lot and I set him back down.

What happened? I write in my notebook.

He's breathing heavy, his leg is in pain, and I sit down beside him. The kids beat me up, he says. He's holding his leg and some new blood seeps out. They took my blanket, he says.

It's cold, with our breath in the air. It's just after Thanksgiving. Three cats sit on their haunches close by, blinking and looking at Kenwood. They want to come to him, but they are skeptical of me.

I say, Come here, kittens. I won't hurt you. But the cats say, We'd rather not.

I don't know if Kenwood heard me talk to the cats, if it's possible he could hear me. He doesn't look at me or the cats, but he puts his hand on my thigh. He rests it there, then squeezes a bit. Then he moves his hand up. He squeezes a bit, then moves his hand up some more.

I shake my head. No, I say to the cats. Please, Kenwood, I say to the cats.

The cats sit in the cold sun, they don't answer or move. They sit blinking and staring at Kenwood.

I push off his hand and stand up. There's tears in my eyes and I shake my head no.

Bill, says Kenwood, it's ok. It really is.

I shake my head no.

It's love, says Kenwood, though I shake my head no.

#

I go off my meds. I don't tell my dad or Mom, of course, I just stop taking the pills, there in the little box on the kitchen counter. I take out the pills for each day and put them in my dresser.

At first nothing happens. I feel a little bit dizzy though that's probably my nerves. With these kinds of meds it takes a while to get them out of your system.

A couple weeks later, my eyes are weird. They feel bunched, tight, and it's like I'm in a tunnel of light. I see regular in the middle, but all surrounding it is light. My thoughts get wild, and I can't stop pacing. I think, *Kenwood, Kenwood, Kenwood, Mom and my dad, my dad and Mom, my dad's name is Bill*, over and over.

I wait for the ghosts. I lie in bed as long as I can stand it, my feet not ever still, and I wait for the ghosts. I want to see the colors like funerals, the pink and blue fire. The death of your grampa and the white-silver tears. But the ghosts don't ever appear.

Mom and my dad have been watching me lately. They know I'm wrong in the head. It's any moment they'll take me to the hospital. I try to stay in my room and let nobody see me.

They take me to the hospital. The ambulance does. They found me in the bathroom upstairs, washing my hands. I was washing my hands for an hour.

They give me some new meds and now I'm in a green twilight. The nurses and doctors are green. Their blue scrubs and white coats are green. I don't have any thoughts, just green. I have no thoughts for quite a long time.

Kenwood comes to the foot of my bed. Around him are a crowd of green butterflies, fluttering in green circles around him. He raises one hand, and the butterflies gather around it. He sweeps his hand through the air and the crowd of green butterflies flutters and grows.

Are you alive? he says.

Yes, I say, I'm alive. The nurse on her computer looks over at me.

Are *you* alive? I say. The nurse stands up and comes over to me.

No, says the Wild Man. I died of gangrene and sepsis.

Oh, I say. Does that mean you're not real? I say this, and the nurse is leaving the room. I figure she's going to go find a doctor, tell them I'm talking.

I'm as real as anything that's alive.

Except you said you were dead.

The Wild Man laughs. I say a lot of things. So many things. Which ones do you think are true?

I shrug. All of them are true.

This causes him pain, his shoulders slump and his eyes close. Though then he smiles again. We make up what we want, he says. Whatever we want. At that, he and his butterflies follow the nurse out of the room.

Kenwood, I say, at his back, That wasn't love. It wasn't nice. But he doesn't turn around, and it's the last time I see him.

#

I work at Wegman's now, a fancy gourmet grocery store. I sweep the floors, help the produce lady put out fresh apples. I take cigarette breaks around back. There's the food waste bins where the unfresh produce goes, the docks where the trucks unload all of the groceries.

The store is in Hunt Valley, just a short ways from Cockeysville. It got its name from the fox hunting they did in the area. It's known for hunting and horses. In the 1970s, the famous spice company came in. It can smell like garlic or cinnamon on any night of the week.

Ok, I know, you want to know about Kenwood. You think all this other stuff is just filler. You want to know if he's real. You'd like to know if my dad ever saw him when I was just 9. You'd sure like to know if I talked to a mouse.

About that: remember when I said it's all your fault, what happened to Kenwood? What do you think? Be honest now, you know that it is. It's your fault. It's my dad and Mom's fault. And even my fault. Haven't you been listening to the history facts? How do you think all of that happened?

I get off work, stick my apron in my locker. A checkout girl is just getting to work, putting her purse in her locker. Hello, I say, and she waves.

I get home and Mom is making dinner. My dad is sitting at the table drinking coffee. He drinks coffee when he gets home from fixing teeth all day.

Hi, Mom, I say.

She says, Hi.

Hi, Dad, I say, and he nods at me. He a lot of the time doesn't talk too much.

How was work? Mom says.

Ok. I said hi to that girl. I go pink in a bashful way.

Mom smiles in her eyes. *I'm so happy for you*, says her eyes. And she is so happy for me, though she knows that nothing will happen with the girl. At work, I'm the kid who is a little bit crazy.

I'm almost done, finished with this story. Just one paragraph more:

I don't know if Kenwood loved me. If what he did was love. I'm not sure of any of that. At this point, he's probably buried in an unmarked plot. Or he's ashes sitting on some

government shelf. But it could be, it's possible, he's up to his waist in a faraway bog. He's cursing and sloshing, humming some song, all the minnows gathered to swim in his wake.