

TROPICS AND MERIDIANS: SHORT STORIES

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Franklin Morris, A.A.S.

San Marcos, TX

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TROPICS AND MERIDIANS: SHORT STORIES

Approved:

Dr. Heather C. Galloway

Director, University Honors Program

Approved:

Dr. John Blair

Department of English

Supervising Professor

René LeBlanc

Department of English

Second Reader

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ABSTRACT

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Franklin Morris, A.A.S.

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SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: DR. JOHN BLAIR

TROPICS AND MERIDIANS is a collection of short fiction that spans time and place (West Africa in the 1990s, Texas in the 1970s, Kansas in the 1960s). While each protagonist is unique—a father, a teenage girl, a child, the college age son of a wealthy businessman—they are united by their need to free themselves of existential burdens: grief, isolation, religion, sex, society, and the desire to find meaning in what may be a meaningless world.

For my great-grandmother Ethel and her daughter Helen.

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*“He who is unable to live in society
must be either a beast or a god.”*

-Aristotle

TROPICS AND MERIDIANS

I remember you, barefoot, standing vigil over the River Congo, your dress the color of winter and hair misty with sweat. The year was 1980. I was there and we held hands and stared over the river into the highlands that crowned Brazzaville. We were silent mostly—something like awe, but not. There isn’t a word for it. The sun was setting and there were Congolese children everywhere, with their arms, legs, and minds still attached. They kicked soccer balls to one another and shouted and laughed and cried. That day came and went and I was too young to know I was happy. We were small children, on that last day I ever knew you—and we stood on the Congo’s muddy banks, not knowing how to fight the current, not understanding that we needed to before it swept you away—first to the airport, and then to Great Britain, and then to—where?

It was 1999 when I returned to Kinshasa and the streets were still wet with blood. I came back here after the wars to wait for you. My arrival was badly timed and the airport was a mash of baby blue berets and camouflage fatigues. Jetlagged reporters chain smoked cigarettes and shouted into payphones and mobs of men scattered as quickly as they gathered, bumping into one another unapologetically, rereading their maps *ad nauseum*. Hoards of pickpockets and whores lined up to welcome us with paper signs and broken pigeon-French pleas for food, money, help.

The Grand Hotel was overbooked and (since my name carried less weight than the 200,000 FR per night that the United Nations was dropping) I took a room at a guesthouse around the corner instead. It was a naked hut with clay walls and no windows, a minute's walk from the Congo in the Le Gombe district (which the UN had recently declared "safe enough"). I still live in that room today. It's a sleeping pad on a dirt floor, no electricity, and a bucket of water brought daily by a thin old black man with bloodshot eyes.

Every morning I walk to the Congo, where I sit for a few hours smoking cigarettes and watching people's faces. By the river I see men with sandals and calloused hands carting wheelbarrows all day, back and forth. Tired looking men with round faces and faded, button-down shirts gather to talk quietly by the water, occasionally pointing, never smiling. Men, men, and more men. It's men

everywhere. There is not a woman to be found here that isn't a prostitute. No children either. Insanity hangs over the city like apocalypse itself.

When I left it was twice the size of Chicago. Today it's a skeleton. It's a junkyard—roads and buildings shelled, shattered and burned. Across the street from the river there is a sad, charred frame, the remains of some nation's embassy—a nation that left and never came back. Le Gombe is (by comparison) unscathed. Other parts of Kinshasa are graveyards of shattered clay huts. It's a metropolis reduced to broken pottery.

As the day grows darker, mosquitoes come out to feed and younger men leave the market, walking home by way of the river as if to make sure it's still there. When night falls I take the alley back to the guesthouse. In my room at night I light a lamp and stare at the only picture left of you and I. Torn in half and taped back together innumerable times over the years, it is so wrinkled that I have to strain to make out your features. My face is still distinct but yours is faded and ghostly—smearred and smiling wildly out of the gray, blurry world behind us.

*

My grandfather, August Wolf, was a mountain. You never knew him, but he once ruled this land, his kingdom stretching to the ends of the earth. At its peak, Wolf Petroleum was a leviathan—swallowing

27 nations, rivers and oceans, peaks and valleys, tropics and meridians. After the Second World War, August planted the seeds of his future, and my past, in the Gulf of Mexico and then in Venezuela. His company spread through the South American jungles like malaria, eventually gathering all of the nation's oil under a single, untaxed umbrella. It was capitalism at its most brazen—raw, uncured, and incurable.

My father spoke fondly of his youth in South America, in a village an hour outside of Caracas by car. It was an oil town where the roads were dirt and sugar cane grew like grass. As a boy he sprinted through cane fields and picked wild strawberries with his guards by the Orinoco River. He used to tie un-baited hooks to sticks, he told me, toss them into the water, and watch it all bubble and boil as hundreds of piranhas devoured one another for a bite.

There is only one picture of him from this era. Seven years old, he is holding a fishing rod and is surrounded by dark, thick-browed men in stained white shirts and work shoes. All holding rifles. His sweaty head is shaved and his pant cuffs are rolled up anachronistically high, like a child of the dust bowl. He doesn't smile in pictures. Even as a boy he was humorless. And slender too, as he would be throughout his adulthood, with a face that looked precocious, tough and worn beyond his years.

August moved the family to Kinshasa after Venezuela's military collapsed and retired as president of Wolf Petroleum 40 years later. I last saw him at his ranch outside of Gladewater, TX. It was near the border with Arkansas where the land is the color of wheat and empty grain silos tower over the plains like monuments to a long-dead America. He was ravaged with age—350 pounds, a visor and sunglasses, and a beard that scraggled down his chest. He smiled a lot—all tooth and beard—and seemed to slur-shout everything he said. He sipped from an ever-present stadium cup, filled to the brim with ice and straight Kentucky Bourbon. No one was surprised when he abandoned the ranch and moved to Washington.

Some years later we received word that he drank himself to death, alone in his room at Washington DC's Shoreham Hotel, at the age of 72—a year into his first term in the U.S. House of Representatives.

*

My second month back I met Nbeku—half Nigerian and half European, like you—for drinks at the Grand Hotel. It had been years since we last saw each other in London and he hadn't changed, quaking and laughing and always seeming on the verge of exploding. Energy poured out of him like a roman candle. When we were together I was like that too. We talked fast, drank faster, and sat on the edges of our chairs ready to turn over our tables. It was all

fantastic madness. He talked so loud and moved his so hands maniacally that no one in the room could keep their eyes off of him. “This place is shit, man,” he shouted. “The only thing four-star about this place is the fucking price, man.” We slugged back five whiskeys each and walked, almost sprinted, to Disco 3601 a few blocks away.

The Disco was a hive. Music and people filled the room and bodies swarmed and screamed and pressed into one another, like bursts from some fleshy, sweaty orgasm. It was an awful dilapidated old building that looked like it had been an airplane hanger in a former life—concrete floors and high aluminum walls, adorned with giant red-foil hearts. Men, European and African, with short hair and polished shoes groped smiling whores in glittery dresses. The whole greasy mass contorted under the spell of the Congo drums, the air heavy with the anticipation of sex.

Nbeku dove in and started dancing with two women, one plump and one skinny. I sat for a moment at the bar, only watching, but then he came and pulled me into the crowd. “Dance! You got to dance, man,” he shouted. He introduced me to the smaller prostitute, but I don’t remember her name. It was something Bantu. In her blue glittery dress (too large for her slight frame) she looked alarmingly beautiful. After a few minutes I stumbled out toward the door, never letting go of her hand.

Outside, the air was only slightly less oppressive. It was dank and made reality spin. She hugged me and kissed my neck and took me by the hand into the wood huts behind 3601. There were a dozen or so. Our room had a lamp that hung by the door, which she lit and carried to the bed. I laid back, sick and drunk. She slid off her dress and looked as black as oil, sweat dripping down her pert little breasts and disappearing around her belly. I grabbed her, pulled her on top of me, and pressed my dry mouth to hers.

All the while drums from Disco 3601 thundered around us. The whole room seemed to warp and breathe to the rhythm. For a moment, as I stared at her naked on the bed she transformed into you—healthy and glowing and everything at once—my wife, sister, mother. The Virgin Mary. I kissed her harder and harder and rubbed myself all over her. Tears started down my face in my drunken stupor. Then I nailed her fragile black frame there on that mattress, never able to fully block her out or draw you in.

When I was finished I laid my head in her lap and she ran her fingers through my hair. Neither of us said anything. The music from the club had stopped and in the distance there was the faint crackle of gunfire. The lamp burned itself out, and we went to sleep.

*

My mother left my father and I when I was too young to remember. I don't know anything more about her. I don't remember

much about my father either. He worked at least eight months of every year in Wolf's foreign offices in Singapore, Luanda, Lagos, Texas, or London. When he was in Kinshasa, he lived his work. I admired that when I was young. He was an absurdly well-composed, well-mannered man—almost regal, with a stone face that threatened to strangle the humor out of any room he walked into.

When I was a boy—six, maybe seven years old—Mama Zimbo, my nanny, drove me to visit him at work, unannounced. I was nervous at first but when he saw me he was delighted and introduced me to his staff. Afterward we climbed the stairwell to the roof. The sun was a hot-white ball that day and so low in the sky I imagined I could touch it. It was absolutely perfect. We stood together, thirty-five stories above the street and looked over the edge at all of Kinshasa. The Congo seemed to pour like a waterfall over the curvature of the earth. Below us thousands of people walked every conceivable direction—carrying wood and water and food, like workers in one giant factory. Neither of us spoke, but when he put his hand on my back we both knew what it meant. He drew a line with the tip of his finger slowly across the horizon. It was his way of saying, “one day this will all be yours.”

He was wrong.

When Kinshasa and Rwanda collapsed in the mid-1990s our assets there evaporated. We had good wells in other parts of the

world but it sent shockwaves through the company. During the reign of August The Great, the people thrived. In the few years that my father was at the helm everything wilted. The stockholders were all nerves, and while he was not ousted, he was definitely being handed his hat. He came to Kinshasa in late 1999 as a last effort to negotiate an agreement with the new government.

We arranged to meet by the river. He was an hour late and arrived reeking of liquor, his shirt sweaty and his tie loose. He was still skinny, but his gut was swollen from drinking. We sat on a bench near the river, silently. The sun was starting to set and the roads were emptying. It had been years since I last saw him and he was different, hunched and weak. Unhinged. His black hair was completely white. Every last trace of that skinny little boy in Venezuela had faded.

“Did I ever tell you about the trip my Dad and I took to Lagos?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“I was about your age. The whole country was broken back then. It was just after the Biafran War and there was a lot of anti-white, anti-colonial stuff in the air. We came into town about three in the afternoon, and there were people everywhere. My dad had been drunk since breakfast probably. I guess that or he wasn’t paying attention. Anyway, he ran over a little girl in the street, on one of the

main boulevards. Killed her. There was a truck behind us, full of metal pipe and workers, going to a plant somewhere—they swerved to miss us and crashed, and people and pipes spilled out everywhere. Back in those days when something like that happened, which it often did because of the fucked up traffic in Lagos, a mob would form in the streets and they would usually kill the people responsible.

“Well, my dad knew this and tried to drive out but the people from the truck blocked our way and they were running up and screaming at us and banging on the hood. The workers were pouring out from the alleys and women watched out of windows. People ran over to the dead girl and picked up her head, saw she was limp and started crying and shouting. It seemed like a second and there were fifty or sixty people gathered.

“My dad got out of the car and grabbed one of the pipes off the ground. It was heavy, but he was a big guy back then—with big hands and big arms. He grabbed the pipe and ran into the crowd, swinging randomly, and screaming. He hit some of the people in the head and they dropped straight to the ground. Their heads cracked open like eggs. The crowd must have thought he was a maniac or something because everybody started running away. They could have easily overpowered both of us but they all just ran as fast as they could. It took about 30 seconds for the road to clear. There was blood everywhere, all over the ground and all over Dad and his shirt.

When he got back in the car and drove off there were four guys and the little girl on the ground with their heads broken open. Pretty obviously dead.

“When he told the story later, at meetings and stuff, he joked that he didn’t want to get into a car accident again because he would ruin his batting average. You know, he had killed five people in his first accident and didn’t know if he would be so lucky again. Everyone laughed when he told it and patted him on the back.”

“What did you do,” I asked.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I mean, what did you do when he was hitting people with the pipe?”

“Nothing.” His face tensed. “I did nothing. I just sat there. I didn’t help him or anything.” He put his head in his hands and exhaled. “You know, he never asked me for anything. Not help or anything. He always knew I would fuck up and I proved him right. This company was everything to him, and I drove it into the ocean.” He quivered a little and started tearing up. “When he told the story to his friends, he never told them I was there. He was ashamed. You know, I always wanted to be like him. And I had a chance and I wasn’t. I just wasn’t. He was so strong and I was so weak.” He leaned his head forward into his hands and wept. Spit stringed from

his mouth. “Weak and stupid” he kept repeating. “Oh Jesus,” he said in a frenzy, “I loved him so much but I was too weak and stupid Leo.”

His sunburned skin seemed to hang down off of his cheeks bones. He reached over and wrapped his shaking hand around my arm and leaned his head against my shoulder. His touch sent fire through my nerves and I went mad and started slapping him, tearing his clothes, and screaming. He turned his face up to the sky and wailed. I was volcanic, panicked and sick, vomiting hate like magma in every direction. It was as if he had pulled a thread and the whole wretched universe had come undone. I bolted up and started back home, leaving him alone on the bench. Looking back for just a moment I saw my father slouched onto his own lap, heaving and weeping. And August beside him in all of his corpse gracelessness— bloated, bearded, bloodstained.

My fathers and I, reunited.

The oligarchs of old Africa.

Kings of no nation.

Somewhere behind me the last remains of the sun slid into the belly of the great bloody Congo. The night had fallen and so had we.

*

When he was alive, August used to say that there was no justice on earth, and that idealism was an empty effort. The invisible hand of the universe doesn't favor right over wrong any more than it favors

hot over cold or north over south. Drawing from his limited knowledge of the Bible, he would say that idealists were “lambs who wished to lie down with lions.” I believe now that he was right. There is no justice on earth. And he was wrong, too. Lions and lambs—they’re all the same.

You should know that I am no idealist. In truth, I have no affection for the African people. I’ve been told that one of my great failings as a human being is an unbridled disdain for everyone, equally. I hope you will forgive me that. I have even less appreciation for Africa itself—the land, the water, and so on. This isn’t for any lack of trying. As a teenager I read Emerson and Thoreau, but now I find them absurd. There is more comfort in the glassy impotence of an airport or an embassy than any mountain or river. Sometimes I wonder if any man ever *really* feels a kinship with nature—or if it is some phony pretension to which we all can’t help but aspire. Nature is, to me, massively austere and unknowable. Something to be appreciated, maybe even admired, but a man can find no more peace or unity or answers in nature than a fly can find in a helicopter.

The problem of nature is the problem of the world—and that is that we are a poor match for it. There is a cognitive dissonance between its meaninglessness and our tendency to try and order its chaos. We cling to what we can, be it nature, a god, power, or money. Something we can control or allow to control us. For me, that thing is

you. You are the constant in the equation that gives me my humanity. My journey ended before it ever began, with you that day on the Congo. I've learned nothing since, changed none, and perhaps never will. Without that memory, I don't know what I would do. Without it, everything is freefall.

A doctor on the radio said that remembering is the act of creation. We tend to think of our brains like filing cabinets—something happens, we put it in a file, and access it later when we want to remember. That isn't how it really works, though. He explained that whenever you remember something your nervous system fires a bolt of lightning to your brain's creative cortex. Every time you remember a person, you create them anew and every time you access a memory, the process of remembering colors it. It's Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle at its most tragic. The more you remember someone, the more you change the memory, the less accurate it becomes.

Well, I have one last memory of you from the University in London. In the library. At least I think it was you. You were reading alone and I recognized your face under the lamplight. I had been aging you in my mind for almost two decades, but your face was different than I imagined it. You had the same nose, slightly upturned tip. And the same lips, not too full or too thin. You had on a dress like the one you wore on the Congo that day. A dead match. I

watched you chew your eraser and trace the length of your eyebrows with your fingertips before following you into the street. People are so graceful when they don't know they are being watched. I walked behind you for a way, but lost you somewhere in London's rainy rush hour. In the days following I thought about what to say to you, how to remind you of Kinshasa. Every night for a month I waited at that same table in the library, but you never came back.

We knew each other for such a short time when we were children, but I have to believe it meant something. Do you know—I wonder—how it feels to realize the best days of your life are already behind you? Part of me hopes you do, and that you miss me like I miss you. The better part of me hopes you don't remember me. By that doctor's rationale, I wonder sometimes if you ever existed at all. Maybe I created you to fill some emotional void. There is truth in that and I realize that my mind is too blurred and damaged to be trusted, even by me.

But I know we were together once. I remember it all perfectly.

SUNBERRY

The first country Mary learns is Vietnam. She hears it on TV, touches it on a map and thinks it's shaped like a cobra. Her father is in the doorway holding his hat in one hand and suitcase in the other. He is lanky and his hair is red like hers. When they call his number she goes with him to the bus station in Dallas. It is her first time leaving Amarillo and she stands at the foot of a tall building and tries to make her back as straight as its steel frame. There are others like it all around, reaching out of the ground like metal arms, so tall they don't have tops. Highway overpasses twist between them and she imagines the roots of the whole thing must meet somewhere in the cement under the city—like it's all one being, sprouting from a lone steel seed. She holds his hand and can't understand why he is going, but knows he will be gone long. She closes her eyes tight and the smoky metal of the city bleeds into her body—a moment she tries to keep. But it passes.

The next year she turns seven. They fold a tight flag and place it on her father's coffin. When she is seven-and-a-half she moves with her mother into a single-bedroom apartment above the Chinese

restaurant in East Amarillo. The zodiac on her placemat says she was born in the Year of the Dragon. “Marry a monkey or a rat,” her mother tells her. “Beware the goat and the ox.” The walls make noises in the night and keep her awake. She tells her mother that she hates it, but rent is cheap and they leach free water from the restaurant below. So they stay. When she is thirteen the other kids think she smells like poverty. Smoke from her mother’s menthols clings to her school clothes, and the perfume she wears to cover it is saccharine and whorey. Mary gets lice and her mother cuts her hair too short. They have a color TV that she watches at night to help her sleep—Alice and the Jeffersons. The apartment still scares her.

Candace goes by Candy and is her best friend at school. She lives with her older sisters and mother in a house behind The Tavern, a bar her mother owns. Mary sleeps over sometimes and both mothers barely notice. After school, on a Thursday, the girls drink lemonade in the daylight and pick fruit from the sunberry tree in the backyard. Candy says they are poisonous but Mary can’t help herself and tries one anyway. She doesn’t die, so both girls grab handfuls of the black berries and shove them into their mouths. Their taste is sharp, piquant. They aren’t fully ripened but Mary and Candy don’t know that. Later Mary empties her pockets and finds a few. She admires their symmetry—it’s as if when the lord made them he did so with more care than everything else. She twists one between her

thumb and index finger until it starts to burst and the crimson juices leak all over her. Strange, she thinks, how they bleed like we do.

At night she doesn't talk and drinks in the noises from the bar as they trickle through the walls—Merle Haggard, Conway Twitty and Dolly Parton. motorcycle engines and laughter. The sounds, those that groups of people make when they don't know they are being listened to, put her at ease. The girls do each other's make up and wash it off before they go to sleep. Mary and Candy pull the covers over their heads and listen to the older sisters gossip—"Joan is a slut. She fucked Bill while he was fucking Carol." Laughter. "They probably all have crabs," another voice says. More laughter. Mary doesn't know what it means but she knows it's funny.

She turns fourteen, starts high school and leaves her virginity on the floor of the bathroom at Candy's house. His name is Lucas and he is a senior, but five years older than her because he failed a grade. Everyday the school makes him shave his beard but it starts to grow back by last period. He smokes Lucky Strikes and is sleeping with Sue Ellen, Candy's sister, a sophomore. Sue Ellen and the sisters are at basketball practice on Friday and he comes over to wait for them. He sits on the couch with Mary and says things that make her laugh. She has a ribbon in her hair that she takes off and twists nervously between her fingers. "No, keep the light on," he tells her. "I like to see the details." It hurts worse than she expects but is over in

a few minutes. He kisses her and says that she is beautiful and that he loves her and not to tell Sue Ellen.

She goes to school the next day wearing Sue Ellen's lipstick and a bright red ribbon in her hair. Lucas sees her and looks away quickly, then looks back again. She spies him walking with Sue Ellen and it fills her with nervous energy. She feels powerful and doesn't understand why. Lucas puts a letter in her locker telling her he is coming over to her apartment, the one above the Chinese restaurant, on Friday. She goes to the drugstore after school but can't find what she is looking for. "Where do you keep the—" she pauses, thinking of the word for it. The woman behind the counter is sweaty and impatient "—The what, darling? Come on. Out with it," she says. And then Mary remembers the word, "rubbers," she says. "Where do you keep the rubbers?"

Lucas comes over that Friday and every one after. They do it on the couch mostly. Afterwards, he watches TV and drinks beer and Mary lies across the couch with her legs stretched over his lap. They don't talk because there is nothing to say. Mary tells Candy about Lucas. Candy hates Sue Ellen and never tells her, but when Lucas finds out he is furious. "Are you crazy?" He asks. "Are you trying to pull something Mary? If you're trying to split us up it won't work. Is that what you're trying to do?" She acts like she doesn't understand the question. Her mother comes home from work early to change for

a date, finds them together and makes Mary go to the doctor and start taking the pill. “Don’t you ever let anyone say that I’m not a responsible mother,” she says, sipping her Malibu and Coke—no ice. “But goddamit Mary, I’m too young to start being a responsible grandmother.”

Mary is a junior when Sue Ellen gets pregnant. Sue Ellen is a senior and working toward her cosmetology license when Lucas dumps her, saying the baby isn’t his. He picks Mary up after school on Friday and she tells him that she slept with someone else. He grabs her by the hair and screams into her face, his breath burning like fire. Lucas doesn’t ask who it is, but that night, under the sunberry tree, Candy does. Mary tells her it’s Walter. “Walter?” she says, surprised. “Walter from the Tavern?” Mary nods. “When?” Mary tells her that she hasn’t slept with him yet but that she wants to. Candy smiles. Devious. “You’re wish is my command,” she says.

The girls spend what seems like hours putting on different dresses. Mary picks a tight one, one that Candy used to wear to church years earlier. It’s slick-black satin and has a white plastic lilac just above where her right breast should be. It shows her shoulders and, since it is made for someone of her weight but shorter, it rides up high, almost to her underwear. Before putting it on she stands naked in front of the mirror, looks at herself and sighs. Her figure is no different; for her, puberty meant little more than periods

and a bristle of flame-colored pubic hair. Her arms are too long, hanging down almost to her knees. Her only fat is in her face, baby-fat that never sunk to the center of her body. Her nipples are tiny, like twin pink dimes atop breasts that still haven't developed and her ribs and hip bones beetle out of her flesh—her flesh, poured tight over her skeleton like freckled milk.

They slather on makeup and it makes her feel like a woman again. “Come on Mom!” Candy pleads. “Mary got dumped today and I wanted to get her all dressed up and make her feel beautiful. You and me, we can show her ‘a night out on the town.’ Isn't that what you always call it?” Candy's mother sighs and leans against the bar. She stamps out her cigarette, a Benson & Hedges Menthol Ultra Light 100, and brings her hand up against her face in surrender. “You girls do look so beautiful.” She smiles. The girls hug each other excitedly, giddy with joy like that first day beneath the sunberry tree. “No drinking or I'll make you clean the toilets at last call,” she tells Candy. “I promise Mom,” Candy answers. And Mary enters the bar for the first time.

The Tavern is swollen with sick drunks in frayed denim and leather. As she hobbles through the crowd in her heels and church dress Mary feels tingly, orgasmic—drunk on the voices and the music, on eight-balls hitting corner pockets, on the room's dimensions, its smells, its wood paneling, smoke and neon. Walter works behind the

bar when it's busy and busses when it isn't. Tonight is his night off and he is on a barstool with his friends. He is old—older than Lucas, but younger than her mother, in his thirties maybe. He has a shaved head and tattoos that run from his shoulder blade to his ankles, drives a truck from the 1950s, and has a dog named Dixie. Candy holds Mary's hand and pushes through the crowd straight to him. "Walter," she says, "This is Mary."

"Nice to meet you, kid," he says and puts his hand out to shake hers. She doesn't extend her own, just stares at him. She blinks her eyes, opens them wide and chews her lip like a black-and-white movie vixen. He hesitates a moment and withdraws his hand. "How old are you kid?" he asks. She tells him she's eighteen. Laughter. "Eighteen," he says. "Maybe in dog years." He looks at his friends, "Hey, she says she's eighteen!"

When she doesn't leave Walter stops laughing and starts telling her about his tattoos. He leans down and tells her a secret about Candy's mom. Mary laughs and rolls her eyes. He is drunk, and she stands with her body against him. Drunker, he leans down and kisses her—hard—pushing his tongue to the back of her mouth. She pulls away, but plays it cool and Walter gives her a beer. She drinks it quickly and thinks it tastes like Lucas after sex. Candy is sitting on Duane's lap and Candy's mother is pouring shots under a neon Corona. Walter whispers something to her that she can't understand.

He leads her to the store room in the back. Mary is standing up and he is sitting on top of the freezer, kissing her, pushing his fingers inside of her and twisting them in blind half circles. "I've seen you," he breathes. "In the backyard, when I come to work. I wanted you so bad right from the second I saw you." He is breathing hard and keeps kissing her. She doesn't say anything but is kissing him back.

The noise from the crowd outside thunders—faster, louder. Walter unzips his pants and she puts him in her mouth. He drinks his beer and moans. She does too. He puts a his hand on the back of her head and grabs a fist full of red hair, then he pushes her forward toward his crotch and holds her there. She gags and screams but he won't let go. She hits him with her fists and pushes away. He's smiling and she's not. Spit is dripping down her chin onto the plastic lilac. She starts toward the door but he stands up and blocks her way. "Come on, you can't leave me hanging here," he says, standing there half naked, holding his erection. "Come on, it aint so bad, is it?" He puts his free hand on her face and she smacks it away. "Alright, alright, he says. Just relax kid. No more of that. You just stand there a second."

She is livid, but doesn't say anything. He pulls down the straps of her dress, exposing her. She closes her eyes—tight—and doesn't see him finish himself in his hand, wipe it on a bar towel, throw it in the trashcan. "Somebody needs to teach you how to suck a dick,

kid,” he says and slams the storeroom door behind him, leaving her alone inside. She changes at Candy’s and walks back to her mother’s apartment, fifteen blocks with no streetlights. Her mother isn’t home so she lets herself in and curls on the couch. The silence is oppressive and she turns on the TV and raises the volume until neighbors start banging on the walls. She is crying off her makeup and her mouth tastes like vomit.

A month later Walter does the same thing to Candy and her mother fires him. He throws a chair through the bar’s front window and says he is going to kill her, but he doesn’t and leaves town. She nails a board to the window frame that stays there for months and slaps her daughter hard across the face for “slutting around with bar staff.” She paints on the outside of the board: NO GUNS, NO DOGS, NO SNAKES, NO ATTITUDES.

They finish high school on a Friday and graduate the following Saturday. Her mother is so happy she cries. Sue Ellen is there with her new baby. The alphabet prevents Mary and Candy from standing together during the ceremony, but they reconnect immediately afterwards. Time changes their faces and bodies and Candy looks as beautiful as a movie star—her hair is straight and to the middle of her back, her breasts are full c-cups. Mary is still small for her age and has the face and body of a pre-teen—Candy, of a woman. At Candy’s house that night they talk about what to do next. “If you could do

anything, what would it be?” Candy asks. Mary thinks for a long time. “Dallas,” she says. Candy looks confused. “I want to live in Dallas.”

It is winter and her mother is crying at the bus station. She gives Mary stationery and a book of 15 cent stamps and kisses her, leaving a smear of hot pink lipstick on her forehead. A black man on the bus touches Candy’s hair and tells them that he can show them around his neighborhood in Dallas. He says he plays funk bass. “You know that Sly Stone? Yeah, we grew up kids together. I taught him everything he knows.” He smells sour and has gloves with no fingers and fingers with no nails. The bus driver takes them seven hours down US 287, four-hundred miles south and east to their new home. Mary perks up when she sees buildings breaking in through the fuzzy distance and shivers as they drive into the heart of the city, twist through its grid, and come to a hard stop. She stands and stares up into the infinite skyline and is overwhelmed by it all—the ocean of bodies buzzing like white noise, the buildings in varying states of mathematical perfection. She feels weak, happy, born—married to and buried by the city all at once.

Through a friend of Candy’s sister they find jobs waiting tables at the same diner. They work different shifts and don’t see much of each other during the day. On her days off Mary takes the bus downtown and sits on a bench at the intersection of Young and

Browder St., in front of city hall. She watches people driving by and walking in and out of the building and finds it strange that each one of them is a real person with lives and families and problems just like hers.

Chasers is close to where they live and it feels like the Tavern, so they meet there after work and talk about their day. They start smoking cigarettes and drinking Miller. Candy burps when she drinks too fast and Mary laughs at her. They meet men and bring them home most nights. Candy meets James, who everyone calls droops because of the bags under his eyes. He works at McDonalds and has cartoonishly large lips. "He's an amazing kisser," she says. And Brian, who is perfect looking but terrible in bed. "Sometimes he comes when we are just kissing," Candy complains.

Mary dates Burt who is tall and skinny and works days at a factory, putting labels on packages of cotton balls. He has a moustache and chest hair and seems surprised by everything. "Well I'll be damned!" he is always saying. She sleeps with his friend Ted who is a cook at Chasers and smells like salty smoke. When she tells Burt he is uncharacteristically surprised. "I'll be damned," he says, shaking his head.

Barry has long hair and a full beard and drives a motorcycle that he built himself. He seems like a contradiction—a hokey Midwestern accent, calloused hands and dirty fingernails, but he is a

college boy too, taking classes at the community college. “I’m going to be a teacher,” he tells her. “American history.” He has prison tattoos, like the ones Walter had, green and smudged and saying things like *MAGNUM*. “That used to mean something when I was a kid,” Barry says, “Now it’s just a shitty TV show.” He listens to Woodie Guthrie and everything to Barry is “good” and “old” and “American”—Budweiser is “good old American beer” and a Chevy is a “good old American car.” He talks constantly, which Mary likes, and he seems to know about everything from science to politics. “I like that Governor Reagan,” he says, “a good old American.”

He is married but says he doesn’t love his wife and is only with her because of their son. They sleep together at Mary and Candy’s apartment on her days off and she likes being around him afterwards. He reads to her from *The Grapes of Wrath* until she falls asleep. He calls her “Momma” and refers to her in the third person. “Whatever Momma wants, Momma gets,” he says. Candy likes him too but is starting to miss Amarillo. She takes all of Mary’s stationary and stamps, writes letters to her sisters and mother, and runs up a bill talking to them on the phone.

When Mary finds out she is pregnant Candy is the first one she tells. Candy seems scared and cries, but Mary doesn’t feel anything. Not happy, not sad. When she tells Barry he turns gossamer-white and is, for the first time, at a loss for words. The rest of the day he

speaks carefully, as if she might be weighing his reaction. He calls her a few days later and tells her that he loves her and that if she really wants him to leave his wife and son, he will do it. She tells him not to. He cries on the phone and says he is sorry and hangs up. She looks at herself in the mirror after she showers. Strange, she thinks, that another person can be growing inside of a body so small. When she comes home from work she sees that Candy has made her a list of options and left it on her bedside table. They all seem equally bleak. “If you want my opinion,” Candy writes as a postscript, “I think we should go back home. We can live at my mother’s house and raise your baby together.”

Mary still feels empty. She writes her mother and tells her she is coming home, but doesn’t say when or why. It’s her last day in Dallas and she goes back to city hall and sits on the bench for hours hoping for a reason to stay. People seem sadder now. Faces dour, they walk in and out of the buildings and busses like a procession of undertakers. On the back page of *The Observer* she sees an ad for a women’s clinic and writes the number in her palm, then tries to forget it’s there.

As they wait onboard the bus to leave, Candy is visibly happy. “Oh Mary,” she says, “don’t be sad. You made the right choice. We’re going to be so happy when we get back home.” Mary nods but doesn’t mean it. “We both wanted to come here—and we did and it was

great—but it will be just like it used to be, you know?” Candy reaches in her purse and pulls out a photograph. “Look, I was waiting to give this to you.” It is a picture of Candy and Mary under the sunberry tree behind the Tavern, Lucas holding the camera. They are in their shorts and t-shirts, youthfully sweaty in colors washed and exaggerated by the Amarillo sun. Mary touches her own face and realizes how much older she must look. She is thinking about the lifetime that has passed between that picture and now and tells Candy she needs some air. “Hurry,” Candy says.

Outside the station, night has fallen and downtown Dallas is waking up. Shifts are changing and streetlights are turning on, the police drive slower and pay more attention to their surroundings. It’s Christmas time, marking a year since they arrived, and the building across the street lights up selective windows in celebration, turning itself into a forty-story tree. Her ears fill up with conversations, music seeping out of car windows, wheels and engines. She remembers that she is standing almost exactly where she last held her father’s hand. She closes her eyes tight, smiles, and doesn’t turn to watch her bus depart down Elm, en route to Amarillo. When she opens them wide again the city comes alive all at once, its magnificent luminosity stabbing at her eyes—her eyes, like fixed stars, shining on the beauty of the city and the night.

BLEEDING PARIS

[Winner of The Gates-Thomas Award for Fiction, 2009]

Alan Lamb and I share a morbid commonality. It's that my own son is a murderer, and Alan is, himself, the son of a murdered woman. I know him now much as I knew him then, which is to say not particularly well. We grew up a half-mile apart from one another near the Arkansas River in south-central Kansas, where the country is plains all the way to the horizon, taciturn and redundant in every direction. His mother, Margaret Lamb, was killed on the 16th of July, 1965. I was seven years old and Alan was eight. Because our house was further out of town than Alan's, I never heard the sirens that roared out from Paris to rescue him. I never saw his little sister, shrieking, painted in blood spatter, grabbing the dead woman's hand and refusing to let go. I never saw Alan in the passenger seat of the police cruiser, sweating and shivering under a blanket, pressing his fingertips into the window glass and watching his house, his family, his whole world, plunge into the blackness of the Kansas night.

"God was there that day too, Dale," my father told me after she died, "he is everywhere, watching over us, keeping us safe." I believed

him. At the funeral I stood between my mother and father in one of the back rows. The church was a majestic old whitewashed building from the turn of the century with a steeple that seemed to pierce the clouds and windows that flooded the room with sunlight. Margaret's sister Agatha collapsed onto the podium in tears, not a minute into the eulogy. Pastor Dennis finished for her. My mother held my hand and my father gripped my shoulder, squeezing it so hard that I could tell he was crying, though I didn't dare check. Everyone in town seemed to be crowded into the old church that day like refugees—crying and praying side-by-side, whether we knew the Lambs or not.

Alan sat in the first pew, wearing a new white shirt and his father's tie. When he left the church that day there was something different about him. Something that even I, at so young an age, noticed. It was in his eyes. They had a new softness to them, a new fragility that wasn't there before. In the weeks and months following the funeral I pictured those eyes as I prayed for Alan at the dinner table, and then again before bed when my parents came to tuck me in.

The Lamb murder was the first in Paris since the Bleeding Kansas years and, since there wasn't yet a town newspaper, people swapped details in the aisles of the general store and over beers at Kirby's. Alan's mother was killed in the master bedroom of their old farmhouse. Mike Lamb, Alan's dad, owed money to a man in Wichita,

two hours east of Paris. Not a lot of money, but enough to send a few men of questionable character up to Paris to collect. They came in a rusty pickup, pulling up to the house on a Tuesday afternoon.

Margaret answered the door. The men didn't believe Mike wasn't home and searched the house, turning over every closet and bedroom looking for him or their money. Then they took her upstairs to wait for him. Alan and his sister, a smiley little blonde girl that everyone called Clover, hid in the wooden utility cabinet under the bathroom sink.

Nobody really knows what happened after that. There was some yelling and then a gunshot, and then more yelling. It seemed like just a few minutes, Alan told the police, but in actuality the men were there for several hours. When silence fell over the house, Alan came out from under the sink and found his mother on her bed, naked from the waist-down, lying on her stomach in a pool of blood—a single gun-shot-hole in the back of her head. He didn't have the strength, at eight-years-old to turn over the dead-weight of her body, but if he had, he would have seen she was slashed and stabbed about the face.

The Wichita Police Department arrested three men in the subsequent weeks, two whites and a black. At first they claimed innocence, but were all convicted a year later when the two whites, Earl Whitten and Bobby Marshall, both men in their early twenties,

traded their testimony for life in prison. They had stayed in the car, they said, ready to leave when the black man, Harold Spencer Smith, went back inside the house. They were outside when they heard the gunshot. When they last saw Margaret she was alive in her bedroom, shaken, but alive nonetheless. Smith, the men claimed, had raped, mutilated and murdered Margaret Lamb. He pleaded not guilty at trial—saying that he had never even stepped inside the house, that he had spent the entire day in the truck. It took the Paris jury almost an hour to deliver Smith his guilty verdict. He was a tall, skinny man, and he cried and shook his head as he was led from the courthouse to a bus, and then to the Ellsworth Correctional Facility, where he was hanged two years later, in the autumn of 1967.

150 miles east of Ellsworth is Topeka Correctional Facility, where my son, Jonathan, will spend the rest of his life. The circumstances surrounding his homicide case are fuzzy and, truthfully, the whole thing is too painful for me to relive in detail. I will say this, though: when he was growing up, I regret that I only saw him as he was in the present moment. I never surrendered to nostalgia and that is, perhaps, why I didn't notice him grow over the years from a boy, into a man, into a murderer. The boy is all that's left now. It wasn't the man or the murderer, but the boy who called me in the middle of the night, manic, as scared as I imagine Alan was the day he stood over his own mother's body. He exploded into the

phone and I tried to calm him and make sense of the whole thing. But he knew. So did I, and we both wept together on the phone. We knew that there was no way out of what he had done. Poor, beautiful boy. We prayed together for forgiveness that day, but that didn't change a thing. The pain was and is infinite, as if he had died instead of killed. It was one drunken night, one jealous rage, one single bullet—a lone, solitary act, impossible to rewind, holding the power to unravel his entire life and, by extension, my own.

*

I didn't know Alan well, but we weren't strangers either. Paris is a small enough town that everyone is in perpetual proximity to everyone else. The fact that Alan and I were so close in age made this even more the case. We spoke in passing, in the hallways at school, in church on Sundays, and later at the Lamb family hardware store where he worked for all of his adult life.

On a Saturday night, almost a year after Jonathan's conviction, I ran into Alan at Olympia Lanes, a bowling alley on US-96 near the old high school Alan and I attended years earlier (the same school where my wife Joanna and I teach today). I was bowling alone when I spotted him a few lanes away. We traded smiles. He walked over and asked about Joanna and I said she was well. He asked if I wanted to bowl a game together and I said sure. We drank a couple of beers and filled an ashtray with cigarette butts. After a while we started talking

about Jonathan. I told him about the case, about the details of it, the guilty verdict, the trips to Topeka which I made every weekend. I told him they had become less frequent for Joanna.

“Does that cause problems between you two?” Alan asked.

“Not really. I don’t think she gets the same thing out of the visits that I do.”

“Which is what?”

“It is like a drug or something—seeing him. I think about it every second I’m not there, and then when I get there, it’s not as comforting as I need it to be. But I repeat the whole thing when I get back to Paris anyhow.”

“This all must be really hard on you and Joanna,” Alan said, looking me straight in the eyes.

“It’s been rough. Sometimes I think she handles it better than I do. Or maybe she’s just better at burying it.” He nodded quietly and lit another cigarette, bringing it to his lips, blowing the smoke out slowly.

“I don’t see you in church anymore,” Alan said.

“Yeah,” I hung on the word, searching for an explanation that made sense.

“You don’t need to justify anything to me. I understand. When you go through horrible stuff, sometimes you have to make changes in your life. I know I did. I thought a lot of times about not going to

church anymore, myself. You are no worse for having those kinds of feelings.”

“I guess,” I said.

“You tell me to shut up if this is too personal here,” Alan said.

“But you don’t go to church because of the people in the town, right? Because of the things you think they are saying about you and your boy, right?”

I thought for a moment. “Yeah, that’s a big part of it, that and just being alone a bit,” I said. “I don’t have to pretend to be doing OK.” Alan nodded. I continued. “Do they say things about us? At church, I mean?”

“I’m not going to say I haven’t overheard some things.”

I scoffed a little. Alan ignored it and continued. “Are you still religious?” he asked.

“Yeah, I am. I still pray a lot,” I said. “More than ever before in fact.”

“I don’t.”

“How’s that?” I asked, startled. “You’re at church every Sunday. What do you do there if you don’t pray?”

“I just close my eyes and try not to think of anything at all. You know, I block out all of the noise—even Pastor—and just try to be a blank slate for a few minutes.”

I was silent, not knowing what to say. A few lanes over someone bowled a strike, and there was a moment of celebration with beers in the air.

“Let me ask you something—and again if this is too personal you just tell me to shut up—do you hear God’s voice, speaking back to you, when you pray?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “No, not really, I guess. I don’t hear a voice exactly, but sometimes I feel him, I think. I have a sense that everything will be OK.”

“And is it?”

“Is what?”

“Is everything OK?”

“Sometimes it is,” I said. I thought for a moment and took a swig of my beer. Alan was looking at me intently, waiting for me to go on. “Mostly it’s not. But I don’t know what I would do without it.”

“It’s hard at first, but you move on eventually.”

“Not sure how.”

“Well,” Alan said, “I stopped believing in God after my Mom’s trial. I never found my faith again. At first I felt bad about it, like it made me a weaker person or something. I told Pastor and he said for me to pray more, you know to have a more personal relationship with God. That didn’t seem to work though. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was just talking to myself in my head. I had never realized

that's what I might have been doing, all those years. But then I did. One day I realized I was speaking to silence. Like I said, I felt really guilty about feeling that at first. Not so much anymore though. It was like realizing the world was round, instead of flat."

"But you keep on going to church?"

"I do."

"And you don't believe in God?"

"Nope."

"Well that doesn't make a damn bit of sense Alan. You're just lost."

"No, I'm not," he said.

"Yes, you are."

"You got it wrong, Dale. Do you remember in high school—when Mrs. Caldwell made us read a bit from that poem, *A Song Of Myself?*"

"Yes, I remember."

"Do you still teach that in the school?" he asked.

"I teach Whitman, but not that one."

"That's a shame. Well, that is kind of my reason. What he said in that poem. I don't know much about poems, but I read the whole thing outside of school, on my own. It's long, but I memorized a part of it. He said, 'I do not press my fingers across my mouth.' Do you remember that part?" I nodded, and Alan continued. "He said, 'I

believe in the flesh and the appetites, seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle. Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from. The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer, this head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.’

“You see,” Alan continued, “That’s what did it for me. It’s not the words of the book, but the people. The way they all came together for me after my Mom died. Like the whole town gave me a big hug. I fell in love with people, Dale. And I decided that if that is all there is, well that isn’t so bad. And I’m happy with that. It isn’t always easy to be, and I’m not happy with everything all the time, but I’m happy with that.”

“But that’s not all there is,” I said. “That’s a poem. It’s not real life. It’s ink and paper, not flesh and blood.”

“And The Bible’s not ink and paper? It’s not an easy thing— don’t think I haven’t struggled with it, Dale. But I just can’t believe that there is some purpose to all of this. Not after what happened.” He stopped for a moment and lit another cigarette. “Don’t think I’m trying to convert you to my way of thinking or anything either. We’re just talking here. I’m just telling you how I got past all of it.”

I smiled and nodded.

“You know that you can’t know God’s will,” I said. “You can’t know his plan, and you just have to have faith.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t want there to be a plan. If this is all random, and if nothing happens for any reason—well, I can deal with that. But if God had some glorious purpose for my mother up in heaven, and decided to have a couple of guys rape her and cut her up and shoot her—well, that I won’t accept. I can’t.”

“People did that Alan, not God. And we can’t know the mind of God. You know that.”

“Well, if there is a reason then I need to know,” he said sternly through his teeth. He pressed his index finger into the table. “I need to know why, Goddamnit.”

“I understand that.”

“And another thing,” he said, his voice getting slightly louder with every word, “and this is nothing against your son, I don’t know his heart, and I don’t claim to—but I don’t want any part of any God that would forgive those men who killed her. I don’t want any part of a God who would put her on the same level with them. That man, Harold Smith, when he died, he was surrounded by people. When Whitten got cancer, he was in a hospital and had a priest come and hear his confession. When my mom died—after they cut up her eyes—she died alone in the dark. Some things, sometimes, are beyond forgiveness.”

Neither one of us said much after that. I was too sad and he was too angry and we were both a little too drunk. We finished our beers, finished our games, shook hands and went our separate ways.

On the way home I drove by the old church on US-96. It was a Saturday night and I could see people inside through the windows. I pulled into the parking lot and killed the engine. I wanted to run inside and throw myself at Pastor's feet, to beg forgiveness for Jonathan and for myself. But I didn't. I turned the key, re-started the truck, and drove away from place where I found God, where my father was buried, where my wife and I were married, where my son was baptized.

At home Joanna was asleep in our bed. I made myself some tea and took it to my chair by the fireplace. Palms together, I closed my eyes. All I could think about was Margaret and Alan, Jonathan and I—mother and son, son and father. Alan had found community but lost God. I held onto God, but had turned my back on people. I was right and so was he. Maybe a stronger man would have pulled himself up and kept going. But I couldn't move. I just sat there by the fire, eyes closed, praying to be reborn into any life other than my own—my single, tiny, solitary sadness—breaking beneath the weight of the infinite silence.

In the morning there was rain, so hard I thought it would never stop, but it did. I left earlier than usual to see Jonathan, driving east

instead of west, toward the house where Alan grew up. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised to see it wasn't there anymore, but its absence caught me off guard. No trees, no house, no fence—just the naked plains. By the road, where I imagined their mailbox would have once stood, there was a splintered and muddy cross, leaning from neglect. I stood in front of it and looked through it to see the house that wasn't there.

After a few minutes I was back in my truck, headed toward Topeka. The fog still hadn't lifted, and my headlights ricocheted back and flooded the cab with pale winter light. On mornings like that it's impossible to see more than a few feet in front of you, but it was all the light I needed to make it the entire way.

SONGBIRD

My name is Madeline. When I was younger I had a band with David and we made tapes with songs on them. Nobody knows where he is now. People say he might have taken an empty train car to another state or that he might be somewhere near our apartment riding bikes with his friends or sleeping in the trash or dead or fixing cars in the city. I like to think he is still close, but he hasn't been home in a long time. Mommy and me don't talk about him anymore because it makes us both sad and we don't want to be any sadder than we have to be. When we made the last band together I was six years old and he was twelve. We were copying Daddy—but a good copy—not the kind that makes people mad.

We still live in the same apartment. It is above a garage, ten minutes from school, and has two bedrooms and one bathroom, a living room and a kitchen, brown wooden floors, and walls that are white and sometimes yellow. Mommy tried to cover the yellow spots with the paintings she used to make, but there was too much yellow and not enough paintings. Daddy and David don't live here anymore but Mommy and me still do.

It always seemed small because there were so many books and magazines and newspapers and instruments covering the furniture. Daddy used to joke that he kept it like that because the furniture came from Grandma (on Mommy's side) and it was cursed and we had to cover it up. Mommy always told him to be quiet when he said that. I thought that was probably not true too, because even Daddy's piano had books piled taller than me and I had to be careful when I walked through the living room not to knock them over because Daddy and Mommy said they would fall like dominoes and make the whole apartment fall down.

Daddy used to play music a lot when he was here. He had instruments in every corner of the apartment—big pianos and little pianos, a piano you wore on your shoulder called an accordion, pianos with buttons that made sounds like drums, and he had real drums, and guitars that were black and wood colored and some of the guitars you plugged into radios, and some didn't have enough strings, and some had too many strings, and there were small guitars, and round guitar banjos, and little flutes made of wood called recorders, and even more things David and me didn't know the names of, scattered everywhere. David and me didn't play any instruments then, but we both read books that older kids were reading at school and Daddy said it was because we were both the smartest and that I was the prettiest too.

He used to have lots of friends come over and they talked about books and drank coffee and smoked and sometimes they played the instruments and made songs and laughed really loud (even Mommy). David and me got excited and laughed too, even though we didn't understand what everyone was laughing about. Then when everyone would leave at night Daddy and Mommy would read to us and just Daddy would play us songs on a guitar and sing to us softer and softer until we went to sleep.

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When daddy died his instruments stayed in the same place for a long time. We let the banjo stay on the couch. We sat on the floor instead. The accordion was on a pile of books so we only read books from other piles. We walked through the room like it was booby trapped, being very careful not to knock over any of daddy's instruments. If we bumped one by accident we looked around and made sure that nobody saw and then put it back the right way. I think that after the funeral Mommy wanted to take care of us, but she was so sick and so tired and so sad that she went to the bed her and Daddy slept in and didn't get out of it for a long time.

David made me lunch and dinner every day and made some for Mommy too and took it to her in bed. It was the summer so we didn't have to go to school and we sat in the apartment and watched TV mostly. Since he was older than me it meant he was in charge and

could tell me what to do, like clean the bathroom Madeline or do the dishes Madeline or say Madeline its bed time, and I would have to go to bed. He didn't though. He was always nice and let me stay up when I was supposed to be asleep and watch the Monkees on Nick At Night and breakfast for dinner. When I was sad and crying about Daddy or Mommy he would hug me and kiss my head and sometimes cry too and then he would start hitting himself and say that he was supposed to be strong and not cry because men didn't cry and he was a man but I liked it when he cried. Sometimes I thought he did it just so I wouldn't have to cry by myself. I didn't like him hitting himself though so I usually stopped when he started that.

Because Daddy was dead and Mommy lost her job we didn't have a lot of money for things like new clothes and big meals. Mommy would give us a little bit of money every week for food and when we had some left over David and me used to walk to the Goodwill. We would buy clothes and tapes and records and shoes and old suitcases and photo albums and typewriters that always had a couple of keys that didn't work. One day in the middle of summer David found me a video from the Goodwill bin called "Follow That Bird." It was a movie about how a bird called Big Bird got kidnapped from Sesame Street by bad people and it was sad. Everyone from Sesame Street helped to find Big Bird and it was an adventure across the entire country. I watched it over and over and made David watch

it over and over with me. He laughed at all the same parts I did but at the end he said it was dumb because birds can't talk and they aren't that big unless they are dinosaur birds. And he said if Big Bird was a dinosaur bird it would have been awesome because he would have just eaten everyone the whole movie.

Whenever he said that I hit him on the shoulder as hard as I could. He would say Ouch! And tell me I can hit pretty hard for a girl and he would chase me and squeeze my sides and tickle me until I screamed. But then he would let me chase him down and tell me that I was very strong and could probably beat up all of the boys at school if I wanted to. It was nice when he would let me win because it would be no fun if he won all the time. He eventually started liking the movie too. He said Snuffaluffagus was better than Big Bird, which wasn't true, but I let him think so anyway and did not hit him because I was glad that he liked the movie at all.

He bought a movie too called The Outsiders that had the Karate Kid in it. He said The Outsiders were so cool and that when he turned fifteen and got a job he was going to save up money and get a leather jacket from the goodwill, and cigarettes from the 7-11, and a knife that flipped up, but he didn't know where to get that from. I told him that was a stupid idea and said that I didn't want to dress like Big Bird just because I liked Follow That Bird! Then he said I already looked goofy like Big Bird and I hit him with a pillow and he grabbed

it and chased me around the apartment and Mommy yelled at us through the wall and told us to shut up because she was trying to sleep even though it was four in the afternoon.

*

When I asked David what he was going to be when he grew up he said he was going to be a musician like Daddy was. I told him that he didn't know how to play any instruments and he said he would take classes when he got to high school band because that is when Daddy started. That made sense to me so I decided that I wanted to be a musician too, but I thought it was dumb to wait until high school to start because that was a long ways away.

After summer was done David and I went back to school. I was in the second grade and he was in the sixth grade so we had to go to different schools, which made me sad because people didn't talk to me at school except for teachers. Everyday when school was finished I would sit on the curb and wait for David to come on his bike and when he did we would walk home together.

Mommy got out of bed in October and got her old job back at the telephone company and after a little while she stopped going into her bedroom and started to smile more and eat dinner with us. She made big meals because we had money again and watched The Outsiders and Follow That Bird with us. She gave us more money to buy movies at the Goodwill but we still mostly watched Follow That

Bird and The Outsiders. On the last weekend in October she told us that we are going to clean the apartment and we took down the book piles and put them all on bookshelves. She told us it was ok to touch Daddy's instruments and that we should move them to the garage because he would have wanted us to have a clean apartment. I told David that I thought we shouldn't move things because the apartment was never clean when Daddy was here but he said we had to listen to Mommy and that now we could use the couch too. We were all happy in the clean apartment but in November Mommy made friends from work that were women and some that were men and she was gone at night after work and some nights she came home smelling like beer and cigarettes and some nights she didn't come home at all.

David said we shouldn't tell her anything about how it makes us sad because she works hard to give us things and she is still very sad from when Daddy died. I told him: I guess your right. That is when I decided it was a good idea for David and me to make a band.

Daddy had a small gray tape player with no door that said SONY WM-D3 CASSETTE WALKMAN on it and David said we could use it to record songs and things. When Daddy was alive, David and me broke the door off of it—by accident of course—when we were playing with invisible swords in the living room and Daddy shouted at us and sent us to our room. One day on the way home from school David and me bought a blank tape from the store instead of milk. He

was smart with electronic things and figured out how to record quickly and then he taught me: 1) You put the blank in with the tape up, 2) you put sticky tape on the blank to hold it in cause there was no door, 3) you press REC and PLAY at the same time.

It was simple enough but I felt weird about playing with because it was Daddy's and recorders are something that grown ups use, not kids, and I thought that might make Mommy mad. David said it wouldn't upset her but just to be on the safe side we would only record when Mommy wasn't at home. I said: OK, and I also said: that means we can record a lot.

We now had what we needed to make a tape but we didn't know how to use all of the instruments. David said it would be really easy. He said all of the keys on the piano had a letter for them so we put pieces of tape on all of the keys and lettered them A to Z with marker, but then we didn't have enough letters so we used numbers for the rest. I asked David how to write songs once we did that and he got some of Daddy's staff paper and wrote "A-A - Q-G - 14-17" and told me to play it. He said that is how composers did it and that along time ago there was a famous composer that couldn't hear anything but still wrote songs with letters and numbers. I figured that if he couldn't hear and was still famous we should make songs too because we could probably do it better than he did.

I sat at the piano and played the new song over and over and David hit the drums softly at first, then loudly, and it made us laugh and smile like Daddy and his friends used to. I told him we should have a girl singer because girl singers are more famous like Madonna and Blondie and Martika. He agreed and said I should be the singer. We had fun making sounds on the piano and the drums but I said we had to think of the most important part: the band name. I told David that we absolutely *had* to be called Follow That Bird. He said that was very stupid and I said that since I was the singer what I said was more important. He got angry and called me a stupid singer so I ran to our room and got in my bunk and slammed the door really loud.

I was certain that he would follow me and say he was sorry but he didn't for a long time. I lied there until it got dark. Mommy was still out with her friends and David came in to go to sleep and crawled up to his top bunk and by that point I didn't care anymore about the stupid name. I just wanted him to not be mad at me and play with me and make me laugh again. Instead of doing any of that he laid there quietly and I could feel him still being awake and so I started to cry. David heard me and crawled down into my bottom bunk and said that he had an idea that would make both of us happy. He said that I could call the band Follow That Bird and he could call it The Outsiders. I told him I didn't understand how one thing could have

two names. Then he said to my friends we could call it Follow That Bird and to his friends we could call it The Outsiders.

I thought about it for a little while. I could feel him staring at me and waiting for my answer, which told me that he still wanted to be in the band with me and I knew I still wanted to be in the band with him too. Then I told him that I didn't care what his stupid friends thought because they were all boys and I said we could do his plan. He laughed and hugged me hard. My nose was stuffy and snotty from crying and it pressed into his shoulder. He said he loved me and that he would always take care of me and kissed my head and went to his bed and went to sleep. I got all of my blankets and tucked them in underneath my feet and legs and back so I was in a bed-burrito (that's what David called it) like a sleeping bag. Daddy used to call it snug as a bug in a rug. I felt loved and fell asleep warm and happy.

*

The next day, and every day after, David and I practiced for hours while Mommy was out. David banged on the drums and I would hit the piano keys and sing so loud that my face turned red. I didn't have any good stories to write about so I sang the words to Madonna songs and Prince songs and Debbie Gibson songs and songs from Daddy's Beatles records. I started to hate being at school even more when we made the band. I waited and waited to go home and

make song tapes with David. I would scribble songs on the blank pages of my school spirals like this:

La La La La Da De De Da De
A G R P M 7 17 Q P

When I went home David would look at it and say it was my best song and we needed to record it so we could be on the TV. We never even practiced them. We just hit REC and PLAY and started playing. David and me smiled the whole time we played and didn't stop. The sound of the drums and the piano filled me up so full that I thought I would explode and start laughing or crying or screaming or howling like the funny dog from the TV.

We made so many songs that we went through the whole tape very quickly, so David had to get another one and another one and another one but that was ok because they were only \$1 at the store and the store was on the way home from school. Once we had five tapes made I got the idea that we should make tape covers like the ones we got at the Goodwill with Madonna and The Doors on them. David said most of the bands had pictures of themselves on their tapes but that we didn't have a camera or any film. I said that was OK and that I could draw a tape cover myself since my teacher told

me I was a good drawer. I made it simple, with a picture of a bird and the words "Follow That Bird" big and then the name of the tape smaller (I called it "Fly Fly Fly" because I wanted us to be mostly about birds). I cut it out and folded it the right way and put it on the tape. It looked beautiful and I held it in my hand and David and me looked at it from a lot of different angles like down and up and on the table and from across the room and each time we moved it we kept wiping the fingerprints off with our shirts so it didn't get dirty.

By the time we finished the fifth tape Mommy started bringing home a man that was named Joe. David said that Joe was maybe going to be our new Daddy soon and I said that was bad because he was loud and dirty and some nights him and Mommy would drink beers and scream at each other so loud that the police came and had to break them up. David slept with me in my bed when that happened and I put the blanket over my head but it was still so loud.

*

One time David and I played the first tape for Mommy and Joe and Mommy said it was good but Joe started laughing at David and told him that he was stupid and a queer and it was just some old racket and not even music. David said for Joe to shut up and called him a bad name and knocked his food on the ground and then Joe socked David in the stomach so hard that he couldn't breathe. David was screaming and Mommy tried to get Joe off of him but he called

her a bad name for a girl and knocked her on the ground and it was so loud and I was so afraid that I ran to my room. When David came back in he said he hated Joe and Mommy and he was going to run away and I told him that he couldn't because I would die without him to take care of me, and then he cried without me even crying first.

Over the rest of the school year it happened more and more that Joe stayed the night at our apartment and was mean to Mommy or David. He yelled at me and said I was dumb and ugly but he didn't hit me the way he hit them. At school I was glad everyone left me alone and I wrote the songs in my notebook with words from songs on the radio. David was happy when he was at school because he found friends that looked like *The Outsiders* (but without leather jackets because they didn't have any at the Goodwill). After school they rode around on their bikes and threw cans at cars and laughed at people but not me. They used to go to our apartment and put Mommy's beer into coke cans and stand outside and smoke Joe's cigarettes and whenever I asked David to come inside and do the band with me he said he was busy but that he would do it tomorrow. He used to go out a lot after everyone went to sleep at night but I didn't know where he went and, at first, I would get mad at him when he came home but then I stopped and was just glad to have him back.

After a little while he said that school was stupid and he stopped going and rode around on bikes with his friends while I was

at school, but he was still there at three o'clock every day to walk me home from school with all of his friends who were smoking cigarettes and cursing even though they were only thirteen. When we got to the apartment he would just leave with his friends right away, so I was by myself and made covers for all of the other tapes and I made posters for the band out of pieces of construction paper from school and then I would sit in bed and do homework. When I finished I would do pretend interviews in the mirror with the people from the news and I pretended we were the most famous band in the whole world. I said things like: This song is by my brother David and me—Then I made a crowd noise with my mouth and said: It is for Daddy (and then I made some more crowd noise and so on). Then I would press PLAY and listen to the tape so loud that no other sound from outside my headphones could get into my ears.

David got in trouble in April with the police for stealing money from our neighbor's house and Joe and Mommy screamed at him a lot and David said a bunch of curses back at them and I could hear them in the kitchen so I turned up the tape as loud as I could on my walkman and tried to go to sleep but things were starting to get so loud that the walkman didn't cover them up anymore.

*

The night before David left was a very bad one. Joe came home angry and drank a lot of beers while David was still snuck out. Him

and Mommy yelled and then fell asleep for a couple of hours. David came in through the window and woke me up to tell me goodnight, which I always made him promise to do.

Later on in the middle of the night Joe came into our room and got in my bed and started kissing me on the mouth. He tasted like cigarettes and throw-up and was kissing me hard and his moustache hurt my face so I started screaming and David woke up and started throwing things and Joe and hitting him on the back. Joe started hitting David really hard in the face and Mommy came in and was screaming and everything was happening so fast while I was in my bed and I couldn't make it go away and I started screaming too. Then the Police came and David and Mommy were bleeding and Joe tried to punch a policeman and they hit him with the police stick and put him in the handcuffs and took him to the police car. David told them about Joe kissing me, and they asked me if it was true and I said yes and the policeman said: Son-of-a-B-Word, real mean about Joe. Then they left and we all went to sleep because we were so tired.

The next day David didn't show up to walk me home outside school on the curb like he always did. I waited for an hour and then I walked home all by myself. Once I got home I tried to listen to one of my Follow That Bird tapes but I couldn't because I was too sad and thinking about David. Mommy came home and I was in bed staring at underside of David's bunk and wondering if now that Joe was gone

David and I could start playing music again and recording more. I wanted to do a concert for all of David's friends and I thought they would like it.

When David came home Mommy started yelling at him like she usually yelled at Joe. She told him that was stupid cause he dropped out of school and that he was a thief and that he was why she was sad all of the time. And she got mad at him and said he made up the thing about Joe kissing me and that Joe loved her and not me and that they were going to get married but now Joe wouldn't ever talk to her again. She said that he would end up on the street sleeping in trash like his friends. David didn't say anything back. He just came to his room and got in his top bunk. I asked him what was wrong but he didn't say anything. He didn't even cry. He just lied there quietly and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night he woke me up and told me he was leaving for a little while with his friends. He said that he was the one making Mommy sad and he wanted her and me to be happy so he had to go. I said: no you can't go and he said he had to and that I would be OK since Joe wasn't coming back anymore. I told David he couldn't go and I grabbed his arm and he hugged me for a long time and we were both crying and sniffley. I asked him where he would go and he said that a lot of his friends ran away from home too and they were fine. I asked him if I could come and he said I needed to stay

and take care of Mommy and I was too young and that the streets weren't safe for me because I was a girl even though I was a strong girl. He said before he left he wanted to give me two very important things:

1. Black Flip-Up Knife. I never even knew he had one. He said to keep it under my pillow in case anybody bad ever tried to hurt me. He showed me his adams apple and said if bad people try to hurt me or Mommy to stick the knife there and the bad person would drown in their own blood. I said that's gross, but he said he was serious and that's what ninjas do.

2. A box of blank tapes. There were ten of them and they were 90 minute ones instead of 60 minute ones. He said he wanted me to make more songs without him and I told him I didn't know how and that I wanted to wait for him but he said he would be mad at me if I didn't. I told him I couldn't do it and said: please don't go David.

He said he loved me and he knew that winters were cold here so he would probably come back by winter. Then he went out the window in our room like he did a bunch of times before, but this time he had a backpack full of warm clothes and the saddest face I had ever seen.

*

He didn't come back by winter like he said. In fact it has been two winters now since he left. At first I thought Mommy didn't notice

but then I came home from school one day and she was in my room holding his clothes up to her face and crying into them really loud. She didn't see me watching her so I crept back outside and waited a long time before I came back into the apartment. I cried a lot too. I still do. I didn't have anybody else in the world but him and I still don't and I really hope he comes back. Before Daddy died I was the happiest girl alive. After Daddy died, when Mommy was sad, and when we didn't have any money, and when things were going wrong wrong wrong, doing the band made me really happy too. David liked the band but I just don't think it was enough for him.

I want to be happy like that again so I am going to start making more song tapes. Even though David isn't here I am going to put his name on the inside covers of all of them because I don't want to be in a band that doesn't have him in it. I also decided that I would start singing my own words that I write about things that happen instead of copying other people's words from the radio. David has been gone for a long time now but I know he will come home one day. And when he does instead of telling him what happened while he was gone I will give him my new song tapes and he will listen to them and my words will tell the whole story

*“Yet from those flames,
No light, but rather darkness visible,
Served only to discover sights of woe.”*

- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

THE MEANEST FLOWER

I’m not much of a nostalgic. I rarely think about my adolescence, but when I do it comes back to me as a photograph of a classroom I once knew. In the classroom there were four walls: two blackboarded, and one papered by glitter-glue pictures of the usual presidents—Lincoln, Kennedy, Washington, and so on. They were sticky-tacked to the wall for almost a year and were suspiciously out of place in my eighth grade math class. Nobody ever asked Sister Therese why she hung the pictures, she never volunteered an explanation, and because I spent that year peering out the windows of the room’s remaining wall, I supposed I wouldn’t have cared enough to remember anyway.

That was where I met Cody, who sat two desks in front of me, and a row to the right. It was also where, only five weeks after transferring from a military academy in New England, Cody became a minor legend by pissing on Sister Therese's desk. As a few friends and I played lookout, Cody targeted her square desk calendar (the bible-quote-of-the-day sort) before turning his attention to the wall of glitter pictures. He managed to take out a good number of presidents before losing steam. The aftermath was glorious—Kennedy and Lincoln, soaked yellow and bleeding glitter down the wall into pools that beaded atop carpet like drops of Mercury. Cody's piss-river rolled over Sister's faded oak desk and the previous night's homework, leaving in its wake a yellow, wrinkled mush.

It was an absolute riot. We laughed so hard that we almost peed ourselves. After all, Sister Therese (or "Sister Obese" as Cody took to calling her) was a colossal hard-ass and entirely deserving of every last drop. Even before Cody's transfer, her class earned a school-wide nickname: "The Fourth Reich". But if we had it bad, for Cody the class should have been a nightmare. Sister took every opportunity to belittle him in front of the rest—screaming and ridiculing his intelligence, posture, dress, everything. He never seemed to mind; he only laughed, just as he did that day when he desecrated her desk. For Cody this was war, and war was funny.

This is a good time to stress that, even prior to Cody's arrival, we were no strangers to teenage misbehavior. In the limbo between our seventh and eighth grade years, we had come into the age where acts of juvenile delinquency began to improve our social standing, and we all knew it. Soon we were spending afternoons slouching behind the gym, sharing a stolen pack of so-and-so's Mom's Marlboro Lights and, when we could secure it, drinking warm beer out of coke cans, sometimes mixing in whisky or red wine as taste was no issue. We spent weekends crawling stealthily into and out of one another's bedroom windows, and then together we wreaked havoc on our neighbors, by the moonlight, atop ten-speed bikes—wrapping houses, slashing tires, egging cars, and shoplifting whatever we could safely get away with.

I guess, for us, it was that we never had a chance to belong to anything. Not hippies or punks or any of that. There was no movement for us, and in the temporal vacuum before Hot Topic packaged, shipped, and sold teenage identity in malls, we clumsily created our own. Our revolution took place in movie theater parking lots and behind dumpsters at youth group meetings. It was characterized by baggy, ripped up pants, “punk rock” sneers, and the ever-present cigarette dangling off our lips.

Absurd? Yes, slightly. But for me this benign, PG-13 criminality was the only escape from the nerdity that plagued my pre-

pubescence. The “cool kids” wallpapered their rooms with Sports Illustrated models, Lamborghini Diablos, and posters of the latest Schwarzenegger film. My room: a poster of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue and one of the sun setting over Stone Henge, a magazine-cutout-collage of Carl Sagan, and a wall-sized, full-color print of the Orion Nebula. My friends were running from themselves in much the same way. Our parents were all lower- to upper-middle class. No one came from an abusive home. We were happy boys and good students, despite lapsing occasionally into fits of canned teen angst.

But Cody was different. For starters he came from money—lots of money—and old money, going back generations. His father sent a different car to pick him up after school: Jaguar Monday, Ashton Martin Tuesday, Rolls Royce Wednesday, and so on. And he was bad too. We were *bad boys*, but Cody was a *bad guy*, and left to his own devices he would grow up to become a *bad man*. I think everyone knew this—even back then, when we were so self-absorbed that we knew little else.

He used to speak aloud to himself at full volume, unaware, or perhaps indifferent to everyone around him. When people talked to him he sometimes didn't respond at all—sometimes only stare, glassy-eyed as if he wasn't looking directly at you, but at some point just in front of you. In the same detached manner he would spontaneously

burst out laughing in class, on the soccer field, in the lunchroom. And it didn't end there. His handwriting looked like an excerpt from a ransom note—every letter a different size, and some traced over five or six times making them dark and depressing them into the following pages. Every morning he would scribble down lecture notes like the rest of us, only after a few minutes he froze and stared—not at his notes, or at the teacher, but through them, or at the æther around them. He bit his fingers neurotically, chewing and gnawing their tips and cuticles, until they were raw and bloody. Some were without nails as a result, and blood oozed through his bandages, leaving rusty smears on everything he touched.

He sat in my line of sight back then, blocking my view of the chalkboard, but I didn't mind. He was far more intriguing. Sometimes during his mini-trances teachers would have to call his name multiple times to elicit any response. When he startled back to reality it looked jerky and unnatural, like watching an exorcism. Afterwards he slouched the rest of the period, frail and spent and goosebumpy.

At first we thought he was (literally) retarded, and kept our distance, but somewhere in his second week at the school he joined the Scouts, and after a few retreats, stories started circulating about him. Two from my clique, Sam and a kid we called Chowder, were Scouts as well, and they invited Cody to sit with us at lunch. On his

first day at the table he made Chowder laugh hard enough to shoot a mouthful of milk out of his nose. After that he was a regular, and our six became seven.

While his tales of youthful criminality were impressive, his greatest contribution to the lunch hour was the introduction of sex, something we knew nothing about. He talked about all the girls he had fucked at his old schools, all the ones he intended to fuck at ours, and how he would do it—sparing no detail and missing no opportunity to say the word itself, *fuck*. While we had all thought about sex (constantly as a matter of fact), and sneaked peaks at our father's or older brother's dirty magazines, sex was something we thought two people did facing one another, usually in the dark, and never talked about. Cody exploded this notion, going on about an entirely different kind of intercourse, one that conflated our ideas of sex and violence. He spoke of seething orgies involving dozens of people, putting objects in holes we didn't even know existed. In Cody's fantasies there were animals, whips, gags, razors, dildos, all among sweaty, writhing (often bloody) naked bodies. "This is the shit," he told us, "that your parents are doing while you sleep." And, of course, we believed every word.

In a month's time he went from the new kid at the table to our *de facto* leader. By the time he pissed on Sister Therese's desk we were putty in his bloody hands. We kicked in lockers together and

blew snot rockets all over the walls of the boy's locker room. Cody was convinced that it was possible to spy on the girls changing, and we helped him smash a hole in the ceiling. When his plan failed he got angry and kicked a sink off of the wall. The principle, a balding, moustached man (with an obvious mid-life crisis) who liked to be called "Mr. D" took notice, and started having daily conferences with Cody, usually during lunch. One day, just before midterms, Mr. D took me aside after school. He tried for a while to seem nonchalant, but the approach was badly veiled and he quickly abandoned it. He told me I was a good kid running with a bad crowd and that I needed to start thinking about my permanent record. Neither of us said Cody's name, but we both knew the meaning of "bad crowd."

I met the boys behind the gym later that day. I told them what Mr. D said and we shared a laugh. Sam asked what I thought about Cody and I told him that I liked him. Then he told me something, under his breath, in a volume the others couldn't hear.

"He jerks off," Sam said.

"What?" I wasn't sure I had heard him right.

"Cody man. He jerks off. We caught him, Me and Chowder, in a tent at Scouts. He laughed and told us to get lost. He didn't even stop or anything. Then next time we saw him he acted like nothing happened." I didn't know what to say, so I kept quiet. Sam continued. "I think it's gross when people do that," Sam said. "Makes

me fuckin' sick. I never jerk off. I never even tried it. And I never will."

"Yeah," I said, pausing a moment to muster all the seriousness I could. "Yeah, me neither."

"I don't like him at all," Sam said. "I haven't for a while. He's a fuckin' bastard, man."

Sam was right. Cody Roberts was a bastard in every sense of the word. His father never married his mother.

His mother left shortly after he was born. He never knew her.

She left again when he was seven, moving away and never calling or writing.

She died when he was five-years-old.

He even once had the balls to tell us that she died before he was born, and it (shamefully) took us far too long to sort out the chicken / egg paradox.

Of course, none of this was true, but that didn't really bother us. Thirteen-year-old boys don't care about anything that doesn't directly concern them. Whether we wanted to know or not, however, we all found out the truth about Cody and his family several years later—the day it was printed in the A-Section of the newspaper—on Halloween, 1996.

Time went by and we all went to different high schools. Our interests diverged, and so did we. Days of not talking turned into months, turned into years. None of the seven of us kept in touch anymore, and if I was any indication, we rarely thought about one another either.

My father tore the article out of the newspaper that morning and left it by my house keys, where I would be sure to find it. I read it over and over, hoping each time that the letters would rearrange to tell a different story. It wasn't sadness I felt but something I haven't a word for—a combination of shock and profound emptiness. I mouthed the words *Oh my God* over and over. I found myself mouthing them voicelessly as I walked through the hallways at school later that day, as I changed for gym, as I put books in my locker. *Oh my God. Oh my God.* The words came every time I visualized the article, with the news-washed mugshot of Mr. Roberts, Cody's father, and the headline above it in bold type: **SEXUAL ASSAULTS ON BOYS ALLEGED: PORNO RING OPERATED FOR YEARS, POLICE SAY.**

That night phones rang non-stop. Details had emerged in both the morning paper and the evening news and a few points were clear. Cody's father sent a videotape to a man in Alabama, a video of him and a preteen boy. There were apparently many more. "Roberts kept photos and videos of his encounters," the news reporter informed us. Police used the photos to find victims at local elementary and middle

schools. By the end of the week ten boys had come forward. The news implied that there were hundreds more, but couldn't give an exact number. At first, Mr. Robert's lawyer denied the allegations, but the sheer volume of the evidence—some 27,000 photos and videos confiscated from his Tanglewood mansion and three other homes—told a very different story. Many of the photos, a number of which had been circulating for years, were of Mr. Roberts himself, having sex with children. Sometimes his own.

The initial burst of phone calls raised more questions than answers. Sam, in tears, wondered why no one told. Some (like my friend Will) said Cody was a “faggot” who should go to jail with his faggot father. Some (like my friend Chowder) were victims themselves, soon to be identified by police. The final article written about the case, titled CONVICTED CHILD MOLESTER, PORNOGRAPHER, GETS 20-YEAR SENTENCE, was printed following Mr. Roberts' sentencing. It painted an even more deranged picture:

Roberts would take his sons and their friends to a La ports bay house on Cresecent View Drive. Once alone with a boy, he would tell a tale about a man, named Bayman, who fell into the bay while boating with his family. He told the boys the man was decapitated by another boat, by but his headless body still swam in search of his family. Roberts said the body is still looking for his son and would kill anyone who stood in the way. However, Roberts told them that if they would strip naked they would be safe. That is how he talked them

into disrobing. "He would get his sexual jollies by doing the undressing,"
Assistant District Attorney Denise Oswald said.

With good behavior, and I expect nothing less from such a gentleman, Mr. Roberts will be released in the early months of 2009—his “debt to society” paid in full.

*

I put the newspaper clipping in a drawer in our utility room that day. I folded it in half and then in half again. Then I moved on. For all I know it's still there, yellowing away among the hammers and the flashlights.

Days turned into months, turned into year. Again. This time ten years, and now I am at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City, expectedly delayed and thumbing through a magazine when I come across a piece of a poem:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

For the first time in years I thought of Cody (with whom Mr. Wordsworth, the poem's author, was likely unacquainted). On the

plane back to Texas I asked myself why those few lines had such a profound effect on me. At first I had a comfortably superficial interpretation: Cody was “the meanest flower” that Wordsworth was talking about, and whatever lingering emotional issues might be left over from a childhood spent in that hell of his, were the thoughts that lied “too deep for tears.” That’s fine, and it makes sense on some level. But it wasn’t the real answer. That isn’t why the poem jumped out at me. After a few days I started to see it differently. Perhaps *I* was “the meanest flower” and *my* thoughts were the tearless ones. Indeed, I have often been conflicted over my own, emotionless reaction to Cody’s tragedy. I have never been one to lack empathy, but when I think of Cody, I don’t feel any kind of pain. I feel nothing at all.

I attempt to explain it like this:

Imagine you witness a head-on-collision. You know you should call for help, you know you should render aid, but you don’t. You can’t. You sit frozen, impaled by the shock, arrested by your own biology. Well, with Cody, the freeze never left. I can see myself still, staring at the newspaper, mouthing *Oh my God* and I realize that I never really left the kitchen that day. I moved on, and carried it with me.

We all *say* that we know that terrible things happen to innocent people, but do we really? I don’t think we do. I think in order to live out our normal lives we have to tell ourselves otherwise. Bad things

don't happen to good people. Ever. They can't. And so, I think about these things. And then I don't. I move on—not because I want to—but because I have to. With my own well being in mind, I woefully fold my friend Cody in half, and in half again, and leave him to yellow away in the drawer with the hammers and the flashlights.

VITA

Franklin Anthony Morris was born in Corpus Christi, TX on January 20, 1981, the son of Bert Morris and Christine Morris. He spent his childhood in Zaire, Nigeria, and England before moving back to Texas. He holds an Associates of Applied Sciences Degree in Commercial Music Management from Austin Community College, and will be earning a Bachelor of Arts in English with a Creative Writing Emphasis and a minor in Philosophy from Texas State University-San Marcos in May 2009. He received The Gates-Thomas Award for his short story "Bleeding Paris", and has worked as the fiction editor of *Persona* and *The Rio Review*. While at Texas State he worked as a Supplemental Instructor in American History, was a member of the Sigma Tau Delta and Phi Alpha Theta Honor Societies, and was enrolled in the University Honors Program. Franklin Morris lives in Austin, TX, and has published articles in *Austin Sound*, *Austin Music Magazine*, *Study Breaks Magazine*, *Urban Pollution*, *Soundcheck Magazine*, *The Austin Independent*, *The Accent*, and *The University Star*.

Permanent Address: 3025B Guadalupe St.

Austin, Texas 78705