Doran Larson

SYZYGY
A Novella

syz y gy *n.* [LL. *syzygia* conjunction, fr. Gk, fr. *syzygos* yoked together, fr. *syn-* + *zygon* yoke] (ca. 1847): the nearly straight-line configuration of three celestial bodies (as the sun, moon, and earth during a solar or lunar eclipse) in a gravitational system.

—*Webster's Dictionary*

. . . the measure and the measured, being related, are mutually interchangeable.

—Copernicus

Overture
(twilight)

May 3, 1943

. . . and whether you will understand the story I have to tell, or I can understand myself, depends upon holding memory in one perspective, in the light I can wield across so long ago in my life, and across the change since then. To gain her help, to invite her into memory, I ask, "Mother, do you miss him?" And then, "Do you miss him bad?"

She closes her book over her thumb—"Bad*ly*"—a hand still resting on my hair. She asks, "Do you, Winthrop?"

So it is here I will try to put the pieces into alignment. Like drawing a map of the stars at one moment, in one place. Or stopping along a field of summer cotton—the wheeling rows suddenly fixed to one, from which all the others fan. And this is where I am:

I am lying beside her under the great tree, while she sits upright, as I gaze down my own foreshortened body, toward the hills that collar the valley of lush fields. In my frame of vision, facing sunset, I imagine her shoes and my own bare feet are pickets in an incomplete fence—encircling me and Mother, at the protected center of the green land, brown foothills, and the ragged hem of western peaks. (War on the other side, but that's not the worst.) And feeling this safety, I point away from us, and from her question: I say, "Look," wheeling a finger across the horsetail clouds, burnishing copper sunlight to pewter, grading back into cold cold blue. "The colors change."

She says, "We'd better get some supper started."

Sweeping the spectrum from burning hilltops, my arm comes to rest across Mother's lap. I turn to gaze over her legs—above her hand on the book, toward barn and tree and clapboard house, where stars will prick the tarp of night upon the east.

But what is there to offer a barricade? Where is the safe frontier in that direction?

She cannot see it. She is not looking that way. I am looking that way, and I cannot see it. I cannot see the bordering mountains, or the carpeted moat of green fields, or my own small body.

"What is it, Winthrop?"

I say, "I like the night when it's here. It was good when I used the drainpipe for a telescope. And I have my real one now."

"But in between?"

I hold firm to Mother's hips. She is narrow, and yet she is strong. She is strong, because she is Mother. I say, "Everything's moving. Everything goes by. . . . You can't make a sunset last, you have to wait another day and then it's different. It's not the one you remember, the one you wanted to hold on to. Even us sitting here. Sometimes you read and sometimes you sew. So even what we do most nights isn't really the same. And later we might not do this at all. Not even this. Things change in the day and night too—the sun and moon and stars move. But you can't really tell unless you pay attention, until you look very close, unless you're very very still. But now the change is all over us."

She says, "In between."

"Yes. The sky not even one whole color."

She tucks the hair behind my ear. She says, "Are you so afraid of things changing, Winthrop?"

And I say, "I guess so."

She teepees her book on the grass. "But just think. You like school. College will be a bigger change than you can imagine but you'll be happy there. People your age won't laugh at the things you say. They'll listen. They'll know how smart you are."

"I don't want to be that smart, Mama."

Yet I am happy she laughs. "Good gracious," touching my arm, "You *are* feeling blue."

"Really," I say, though it's a lie. I'm glad I'm smart. It's a private place you carry with you.

"So what do you say if we make—"

"*Do* you miss him, Mama. Do you?"

She narrows her eyes toward the west. And I cannot make myself say it: I am not hoping to hear she loved my father. Not hoping for a testimony of love. My face still resting in her lap, under her hand, I watch Aunt June set a basket of laundry beneath the clotheslines, between the house and barn. She is thin and strong like Mother, though she loves Father in a way Mother does not.

But June loves me like Mother loves me. June helps me and Mother helps me, to write and to read, and to master the stars with the math I know even better than they. Mother says writing is making your life last, it is making the world stop and listen. And reading is listening—like robins, June says, can hear the worms beneath the grass.

I want to be older. I want to be a man who can understand how men and women work, how their hearts work. I want to understand why June loves Father, but Mother married him. And June married Selby, who no one could love, people say, and loved no one but Mother. But I don't want things to change. I want always to be here, beside Mother; I want to look up into the fan of sunset, embraced by summerevening air. But I want to see Mother and June and myself, and the house and barn and the spreading fields of unripe cotton, and the past, and the present, from way up high. Then, an older boy, I could write the start like this:

His mother and father had not been happy, their unhappiness propelling his father across the yard, escaping murder, amid the slamming screen doors, the shouts through the dark as women scuffled onto the porch to see the body carried from the field. Then Father, Sam Himmel, was wheeling the pickup over the dust and onto the road.

From his perch in the barn loft, Winthrop Himmel was afraid and sad and excited. He watched the women weep over Selby, lying broken on the ground. He followed the taillights fading across the black-green fields, shrinking as they turned onto the highway, like embers flying into the night. Aunt June stood longest in the road. Her dress was rippling curtains under a quarter moon, becoming a window Father had fled through. Until she started screaming, and Mother tried to soothe her—rocking in an ugly parody of joy, while the siren stopped, and thin Rory Kreig, ashamed at his duty, began to ask questions.

And in unyielding relief from the horror of that night, at the base of the shading oak, as Mother resumes her reading—he cannot imagine being happier. The future is as frightening as the near past, bounding this moment of stillness like a sand spit. And time past and oncoming dissolve their place to an island, to the shrinking patch of Now bordered by his own bare feet. For once the war is over, there will again be men in the town. And the stories that flow over empty store shelves, welling up in laughter beneath the close valley nights among girls and women, these will dry, shrinking back to afternoon coffees and quilting bees, to whispers over kitchen sinks.

Perhaps, like others who had only gone to war, Sam Himmel will in fact return, to face his wife, and widow, and questioning boy.

And the view as he looks up now, the arrow of Mother's chin cutting through the currents of blowing leaves, this evening will retreat into nights

in his dark room. His ear to the floor, tracking the thrum of her sewing machine, his father shifting logs with a poker, or their voices jabbing cruelly in one room . . . fighting sleep until he can whisper, "Mama," as her shadow crosses the landing.

Then her outline will enter his room like an embodied secret. And sitting on his bed, trimmed in moonlight, she will stroke his brow. She will paint again in color her young girl's body in a late fall afternoon, climbing the eucalyptus that bows over the reservoir, because her Uncle Arne had challenged her. And June trembling when she, the dauntless Elizabeth Winthrop, leapt into the water from above daring's reach. Or the time she'd held her breath longer than Gus Noonan (who fell unconscious), and broke Jim Bullock's nose because he said June was dumb—despite the talk of the girls, and the talk of the women, who never said scandal, and eye to eye with Elizabeth Winthrop, always offered cool respect.

But best of all, she would tilt the shade on his bedside lamp, and her hands would become the shadowed eucalyptus—her fingers like sabred leaves—or her giant profile becoming Jim Bullock's, and Winthrop's silhouette first caressing her nose, her cheek, veiling their faces inside the hair he'd unlock from its intricate braid.

And while each tale pitted her and June against a host of boys, and though she tickled his ribs and pulled the ears of the bad sex he'd been born into, he had always felt part of her conspiracy, her courage simply the engine for their joy.

Then the heavy tread, and the name never allowed on his own lips—"Elizabeth"—finding her behind the door. Then she would kiss him one last time, and linger in the darkness before she went to the bathroom, and water ran, and their door pulled shut.

Mother continues reading, tilting her book across my back to catch the waning light. I lift my hand. My arm's shadow, across grass, is twenty feet long, waving like a spindly eucalyptus in a strong wind. June shades her eyes to see us, and I wave with my giant fingers, and she smiles. Then she leans again to the basket. And as she straightens, her shoulders cross the yard, rising to the top of the barn door, rising above my hand outstretched on the grass.

But farther east, at this hour, there are not even shadows. There is only the stageset for memory; of Father running through darkness from behind the barn. And the line of that panicked flight—that zigzag like a weathered rail

fence—is the frontier of something horrid: about being a man, about never knowing until too late that men are fools, learning truth only after ignorance brings the world to a crash.

I am the son of the murderer. And of the murdered.

And how then will I protect Mother? In her pale blue housedress, sunlight shaping her profile like hands sculpting clay, eyes hard and bright . . . how will I protect, if it is dangerous in a twelve-year-old boy, protect her from my memory?

> *He is unlike other boys, those sentries and swaggering heroes, untouched by cold and heat and violence, slaughtering Japs hidden in hedgerows, and krautish field mice, and disdainful of the weakness they sense in Winthrop Himmel. For him those crusades are seductive only as respite from ridicule—parading the body's armor—while the rhythm of his heart was in marshalling the ugly shapes that dwelt in memory, gathered up in the years before Father had fled.*
>
> *And he feels this malevolence, the mauling of the soul by recollection, because he has read in all of her gestures in these last two years, in her conversations with himself and June, he has sensed her joy that days are passing, each hour the clack of a train moving farther from the past. Or is her ease only the echo of his own relief?*

So I asked the question—certain I will not love her less, not Mother, to discover she misses her husband.

I pull up a tuft of summer grass, to fill my long silence. I say to her, I say, "I don't miss the hitting." And because I cannot yet ask the question I shamed myself once by asking badly, a question I cannot yet form for myself, I offer the distracting jewel I've been shaping for a week. "Mother," I say. "Mother, I was thinking."

"Oh goodness" (her laughing smile) "what now, Copernicus Smith."

I breathe deep. I feel my lungs, I feel the weight and depth of my own body, my cheek nestled in thin blue cotton over her waist, collecting the words I have practiced. "You remember I read how a lunar eclipse, it looks the same everywhere—wherever the moon is in the sky. But a solar eclipse is different from different places. I was thinking, if there's an eclipse you can see from Russia, it won't matter to the dead people and I read seven thousand Germans got killed there in a town called No-vo-ros-sisk. And Japanese sol-

diers got killed in Burma. But no one in Burma would know about it, about the eclipse, even if they're alive. So in Russia it doesn't matter if you're a dead Russian or a dead German, and in Burma it doesn't matter if you're a live Japanese or a live Burma person as far as the eclipse goes."

She smiles. She smiles since they've become old jokes, the riddles I draw from gazing at the sky. "And," she asks, "does that tell you something about Burmese and Russians, or about death and living, or about the eclipse?"

After a moment of confusion, I turn and see her face sympathetic, and amused. I am touched by Mother's face, yet there is something troubling, so I ask, "Can't it be all of them?"

She asks, "Or maybe you just can't choose?"

I laugh. I do laugh, because I do not know, any more than I can understand the question I can't yet formulate.

But there is also something wrong, a shadow she cannot see into: I do believe it is all three, joining Russians and death and the shadow of the earth, if only in my own mind, in the very act of hypothesis. Yet our laughter is over that too, the ease of knowing differences exist between us, and that fine things hover—with patience, and grandeur—beyond the thin light of speech.

Then there is silence, and I finally ask again, the broken grass blades raining onto her dress. "Do you miss him?"

She leans down. Kisses my nose. My cheek.

"I have you, don't I?"

Yet there is something in her voice, and my own uncertain thoughts, as though this too is a real question.

> *And because he still masquerades in the body of a child, he will lie into the night, unconscious of the curtains lifted and dropped against the sill, drawing constellations in a notebook until sleep grounds his body. Yet he will continue his map, charting images gathered from the whispers of women, through nearly closed doors, from the giggling of children attentive to adults on sweltering porch chairs. And through the kaleidoscope of senses barely under his command, shifting pieces of talk, and rumor, and implication, his memory will sputter like a broken film strip, of a Fourth of July reunion, in 1941.*

1
(evening)

July 4, 1941

He has kneeled at his grandmother's narrow bed, searching the shadows in her photo album, holding images close through curled fingers, the way he'd used a drainpipe to pick out stars. He has seen his grandfather redressed in a young man's brow and torso, and babies he knows are June and Mother, laughing, under each strong arm. There is June at Mother's side (in sundresses, barefoot) only a year her junior, her posture bent toward Mother's smiling light. And here is June and Selby, in wedding clothes, staring blindly toward the camera. A year later, Mother's face is blurred, turning with the force of a shout from the picture frame. Her arm cast back, she leaves the trace of a ribbed wing, flying from Father standing cock-hipped, with himself, Winthrop Himmel, riding snug on one bent arm. Then Selby and Father wrestling—in the fields, in the dirt road—tangled tight as a knot cinched by strong hands.

June calls from other pictures, "You will break your necks," beside her sister, in housedresses and aprons, the profiles stenciled upon the flat-combed field.

On that Fourth of July he was up with the gray light. Cleaning pigpens in the cool and quiet, every motion a hurried secret against the rising heat. Father's eyes were stones pushed into weathered clay. His shoulders swung from the center of a tendoned body, dumping buckets of feed, forking hay and carrying bales . . . every motion efficient, and resentful, under some wordless curse. He could be kind. He could take pleasure in his wife and son and a clear night. But in the morning, again unpardoned, the sweep of spite was doubled, its gravity pulling in mother and child and the ungenerous earth.

By two o'clock the day was throbbing with heat. Cicadas whirred like impending brushfire. There were pickups huddled under the trees, arrived in time to hear the President. His cousins played tag in the yard, disrupting chairs and tables and scolded by mothers bearing bread and pies. James Bullock sat on the back porch rail. He was quoting Wendell Willkie from the paper: his sleeves rolled, his hands stained gray from working in the new oil fields, his nose still crooked where Mother had hit him eighteen years before.

But I, Winthrop Himmel, I was wrestling on the grass with Joe Noonan, my second cousin, and the President's radioed words through the window—

". . . deep conviction that we pledge as well our work, our will, and, if it be necessary, our lives"—these words were broken up between my own straining and Joe's disdainful grunts. Joe was bigger and stronger and we were just showing off for Mary Beider who was busy ignoring us both, *". . . a new resistance, in the form of several new practices of tyranny . . ."* covering the tables with crisp white cloths.

And so it all seemed play, like the war that was only pictures in the papers and newsreels (men marching up hill, men marching down; Hitler and Churchill exciting crowds from balconies), until Joe gripped my neck so hard the bones popped: "I could kill you," and the breath in my ear, like a touch that's dirty and private. I panicked before a vision of Mother's face, ruined with grief and guilt that her own triumphant stories had tricked me into a lethal fight.

In a burst of strength I broke away and stumbled to my feet. I ran from the shade, across the burning grass into the cotton rows; I ran, watching my own bare feet and denimmed shins kicking through waist-high green, my hands stripping the delicate blossoms, tasting blood where I'd chomped the lump in my cheek. I ran and I ran, breath and pulse thundering, across the rows, then along them, the sun in my eyes until my exhausted body pulled my will to a halt.

I was wheezing, looking back across the flat-ribbed green. Women in triangular dresses walked beneath the trees, then returned to the yellow house. Like caterpillars in clothes, my cousins skinnied along branches, weaving red and white and blue streamers into the leaves, above the folding chairs arranged in a loose circle. And as my breath slowed, as I looked up into the blankblue heavens, and down at the house and barn at the center of the shallow funnel of fields, then at the outline of the hills behind me, my heart settled. I felt at home, placing house and family under the broad sky, locating one beneath the other. And the horror that sent me running from the yard, of Mother's grief that she had taught me wrong—this vanished; for I'd found again what I believed was my peculiar gift, nurtured by Mother: to see the coming and going of people from the outside, under the humbling enormity of sky. And this was a skill I had taken from Mother, who alone, from inside such pictures, could place people's smallness within the sweep of time. So that my ability, from the outside, was only hers, from the inside, and made in turn into something else—something my own, and hers at the same time. Myself, and her at the same time. So that we stood there, observing, together.

I walked slowly back, dawdling to unfold yellow petals in my hand, watch-

ing barn and house, yard and trees and cousins growing big enough to surround me. I watched the sun scrape shadows across the grass, doubling noses and lips, etching each feature beside itself, making each face a kiltered sundial; and I sat at the base of the oak as the circle of chairs filled up with young men hunkered elbows-on-knees, the older men lounging, the women worrying the tables, back and forth between grass and kitchen, yet laughing, whispering, talking through the window to women at the sink. And I watched the men in the circle, telling about men hurt running gins and tractors or bursting oil pumps, and again the war, arguing—like the papers—over whether or not to join. I watched them, and I listened, and the women moving back and forth. I watched Father and Selby avoiding each other's eyes from opposite sides of the circle; occasionally finding me for a nod or smile. I smiled back, though I could not smile at one while the other watched—as though through me they would be looking at one another. And in that ricochet, it was they who held the men together, after Uncle Arne (the children laughed) hugged his own fat arms, and swayed, describing the battle in store. For after the meal, once the women had retreated to coffee and pie inside the lighted house, the children playing Marco Polo, Selby and Father's eyes would meet directly, one first long moment, before they lunged across the circle. Then the bottles would appear beneath the night, and I could cup my hands around one eye, watching Cassiopeia above the northern horizon, and Scorpius, and the Big Dipper, shards of million-mile light caught in glass and liquor and steaming brows.

So it is not until now—since the war has swept away the young men, those men still so grave with work, and cynical with sex, that boys are obliged to fall into their orbits—it is only now that Winthrop Himmel has been free to listen to the talk of women, to Aunt June (balling yarn off his hands, turning blue oblong into blue sphere) recalling with Nellie Leininger how Rory Kreig fell for Loraine Moraine's lisping cousin Harriet, who was visiting from Reno. And Beth Sommers' confession to Mother (seeking advice to handle him), how wild Shannon Cude showed up at a sunrise service, so clean and handsome in his Marine Corps uniform that she had the temporary madness to marry him. And from more than one mouth (in the shapes of spite, or amusement, or admiration), how Sam Himmel and Selby Anderson fell in love with Elizabeth Winthrop, who would favor neither. And how those boys—strong, hopeful though it was 1930—accepted equal shares in her indifference, bring-

ing Elizabeth, and her sister, to the Thanksgiving Dance.

They say how good June was. How kind, and patient, and thoughtful (. . . whispering of Mother's pride, never wondering, could June be good without her sister's shelter).

And it was from these summer evenings, as Winthrop Himmel watched Father and Selby's sweating shoulders as they grappled to earth, after hearing how the men who watched had become joined to the women inside that he struck on his fascination with stars and planets. To discover if the bodies of men, and the bodies of men and women were drawn to each other by laws as in the sky.

In books and in school, he had heard the myths explaining the placement of the stars. But he'd never believed them. He had even spoken up in the green-painted room, while children sighed, or giggled—"We shouldn't make stories up about the stars"—trembling visibly, his bladder aching with shock at the presence of his own voice, while Mrs. Roberts' smile offered guarded encouragement, "they don't kill each other, or act mean, or get jealous," his voice near collapsing, "they're different than us—better"—as he sat back down.

Instead he used the sky to explain what he saw on earth. For mapping planets was clean, like strokes of ink on white paper, and extended its precision to blood and love and habit rather than tainting the thoughtless stars with the ugly longings of men. And there was this: by believing he could understand emotion in the net of hurtling planets, his own pain was abstracted. Like the day Father broke the skin inside his cheek for the first time. Even now he can recall running bloodied from the barn up to his room; can remember dripping red onto the fresh page, tracing the orbit of Io around Jupiter. The scarlet burst seeping into paper, like a red sun cast from inner cheek into the dance of moon and planet. Then—his heart slowing—writing names, and attaching each to each as though these orbits too could be charted: setting Selby, Father, and June, on an elliptical path, around Mother.

And the pieces of this story—how Mother married Father, and Selby married June—refracted again through a dozen mouths, entering his child's mind—these were an incomplete puzzle, depicting a shifting landscape. Or like the afternoon he was playing with Luis Garza and they broke two jars of summer tea. Identical in shape but different sizes, glass and brown water shattered on the porch. And when he tried to determine the shards that would make a

whole jar, he found it impossible to guess which had borne a broad, and which a tighter curve—that pelt of mirrors reflecting a thousand suns, a million blossoms from the trellis, a thousand versions of Mother and Selby coming up the steps, Mother grabbing Selby's hundreds of arms in her two hundred while ten-thousand tendrils of her hair snaked loose among shrunken reproductions of himself, and Luis, gawking.

Granpa Winthrop says, "You could watch those boys slung across the steps, Elizabeth and June in the swing-chair, like something out of a magazine" (whispering on the porch) "and never tell which was the boy she loved, and which she ignored."

Mother allowed the boys to glow together in her presence (Lupe Noonan said), so that June could bask in the proximity of Sam Himmel, whom everyone knew she loved. But whether this was Mother's benevolence toward her sister, or resistance toward the boys, no one could determine—nor dwell on it long before the talk returned to the night around whose shifting center all the tales of that generation seemed to turn in argument, as though to explain the veering of planets across the sky.

Everyone agreed, Elizabeth Winthrop came to Father's house in the night. Some said, "She was running hard." "No, no—she walked steady, I heard it straight from . . ." "She knocked gentle and—" "—screamed at that door like a wounded cat."

In the versions of her screaming, Granpa Himmel found her, her arms wrapped around herself, twisting her body like a mad child. Or Father came down alone, without waking another body, and she was deathly calm. Then she led him through the rain, under cover of the oak where Winthrop lies beside her, bearing her name, who demanded that Father marry her, or agreed to his request, below these branches, and a two-year-old memory—of boys hanging by their knees, their arms dangling brown as sun-parched fruit—Matt Leininger and Neil Blair and Teddy Bullock—who would shortly die in Alsace and Guam and a jeep accident in Georgia.

Grandfather's sister Alice claims she saw them from her upstairs room. She whispered over the cakes and coffee following Teddy's funeral—"The wind caught Elizabeth's hair, whipping the strands around Sam's chin he held her so close. Like Vivian, and Clark Gable." Then Alice stopped, savoring her coffee, beside the faded lamp, prolonging the only anticipation she would evoke in her maiden life. "I don't know what they said except it was their

hearts talking, you could see that." Then, what he could never believe: "She was desperate. Elizabeth Winthrop. Desperate and scared." (The women were silent. Mary Bullock wept in an upstairs room.) "But say what you will about Elizabeth—and I'm not the only one here that's said a little" (the women straightened, but cowled their eyes) "it *was* Sam she'd loved all along." (Her audience nodded quickly; Alice smoothed her sleeve.) "It'd be indecent even to *doubt* about that."

("She'd woken from a dead sleep, and marched straight over to Sam's house" "I saw him coming in late, not long before she's supposed to showed at the Himmels" "Cut across my field, that guilty lope like all those Andersons" "Stuff and hogwash. She liked Sam" "She liked no one. And gave it up willingly to no soul on earth")

The echo of these contending voices, their motion, makes a sickness through my gut. I open my eyes, to the shadowless grass, feeling myself fall with fear and thanks from memory into my own small body as June pins sheets to the line, the white erasing the well pump, and pieces of the fields Father and Selby worked together (until the wrestling began, and Selby went to the oil wells), the fields Bill Leininger leases, and harries with his daughter Selma and a Mexican boy. And I wonder: If she was wild that night, do I sense it in her rough skin, however tenderly touching mine; and if she was calm, and loved Father, does she feel that I, lying beside her, am only a shadow of the man?

"I know something you like," Mother tells me, laying her book in the grass. "And it never changes. You like corn fritters. How does that sound?"

The sun has fallen from sight, though the sky in the west remains a blaze of pearl.

"We have more ripe tomatoes in the garden. I could cut them up for salad the way you showed me."

"All right. Aunt June'll make the fritters. You like the way she does."

I hesitate, because Mother is strong, because Mother is always kind to me. But for June's sake, I must say it. And Mother cannot stand resistance, after standing nothing else for thirteen years; yet I say it, I say, "If she wants to."

Then her questioning look, and her hand that has been moving, slowly stroking my back, stops still.

I have heard it said before, between other women, in other words, what Harriet Kreig said to Margaret Johnson in the parking lot at church, she said it was a crime, how June was bullied by Mother, after Mother had ". . . ru-

ined June's whole life by marrying Sam."

And then I tell her quickly—as though I'd echoed Harriet—in one breath, "If people could understand they wouldn't need to gossip."

A forced smile returns, against the talk, against the town I too am a part of. Yet her look warms its hold upon me, thankful this moment is between us. "Yes. That's just it. That's exactly right."

Alice says, "June's not my niece by blood but I'd be proud to claim her. Her sister married to the man she loved, right there in the same house, and not a hint of resentment."

Then Selby had his wild tear. He drank. He drove his father's pickup into the river. He started fights. He cussed Sam Himmel outside the cafe, and never turned another hand to cotton or alfalfa to earn his living. Then he showed up at the Winthrop house on his sister's bicycle. He wore his father's best suit (the extra waist pinned up like a hunchback), bearing a ring, and the golden poppies he'd picked from beside the road, to ask June to marry him.

(The story was in town before he rode back home. Women laughed, and men were puzzled, and everyone felt sick on hearing she'd said yes.)

At their engagement dinner, Father tapped Selby's shoulder, or Selby tapped Father's. And armed in the bodies of men just twenty, the wrestling started, and continued even after Granma Winthrop threatened Granpa with a lawyer-nephew, giving June the acreage across the road from her sister—giving June's good heart to Mother, and Mother's protection to her baby girl—where Selby built a house everyone said was too small for children.

The evening of the day the wrestling stopped, I was in the barn with Joe, sitting on the rail above the pigpen. The men were outside the back door, burning oak and manzanita. Daylight came through the walls in stripes while doves fluttered above the loft. Joe was jabbing at the pig with a hoe. I could not object because Joe would whip me. The previous summer Mother and I had named the pig Squint. I wanted to look through my star books, and sit beneath my telescope once the night came down.

I narrowed my eyes to imagine the holes in the roof were distant planets, looking at Mars and Venus, despite the pig's cries. Then the men came in, led by Father. They gathered around the pen. Father rested his hand on my back, watching Joe try to ride the pig. And I was glad, feeling claimed by Father.

Joe's father was a thin man, his face a mask chipped from old wood. He said to Uncle Arne, "A lot of folks in this county aren't two generations out of Germany. What's our cut defending a bunch of Frogs and Pollacks."

"Three million a month," Bob Suthen said, leaning on the pen's gate. "Uncle Sam pays that now for produce to feed the army. War'd be a boom for everybody." He nodded at Selby and Gus Noonan and James Bullock. "Oil'd go sky high."

"The English too," I started. It was scary, being a boy, talking up to grown men (even echoing what Father had said to George Stakes at a foreclosure auction). But it felt good to be heard by men, with Father behind me; it eased the sense that I was not inside my own body, that among men I merely watched from wherever my body happened to be. Father nodded approval, then glanced at Selby, who would not take his eyes from Joe. I said, "We fought them twice to get our country."

Squint tore loose from Joe's grip—"Goddamn Churchill anyway."

Gus Noonan said, "Watch your language, boy," but Joe just kicked at Squint. The men leaned on their arms, amused at Joe's daring. He started like he was climbing out, then turned and leapt. The pig bolted. Joe hit the dirt but he'd grabbed one hoof. Running on three legs and kicking like a jackhammer, Squint dragged him around the pen. Everyone laughed. Then Joe jumped up swearing. His father slung him by the straps of his overalls and dragged him over the rail.

There was talk about how Gus beat his boy (a Mexican uncle had threatened to avenge his nephew), but out of respect for Gus' rights, and to save Joe humiliation, the men retreated to the fire. Father's strong hands lifted me to the ground and I joined the boys leading the way outside.

The sun had nearly set. The circle of men reformed around the pit, standing on the feet of their own long shadows. Selby lit a cigarette. Father shifted coals with a shovel. Selby was heavy in the arms and shoulders. His blunt nose centered a square face under brown-blonde hair. "Your boy doesn't like this war, Sam. He's got sense."

Yellow oak and red manzanita succumbed to smoke and glowing coals. Ash lay across the top like a dirty snow fall. The men watched Father. He continued moving the coals. "I never said it's a good deal all around. But Americans are fighting volunteer now and Hitler's about to get Moscow. They need help." I climbed atop the fence, where I could see through the two barn doors, over the shadow of the rising and falling hand, to where June was showing her summer flowers to Nellie Leininger. "What the hell you know about Hitler?" Selby said. "That country's back on its feet without any of Roosevelt's goddamn socialism. Hitler's better than Stalin—that's what

Lindbergh says—maybe better than a rich boy President encouraged the reds that ran labor wild up and down this valley for ten years."

Joe made no sound, though the blows echoed. Mother and my great-aunts were carrying plates out to the tables. I watched the train of dresses bleached by the last wedge of sunset. Then Uncle Arne, a round man with small round glasses, took out his watch. He said to Father and Selby, "A little early for the main event, isn't it boys?"

The others smirked; Bob Suthen laughed outright. Gus Noonan was walking toward the house. Joe started giving the pig hell, beating it with the hoe. Its blade rose into the square of light. Selby flicked his cigarette into the pit and turned toward the barn. The screen door slammed. Swooping out the loft door, the doves suddenly fled like a black breath, like charcoal flags cast up to the evening sky.

★

June comes to us from pinning sheets. Her shortened hair is trimmed in sunset, her narrow face clear. She stands, hands on hips, while Mother makes me repeat my conundrum about dead Germans. Then Mother tells her, "When I bought him that telescope, I thought I'd free his mind. And here he just wants to tie ours in a knot."

June cocks her head, smiling at me, "I think it's a nice riddle."

I want to ask if she feels bullied by Mother. I want to ask if she has ever wanted another life. I roll onto my back, watching the violet sky cool to shades of blue.

"Nice and nicer," Mother says to June, "can we do anything you won't love us for?"

June says to me, "I'm proud of you, Winthrop," not meeting Mother's look. "You'll make us all so proud. You just go on thinking and don't mind us."

"Who discouraged him?" Mother laughs, though a challenge edges her voice.

"You joke so, Elizabeth. I just want Winthrop—"

"Winthrop knows—"

And then an unexpected tone, like hands pressing me into a chair, June says to me, avoiding Mother's eye: "Your father's a smart man, Winthrop. Smarter than most people know."

I want to ask, I want to sit down with June alone and ask what he was like before that night, before they walked engaged from beneath this oak. Mother starts to speak, but stops, suppressing anger for my sake.

June looks toward the house. She turns back to us: "Winthrop should know what his father—"

"I think we can discuss this later, dear."

June rubs one hand with the other. "Your father was good in school, Winthrop."

"June."

But what has brought this out, at this moment?

"He had troubles, Elizabeth, you know—"

"Yes I know."

"You've always been unfair to him."

And still the fascination is not in what is said—though here is the mystery I have hoped to solve by a question—but in June's speaking boldly, to her sister, before me.

"Winthrop can't go on thinking that—"

"Oh good God. Good God, all right." Then Mother's hand comes away from my arm, pressing her temples, holding a dangerous pressure inside. "All right then." She looks hard at June—"All right"—then down at me, like a bolt of steel staking me to earth. "Your father—Sam—he wanted to be an engineer. He had the brains but Granpa Himmel wanted him for work."

"But it wouldn't have stopped him." June's hand rises to catch her thought, and offer it, her fingers opening, "except Granma Himmel got sick."

"And there was a Depression on. But that," Mother tells her, "was not Sam Himmel's private burden; nor was sickness, or an ignorant father. Then he married me; and yes, June, he had things to be angry about—don't we all—but I also know he had only us under his power to blame and punish and never hesitated to do both, any more than he ever stopped to think he might have borne some responsibility for the choices he made. And he did make choices."

June worries one hand in the other, "You never—"

"All the choices a man at least is given the freedom to make. And if I had it all to do again—" (but now June nods, sorry that she ever started). "If I had it to do over, and I could come back as a man with a sick mother and stupid father in a busted nation, I'd take that five times and worse, along with all its privileges, to being born a woman. My God, June." (I should not be here;

they should not be saying these things before me.) "I had to yowl and threaten even to keep our name for Winthrop. And then he killed your husband, and abandoned us, and still he's got you for an advocate. How much more freedom could a human being expect—where on earth's the end of his immunity?"

June's hands tremble so badly she balls them into fists. And I know though I am only twelve, Mother is partly wrong; June does not defend Father because he is a man, but because he is Sam Himmel, and she loved him.

June sits at my other side, her hand snugging my shoulder so close I can press one ear to her thigh, trying to sense her nervous hum—"Mairzy Doats"—echoed from the radio through flesh and bone. And in the terrible awkwardness of that cease fire, touched by Mother's hand on my brow, as my aunt's fingers rest on my arm, I try to feel that no one is missing—not Selby, not my father. That by sisterly love they conceived me, that in feeling their closeness I feel my whole, uncontested source.

We are quiet for a long time, our outlines becoming faded under the skirt of night, though I can see other words, other anger, shifting across Mother's face. Yet we say nothing, our breath slowing. We watch the sky, until Mother says, "Let's be extravagant."

Her voice is taut with self-command. She stretches her arms before her, smiling just enough to clear the anxious air. Finally, her eyes embrace her sister's. "We can't buy the shoes or meat we want, but the war effort won't be hopelessly compromised if we slaughter a chicken."

June says, happy, "If you'll kill it."

"Oh I know, dear." And then Mother's hand disappears from my brow. And I look up, seeing it bridge to June's shoulders, topping my vision of branches and leaves, holding her and me beneath the threshold of their forgiveness. "You can imagine it just got tired and threw its own head off."

Then Mother strokes June's cheek, and they laugh—tentative, thankful—and I close my eyes. But the moment the world is dark, memory ruptures, and I see Selby and me in the bed of the pickup, on a trip to Morro Bay in 1936. Climbing up through sandstone hills, rolling down to the sea yelling Row Your Boat into the hot wind; then Father cutting muscle-man figures on the sand while Selby threw stones across the shimmery surface, and Father leading me into the shallow waves, and the flat white skipping stones too close as Father clasped my five-year-old wrists, dunking me into gray water. Mother yelled from the beach. At each burst up I could see her waving, gasping as the

sky exploded again yet never catching a whole breath, and Mother's hand clocking sideways and back into blue and Father's booming laughter until I was swung around and around from his square hands, becoming flat as skin-white stone, gripping my arm and leg, a ring around his axis, making water churn as he turned, and then my body flung, weightless for two flat turns splatting hard into water so shallow my chin hit sand.

June, her ankles crossed on the quilt, reaching toward Selby. He was angry as he approached to pull me from the water. A Mexican family stopped to watch, cooking lunch over a driftwood fire. And then the moment their awkward laughter now has evoked from memory:

June came to the water's edge. Mother shrugged her away, her hem stuck wet to brown shins: "But he would! Don't you know that by now? Don't you know him? He would do it! No matter whose he is. Be*cause* of"—her voice broken and scraping, showing the despair she might have felt—"He would *kill* my boy!" and the memory of that driftwood smoke weaves a shadow of dread through my lungs bursting for breath, the power of Selby's grip hoisting me from smoke and sand and stinging water, into the smell of smoldering manzanita. I had fallen from the rail of the pen; Selby lifted me and scuffed my hair, pushing me back atop the pen where Joe was down again with the pig. Dickie Mueller, and Mary Beider who was thirteen—her dress printed with violets, the only color in the shadowy barn—sitting with me, Winthrop, on top of the rails.

"Mother."

She looks down, and at the contact of her eyes I sit up straight, turning my back to the west. I speak before I know what to say, in an effort to tether this moment to the past, to open the past between us. And I want to say to her: I am thinking of that time. And what is inside me, what I am afraid of—she can have that too, she can know what I am thinking.

"That day," I tell her, and they are listening, and worried, for me. "Joe had a pocket knife—showing off how he would cut Squint's throat."

June worries a fold in her dress. But Mother nods, ignoring the thinnest veil of confusion, "Yes, Winthrop," and she holds my hand. "It's all right."

I tell her, "Joe's father had beat him. I wanted to go inside. I fell and Uncle Selby set me back up; I think Joe still wanted to cry like me but he wouldn't." I felt sickened by the knife's glint, and a gash on my elbow, and turned toward the men, squatting on their heels in the corner. But my unease then—what I want to say, what I am describing only on the outside—

"You were frightened," Mother says, to help me. "About killing—"

"He was trying to be grown up. Joe was. He was scaring Dickie Mueller. And the men in the barn they didn't hear. Or they only looked. They were squatting on their heels the way men do and barely looked from under their hats. They were passing a bottle. They were arguing about the war again and Bob Suthen, he was collecting bets. . . . He was taking money. . . ."

"On Selby or Father."

"Oh stop," June pleads. "The two of you, for goodnessake." Mother touches June's shoulder again, as June's eyes are in mine, asking me, yet ashamed because she cares for me and knows I need to speak. "Why do we have to talk about it? You're such a good boy, Winthrop. We're happy so often except for the terrible war."

"You wanted to talk about Sam," Mother tells her. "We knew him too. It can't be just what you feel."

"But haven't we suffered enough?" And then to me, "Haven't we?"

Then June turns her face away, toward the barn, where Father did what sent him from her life. I look to Mother for help. But she is watching June's face: holding it like a glass bowl, turning it between her eyes to detect a dangerous crack. She seems to see it. Sees her sister must be placed back gently on the shelf. She says to me, "You tell me later, Winthrop," while her other hand holds my elbow, linking us three together and gently pulling until I cast again one arm across her lap. "There are years yet, Winthrop. There are years" (she knows he is not returning) "years and years and years."

Yet he cannot stop hearing the pig cry, and the men complaining about the Mexicans, and the Okies who'd settled. Through the front barn door, through the kitchen window he could see Granma Winthrop with three other women. Beneath the oak tree, the edges of the tablecloths thatted in the breeze. Granpa Winthrop sharpened a knife outside the barn's back door, peddling orange sparks onto the dirt.

What he'd wanted to explain to Mother was this: as he turned from his perch to gaze at the women inside the house; the children among whom his years stranded him; the men on their heels and near the coal pit—there was a stillness on everything. The pig's grunts, the rasping grindstone, the curses too fell short of his ears. Like a picture waiting to come to life. Or the black and white world, before it bloomed up color in *The Wizard of Oz.*

But strangest of all was the certainty, that he would remember that moment forever. He would remember because he knew everything after would be different, as though women, children and men were points on a map of past to future; and the light from the kitchen was from a radiant but extinguished star, sending its glow to him now, and to the circle of men he would join, someday. As though memory were suddenly needed to sustain his own identity, demanding his will to traverse—as one whole boy, in one whole body—the tenuous alignment of time.

"I'll cut him now," Joe taunted. "I will."

Dickie Mueller was five, and small for that. He wailed for the men to hear, "I didn' say you wouldn'!"

Joe jabbed toward Squint's eye. Mary climbed down and ran toward the house with Dickie in tow, abandoning the barn to shadow. Joe was scared and flustered. It was just the boys, and the men in the corner, and his voice broke: "We're going to kill him anyway. I won't even get in no trouble."

To take a step, to hear himself upon the new horizon of time, Winthrop said, "You will too. And your daddy—he'll beat you again."

"Will not."

"He will."

"Will not not not and so what so what he can't kill me I'm his boy he can't kill me can't can't can't"—yet so rigid with fear he couldn't move when Squint turned suddenly. The knife pierced the pig's shoulder. Joe's father was out by the pit. Selby was coming into the barn bearing rope. The pig's squeal brought two of the older boys, Ted Bullock and Nick Dresser. They grinned. Nick reached between the rails to scuff Joe's head. "Girls are more fun to stab, Joe. And they cook better."

Ted reared back, barking like a man. A nervous laugh escaped from Joe as Selby heaved one rope, then another. The coils arched over a cross-beam. Doves flew and resettled. The rasp of hemp on wood turned Winthrop's stomach sour.

"It's time?" Winthrop asked.

Selby pulled the dangling ends. He smiled, "You don't like killing."

"I didn't say—"

Then a strange, crooked smile, a mix of sympathy and disdain. "You never have to say it."

The other men were gathering. Father turned through the door as Selby lay a hand on Winthrop's shoulder. Father stopped still. In the shadows,

under his hat brim, Father's eyes were glints: "We better start if we hope to eat before Christmas."

Selby's hand remained on Winthrop's shoulder. The boy felt caught in the glare between the men. He could not shrug the hand away. But he moved from under it, toward the pen's gate.

All the rest of the year the women did the butchering—pigs and chickens or the rabbits shot in the fields—just as Mother and June and Granma Winthrop tended to Granma Himmel. But once the ropes were dangling every Fourth, the men gathered. Boys came from the yard; and without being told, the older girls pushed in the barn doors, closing them into a dusty twilight.

And then for a moment the stillness was on them all. In suspenders and overalls and bleached white shirts, they were sliced by the sunset through the board walls; a stripe ran up Joe's knee, disappearing over his shoulder; three lines bent around Arne's broad gut. Winthrop was riddled by sheets of light as his father led the squealing pig. Joe clutched its ears. Selby laughed toward Gus Noonan, "You'll have the best of him yet, Joe."

Father tied a rope to each of Squint's rear legs. Then James Bullock and Bob Suthen hoisted the thing alive. Two split hooves, paralleling the stripes of light, cut into the dirt before it swung, twisting loud and wild. Its head was as high as Winthrop's shoulder when they tied the ropes to posts.

"Dosy Doe," Selby said above the pig's cries. "You like to dance with that pig, Winthrop? Joe had the first dance. A chacha it looked like to me."

"Let it alone," Gus Noonan said.

"Winthrop can make up his own mind," Father said. Then at Selby, "Nobody can say Elizabeth's son couldn't choose for himself."

No one spoke. The men waited on Selby, who stared at the earth.

Winthrop slipped farther into the shadows as Granpa Winthrop handed the knife to his son-in-law. Winthrop wanted to cover his face. Squint still raised a ruckus. The knife flashed in a sheet of light as Granpa Himmel pinched the artery. Winthrop closed his eyes tight. But he could not stop imagining the knife puncturing skin. The punky sound released a sigh from the men.

To show they were not afraid, the smallest boys brought the enamel blood bowl. The pig flailed. Its blood whipped across the boys' faces. The older boys laughed. The red drops flashed and disappeared and flashed lower across the wafers of light until Matt Solingen kneeled and grabbed the hooves, steadying both with his own suspended weight. Bob Suthen lit a cigarette. His hands shook. Selby was glaring at Father.

"That ain't the way." The blood lubdubbed down the knife blade, over Father's knuckles, into the bowl held up wobbly on six small hands. Selby spat. Father watched the blood. Cigarette smoke rose through the light like incense. The others talked low while the pig weakened, and died, and Father emptied its guts.

The ropes were let down. The carcass bent over Selby's shoulder. They paraded toward the coal pit through the back door. Winthrop turned and ran. He pushed the tall front door, slipping into the light.

He chased his own long shadow over the grass. It rippled up the porch steps. He wanted to run to the enormous rose-printed room and cramp into his grandmother's closet. She was dead. But Granpa would not surrender her things and Winthrop wanted to bury his face in scents of cedar chips and starched wool. Mother snagged his arm as he crossed the hall, pulling him into her skirts. "What's the hurry, Mr. Einstein?"—and in the kitchen he saw Aunt June, who saw the fear and panic in his face, across the distance through the dining room.

A distance that felt so long, framing her worried features in waning light, framed by windows, and doorways, because she was not his, or anyone's Mother.

★

The light in the west has cooled to cobalt blue. June sits close at my side against the tree. We can hear Mother calming chickens, talking to each by name, soothing chaos until she grabs a neck.

I don't know how to ask my aunt, I do not know how else to ask her, "Did you ever want your own son—or a little girl?"

A chorus of suspicious caws from the coop. I watch June's face, the features reflected in my own, the eyes set apart though my hair is lighter. Her chin is narrow, the cheeks unnatural whenever deformed from her mild smile. She worries again the fabric of her dress, drawing it into tiny pleats.

I know it is hard for her to speak, as though without Mother near all speech is betrayal. And yet she says, despite her fear, "Your mother, Winthrop, she doesn't believe I'm happy just having you." Her hand rests on my arm. "Winthrop."

"Yes," I say, "Yes?" to let her know this is between us.

"You—you don't like secrets." She looks toward the coop. Its door is black with shadow. "But you can't tell her ever I said this." She lets the fabric free and smoothes it flat again and again. Then she shocks me. (The chickens become hysterical; two fat birds fly straight from the coop.) The pleats are gone. She is stressing the material and will not look at me. "You must leave here, Winthrop. You're smarter than any of us, you can go to college and then you'll be free." I sit up quickly, holding my Aunt's thin hand. "I'm sorry, Winthrop. I don't mean to scare you." Yet I am afraid, of what she is about to say, and still I want her to try and say it. "You simply have to go away." Then her eyes, holding mine. "I know you love us. But there's nothing else here. Not for the kind of man you should be. And you can't live with women who can only talk and talk and talk," her eyes harder and clearer than I have ever seen: "You can't live your life for other people, waiting on them to become what you want, or thinking you can change them, because they don't change, Winthrop. They stay or go away or die but they never ever change."

I want to do something for her but I am only twelve. I hold her hand between my own. She is speaking to me as an adult, and I am not even a man. She is speaking as a woman.

She says, "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," I say, "It's all right. It's fine. It's all right."

She looks into my confusion and her mouth brightens with sympathy. "You're such a good boy, Win."

"Winthrop!" Mother calls. She has emerged from the coop with a hen's neck broken in one fist. "Get some water on the stove. The big pot. You know," disappearing into the shadow of the barn, cast across the chopping stump.

June keeps her smile to make me less afraid, to tell herself nothing terribly secret has occurred between us. She says, "I'll help," knowing I will merely help her. She presses her hand to the trunk to stand.

We cross the grass. We enter the kitchen over the back porch. She switches on the brash light, fixing shadows of the table and chairs and teapot. She pulls the pot from under the sink clanging from among the others. She starts the water drumming against the sides. And for several seconds we watch together.

The force of the tap boils up from the steel bottom. And while we watch the water climb, our shadows stenciled across the roiling water, I remain beside her. My arm is around her waist as though holding her up, as though

she is old and thankful for my help. Then her fingers find mine on her hip, and lace, and press, again and again.

And I am sure that I will always know and love her, as I will always know and love Mother. But there will be this closeness. This idea that June and I are people who never speak harshly, who will always account for what others feel, respecting greater wills than our own; and yet we will find our way to speak to one another, and to find out others like ourselves.

So we are happy here for a moment; we are happy here: we love Mother, and love her will, and cling to it, and survive by it. So we can hold each other up this moment in our weakness, in our ease admitting that we cannot know, and cannot imagine life without a timid dread of whatever will happen next.

★

Over the meal the adults talked about the war, the napkins mildly luminescent in the evening light. There were three card tables set up for the children. Winthrop liked eating outside, making faces at his cousins chewing corn and potato salad, his toes grabbing at the grass. Elmer Gansevoort, who smoked cigars and sold rubber products to women up and down the valley, had arrived late from Fresno with his aunt. She had come from Holland to live with relatives. Because of her accent, the children were shy around her. The adults pronounced their words slowly, as though she were partly deaf. Winthrop liked her voice. The sound was of marbles in warm butter. She was skittish at any loud word, or Elmer's laugh like popping paper bags. And braids were wrapped around her head. She reminded him of Mother, beneath the worry that marked her mouth. Her name was Mrs. Newenhause.

Jeanne Blair bragged that her family was going to a Marx Brothers movie in Los Angeles, weeks before it would come to town. Dickie Mueller wanted to see Roy Rogers in "Border Legion." Then Mrs. Newenhause's voice caught everyone's attention.

The children too fell quiet. Aunt June stood up and walked behind Mrs. Newenhause, her hands coming up, then dropping. Mrs. Newenhause's eyes were shut, though the words didn't stop.

It was like hearing the sirens in newsreels about London. And words kept coming. She had forgotten where she was. No one looked at anyone. They watched her face, or stared at plates, listening. He would remember the pic-

ture of an old man, kicked bloody by soldiers, a girl's bruised legs obscured behind a half-circle of boots.

Then her eyes opened, as though she (and everyone in turn) had been shaken.

Then another voice. He had been hearing it—they all had—without listening, begun before Mrs. Newenhause had stopped. He watched Mother's face. She had reached toward June when June rose from the table. But now she was glaring at Selby, who sat across from Father.

Winthrop had to look at Selby too, in his white shirt and dark suspenders, hunkered over his plate, and then remember what Mrs. Newenhause had said, to realize his uncle was calling a woman a liar. ". . . stories in the Jew papers" grunted into Father's eyes while everyone looked sick. Mrs. Newenhause appeared ashamed, and yet she asked with her eyes, Who will make him stop?

The men looked uncomfortable. They had talked of war. But she'd seen things none of them had imagined. And Selby's words, however offensive, held hope of lightening the shade cast across their manhood. Their mouths were full of unchewed corn, hands gripping sweaty glasses of beer and iced tea. Selby fell quiet, stuffing his mouth with pork and potatoes, his eyes still bolted on Father's.

Then June's voice, like a sparrow shattering thin glass, "You just won't go back. You'll stay here. We won't let you go." Even Mother nodded, forgetting Mrs. Newenhause had already fled to other relatives. But the silence came back down like a bird after ungainly flight.

And seeing those adults dumbfounded, Winthrop felt for the first time that there was a whole world even grownups, even Mother—her fists motionless on the table—could not vanquish. (And yet there was a look, as though her stillness were merely waiting—her eyes still upon on her plate; as though she had caught a glimpse of the outcome, and the vision of herself and her sister living alone.) Then Elmer broke out about selling a toilet plunger to a Filipino in Visalia.

A sudden chaos of voices, talking recipes and weather and the price of shipping cotton. Two tables away, he could see Mrs. Newenhause sink down in herself. Winthrop closed his own eyes hard, trying to imagine what wooden shoes would feel like. Then Mrs. Newenhause was talking.

Everyone fell quiet. Her eyes went to Selby and then to himself, to Winthrop Himmel. The boy wanted to tell her NO even before she nodded to Selby,

and repeated, "How much you look alike. Your son and yourself, like a little you—"

"I'm—no, no," Winthrop called to her, poking himself in the chest, his voice coming from miles away; "I'm Winthrop, my Mother's name, Winthrop Himmel and that," pointing toward Father, the other hand pressed to his own chest, to reassure himself he was alive, it was his own voice getting confused—"You don't . . . you see—we're . . ."

Uncle Arne started cleaning his glasses. Bob Suthen fumbled for a cigarette. Beth Sommers seemed to be choking while Alice's eyes became thinly rapturous.

But Mother said nothing. Holding her breath, her eyes unmoving, perhaps waiting for things to evolve. Mrs. Newenhause looked along each line of diverted faces. She appeared baffled how her attempt to make herself welcome, even to the man who insulted her had gone so wrong. The men glanced first. But it was Mother's eyes he watched, and followed her line of sight pinned to Father.

Like a Charlie Chaplin routine, Father and Selby rose in mirror images, pulling their napkins from their collars. Mother stood. She took June deeper beneath the tree, while June quietly cried. Winthrop watched the two men walk away, across the circle of chairs, toward the corner of the barn.

Once they were gone the other men stood up. Some carried biscuits or glasses of beer, their white shirts floating through the twilight, trailing cigarette smoke like thin pennants. Then the older boys, walking slow to look grown up. And finally those his own age, after asking permission.

They were all gone except himself. The girls moved from the card tables, into the spaces next to their mothers. But no one spoke. They waited on Mother and June. June gazed at the tendrils of smoke still rising from the pit. Beneath a quarter moon, Mother spoke to her calmly.

Then Harriet Kreig whispered to Mrs. Newenhause, who looked as surprised as though Harriet were dribbling ice water into her ear. The girls glared at Winthrop and he stood up.

From the corner of the barn, he saw June nod deep. She continued to listen, fingering Mother's collar, taking in her words like a scared child.

★

The pig's eyes were scorched to patent leather, the hooves unnaturally wide with the flesh carved away. He approached across the ceramic earth between patches of crisp grass. His father and Selby had removed their shirts and reslung their suspenders. Under their cocked hats, not even the older boys smiled. Father's stomach and arms were pretty as the muscles on a running horse. Liquor passed quietly. Selby's heavier arms flexed.

"Wait," Father said. He searched for Winthrop, standing just outside the circle of men, behind the older boys, at the outer reach of the boys his own age. He nodded away, toward the house. "Go on, son."

Men and boys turned at Winthrop. He wanted to flee but wished that Father had not picked him out.

"He can stay," Selby said.

Father said, "I don't think this is your business. And I'm sure it's not—"

"What is it, Sam," Selby said. "Afraid to let the boy see his old man get whipped?"

Father looked at the ground, then at the other men, who could not hold his glance. Then he looked straight at Selby. "Yes. That's *just* it."

Then, though the older boys thought they understood, not one grown man could look at another. Like they had all been shamed. Winthrop took a step back, and a second.

Selby and Father moved toward each other, centering the loose flock of men. Like body and shadow against a blank wall, their shoulders dropped and they started to circle.

It was as though a movie of one of the other matches were being played slow. Hands touched hands, like blind men trying to locate each other. They came close, then pushed away and closed again, in a square dance of hands gripping hands. Their arms made an empty oblong as they turned. Then Selby flung the grip high, and stepped in. His right arm went over Father's shoulder.

Men and boys came alive, leaning in, encouraging their bets.

The two men went to their knees planted wide apart. Already marbled with sweat and dust, they grappled until his father set a boot and threw them over sideways. Legs and hips and arms twisted in the dirt, drawing up a new chorus.

No one saw him step away. His father and Selby were cut into stripes between the legs like fighting dogs beyond a picket fence. He continued walking backwards. The bodies shrank until he stumbled and fell inside the barn. He turned onto his stomach, toward the house framed by the door, and dangling rope.

Darkness loomed above him. He stood between the ropes hanging from the crossbeam, the hemp still kinked from the pig's hooves. Night was coming on fast. What he saw in the lighted kitchen window looked magnified and overbright, the picture closer than the framing barn door. June was setting a steaming pot on the tray Mother was ready to lift from the counter. Then June wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist. She glanced into her own reflection in the dark glass, pushed back a piece of hair, then looked down into the sink.

Girls and the younger women were talking at the outside tables. Jeanne and Selma Cory were playing grownup. They sat on folding chairs with their ankles crossed. Their feet swung above the grass as they sipped from empty coffee cups. "The Broadway does sell the most lovely china, don't you think?" "Oh it is just lovely. And so reasonably priced, what you don't expect these days—I seen in the paper crystal dessert glasses for just a dollar ninety-eight for six. My husband don't agree but you know men."

He could not move forward. The shouts of the men, the thud of bodies on dirt tethered him to the spot. He reached out and touched the bloodied ropes. His fingers moved up the hemp braids, his eyes on the house, until he could reach no higher, and he jumped.

He was suspended above the earth. Swinging forward and back, his shoulders pulled apart. Yet he hung on, between the scene before him, and the rising shouts behind, his body an ungainly pendulum.

It was the momentum of his leap that pulled him back. Yet each time the shouts grew louder, he felt the tug of a terrible vision, of running back and cheering on the battle, growing fast as in a fairytale, breaking the seams of his overalls, his laughter raucous and lewd against the smoking sky; then, swinging forward toward the clink of dish on dish, toward the window scene, he was growing smaller, walking on his own pant legs, dragging sleeves as he crawls up the porch steps, through the hall and kitchen to curl up into Mother's embrace.

So he withstands the ripping in his shoulders, holding on above either vision. Then the swinging stops. And he cannot hang any longer—except one

raw moment, his fingers slowly burning over the hemp, before he falls to his knees.

". . . and wouldn't crushed velvet look beautiful in your sitting room." "Use your speed, Sam, use your damn quickness or I'll be workin' overtime the rest of this week." And a wave of laughs, and rush of hot, clean water.

His legs feel miraculously strong, his arms mere appendages. But as the window grows, casting light across his path like a crooked doorway, he does not shrink. He feels Jeanne and Selma pass, his body hidden behind the sudden impulse driving him up the steps, past the flowered trellis and a napkin unfolding in a breeze on the porch, through the screen door.

June has gone into the other room, to help Mother. Nellie Leininger and Harriet Kreig are washing dishes. After sweat and burning fat, he breathes in dish soap and skin powder, a world all low-toned color under the mothy ceiling light. He still does not know what he has come to do. He sees Mother and June serving coffee in the other room as he steps through the doorway.

The women turn. He has tracked dirt through the kitchen and onto the good rug. Yet this is not why they stare. They are not scolding. He is not even a boy in their eyes. He can feel them seeing something—through Alice's glasses, in Mary Bullock's squint—something he does not yet understand, a thing unspoken in themselves.

His mother is the last to turn. June's lips tremble, searching her sister's profile.

"They've done it," Aunt Alice says for the room, sitting up straight on a wooden chair.

His mother does not seem to hear. She is taken aback yet not untranquil, as though recalling that she's been awaiting this moment for years.

And Winthrop sees her face for the first time: her strong and slightly curved nose, the narrow chin, the dark hair loosely bundled, even her thirty-one years; a look no adult has ever shared with him, not a look ever properly passed between mother and son—of fascination, and challenge, and surrender. June reaches into the air behind her, touches a chair arm and sits down.

"Who is my father?"

And yet these words, taking all the air from the room, do not feel new, or even momentous. Like a sign passed every day, suddenly discovered to have a meaning.

Beth Sommers' cup rattles on its saucer. But all he can see, as though staring down his drainpipe telescope, all he can see surrounded by the fluted

yellow lampshade, and June's anxious face, and the curtains feathering over the light green wallpaper, all he can see is Mother's eyes tipped into his, pouring a mixture of tenderness, and anger, and sadness he has felt not even in the labyrinth of moods at his bedside. June reaches up and touches her own lips. Mother's eyes do not break from his when she sets down the tray.

But clearest of all—in that moment, as it is now—is the awareness like a chill, that with his one chance, he has asked the wrong question. For the answer is as obvious as the embarrassment between these women, as free for taking as the silence his mother has allowed to frame the talk and rumor she cannot but know he has heard.

Then Beth says, "God is our father," clutching her cup to its saucer. "Winthrop, we are all, all orphans. Lest we become infants in Christ."

The women breathe again. But Mother's eyes and his hold still, though the private corridor of their gaze has absorbed a blow, like a dent in the rainpipe, cutting into its roundness.

And the moment it is too late, he can see that there was only this one chance, in a configuration as tentative as an eclipse that reveals the earth's tight curve. And his own mistake, and Beth's voice, have passed between them like an opaque cloud. Alice: "I'll bet Winthrop would like a nice piece of rhubarb pie."

But he and Mother too have created this darkness. It is neither's fault. Nor in the power of either to explain, or admonish, or, for him, ever fully to ignore. For in the glare of his present desire, the truth he seeks casts a vision of Mother, of Elizabeth Winthrop, as wildly unproportioned as her profile looming against his bedroom wall. So now the proper question (Beth escapes for his pie, Alice asks Mary Bullock where she found the fabric for her dress), it is his alone to unravel, by calculation, and cross-reference (June touches her sister's waistband)—work that will demand its portion of the rest of his life.

★

He climbs quickly up the board ladder, into the loft, then crawls through the straw. He wipes his eyes and peers between two planks.

The shouting has stopped. In the strip of vision he can see the black carcass, and the men huddled over something on the ground. Their heads bend together, like the tips of cupped fingers, as though the earth itself has thrust up hands to retrieve a thing escaped from its depths. Then one man straight-

ens, touching the top of his own head. The man beside him kneels. The man touching his head is naked, and sinewed, from the waist up, trimmed with sweat and moonlight.

And then the boys his size—when so shortly ago he was still a child—begin running toward the house in furious competition. And he watches their arms pump, dashing beneath him, trying to outrun their own wild cries.

2
(afternoon)

September 3, 1963

In the city today with June, we'd paused despite the sopping heat to look into the display at The Broadway. There were two mannequins—or womanniquins more like—in short skirts, sitting on white metal patio chairs with their heads tilting that broken-necked way. The skirts were green and yellow striped with buttons the size of milk bottle tabs, and I said to June, "They're seated I guess to prove you can wear one of those things and sit without showing off your whole dowry."

June laughed, surrounded by low clouds off the glass, hand on her mouth as she does when I abash her, as I have so often in the last twenty years since we've had money and no husbands to answer to. And I wondered again how much of all the giggling and embarrassment a girl is taught to feel over subjects she knows more about than most grown men, along with the principles you swing like a hatchet over their heads, if those aren't just the game, what you think a husband wants from his wife, what he would never have you without (which he wouldn't), or if the blade isn't sharp because God knows he won't give up the things you need only on account of it's you needing them.

But the queer thing was in front of The Broadway, before I spoke, while June had been looking into the window, my eyes shifted focus without moving. I saw my own face in the glass, only it was atop a mannequin's body and it shocked me a little like I'd glanced into a mirror and discovered the wrong person. I looked younger, the glare washed out lines, or the lines were confused by the lines of the mannequin's tilted profile, the line of her brow and nose and tiny lips and chin fitting remarkably the flip of my hair over my ears like one of those modern paintings with three faces in one. And then I looked over and I saw June's face on the other mannequin, all crazy mixed-up fea-

tures and I nearly laughed out loud because there was something chilling even in that dank noon that hollowed my stomach seeing us as two stiff plastic women because I couldn't get my eyes refocused. So I made that joke—to change the mood—and it worked. Her laugh lifted me enough to turn away from the glass and look at my dear sister, her two clear eyes and small ears and her single straight nose in a face that looks more forty-five than fifty, but after she laughed, the hollowness was still there. Just a little, but I shut my eyes altogether. June touched my arm, "Are you all right?" "Oh, yes, it's just the dampness, dear, let's go into Lambert's for something cool, do you mind?"

The downtown was crowded with women—all the Day-After-Labor-Day sales and their children back at school (there was a picture in the paper saying how this young mother was torn watching her son off to his first day of school, and I'd said to June while we waited for the hand bag show at May Company, I said, "She's torn up deciding whether to run for her checkbook and keys before or after the bus is out of sight," and June about choked on her coffee).

We found a place at the lunch counter of Lambert's with our shopping bags on the floor between us. Busy as they were, some spilled coffee had been left to dry on the formica. June took one napkin from the metal dispenser, dampened it by wiping the condensation from her ice-water glass and swabbed the spot clean. And as afraid and amused as I'd been in front of the window a moment earlier, that little gesture made me feel wonderfully safe beside my sister, it was just such a perfectly June kind of thing to do—all thoughtlessly tidy and saving, not even wasting the water from inside the glass, or a second napkin, and I wanted to put my arms around her for being my friend despite half a dozen things that would have torn most women apart—sisters or no—or ended in murder; like my marrying the man she'd loved while bearing a child by her husband, who would not give her a child of her own. And because I couldn't just up and hug her there in the middle of Lambert's with the clacking dishes and burger patties frying and the sweating women with big prying eyes, I said to her, out of nowhere, I asked, "Did it ever occur to you that I might not assume the money was ours to share?"

She pulled back, started really. The waitress threw a hip against the counter, blowing a curl off her brow in a way that made us both laugh nervously and we ordered lemonade and iced tea, time enough for June to think, and when the woman turned away, June said, "I never assumed anything. I remember being happy for us both, and scared somehow, and feeling terribly bad for

Sam." "Scared of what?" I asked, "about the risk he'd run?" She nodded. "Yes," I said, "I've had a couple of cold chills myself when I think of it, though of course it's foolish. It came out all right and we didn't know to be afraid when the bet was made. Sometimes when I get a letter from Winthrop I think how he couldn't have even gone to college—or not nearly so easily, without working himself ragged—if it hadn't turned out right."

"It was such a foolish thing to do," she said.

"Of course. But sometimes I can nearly forgive him for widowing you and leaving us both alone. Not that I'd have him back now. But you know how men try to understand and blunder into the dark imagining all the silly things they can. I'm not complaining about how things have turned out. I've told you, I can't imagine I'd be happier if Sam were scratching those fields for a living rather than Karl Leininger paying us cash for the right to try. And then you'd be off in your house alone."

She nodded. She never liked talking about these things, about what we might or might not regret. Lucky woman, the past was not a place her thoughts naturally travelled. Nor was there anything new I had to ask. It was my obsession, my inability to resist goading her for testimony, for reassurance, that she was as happy as I. And after seeing her head and mine on those fashionably thin, fashionably younger bodies, the need for that assurance was on me like a thirst.

"I guess I just can't help wonder if you don't sometimes wish you'd married again instead of old-maiding along with me. Do you?"

"I've told you no."

"Then why can't I believe it?"

"I don't know," she said, and pushed a corner loose from her wet napkin with the end of her spoon. "You know I didn't like being married to Selby."

"But he's dead. There are other men. And better. And with our income . . ."

"Just the same, being unhappy all those years, except for you being there, and Winthrop and the family . . ." She took off her gloves and folded them into her purse in her lap. "I only married really for—well, for lack of imagination of what else to do."

"Because I'd already married Sam."

"No. Now don't start that."

"For Godssake, June."

Then I stopped myself. That we'd run into the wall we always did was not her fault. But she recovered her sense first.

"Well, whatever the cause I guess it just gave me a distaste for marriage and anyway, you know how I like our life now, I'm not unhappy. I was married. I couldn't stand all the sympathy if I never had."

Thankful she had eased us over, I said, "The way they were to poor Aunt Alice, never discussing the bedroom in front of her, even children extra polite, like being an old maid were a mental defect."

"But not just that. I'm happy with you, Elizabeth. Honestly I am."

"With me and three houses of rent money."

She smiled a little guiltily, like she really was just a girl. Then she turned away from me to look into the square of day and sidewalk, damp and gray and warm as a fish tank with a weak bulb inside. Then she turned back. "It would have been hard otherwise, you're right, I thank goodness we didn't have to face that."

"And Ed's Last Chance. Don't forget Ed's Last Chance, the horse God knows will never appreciate what he did for two old widow ladies."

And she said, "Yes, thanks to—though it feels like sin to say it—thanks awfully to that dear dear horse."

And then she smiled and I smiled. And we sipped our lemonade and tea and looked around discreetly at the cook's tattoo and the old Mexican swabbing the floor and the people walking outside in the fishbowl of gray light, and the brighter bowl of the TV over the milkshake blender where channel 5 had the afternoon news. We couldn't hear the words but there were the same Alabama state troopers outside a high school that we'd seen in the paper that morning, and President Kennedy talking to Walter Cronkite and then some poor little oriental monk waving timidly out of a window of a U.S. embassy. Then we looked at one another and smiled again and the strangest thing, like in front of The Broadway only now looking straight into June's face. There was a moment when I couldn't tell who was who, as though I might have been June looking into my own face, or myself looking into hers; nor for a moment could I recall whose husband had killed whose, which of us had borne the child we both cared for and worried over, or at the top of the stairs, in the house where we have been living alone together for twenty years, whether I turn right to my door, to the right of the bathroom, or left through the door that hops on its hinges just before it rests shut.

And then, to straighten this all out I remembered the evening in the late spring of 1946, with Selby dead and Sam disappeared five years already and Winthrop off with Arne taking an early look over the Fresno campus, and the war so freshly over it was still a shock to see young men on the streets, or walk into the stores and find shoes and copper pots and all the meat you could want. Summer was already bearing down like God's breath as June climbed the porch and came to my door, the sun through the old trellis we had put up and painted as mere girls, the sun through those slats and vines like a miniature cathedral, and there she stood, with just that much reverence, holding out a little slip of silver paper.

We were still young. I was just thirty-five, yet with a good idea how your life could turn and change direction in a moment, and something said this was such another time as she held out the paper that splayed light through the dust. It was some kind of ticket; as though she'd come to me in a near faint to collect her wash. I recalled that her apron was stained with blood and her hair damp from doing dishes. She stood there staring like I should know what she finally announced, which was that Sam had come.

I got her calmed down, making a fuss over her nerves in order to ignore my own. She said, "He didn't say where he's been for five years, except he still can't live with himself, or with you—" (I laughed inside thinking, That makes two of us) "—or near me because of killing Selby I told him everyone knew it was an accident—"

"He gave you—"

"He told me he couldn't face you but I was to give you this." And then she handed me the printed silver paper.

DEL MAR RACE TRACK
DEL MAR, CALIFORNIA
MAY 24, 1946
$1,000
FIRST RACE
ED'S LAST CHANCE
23/1
WIN

And the reason my mind went from Lambert's lunch counter, and the chatter of women, and the opening credits for "The Edge of Night" back to that particular moment is because there are few others in our life that show the

difference in our temperaments quite so distinctly. While June was standing on my porch looking as harried and distraught as though Sam Himmel had walked straight out of the tomb, worried how I would feel about it, all that was in my mind was, If it did win (and why such a queer show to hand over a losing ticket?), then that little scrap of paper was worth $23,000 minus taxes, and that would pay my mortgage and June's so all the lease money on the fields would come into our pockets, and leave plenty more to buy, say, two more houses with land that would go at $100 a month clear rent we could live on well, plus some savings bonds and what have you, and then thinking, It's only five P.M. We could call down there right now. So I told June, "Go home dear, I'll come over shortly," because I didn't want to shock her overhearing me on the phone to this race track, and then, if it was true, to Sarah Burnstadt who plays around in real estate and knows more about business and a good buy than the men who claim to make it their living in this county.

We talked later, June and I. A few gallons of coffee were poured over how Sam must have joined the service and saved his pay and maybe worked for more after and then decided he would bet with God for his redemption for killing his own brother-in-law, betting on a horse that would need God's help to win. What she couldn't be made to believe for some time was that I didn't even mind he hadn't stopped to see me.

I'd learned to live without him even in the nights (learned to make myself happier in that way than he ever bothered), and Yes, I had loved him, even deeply at one time, or learned to anyway after we had Winthrop, hadn't she loved him too? And of course this was the rock in the row—convincing *her* that she didn't mind, or shouldn't, that he hadn't stayed. And also the old thing: convincing her I'd loved him only for Winthrop's sake, had talked myself into it because I thought it was my duty and loved him out of respect for her—feeling I should not disdain a man she so deeply wanted. But if he wasn't going to stay, well then I'd rather had Ed's Last Chance than another with Sam Himmel without the check that arrived a month later, after Sarah's son-in-law, who's a lawyer in Los Angeles, went down and cashed the ticket.

And thinking about that, June's face was hers again—soft and open and a little aghast at the world, the face that had felt bewildered and moved by Sam Himmel's grandly mysterious visitation. So we finished our drinks and paid and went back out into the heat. I didn't want to look into any more windows, and we already owned more hats and gloves and skirts than we could

ever hope to wear, not even counting what we'd bought that day at The Dollar Store and May Company, so we headed for the car but at the corner of Main and Eighth a young man in a crisp uniform and cap stopped us holding a camera, and June grabbed my arm before he snapped our picture and handed June a ticket. She chirped, as though we'd won a prize rather than been tempted to buy something, "Let's get the picture, 'Lizabeth, can we?"—knowing when she pleaded I'd give in, the way I had since we were girls, so we backtracked and waited behind some others and paid for the picture. It was her way of saying everything was all right even though I'd acted a little funny, to say we were sisters after all and she wanted a picture of us, deciding out loud as we drove which frame to put it in.

It was cooler and drier outside the city and we didn't talk much for most of the two and a half hours home, except to point out where new houses were going up while others stood abandoned, and then the state of Bob Suthen's home since his children had inherited it, and stopping to chat with Tim Sommers by his mailbox telling how much fun his mother was having in Florida with this new man she'd met, the life insurance agent who had handled her claim after Shannon blessed her by driving his pickup drunk through a Dead End sign above the quarry.

It was good to feel the car stop at home, to hear the engine die and feel our bodies at rest. The azaleas were in bloom and honey-suckle scented the air from the trellis that needs replacing. It was just so good to be there, in a place we had all to ourselves, where we could raise all kinds of holy hell if we wanted, where we didn't have to lock doors but could if we pleased against men and their blood fights. I waved to Karl Leininger and his boys, Nellie's grandsons, who have to help Karl work our fields since he lost an arm in Korea. Only Karl didn't even nod back. He just stared and something in that cooled me; he's not the friendliest man but he's civil and knows where his land is deeded. June didn't notice, she was saying as we stepped inside how at The Dollar didn't I think the Mexican girl cleaning the dressing room was a little tiffy when she asked to have the mirror wiped down and did I think it was because of these Civil Rights protests getting everybody all riled up? The house was good and cool, we'd left the new air conditioner on low to dry the air, so we just about collapsed in the kitchen, legs spread with no men around, getting all the air we could and June laughed her embarrassed laugh when I grabbed my hem and started flapping wind down between my thighs and we

took off our hats and gloves and shoes and she was starting to make sandwiches when she saw Joe Noonan push the mail into the box out at the road.

She ran out to retrieve it and there was a letter and picture from Winthrop, of him and this girl Margaret he's been seeing for the past seven years who used to teach at the university there in Buffalo, but now, the letter said, had gone into business for herself. She read the letter out loud. Typical Winthrop, the details tidy as an old woman, half about Margaret and him going to an historians' conference in New York City and the other half describing how a lunar eclipse had cast a strange light over the backyard of his new house when he was showing the children in the neighborhood the shaded moon through his old telescope, and no change of tone, like Margaret and the eclipse were just equally close or far away from him. June was holding our picture up next to the one of Winthrop and Margaret with their hair blowing wild and laughing atop the Empire State Building. She was saying "A pretty handsome family, I guess," when I heard a creak.

I thought right then of Karl acting strangely. June hadn't heard it. But I had a bad feeling down in my bowel. Of course I didn't want her upset over nothing, so I said, "You start supper dear, I'm going to rinse off upstairs," and on the way I quietly took the little single-gauge shotgun from the hall closet.

Going up the steps, I didn't hear any more noise. June's door was open. Her room and the bathroom were empty, though there was a towel skewed out of vertical. I thought I'd left my door open but it always swung near shut. It was just cracked now, giving a view up across my bureau and mirror and nothing to see in the glass except the wall beside the bed, and a corner of the night table. Then I stepped to the side, wheeling the opening across the bureau top, where the picture of me and Winthrop at his graduation from Cal in 1954 definitely was not standing where it should, and feeling half sick with knowing what I couldn't admit (who ever heard of a thief stealing graduation pictures?) but also angry as hell when I pushed the door in with the barrel of the gun.

I knew him the moment I saw his back, sitting on the edge of the bed in his slumping posture, his dense shoulders straining at the seams of a soiled white dress shirt. His hair was touching his ears, unkept, but still dark, and all of a sudden (not for long, but it was there), a little thrill of sex, seeing him on the bed, mixed with anger, and a part of me that kept saying, It's not him, it can't be even while I knew it was and that I could shoot him right then and there and no one would even question. Not given the propriety of my behavior all

these years, keeping up the pretense of missing him sorely because that was easier, having people feel sorry, than the sniffing if I'd appeared happy. "Too little time to think," they'd say, a woman living alone with her sister. They'd believe I'd thought him an intruder, and women can't handle firearms, it went off before she knew what she was doing. And there would be no questions because at least half the women wouldn't blame me if I had known; even sharing a secret laugh over coffee and sugar cookies throughout this county. While the men would be pleased to think their own wives would have acted no different, shooting at the first notion of a strange man in her house, suppressing the thought that a woman might make a cold-blooded choice to kill the only man—scoundrel or no—who'd shared her bed. To think of it would make their own necks crawl. So for those men, the decision to kill a stranger in my bedroom would become a kind of defense of their own manhood—whether you counted that manhood as exclusive right to their wives' desire, or the exclusion from those wives' blood hate.

And so there I stood. In my stocking feet, a small-bore shotgun at my hip, veiled in an alibi as airtight as the fears and resentments of each man and woman, in a house where I was happy to live with my sister like a couple of old maids, aiming at a man whose crazed sense of getting back his own had killed a man who had impregnated me in a drunken, desperate expression of hopeless love. A man unable to resist cutting asides about his son's origin, and in secret avenged his sense of violation upon my own flesh, and then disappeared for twenty-two years save for a misplaced repentance that had set me up for life on the back of a third-rate race horse, set to raise the child of that ancient assault, a child I loved dearly, and given the unhappy choice would have been assaulted again in order again to bear.

And now this man was here, for no imaginable good to me or my sister, having no doubt forgiven himself the murder and the abuse, or having simply been run through poverty to despair past caring for anyone's good remembrance. And I thought, Not a pretty package in any light. But then it dawned on me. Like a lead pie-weight plunked into my blood: He is also a man my sister is still in love with, with whose image she still carries on some ephemeral affair, whatever her protests, and the thought of whose murder in this house would haunt her mercilessly. And he was my son's father. Or all he'd ever really known of one.

And then the thought that made me laugh at myself, that I also wouldn't let him die in the satisfaction of ruining with his blood and viscera the fine

white bedspread June had crocheted through all the previous winter's evenings.

He turned then, and of course his slick dark eyes were on the gun until they rose curious to mine and he asked, "You going to use that?" And I said, flat and cool, "Not now, no. There would be questions if I shot you facing me." "Yes, that's true," he said; and then like he'd read my thoughts, "It's different that way for women than for men." I said, "So you learned something about women in twenty-two years. You've become quite the quick study." "I knew it," he said with a mean little smile, "I knew I'd bring you some kind of surprise."

And then there was a strange peace between us, like rivalry had worn out everything but tedious familiarity. So I asked him, "Do you think you're here to stay? Or to try?" And he said, "To try, yes." And I told him, "We're divorced. I filed papers. Everything's in my and June's name now," and he nodded like he assumed that. Then he asked how I'd been and I told him, "I'm as happy as I ever expected to be in my life. Happier than I knew I could be before you left." And he nodded at that too, which surprised me, since I'd thought his vanity would be wounded. Or maybe he thought he knew better and that I'd come around.

One thing sure, he was broke. His hair uncut, his belt held precariously together with black tape. And yet seeing how that belt perched around his thin hips, the damn sex was there again. And then he asked how June was and I told him what I believed, "All right, given . . ." and then I saw in his eye, like light skinnied through a crack in an attic wall.

That was the real test of my ability not to shoot him. I still had the gun trained low. He said I could put it down if I liked, but I asked instead, "Do you remember you have a son? A boy you raised if you didn't start." And he said, "Yes, how is he?" But he didn't care. The vanity persisted, the obsession with whether spit from his body or another man's had inspired the child he had raised and carried in his arms, whose mind knew only him when it thought of a father—and all his public fathering just a show to goad Selby for that first stupid act. And then he said, "You can still put that down, or we can go downstairs with me at gunpoint as a joke on June," and I said, "What joke?" And then I said, "Course, I might laugh, seeing her face, and she could take that to mean I'm letting you come back, and I don't like her deceived."

And worst was his little smile never wavered, like he already had other plans. We didn't say anything more just then. I knew it wasn't between us

alone to decide, and he knew it too, damn him, so I watched him stand, wearing suit pants and that soiled white shirt and shoes about run through to his socks, like he'd lost his last bet in Las Vegas and walked here.

He went down the stairs, half sex swagger and half loping farmer and I followed him straight down and into the kitchen, still carrying the gun with the barrel at rest.

June was mixing sugar into lemonade. There was late afternoon sun all over that kitchen. And as I went in behind him I was suddenly seeing her new, through his eyes: she was slender and young-looking for her age, a handsome woman with something fresh in her quick, delicate movements. You'd thought she'd seen a Bengal tiger come into her kitchen, like a cartoon version of surprise, her mouth a tall O while I kept thinking, Here's the real danger, Here's the real reunion though he'd been married to me. Both hands were on her mouth, tears coursing down her cheeks betraying all the denials of love she'd put up for two decades. She was seeing a man walk out of memories preserved like bones of a saint. She saw me then and I realized the gun barrel had risen up again and I guess she was horribly confused whether I was bringing him to her, or aiming to keep her from touching him, which you could see she wanted to do.

I said to him, "Sit down" and he did while June just watched. He smiled at me sort of boyish-mean before he turned a warm one on June, and I had to face it: He couldn't talk his way back to me, but June was a different matter.

"You sit too," I said to her, and she did, while all the time I couldn't stop wondering why he'd bothered to earn his money and gamble it and then give the winnings to us if it was just to forfeit any forgiveness he'd won. But the Why I couldn't worry about (any more than I'd understand why we'd married in the first place, with him knowing the state I was in, or why I'd felt he had to do it except from mad panic on my part, still bloody and aching, and on his side a diabolical plan for life-long vengeance, knowing in an instant under that dripping oak that the meaning of his life would take the shape of a meticulous spite for another man's beating him inside me). The How was what I had to keep an eye on. High emotion would have June all out of herself, so after just telling her to sit I said, "Make us some sandwiches, dear, we're all hungry by now," and I leaned the shotgun within easy reach against the table.

There were a funny few minutes there while June made the sandwiches and quietly cried and he and I sat talking stiff but matter of fact about Karl

Leininger's luck working our fields, and crop prices, and the weather, like two people who don't really like each other waiting for a church meeting to start.

June got the sandwiches—devilled ham with apple slices and leftover boiled potatoes served cold with mustard. She slowly caught her breath as she set down our plates and we started to eat and he said with his mouth stuffed full, "God in heaven I missed this food," as though that was the worst of it and June got all wet again, so I said, "He wants back," like he wasn't even there. "He's not living here," I told her. "Not while I'm in this house. We're legally divorced and he's got no more claim than a tramp off the road."

"I'm not so sure," he said.

"Oh no?" I asked.

"Elizabeth, how can you be so?" June asked, before she knew what she was saying.

I said, "Well, for a start he killed your husband and turned his back on Winthrop."

"But the money," she said (I love her, but God in heaven she can be stupid). "You said yourself today."

"Said what?" he asked her.

"Never mind what I said today or any other day—which is none of your damn business." Then I said to him, "What will you settle for? If you don't mind trampling down any forgiveness you earned in the past, even after you seem to have gone some distance to earn it, then you also calculated far enough for a second plan, so what is it? How much?"

She reached over and put her hand on his wrist, and my stomach went hollow again. Grabbed onto it is what, her thumb and fingers moving like his flesh was the Incarnation itself with her eyes pleading at me, How can you be so cold? His other hand came over on top of hers, twisting my own gut when he gently massaged her fingers like husband and wife waiting for me to go away so they could do it right there on the kitchen table, so I said, "He's going to try and manipulate you, June."

Then he said, "I'm not the goddamn devil, Elizabeth, I just want to come home. I've been alone for twenty-two years. If June can forgive me—"

"Oh, I bet you've been alone every one of those nights. Don't forget I know you Sam Himmel, and I doubt you spent your nights composing love letters to me in your head. At best," I told her, "he had another wife and

children he got tired of, or decided he'd rather live on our money than earn it for them."

"Your money," he said flat.

"Our money," I said again, though I had a scare thinking that with the right lawyer he probably could cause trouble.

June said nothing, their hands still working on each other; but she looked torn between his words and mine, like all those days since our four-square courting had been the tragedy they were close to making right. And as much as I felt angry at Sam, I was sorry for June, bearing this susceptibility that every hour of a woman's life is intent on making her feel, knowing I was right about how she'd wanted him all along, but underestimating her need. I didn't for a minute believe it was Sam Himmel she wanted. It was just that he'd been first to break through her natural reserve, through her shame at the need for that intimacy, simply by longest occupying her imagination of such acts.

So I had to take a little breath to say it: "Don't you remember, dear? He wanted me. From the start. I don't mean to hurt you but it was me he married—even knowing the condition I was in. And I showed you the bruises. I showed you. He's just desperate now. He knows . . ." And then I took a breath, letting it out slow, "He does not want you."

"I wanted you back then," he said to me. "But I got to know you too don't forget. Maybe I just realized the mistake I made."

June was in a terrible fluster. It was like I was Solomon and the baby at the same time, but she wouldn't see how little he cared that she was upset. He knew how riled she was and so we both went to work on the poor thing.

"He's already making it him or me, don't you see? If he loved you, he'd respect our friendship, yours and mine. He'd ask kindly to be let back without splitting us."

"It wasn't me started that tone," he said to her.

"You remember being married to Selby, dear. He's not any different in any way that matters. You said yourself how it was a tug-of-war with each of you pulling on *your* heart, never able to just *say* what's on your mind. June—June dear, look at me." And she did, her eyes damming up and chest rising like a child. "June, honey, I know you've been lonely, I know it's been harder on you than on me, not having . . . (He smiled, small and subtle, God damn him.) "But I know him. You have to trust me, dear. This once you have to."

"She can think for herself."

"He didn't learn bad enough of me to be shy of asking to live under this roof, but I said no and now it's you. Don't you see? Something's gone wrong enough in his life that he's ready to give up his dignity and come back for whatever he can get, and whether that's in your bed or mine I don't honestly believe he cares. He's getting old, dear. Like us. So he's crawled back here."

But I could see already, there was no talking it through to her. He could see too. It was in her flesh—the hunger from twenty-two years of uninvited celibacy and I wished to God as I had for my own sake that women could pay for an occasional man like men do women, and have that done so you could go on rationally with your life. But there we were. And then, to gall me even deeper, he started murmuring to her and she whispered back.

He savored this power to draw her into betrayal of me, even offering me a little half wink because she was as good as in a trance. She was torn, but I prayed this very intimacy in words was partly slaking the thirst that had raged so long.

So then I admitted, I just had to trust her. He was right, she could think for herself. The problem was she could never feel for herself, could not separate herself from the needs of others. So when her own longings did pull her in, she lost her bearings between the unfamiliarity of feeling her own desires, and her ability to tell herself she was only trying to soothe others. I had to think.

I tried to look occupied with eating, chomping devilled ham and potatoes, tasting nothing but humiliation for being caught in such a ridiculous show.

And then I had a decision.

It plopped on my shoulder, first like a bad joke, like a wiseacre monkey with a yellow-toothed smile, and then an improbability, a remote chance, until it seemed sadly inevitable.

I closed my eyes and prayed for courage, and for the power of June's sex to be stronger than I knew, and weaker than to lose the whole gamble. I finished chewing and swallowed. And then looking June straight in her suddenly scared eyes, I said, "I'm not going to lose you and the life we have just so you can discover what the act means with him, nor am I going to live watching you wonder until death what it would have been like." (The last was a lie. I'd have taken that if I thought it possible.) I drew another breath. That wicked smile was just flickering up, thinking he saw me making a fatal play, so I said straight to him, "Here's your chance. Do your best with her, and then we'll see what's what."

June just stared.

"What I'm saying is . . ." (I had to shake myself inside to realize I *was* saying it) ". . . I want you two to do it right now and get her questions answered." I made myself stand up with the shotgun. "I'm not past watching you at the end of this gun if that's what it requires. Get up."

They still hadn't understood—couldn't—what I meant. So I said, "I want you to know him. Not in your dreams, and I don't have any way to make you see what's in him faster than to do that." (Her stunned doe eyes.) "You two are going upstairs and have sexual relations right now."

His smile tried to flare up, but you could see a man's dread of a command performance. June turned white.

I was making a bet. This was my own Ed's Very Last Chance betting that if he was back here then he hadn't met a woman strong enough to change his habits, or loved enough to change for, in bed or anywhere else. And I knew what he was when sex stripped what little charm and reason there were off his surface, his ego coaxed out vicious as an eel. And I was betting even now, that selfishness would show and what dreams of intimacy survived in her mind would be extinguished before her body had taken its fill of him.

Well, I guess I had under-estimated her sex because after her color came back in a rush, blooming all over her face, she surprised the life out of us both by getting this frown like a martyred child, like she wasn't responsible since I'd said it. And with that look she made us gawk by standing up and laying her hand on his shoulder. He stood, trying to look cocky but a little dazed himself.

And that made two of us as I watched myself step into the front entry and bring my purse. I took out a package of sheaths and dropped them on the table.

They looked at the little gray package and then at me, and at the package, and at me again.

"I know the chances at your age are small, but that bet was lost once in this house and I learn from my mistakes if I never seem able to anticipate them." But they kept staring because of course that wasn't what they were staring about. So I said to them, cool, "A woman's got to be ready when the opportunity offers."

That didn't amuse her. Her color went a shade pale again. He barked out one quick laugh that on the inhale about choked him, an ugly sound like a belch and a hiccup had met at the center of his throat. June was dead still.

Then she quick took a step and made the package disappear inside her hand and turned through the hall door.

As they reached the steps I could hear her breath come in little whimpers. Their four feet climbed the stairs, and I heard the door swing, take its metallic hop, and shut.

And then I sat down and leaned my face in my hands, feeling certain I'd made a terrible mistake, like I'd played into his plan and they had just walked out of my life forever, World Without End.

So then I whispered, a little prayer into the palms of my hands, "Do it you thoughtless sonofabitch, do it for all the little you're worth," reassuring myself that a man who had learned his shame and repentance over killing another man could not be to her what Selby had been—a man taught shame and repentance over rape; so Sam Himmel's sex would be untainted by conscience, and worse even than Selby's that she had not cared for.

The picture of us from that afternoon was on the counter. I picked it up and wanted to cry looking at us arm in arm, her head tilted smiling toward mine in our neat hats and white gloves. I held the photograph in front of my lips and closed my eyes praying for him to be dragged despite sense, into neglect of all but his turgid lance and its performance (which was formidable, I grant) and too dazzled by it to remember there was another soul involved, making her feel as he had me, as loved and cared for as a muddy warm hole into which to plunge it.

I prayed that she in turn would be appalled at discovering herself a party to an act of histrionic masturbation. And that she would survive his coupling to her body, and decoupling from her heart, and be again the sister I'd known and loved for wiping a coffee stain from the counter of Lambert's.

And to keep my mind from the creaking, scuffling sounds overhead, I remembered the time Winthrop came into the barn, only nine years old, strong-limbed but short for his years, and there found Sam swearing over a broken harrow he could not fix. Winthrop was still squinting against the day after hours at his school books, and in his clean shirt and hands only thinly scaled by before- and after-school work, he pointed at a sheered weld, where a bolt could be put through without interference, and then named all the tools that would be needed, lying ready at hand atop a hay bale—a file and a drill—and the pride I had, standing up straight from feeding chickens, the pride in a son who could do more with his head than five strong men with their backs, a boy who would someday understand the very stars.

Then the hatred in Sam's face, incapable of pride in a boy his body had not produced, surely feeling the child's intelligence like a smirk from Selby, and then yelling at the boy, He was no man at all with his books and his clean clothes—striking him quick across the mouth, and the red splayed over his bleached shirt as sudden as spattered paint across a freshly limed wall. Winthrop fell to the dirt. But by taunting his boy on the ground, Sam was making himself small and you could see, the boy witnessing his father shrink, you could see it in his dry eyes, more shocked and curious than hurt. The boy looked at his father like a full-grown man looking into the face of a freak inside a dark tent, at once repulsed and sympathetic.

I wonder now if he already knew then. A year before he came into the living room full of women—his blood father at that moment dead—and asked the question I would know only later was a blessing for me. So irrevocably embarrassing the women in that coffee and cookie scented room that loosening social ties after a death and a disappearance would be as easy as it was pleasurable, not knowing all the castings off taking place at that moment, as though the coming war had already started and we were losing every man not nailed down to a household where he could raise his own child—throwing Selby into eternity, and Sam into a wandering life, and me and June into premature widowhood and renewed mutual love.

And here he was come back. As though the war had taken twenty-two years instead of four.

Then, half sick with the terror of it and half with the humor, I stood, and stepped over to the counter beside the stove, and though I could not clearly recall how long they had been upstairs, I set the egg timer for five minutes—all the time he'd ever spent with me not counting the punches and pokes in places no bruise would show.

And when I heard her door open and hop before the alarm sounded I opened my arms, knowing it might be a brief self-comfort, and brought my fists to my brow in thanks.

He came down and into the room first. He turned a chair and swung his leg over as I had always asked him not to do, leaning on his arms across the back. Then June came in and I could not tell what she was feeling other than embarrassed. His swaggering confidence, scooping up potatoes and chewing with a smile, that meant nothing. He would act the same either way. She sat across from me, at the other end of the table looking into her lap, rubbing her

hands like a child ready to confess it did wrong. It was almost impossible to believe that they had actually done it. Then she took a short breath and asked her lap, "How much money do you want to go away from here?"

For a terrible moment I thought she was asking me. But he was not confused. You'd have thought the potatoes had turned to shit in his mouth.

"Oh God," I burst out. "Oh Good Lord in heaven I do love you June, dear dear June."

But there was no joy in her. There was only embarrassment and shame heaving inside her breast against a good mix of grief at the loss of a kind of intimacy she had dreamed of since discovering herself in love with Sam Himmel at the age of fourteen. And the struggle of these emotions stirred her whole body, breaking up the face I knew, like a stone tossed through her reflection in water. Yet after a little, she gathered herself together and asked with an edge that made me both proud and afraid, "How much?"

"The income from one house," he said, already recovered and bitterly rehearsed in his second plan. His sex wasn't worth money, so he was selling his potential for harm outright.

"The price of a house," I countered. "You can buy your own somewhere else. I don't want you having any connection here. That's flat. All you deserve is your one thousand, to my mind, and some interest, but I'll be generous to get shut of you."

He was chewing slow. Like the decision was his alone to make. (June was kneading a handkerchief in her lap and valiantly holding back tears.) I wrapped my hand over the barrel of the shotgun. Then I said, "Or you can fight us in court, and win or lose get yourself shot the first free aim I get and damn prison anyway, I could use some time to catch up on my reading and I don't know as I wouldn't meet a pretty decent class of husband killers. And another thing, once we get this decided, you'll go away. Today. You will send us an address where we can mail a check."

And at that moment, with the sun reflecting off the kitchen windowsills, lighting halos over our heads of dry hair and the soft white glare around the steel toaster, in that little ten-by-fifteen foot pool of light I looked across at June and it struck me what I was doing. I was buying back our peace and our quiet life. Of course any fool could have seen that. But it felt like riding hard, leaning again over the neck of Ed's Last Chance, whipping my way ahead of Sam Himmel in order to get back to June beyond an invisible line; and the thought of the life we had lived without any second thought until an hour

ago, it was like a cut-glass bowl we were buying back out of hock to hold the love we had discovered for each other, the pleasure I took in appalling her, our evenings sipping rye in front of the TV, laughing at Dick Van Dyke or Steve Allen whether we thought them funny or not, or the time I had us about in fits (June saying bad things too), about what Nixon would be like in bed and never saying the other, how we'd each give a lot for a night with Jack Kennedy. . . . And that moment in our kitchen I was paying to plaster over the white wall of propriety the world was allowed to see of us—two old widowed sisters the town might talk about but respected for the veil of stoic mournfulness we wore so that when we were alone we could enjoy all the better, all the more privately, and triumphantly, a good drink and a better off-color joke, putting aside the mask of prudish naivete that marriage imposes as an inheritance from ages of unhappy women.

And we had none of that. We knew one another, for better or worse, and loved one another, for better or worse, and knew ourselves linked up dependent without shame or second thought, knowing being really human is just one generosity of self with another, and though the lack of sex and physical intimacy was real, though the absence of strong arms and feeling filled-up in the core was a formidable cost, and nothing either of us would ever undervalue, we'd been happy in our celibacy, wearing it like public armor around our whole, joined selves.

"All right," he said. "But it'll be this one. You'll sell this house."

"We will not," I said straight back.

"You just want it for meanness," June said, and he kind of started, but I wanted to hug her. "You just like the thought of us being put out. So no. *No*."

That did something. Her voice coming bitter in his face right after he'd had her, it was like half his bones had gone soft. He'd lost any leverage his sex could give him and I suspected he was suddenly just hoping to get the hell out of there before we changed our minds and offered him nothing. You could see it in his eyes—trying to look commanding, yet poised to run. So then I said to him, "One more thing. You're going to write to your son. Before you get any money from us I want in my hand a letter in your handwriting, in an unsealed envelope addressed to him. I'll mail it once I've read it. You'll tell him you're sorry for running out and how you decided it was better for him this way, and if you were wrong so be it, you had his best interests at heart."

This was hard for him to agree to. Not hard out of a man's pride but from a man's stumbling fear of such things. I told him again just what he was to write so he could adjust to the idea, and to look disgruntled and then only reluctant, to save face, and he finally agreed. I got an envelope and made him write the address so it would be in his own hand. He would send the contents later.

Well, he wasn't real hungry at that point. But June was the fascination. She was upset of course. Yet her eyes were cool and steady, suddenly carrying all that ballast in her gut. I stood up and put the gun away, then went out on the front porch while she made him some sandwiches for the road to wherever he was going. They came out and she gave him the package in brown paper with string bow-tied around it. The sun was getting tangled in the trees across the road, behind the peak of the house she and Selby had shared and now we rented to a lawyer from Sacramento who kept it for occasional weekends alone from his wife and children. There was maybe half a minute there while we said nothing—since there was nothing left to say—and June crossed her arms tight over her chest looking off toward the trees, and his glance met my glare. He mumbled something about sending an address. I slipped close to feeling sorry for him as we watched him walk down the road with that walk that even then you couldn't deny was none but a man's walk. A bus came and he waved it down and was gone.

We were quiet while he was walking, just watching him get smaller and smaller. A few cars and pickups passed. Tommy Bullock who just took over his father's insurance office, and then Mary Beider with three wild kids coming home from school and shopping, the girl looking about wrung out at age thirty-five what from her kindergarten class and raising Joe Noonan's sons from his marriage to poor Jeanne Blair. But that was all. It was supper time so it was just younger people, Winthrop's age or not even, who wouldn't have known Sam Himmel to see him, though no doubt they'd heard pieces of the stories. And once he was gone and we were just looking at the long shadows, I think we both had a moment wondering if he had been there at all. I went back inside for iced-tea glasses and a bottle of Old Grandad.

We kept the bottle behind the blossom-heavy trellis so we looked like a couple of old ladies drinking tea and watching the day age. We waved at people we knew driving by, and felt uncannily at home despite what had just happened—or just because of it, like we had purged a ghost. And then I asked June which house she thought we should sell though we both knew it would

be the old Brecht place that needed a new roof and that the couple living there—Dickie Mueller and his Mexican wife Teresa from Bakersfield, with two little girls already—had said more than once they hoped we'd sell.

Then we watched the leaves rattle in the sun and a new cooling breeze. The cicadas whirred down like tired dynamos while we grew pleasantly drunk and the unasked questions lost their urgency. Then June suggested we walk, and we walked back across the field to where the creek disappears behind the little hillock so no one would see us and we threw rocks at the water the way we had as girls when we'd wished we were boys. We watched the water from those stones explode sunset, and fall back into the flat flow of black water, and then we grew a little tired and returned to the house. We sat in the living room with our bottle and glasses to watch "Hawaiian Eye." And then during the commercials before "The Untouchables" came on, I reached over to June's hair.

"You have more gray," I said, pulling it around for her to see. Her chin cocked down to look, it was so close to her face, and her neck pooled with wrinkles. A gray hair was nothing new of course, we had never much hidden or even regretted our age, and our colors had steeled over about as one would expect. But I had wanted to touch her and still felt a little self-conscious after all that. And once she had her hair in her hand, I let my fingers rest on her arm. I did not know yet if I would ever be able to ask, or she to tell, what had happened in her bed, though we had talked about more painful things—only not ones I had forced upon her, and I think we both knew there was a rawness there that might never go away, but also might never irritate if we had the sense to keep our mouths shut. Yet in knowing she knew him, there was something like a physical intimacy between us that had not existed before. And as though to give this intimacy the thin body of words, I said, "Since we're getting old anyway, what do you say we move to San Francisco or even New Orleans and become wild women?"

I don't think I'd ever seen her so thankful for a joke. "We could quit wearing underwear," she said. (She *was* drunk.)

"You are a naughty old lady, June Winthrop."

"And put on bake sales for the children of whores."

Then she covered her eyes. She'd appalled herself with a new thought, which always made her weep when she was drinking. She flattened her hand over her breast, knowing there was no chance I would let her not say it.

"John Kennedy's going to Dallas in November. If we can go anywhere, why not . . ."

"What? Oh you wicked thing."

And then her eyes grew wide, and mildly panicked, like she was about to be sick but it was because she could not believe—you could see it—could not believe she was going to say what she was about to say: "Maybe we could fuck him."

And we laughed so hard and then cried so long with laughing, we missed the beginning of "The Untouchables" and shut it off and went out onto the back porch with the shotgun and a fresh bottle.

The moon was up and I set the empty bottle on a fence post. Sitting on our wicker chairs, between more sips of Old Grandad we took turns shooting with the barrel on the porch rail.

"I always wished I could do this better," she said, "get practice like boys did."

"Drunk as you are I'd say you're doing fine, dear."

She loaded and shot and chipped the side of the post. Then we were quiet a while. The moon and stars were out clear and clean. There was a moment when we both took a breath for the size of the sky. And then in that stillness, she said to the night, not like she wanted any answer, or any joke, "His shirt on the whole time"—like wondering out loud to herself.

She seemed to need to say it and had, and I had nothing to offer in explanation. So I loaded another shell into the gun. She lifted it to her shoulder, resting the barrel in the V formed by her two shoes against the rail. I reached over and let my hand settle on her shoulder.

"Don't jostle me."

Kidding, I gave her a little shake. And June, hitting the trigger before she'd properly aimed, she burst the bottle into a hail of moon-struck fragments, lighting up the clear night horizon like an exploding star. Each tiny piece was in slow motion, reflecting the full moon and our place beneath it in an expanding fan of crystal, like an explosion of hard and sibilant ice, like the bursting for thanks of a fragile heart.

3
(SUNRISE)

December 26, 1980

The pain took hold while falling, the cramp an invisible hook, suspending his plummet toward the porch steps. As his point of view descends he is aware of his arms and shoulders; numb and obtrusive as costume wings, his legs a blunt pedestal from which he topples.

His vision has shrunk to a neat rectangle, a bordering but invisible doorway through which he can see the real screen door, bearded with snow. And his son, wearing the blue and gold stocking cap sent by his grandmother, dragging the red plastic shovel from Uncle Arne in San Diego, which will skitter across the ice on the front steps, brittle with cold.

The boy's hand is on the screen. Eyes to the threshold. The opening door, from the father's perspective, is the bottom of a wedge.

The sun stencils shadows on the white, the roundness of his own gliding body, inside which the very fluids shift—breakfast of toast and sliver of mincemeat, the toothpaste still tanging his gums. And behind this precise awareness of the configuration of door, steps, house and sinking shadow's flesh, the thought whispers: How silly to die amid two clichés.

A heart attack while shovelling snow.

My life flashing before my eyes.

For beneath the crystalline sky, inside a green nylon jacket, gloves, ski pants and boots, while tires whisk melting snow from the street and his bundled son comes anxiously out to help his Papa, he remembers sitting in a mud puddle at age three, happy as only childhood's soft-lens can be happy in brown ooze, the sun kissing his belly while his mother balances atop the ladder, reaching to paint the upper corner of the new porch trellis, her sister tip-toe from the top step at the other end, each in old jeans, both unspeakably young, smooth, and brown-skinned. Her arms as rife with muscle as a lean boy; their hair woven tight into summer braids, wearing his father's plaid shirt, ripped free of sleeves. And beyond the corner of the house, between peeling clapboard and scrub oak, he saw his father passing, atop a tractor, a figure on the horizon of corrugated brown field, but not his own father—not his blood—but his father's murderer. Now dead himself, skim-milk blue in the county morgue, a parody of the body whose strong shoulders lifted him from earth, from the mud puddle when he came for lunch, his aunt coming

down the steps with sandwiches on yellow plates, the man dragging his mud-dripping diaper free of gravity and hurtling toward sky, square hands upstretched as his own body flies, touching the apex of earth's jealous reach, and then pulled back heavy beyond weight on the man's shoulder. And then the other father, coming from the barn, the man who contributed fair eyes and small teeth, a blunt nose, who reached across two laps to gently tousle his tow head.

The screen door has opened another seven inches. The boy is taking his first step over the threshold, leaning on the mesh as he's been told not to do in his rush to help. He is a boy after all not made to listen but to push and push even as his own father sinks, wondering calmly whether it will be the blow to the head, on the metal hand rail, or the cement steps, or the contracted heart, that will do the killing. And he recalls what he read this quiet morning, Margaret holding the boy in her lap while they sipped their coffee never suspecting this was their last time together as he read below the black-and-white pictures of American hostages taking communion in Iran—an aid group had sent "chest expanders" for their exercise. And he is amused to think, Better there than here. Better a hostage to fanatics than to a weak heart.

Then, as the boy's step stretches across wood, above whiteness, he remembers in a compact vision the day his blood father was murdered. And remembers weeping—in his first office, a year out of graduate school—over the other father's stilted and inexplicable letter. And he remembers, freshly tenured and married, driving south to reclaim Sam Himmel's body, the square hands, killed in a mining accident in Montana, noted by chance by Joe Noonan at the post office, reading the names of the dead in a New York paper, between headlines about the war his students were desperate to escape, the body counts of laborers beneath hard earth, of soldiers beneath tropical skies, on the motel radio, above the broken drawer, on his way to claim yet another corpse. And he remembers June's telephoned sobbing, desperate to have the body, as a widowed woman is desperate over the heart's property; and then his mother's coldness at the bare kitchen table—cool coffee in neat cups, tap of nail on saucer, clock on the shadowed sill, crumbs corralled in a thin hand—after he arrived with the body on the train, as though gathering back those broken bones were June's and his conspiracy against her.

And he remembers sleeping in his old room, trying to gather pieces of the argument two walls away despite the high school boys thundering engines

down the road, trying to live before they were called to die, and the next day, after the funeral; the walk with his aunt; his mother drinking bourbon and describing the violence, the bruises carefully placed so she could have no public complaint without wounding the dignity that was the last pillar beneath her life, drinking more himself than he could track, feeling a foundation falter. And why did he not ask then? Why not demand in words what he'd known for decades (the evidence facing him each morning from the mirror). Why with both bodies in the ground could he still not ask the question he had asked before a room full of women when he was ten?

Was it the lingering gut-fear of the adoptive father's violence, beating his jealousy into the bodies nearest at hand? He knows that violence still as the lump inside his cheek where his father's blow sent him to the ground tasting another man's blood.

The wound inside his cheek has rehealed and remounted at every important turn of his life. His first intimate word from Margaret; discovering in a dank Siena church the manuscript linking Kepler to an obscure Neapolitan monk; the announcement she was pregnant—in his excitement biting into delicate flesh, drooling the blood he will pass to his own son, who has never known beatings or loud anger, and if petted, is also kind, coming to help his father, dragging his red shovel into the brisk winter sun on this saddest day in the calendar for a child, under the dangling, dull-colored Christmas lights in a northern city. Coming to help a father raised in heat his son can recall only from visits to his robust Grannam Himmel and frail Great Aunt, like visiting an old married couple with Mother in comfortable jogging suits and white shorts, her sister wearing the same garden and house dresses she has sewn on identical apparition-thin patterns for over half a century—the reserved and perpetually scandalized wife to his mother's bravado, in her opinions, in her after-four drinking, like some retired general happy in his demonstrative liberation from routine.

And if crack of steps or cramping heart prove fatal, will the boy continue to visit? And will he hear the tale that has washed around that town for half a century, fading with the generation who cared about sisters marrying men they did not love, as this generation seeps into earth? Or is the tale dying now, as his own body's profound and feathery weight sinks to embrace its shadow mounting the snow, mounting steps and handrail like the spirit of a lover to the embrace of his vivid corpse?

He is halfway there, perhaps less, a rough 45-degree angle to earth so that body and shadow span equal angles from wrought iron, mimicking body, shadow, reflecting glass. At the right edge of vision he notes the rippling shadow of his stocking cap with its silly red ball, the prematurely rounded face, the shoulders riddled in width and shape as his outline traverses snow, tips of frozen shrub, edge of brick path, steps and rail.

And how fast would he fall toward the surface of little Io, nearest and quickest moon of Jupiter, whose mysteries have been the pivot to his career, to this house, to these soon-to-be fatal steps, this son now nearly free of screen and threshold?

He'd seen it first when he was eight, his initial glance through a telescope into the night sky. They had gone to the city, his father behind the wheel, stiff in collar and tie like a Sunday or funeral, his good felt hat brought from its box in the attic, his mother tight at his side in low heels and Sunday white dress, and gloves that fascinated him, conforming like white-wash to her rough hands. And himself, in his only suit, the cuffs and sleeves rolled back because it was bought to last. And as the city rose up on the horizon (he had seen it in movies, heard the older boys talk about buildings taller than trees), he felt his parents' sudden quiet, as though about to talk to him about sin.

They had walked excited miles, his hands raised into glove and rough palm as later he would dangle from bloody ropes, the air full of bus fumes and frying burger and tamales in little hand-pushed carts, drainage stench, then diving into the cool of May Company that felt bigger than their whole town. It was while his mother was looking at purses, as his father tried to appear natural fingering silk ties, it was then he wandered over the creaking wood floors into the display of telescopes.

It was a bright day outside, but they had built a little dome. The mouth was covered by a heavy curtain like at the movies, and while whoever was in charge was briefly away, he had slipped inside, and felt the universe, the very walls and roof of the store become darkness pocked with planets and stars. A large button glowed green on a plywood platform. He pushed it and comets trailed across the sky, stars falling in brief hails like cat claws scratching still water. To one side was a telescope, almost too long for the little space, with a footstool before it. He sat with his knees tucked to his chest and closed one eye. For his last birthday, his Uncle Arne had given him a book about the stars. Each page was a map of the sky at various dates in the year. He'd sat out nights with a lantern turned low, comparing book to sky and sky to book,

memorizing constellations: Perseus and Cassiopeia swinging around one another, spring to summer up over the northern horizon, then swinging back in autumn, chasing Draco off east, Cerberus and Hercules, Sagitta and Pisces, calmly turning while Sagittarius runs shooting bull and scorpion—and lumbering Jupiter, largest planet of all, and the fastest spinning, making its yearly way from one step of the Zodiac to the next . . . and speaking out loud he would let each name roll around his mouth a dozen times to make vision and sound synonymous in his mind, then discovering that a two-foot piece of downspout worked like a telescope, cutting a ring of sky that appeared enlarged.

And while he had looked back from the yard to see his mother and father reading in the living room, exchanging no words under their separate lamps, or his mother at her sewing machine while his father listened to the progress of the wars in Spain and China, he could also look up at the face of a sardonically smiling moon, or abandon all attention to one eye trying to decipher the rings he knew surrounded yellow Saturn, the ones he'd read that Galileo thought he'd only imagined because they grew so thin before he died, and Mars' redness, ever hoping for the occasional miracle: falling stars across his drain-pipe view.

A man named Grote Reber (he'd read on the next-to-last page of the city paper), had built a metal dish in his back yard, and recorded radio waves from the Milky Way. And so he had believed that if he stared long and hard enough, cutting out of his mind the stitch-stitching of his mother's machine, the radio's scratchy "Babes in Arms," if he could silence the sough of night wind through dry leaves, then he would hear those waves, the very galaxy speaking, making of his ears a crystal of attention to the message bombarding the sky.

In the little black dome, out of surprise, and excitement, he discovered just such stillness, but here that balanced concentration only revealed the heavens as a trick of domed tin, painted blue-black and cookie-cut with the constellations, and another dome behind it painted white and illuminated by a ring of tiny bulbs. He stood atop the little footstool and reached to the shape of Jupiter and her visible moons: he could name them by size—hulking Ganymede rivalling Mercury; Callisto, Io, and tiny Europa, no bigger than a hole in a button. Like a book of Braille they had passed around at school, he felt these cuts, and that he would never quite comprehend. Except that they were a lie, and the telescope had unmasked it. And it was perhaps then, already, that his

attention, and fascination, shifted from the stars themselves to why people came to draw designs around their movements.

"Hey there Galileo Jones." His mother, her white gloves luminous, holding the black curtain; she was smiling at him through the scar in the darkness that revealed the daylight world of wallets and wristwatches.

"I want a telescope. A real one. Not justa pipe. I been saving my allowance every week. I have a dollar and thirty-seven cents. Is that enough?"

"Not for the kind I think you mean. Like the one here?"

"Yes. Or bigger."

"We'll see."

"Should I ask Papa?"

"No. We'll see—you and me, honey. Mama has her egg money."

"I know. You said me before."

"Told you before. No baby talk now. You can't get things that way. Come along."

And then the veiled world outside, while his senses adjusted to the light, to the voice of a man irritated with a clerk, the exhausted Mexican woman dusting high shelves, cracks in floor tile, the choking air between tables of folded fabric—the tedium required to sustain this peculiar life on this unprecedented planet. Trick or not, he longed to be back inside the dome—in the cool and dark rather than holding his mother's gloved hand, his father steps ahead on the sidewalk, escaping some argument enacted while he was touching Io . . . the noise and heat and glare carrying rustling bags and swinging boxes.

They had a terrible fight that evening. He was in the yard with his drain pipe. The windows were open to the heat yet he managed to attend to locating Centaurus in a sky so clear it was misty with stars, until his ears were snagged: "You spoil him bad. You'll make a little woman of him and won't be worth a lick of work."

"It isn't your say. It isn't your money. And work the way you mean it, that isn't for Winthrop."

"No. There's a whole lot's not mine I guess."

"Damn you. *Damn* you."

And then he lowered the pipe to cut out a round of light through the sewing-room window, a circle of his mother pulling down the glass and throwing a finger in his father's face, her jaw going taut, the mouth tendoned and ugly. Yet the words still reached him. Like at the theater that time the

sound went bad, and he could see Mickey Rooney singing, but the sound in the room was just people getting mad and yelling at Floyd Blair asleep behind the hole in the back wall; he could hear their voices escaping into the dining room, into the kitchen where the windows were open echoing back off the barn while the circle of his vision was somehow closer and more accurate than being there, as though he could feel through the air his father grabbing her wrist and her face rigid with refusal to show pain. And as in the past, he wanted to kill him. As in the past, he ran, finding his feet before he knew himself running hard across the grass, across the plowed rows, stomping the luminous green blades into dullness, and then swinging the pipe, wielding his own tunnel of vision as a club to crush each spray of new life, raising fluorescent dust, knowing next day he would be beaten and already savoring each blow as a proof of his own defiance: defiance of the man, and of the man he himself would have to become, as though this violence against the earth were an answer to the very blows it would bring.

But the next day, he was not beaten. From his window he saw his father discover the destruction, slam a fist into denimmed thigh before jamming both hands into big pockets and tramping to the barn. Later, as the heat settled into its monotonous gaze, a truck from May Company stopped in the road. A young man in a cap sprang from the open door bearing a box made of blazing white cardboard. And even once his mother, on the porch, had signed where the young man pointed, and the young man plucked a honeysuckle from the trellis to suck the sweet, and she handed over the heavy box—about the length and thickness of a man's leg—into his uplifted arms, saying, "I hope you discover whole new worlds with this, Winthrop," still he could not quite understand what his heart already dared to know.

She spread a clean white cloth over the kitchen table so they would not lose any parts; and as she unfolded the detailed map of black and white instructions, the thought came to him, his hand resting cupped over the white metal tube: I am only eight. It is 1939, I am eight years old, and I already have all I ever wanted, or ever will want. And it is a gift from my mother; and I am just a boy. But I will grow up (his heart pausing), and things will change. And he wondered if that would be a confusion. A longing. For this busy stillness—mother and son—that would last throughout life.

He was wrong of course. He would want other things: a green bicycle, a girl with big teeth in the sixth grade, scholarships, a woman who would reveal to him his own undiscovered body and like some sixteenth-century

explorer of stars or continents, by right of discovery claim him as her husband . . . the regular rotation in a man's life of desiring material and intangible things, with only a hint of the difference—an insight with which women would seem to him born.

Particularly Margaret. Particularly his wife.

For in her he would know again that fascination of evenings with his telescope set at the window of his mother's sewing room. After closing his heart for sixteen years, since his father had found him unworthy even of his rage, and then disappeared, he would feel her pry open that door he had unwittingly wanted to see crack light, when she explored in words, and touch, the prismatic corridors of the heart, announcing what she thought of him, or herself, of them together with the confidence, in his ears, of a meticulous theory of cosmic inception, credible in the telling, inevitable in afterthought.

On their second date, she talked to him about Stevenson's rise, and the fall of McCarthy, then of friends working among Poles who still blamed Yalta on the Democrats. She weaved together the war then raging over the Suez, the drop and rebound in the stock market following Eisenhower's speech, and the city's cap on the mill rate, constructing a web so tight he wondered aloud if he could drink his coffee without risking the lives of Egyptian school girls. She glanced at the TV, at Bob Barker crowning the Queen for a Day, then said to him, No you can't, but finished it with a wry laugh.

It was their first year in graduate school, both country-raised and new to the northern midwest. There was a pause, and in the pool of comfort created when she laughed at the vehemence of her own beliefs, he asked, "Why did you choose me? At that party, there were much better looking boys. They were interested in you."

It was 1956. A nearly unprecedented woman in the field of Political Economy, she wore her hair back tight, her blouses and jackets always square-shouldered, a decade out of fashion. She was pretty in a style conventional in those years, yet few people saw it because her face, her intelligent eye, made a lasting impression that it mattered much less what others saw in her than what she chose to acknowledge in them. He had thought her beautiful, though untouchable, like Io, or a hazily crescent moon. And so he'd thought it mere chance her drifting toward his side of the room, conversing with others, dawdling in each orbit and leaving each a sample of her full, deep laugh, marking a path through the drunken crowd in the loud basement bar, while he found himself staying put, unconsciously waiting.

"Because I believe you're kind. Despite whatever you've experienced. In a man, I think that's beauty."

And he had started, biting into the old lump so hard that a thread of blood appeared between his lips. More confusing, his eyes began to run. She pressed a napkin to his mouth. Her other hand touched his wrist on the table.

They were in a cafe near the Capitol. Men in jackets and ties, secretaries in white blouses and overcoats stood in line for coffee or sat at a half dozen tables raising a din of talk and china and utensils. The line waiting to be served had grown back to their table, walling them into a corner, the street windows clouded with frost on the outside and breath within. The thing growing in himself, the recognition, pushed to break out and when it did all faces would turn and laugh, a nightmare conspiracy of humiliation.

The scorn of boys in school, his father's cutting indifference, all gathering to build a shell, a backlit dome of loneliness, so that he touched the earth only in moments of sickening effort: a circle of boys kicking the life from a road-wounded cat, echoing the jeers around fights, unable to protect a pig fated for slaughter; and there in a child's awareness—forgotten and distorted, he knows, in retrospect—knowing boyhood as the lens transforming the mother's child into the misshapen man. And afterwards praying, as antidote for the nausea, that a cloudless night would unveil the stars and he could sit amid the *kwisss* of his mother's scissors through fabric, her low hum behind his back, his eye fed like hunger with a view of bright, serene planets—the eyepiece like the mirror of rain puddles offering up the visible heavens, cupping the sky in its silvery face.

Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Europa and Io. Patient as memory, and then Margaret saying, as he held their three-week-old son, "You're a good man, Win. But sometimes I wonder if you didn't fall out of the sky and you're just learning to be human, and have the sense to take all our best traits first." And they had laughed, while little Selby slept serene as a space traveller dozing from the long ride; laughed too long not to show there was a truth here neither felt prepared to open. On the very night, after the coupling she would later say had been conception, she'd pronounced him good, but lonely.

"I'm with you," he said. "I love you. You know that."

"In the way you know how. I've told you before."

"Yes."

"Is it ever loneliness to you?"

"Is it . . ."

"Do you feel something missing?"

"I'm happy. Are you?"

"Yes. Happier than I ever really expected to be with a man. I've told you. It's either you or a woman and the other just doesn't work for me."

"I guess I should be thankful."

"Oh, yes. Yes, you should." And they had laughed, rolling back into one another.

And it had worked. Nine years of marriage, after living together for fourteen because they'd both come from houses where marriage was a door locked from the outside by one's own hand. And then, in 1972, at the age of forty-one, his sudden and slightly panicked desire for a child, coming on him like a night sweat. She was slow to agree. And then only once it was understood he would bear the brunt of the care. (She was not giving up her career for a child he wanted more than she, not when he had tenure, and a life's worth of reputation, while she marched back to her office to resell herself to her clients every working day.) So he managed his schedule, and bore the good- and bad-humored stares—the hallway whispering—when he came to office hours and library with Selby in a stroller or strapped to his chest.

And while Margaret loved the boy deeply, he also felt her love for himself renewed. She had patched together the story from his rare and reluctant retelling—the mixed paternity, the small-town rumors—but she told him, she wondered at the detachment, even indifference in his voice. Giving the boy that name had seemed to her a hopeful sign. But before witnessing it, she'd never suspected the boldness of his fatherhood, whenever it was a choice between his career, and what he knew to be right for his boy. And yet she did not feel excluded. Never felt, she told him, that by giving him more responsibility for the child, she had given away her rights.

Except when Selby could not be consoled. Except when his blood-red grimace and trembling screams brought her running to drop this madness into his arms, cursing at him to *do* something. And then, taking the child beyond the reach of her rage, a flicker of disgust cast a shadow over his face, turning to soothe their baby, calming the battle of bloods inside the child's skin.

And so the boy had always been attached to his father, while mildly in awe of a mother he knew in business suits, talking to him across her morning coffee, or allowing him to sit quietly, drawing on a yellow pad, while she worked.

And now this boy, well adjusted as best they can tell, healthy in his five-year-old body and mind, whose image of masculinity will include his father at sink and stove, searching library shelves and yellowed manuscripts, sorting laundry, a boy who will not remember the nation at war, and whose first memory of a President will be of the one freshly elected, who believes the universe—planets, stars, black holes and comets—was created in seven days; this boy is stepping free of the door that has grooved a fan of snow flat as a phonograph album across the landing, standing in his thick boots, gripping his sun-brightened shovel, the other hand a starburst as his mouth opens, his eyes wide and hurt and curious watching his Papa fall toward earth.

The moment their eyes meet, in this last millisecond before impact, the spell that has wrapped him in this comforting slow-motion is broken; pupils to pupils, he is locked back into the gravitational field of shared duration. The sounds of the world come back; he is nowhere but here in his hurt and precipitous girth of body, suddenly falling into real time.

Thus the new configuration is quick, and blunt, and brutal.

His brow, just above the right eye, catches a curved end of cold wrought iron and is cut to bone. His boots slip backwards on the ice as he traverses the last degrees and though he tries with all his will to make his body turn, his forehead hits the corner of one step, his chest another, while his neck bends at the impact, jamming chin across ice and concrete.

He comes to rest in a position that despite the black pain, even now, he knows for comic. His bulky jacket keeps his chest shelved on the bottom step, while his head is jammed, chin and brow, into the angle of another. Blood winds through his right eyebrow, over the lid, and clogs half his vision. The remainder of his body is bent backwards, stretched down the brick walk, like a damp newspaper, like a fish tossed cruelly to shore.

Skidding boots. Then he feels his son's small hands trying to lift him by his collar, raising and dropping his chin against the step. Then the boy grabs his stocking cap, pops it from his head and falls backwards.

But all of these sounds and sensations are conveyed in a kind of pantomime, as though sound itself were still missing one dimension, coming to him from a distance behind the gray blur of pain, like his mother's angry voice dodging walls, escaping through windows. And there remains a mysterious patience throughout his body. His limbs are like anchors in the earth's grip, holding him tight to its hard breast.

For there will be no hope for his exquisitely tentative life until someone

else starts the process. And it is Selby, a son who has never been taught the bullheaded independence that makes manhood a fool's errand, it is his quick acceptance of his impotence to help his Papa that brings out a scream, high and piercing and hysterical, which in turn brings heavier steps, from across the street, down the front stairwell, and so brings the several pairs of hands, what seems a centipede of helpful limbs turning him over, then lifting him down onto the walk before silhouettes lean in, and they begin pounding on his chest as a man's scratchy holiday mouth, bitter with late sleep and cigarettes, covers his.

He does not experience his body at any distance, as he has heard others report. He has rarely felt so fully inside it. Though his eyes are closed, he feels his boy plop down sobbing at his head, his little legs spread so that his ankles rest against his Papa's shoulders, tugging at his hair as though everything will be fine if he can just get his head into his lap.

And there is Margaret. Her voice from high above, cool and insistent as she talks into the phone from the doorway, surely trailing cord back into the front room, talking first to one ambulance service, and then another, because she is a business woman and you don't rely on a single source. And here is his neighbor, Bess Stokowski, who works for the fire department and likes to take Selby to the park with her lover to sail boats, or skate in winter, and now is bearing down her compact weight on his chest while giving expert instruction to Abel Moran, his neighbor from across the street. And Abel's lonely, widower's breath fills his aching lungs.

As they work, he thinks, I have been a reliable neighbor, a loving husband, a good father. For here they are, beating and breathing the very life back into me, to testify to love fairly earned.

And then a truth, brightening the sky above his one unbloodied eyelid, raising that veil to a new height: It is not for my books, for my discoveries in seventeenth-century cosmology that I will be most importantly remembered, nor for the conference papers or professional debates. I will be the man who helped Roger Ortiz change his tire when he was late for work in his clean business suit; I will be the man the neighborhood children flock to on clear summer nights, trailing mothers and fathers, to hear the workings of the universe and peek through a telescope four decades old. And I will be the man to whom a woman who has fought for respect every day of her life, the man she comes thankfully home to. The man a boy will remember as a friend as well as a father. And I will be the son who bore that boy in his arms,

bringing him to his grandmother's home, and ascending the sunbleached steps offered that squirming life as redemption of the suffering of the past, in the repetition of a name, murdered over an archaic idea of progeny, and so remembered as the man who said without saying, as its grandmother took the child into her strong old hands—What does it matter who was father? Who can care even to ask when it has resulted in this?

Sensing these things, he is filled with a sudden wave of resignation, as though watching his soul shake hands with death. And yet he is perfectly aware of the cold air and brash sunshine, shadowed by caring bodies, and touched intimately, as though in saving his life they were engaged in some sadly wholesome configuration of group sex—conceiving not a new life, but his own. And sensing the four hearts and eight hands working so intently for him, he feels an approximation of the dance of Jupiter and her moons, sees the circling in a cold universe, the proximity that is a kind of diagram of love in the regular wax and wane around a behemoth planet.

While a strong woman's hands thump his chest, surely causing a bruise as painless as a blush, while a man abject in solitude presses lips to lips and shares a single volume of air, and while his boy strokes his thinning hair, and while his wife's controlled outrage discovers one emergency room overfull, and dials again to invoke another, he sees them all as loving satellites, circling his body that has grown enormous, bloated with the haughtiness of death. And he feels the earth turning beneath him. Feels the eon-long spin and sweep of stars and planets and galaxies within which these careful bodies turn around his own, in submission to his need, in seduction of his life from its remote black hole.

And feeling this, feeling the Ptolemaic complexity of epicycles upon peripheries of orbits in an intractable play of co- and eccentric circles, the specifics of the past fly away, cast free by the centrifugal force of the Now. He watches the faces of his two fathers, the unexpected letter, the worn hands lifting his child's body, the muscled torsos straining red, his mother's graying hairs, the back yard trimmed in corn stalks, children leaping into the slow creek, an eddy of dust kicked up by school boys on a country road, his first diploma, the jar where he kept scavenged pennies, a bent rain gutter dripping into a puddle brilliant as pale mercury, a callus on his right hand after weeding for his mother, the sweat on a lover's brow in sex, an afternoon coffee on Sproul Plaza, a bleeding pig shoulder, blue-pale cheeks under morgue light, his blood father's unnaturally angled neck atop an old door carried from the

field, days tangled in white sheets and the limbs of the woman he would marry, the caress of skin, the effort of sex, the inexpressible suck of mouth on mouth, soul on soul—even these are suddenly cast off and spin in a wildly plummeting maelstrom, a fragment belt merely concentric with the good hands and warm hearts turning upon his own cold center; and as this happens, as all that he knows beyond this moment flies away, the He-Himself rises, comes up responsive and embracing not so much to live, as simply to be worthy of centering this intimate dance.

It's beating.

Oh, God.

Papa, Papa don' die!

My good bloody God.

And then the siren. And Margaret's steps to the sidewalk.

While the bustle of uniformed strength gathers around him. As he is lifted and strapped and caressed. As the plastic mask is banded to his face he feels his remotest parts wakening to a soft warmth, as though from frostbite, as though, lightyears away, they are just being reached by a hopeful probe sending back data that will open the wide worlds of fingers, hands, feet, as his own life grows deeper and wider inside the galaxy of his skin; and as his heart expands with warmth, it reaches out, drawing into its orbit all the rest of his neighbors, the adjoining blocks, and finally the widespread city that has sent its own to bring him home from a cold, cold distance.

He is jolted into the back of the van. Doors thup shut. Siren resounds and his clear eye cracks open to see light flash red across windows, reflected back from windows all down the worried street, and finally outlining the face of the young man at his side—unfamiliar, yet intimate as the hand bracing his arm in a cupped grip. The face smiles. It says, You're lucky, bud. You got friends. And smiles again.

It seems so simple. So silly really. So obvious throughout the years of tracking stars.

Yes, Io Jupiter
Moon Earth
June Elizabeth
June Sam
Selby Elizabeth
June Selby
Sam Elizabeth
Winthrop Elizabeth
June Elizabeth
Winthrop Margaret
Selby Winthrop
Selby Elizabeth

and every possible
combination of all with each and each with one another. Take one away, and all remaining are proportionately diminished; darken one, and each soul is lessened in the integrity of its place within the wider constellation. And so the only question, the only worthwhile inquiry is into these relations—to contemplate the myriad moments of syzygy, when the relation of one to one becomes the relation of one to one to a third, and the alignment of three casts the shadow of two upon the face of another in a linkage as exquisite as it is temporary.

If his limbs now would only obey his will, he would return the young man's grip, feel muscle straining toward muscle, pulling him back toward real life, which is any life able to touch another configuration of lives, a story told by this young man, to his lover, or wife, or son, if he can only marshal the will to say something memorable, something to touch this soul, to warm it with light and cast a shadow on a third sending his message spinning into countless other orbits. He moans, the sound muffled under the plastic dome covering nose and mouth; the young man leans over, and now he sees the joke—sees how the universe has tricked him.

He sees that the face straining toward his is only his own straining toward itself—his own mix of Elizabeth Winthrop's with Selby Anderson's blood, yet the brow intent and kind as the nephew of June Anderson would invariably be, the jaw sharply defined and muscled as could not but be trained into the adoptive son of Sam Himmel.

But no words come out. His tongue is swollen, a dead animal bloated tight inside its own den. The young hand carefully frees the matted hair from his bloody brow.

"There'll be time to talk later. Close your eyes twice if you're uncomfortable."

He rolls his head side to side.

"Okay. It's no limo, just a lot more expensive."

And he closes his eye tight to signal a laugh, to say he has caught this missile cast between the stringed orbits of ambulance attendants. And he keeps his eyes closed, feeling pitch and acceleration, seeing the flashing lights through his eyelids. Then he imagines Margaret and Selby and neighbors bundling into cars to follow because they must be there; they must be with him. And he hears the siren stopping traffic, overriding green and yellow

lights, breaking through red, as it tells the city—We've got him. He was in danger of spinning out of control, but he's back with us now.

He blinks his eye tight again. And the young man glances through the window, at pedestrians on tip toe, gawking to look inside.

"Ambulance is kind of like a fire. Everybody pays attention. Used to make me all uptight before I got in the service. Now I hear that whine I just think, Somebody's gettin' taken care of. It's all that quiet what's dangerous. A siren goin', you know things are getting better from what they were."

The man continues looking upon the passing streets, the speed and commotion and panic of drivers, familiar to him as the view from an office desk. Then he gazes back down at his ward: "That's a nice young son you got. My little girl's about his age. They keep you on your toes, don't they?" (He nods.) "Pretty wife too. Mine, she's at her sister's today. Time I get home, she'll be all full of what her sister's husband bought them for Christmas, or some big vacation. Hey, you're definitely better. You got your grip back. All right, you hang on. We're about there anyway."

And already he knows he will later recall and miss this moment, holding firm to a man serene before death, and balancing upon his body the hopes and worry of friends and family. The trick will be to sustain this awareness of where he fits, among loved ones, and the very stars, once the drama has faded, like trying to sense the planet's whirling rotation, its place in a dance so elegant it feels like sitting still.

So he grips the arm of another as doors swing open, and the cold hits his lungs, and brightens his crusted eyelid, as his body is trundled into winter sun.