

STEVEN W. FLORES

THE PAIN OF BECOMING

I keep wondering what will come first: a letter from the boy or one from the U.S. Army. I'd be a liar if I said that I wasn't afraid of the mailbox, or that I didn't have horrible nightmares some nights. There's this one that recurs where I'm teaching class and all my normal students are there, but also Matthew's charred body, staring wide-eyed at me from the middle of the room. His mouth is open, as if about to speak, but I'll never know what he wants to tell me. That's the point of a nightmare, I suppose: to bring forth your deepest fears and make them plain.

A few years ago, Gary down at the Pump 'N' Munch caught word that Matthew had joined up, and there hasn't been a day gone by that I haven't wondered whether he's alive or dead. He could be in Iraq or Afghanistan, or he could be home here on R&R and I wouldn't know the difference. The Army keeps a tight lid on that information, and Matthew no longer speaks to me.

I can tell you something about life, or at least my life: it happens slowly, slowly, then all at once. You'll end up somewhere you never imagined, but you'll still recognize it as your own doing. That's just the way of things, I suppose. You make your bed. You lie in it. You drink yourself to sleep.

It was three a.m. when the boy came in, pissed-drunk. He had this girl with him who just couldn't keep quiet. I poured a little Scotch, put *Harvest* on my headphones and paged through my midterms on *Gatsby*. I tried to relax, but the whole thing just ate at me. At five, I decided I might as well get up. I threw together a quick breakfast for the both of us—eggs for protein, Gatorade for electrolytes, black coffee. The kid was going to sweat all of that shit out of his system whether he liked it or not.

I set the steaming plates on the table and walked to his door. With all the noise I was making in the kitchen, I considered the girl fairly warned. I opened Matthew's door and flicked the lights on and off. I could see the empty spot next to Matthew where the girl had been. I made a sound like a starting bell. "*Ding! Ding! Ding!* Get up Matthew. Get up. Time to put the gloves on."

He reached absently for the girl beside him and started when he realized she wasn't there. He looked like hell. His eyes were bloodshot and swollen, his blond hair matted by sweat to his face. He seemed not to know where he was for a second, and his head shot around the room before it stopped on me. "What the fuck?" he said. "It's five o'clock. Get the hell out of my room!" There was a poster of Jack Kerouac on the wall behind him that said something about being "mad to live." I remembered feeling that way once, so I tried not to be too hard on him. "Some night!" I said. "Now hurry up and get ready. Manny's opens at eight, and we have to get there early if we want to get a few rounds in."

Not another word passed between us about the girl. That's what he liked about me: the don't-ask-don't-tell relationship. I asked him nothing and he told me nothing until there wasn't much of a relationship. I was always terrified that the kid was going to mess his life up, but every time I tried to tell him, he'd pack up his stuff and head back to his mom's. I had to reach him in bits and pieces. Boxing was one of those pieces.

132 But that morning, he hated me for waking him up. I could see the anger all over him. "These eggs taste like shit," he said and spit them out on his plate. It was a defiance he wouldn't try at his mother's. Then again, his mother was a good cook with a proper kitchen now that she was remarried to an Air Force man, retired and double-dipping on his pension. I had to hand it to her. There he was with two salaries, while I was barely holding onto my one at the community college. The boy made no secret of the fact that things were much better at his mom's house. When he got his license, he started showing up later and later, until most weekends I didn't see him at all until Saturday morning.

The boy was spoiled. I still stand by that. He took what he wanted from life and left the rest. Would he grow to feel entitled? Was his mother raising him to be waited on hand and foot? Or was he putting me on? Maybe he was acting out to show me he hated me, rather than telling me straight out. Maybe I wasn't listening to him. It was difficult to say. I only saw him every other weekend, and in the time between he was becoming a mystery to me. He was ashamed of me—I knew that much—and he was angry as hell.

It was cold out that February morning, and the air smelled like oatmeal from the Quaker Oats plant in the city. When we were young and Matthew was a baby, we bought our first house not far from the plant and would wake up to the smell of old oatmeal, no matter what Caroline was cooking.

It was a little house with a yard and a flower patch and a picket fence I'd always meant to paint. Years later, when we passed the house on our trips to Manny's, the boy never mentioned it. Soon enough, I learned that he didn't want to remember, and when I learned that, I thought it was no use to keep mentioning it.

On the interstate that morning, the boy was still answering my questions with one-word replies. How's school? *Fine*. How's your mother? *Good*. Have you found a job anywhere? *No*. Was she anyone special? Silence. I could see the embarrassment wash over his face. "Listen," I said, "I hope she was at least good-looking. Maybe even someone you cared about. Because it only takes one time." The way he looked at me, I knew I should shut up. One more word and there would be a fight.

Manny's was a little space on the second floor of a brick building in the Czech Village. There was a small deli underneath and empty commercial space above. The gym itself had two rings in the center with heavy bags and speed bags around the side. It was cold when we got there. I fired up the heater, and the place filled with the familiar smell of sweat and ammonia within minutes.

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The boy finished skipping rope and wrapped his hands over and over again, taking water each time. I sat with my elbows on my knees, resting my forehead on my hands. Before the boy was born, I used to box every morning. Then Caroline drank more and I drank more, and I took up smoking between classes and boxed less and less. I took up life in a chair. I lived as an adjunct. Before I knew it, I was thirty-eight and light of wind with a full gut. I tried to tell the boy to discipline himself. I told him that he was lucky to learn so young.

"Every great talent unfolds itself in fighting," I used to say. "The truth comes when you're hit yet still standing. You discover that you haven't fallen to pieces. More than that, you *refuse* to fall to pieces. Boxing is a form of self-creation. In boxing lies the pain of becoming."

I believed every word of it then. I told myself that the great tragedy of my youth was that I never learned to box; that somehow things would have been different had I learned. My mother used to always ask why someone with *my* brains would volunteer to get hit in the head, and Caroline used to give me shit all the time about my face being too classically handsome to be "rear-ranged." After the boy was born, boxing got me out of the house. And in

those days, Caroline preferred me getting out to me being home. Well, that and the fact that she didn't really mind my face being a little rearranged, now that we had the kid.

It wasn't long after Matthew was born that we bought the house and I started teaching full-time at the community college. Most days, I'd go straight to the gym after class. Sometimes, when it got dark, I turned out all the lights except for the little generator and boxed with my shadow looming on the wall.

When Matthew was nine, Caroline picked him up from school and drove him to Illinois where they stayed with her mother. That was after one of our fights at Sullivan's. Caroline sprayed beer in my face and I returned the favor, and then a buddy of mine dragged me out to his car and made me sleep on his couch. I remember how it felt to be dragged away from her, and it feels like that's where my life started to turn into what it is now. The pain of becoming, and the pain of what we've become. Eight years later, my son and I spent our last car ride together in silence. The kid was disgusted with me to be sure, but mostly I think he was just tired. Had I known we would never talk again, I would have let up on him. I would have tried to make peace.

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"You ready?" I said. The boy rolled his eyes and hawked spit into the trash can. "One minute on each bag," I said and hit the speakers. His favorite band, Nirvana. The boy took off around the bags and I followed. I was winded by the time I reached the third bag and pushed through each of my punches to make it sound like I was doing more than I was. The boy's punches were crisp and clean, each one delivered with a pneumatic hiss. When he got to the speed bags, though, he was missing quite a bit. I wondered if he was just hung over or if he'd been getting high as well. I didn't say anything, though. I just kept pulling through my punches, hoping that the boy would be too concentrated on his own misses to notice.

We'd only run the bags once and the boy was already dripping sweat. "Now you're doing all right," I said. "Sweatin' like a whore in church!" He wiped the sweat from his forehead on the back of his bag gloves and gave me a fuck-you sneer. "It's the coffee," I said. "It's thermogenic. Cus D'Amato gave it to Tyson and made him run in a goddamned snowsuit."

"That's great," the kid said. "How soon until I start raping women and biting people's ears off?"

"That's not the point," I said, but the kid just shrugged. He went to doing footwork around the bags for a while, and I turned the music up and took

coffee and water. When I felt composed enough, I put the striking pads on and got into the ring. I smacked them together loudly three times and said, "All right, pretty boy. You might do okay on that bag, but let's see what you got in the ring." I did my best Liston double-cross and trotted backward around the ropes. For the first time, the boy cracked a grin. "Should I put the heavy gloves on?" he said. I turned the pads in and motioned toward my face. "Bring whatever you got," I said.

The boy took off his shirt and laced up his fourteen-ounce gloves. He was as tall as me but a welterweight at best, and still at that age where his metabolism took care of everything. I was amazed that he could swing the heavy gloves so fast without tiring. He was always a tough kid, and I wish now I would have told him so. When he got in the ring, he was grinning like he'd decided to give me a break for once. "All right," I said, "You give me all you've got here, and I'll take you out to Stella's. Then you can go back to sleep until you meet up with that girlfriend of yours."

"She's not my girlfriend," the boy said.

"You keep treating her like that and she'll think she is."

The kid turned red and clenched his jaw. He could see right through my humor to the fact of himself. He knew he was the accident that held his mother and me together when we should have been apart. I can see that now, how it must have hurt him, but I couldn't see it then. I loved the boy, and I didn't want him making the same mistakes I had made.

He began doing footwork around the ring, moving swiftly and throwing out jab-cross combinations. I smacked the pads together and came toward the boy aggressively, shuffling my feet and dancing around him. The boy was quick and threw sharp punches at the pads that jostled my shoulders. Jab, cross, jab move. Jab, jab, cross move. Each punch delivered with a quick hiss, his blond hair flying up off his head. I turned the pads sideways, and the boy threw hooks at me right and left. "You're all arms," I said. "The power comes from your hips. Do it slower until you get it right." The boy threw hook after hook wildly, still all arms but all hips now, too. I sidestepped him and ran one of the pads over his head. "Fight smart, now," I said. "Fight with your head."

The boy immediately dropped his left hand and leaned in like Ali.

"You better be damned quick if you're fighting like that," I said. "Somebody hits that pencil neck of yours, the jugular vein goes and it's lights out. Pucker up for the canvas."

"I am quick," the boy said. "I've just been rope-a-doping."

He came at me recklessly, dancing around, testing his range. He was damn quick, but I had a little reach on him, and when he dropped his shoulder, I dropped low and made a phantom hook under his chin. "Just teed off on you there. Turned you into a Pez dispenser, buddy!"

He backed up, and I could see his face redden and his jaw clench. The kid had a damned awful temper sometimes. He was always fighting at school and at the skate park. I told him to fight with his head again, but he came back at me faster than before. Before long, though, he exhausted himself and dropped his shoulder, and it was easy for me to cuff one of the pads off the side of his face.

"Dammit, Matthew. Keep your guard up. Your head's vulnerable. I want you to look like you're playing peekaboo."

The kid gave me a lunatic smile I'll never forget. "Fuck you," he said. "You think you can just hit me because I'm not fighting the way you want to fight. I don't give a shit about what you think. You've never even been in a fight."

136 "Matthew, I didn't hit you. I grazed you. I didn't mean to, you moved into it. And I'm not teaching you to fight, I'm teaching you to box. Boxing is an art form, something that requires you to use your head. Do you think you can do that? Or are you still stoned from last night?"

The kid unlaced his gloves with his teeth and dropped them over the ropes. "You think you can teach me to respect you by taking me here and hitting me in the head? You're wrong. I don't respect you. Not at all. You're not even a boxer. You're just a drunk that likes to pretend."

"I am not a drunk."

"Yeah? How many times did you kick Mom's door in?"

"Whose door?"

The boy turned his back on me and walked to his corner.

"That was my own fucking house, Matthew! She changed the locks on—"

"You were drunk. You disappeared."

"I was a *teacher*, Matthew. I went to conferences. Teaching conferences."

The kid scoffed. "Right," he said. "A teacher. Well teach me, then. Put on your gloves."

My face went numb. The blood throbbed in my temples. The last time I went toe-to-toe with the kid, he was a freshman just starting to box and I'd let him use me for target practice. I stood there frozen.

The kid walked to the corner of the ring. He shoved his fingers down his throat and puked yellow foam into the bucket. “Jesus Christ, Matthew,” I said. He glared at me with hazel eyes that reminded me of his mother. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand wraps and took a long pull of water. “Wrap your hands,” he said.

“Matthew, I’m not going to wrap my hands. I’m not going to hit you! You can show me what you want to show me, but I’m not going to hit you.”

“I knew you were a coward,” he said. “You just like to pretend.”

I lost it a little bit then. “You’re a spoiled mama’s boy,” I said. “If you think the whole world owes you something, you’ve got another think coming to you. If you’re convinced you’ve got something to show me, that’s fine. I’ll get in the ring with you, but I’m not going to hit you.”

The kid went over to the corner and rustled through the equipment closet. The gym was still dark in the morning twilight and I stood there trying to make the boy out against the shadow. He tossed a headgear from the corner. “Put it on,” he said.

“Matthew! What do you mean?”

“In case my aim is as bad as yours. You’re a little unstable, you know.”

“Matthew, I hope you’re joking.”

“You want to teach me, then teach me. Put it on,” he said.

So I did.

The boy came out of his corner, dancing and double-crossing. Pawing jabs and testing his range. He was fighting smart for once. I couldn’t quite figure him out. The whole time, I kept my elbows in at my ribs. I held my hands together at my nose in a sort of idolatrous prayer. *Lord, let this be a joke. Let the boy be joking with me.* I thought of Matthew when he was young, on Saturday mornings, picking him up from karate. I remember how nervous he would get before sparring for a new belt. I remember the proud look he’d give Caroline and me, and then later, Caroline *or* me, when the dojo master would give him his new belt. Yellow, orange, green, purple, and red—all the belts used to hang proudly on his wall.

When they left, Caroline took only his uniform and his red belt, leaving all the others behind, with me. She told Matthew he didn’t need those belts. He was a red belt and he would be a brown belt soon enough. When I packed them in his suitcase, she sent them right back with him the next week. *Mom says you should keep these.*

Those first months. Caroline's sister coming to reclaim the boy's stuff. Me trying to hold her at the door. Trying to be gentle and not raise my voice. Staying at the bar very late. Refusing to answer the door. Locking her out. Blocking her out. Blocking him out.

The boy came in with straightforward punches. Jab jab, cross. Hook, jab jab. I cut away from him, taking what I couldn't dodge on the shoulders. The boy was trying to move me into a corner, but fast as he was, I was more efficient. Boxing came like an instinct to me. Second nature. A few punches landed on my upper arms. Adipose flesh twitched back and forth. The sight of it hurting more than the feeling. The boy wiping sweat. Wiping matted, stringy blond hair from his eyes. Watching my hands. I watched his shoulders. I made a few pawing jabs to keep him at bay, to show him that this was a "friendly." I would take a dive in the third, I decided. I danced around the boy, trying to show it was all a joke. Too afraid to raise the white flag in speech, I laughed. I planted my feet, raised my elbows a bit, and tried to catch the boy's eyes. Get him to smile. He wouldn't look at me. Both of us ashamed of this, but more ashamed to surrender before the fight was finished.

138 I motioned with my hands. Taunting like Foreman. Declaring that I was a rock in the middle of the ring and no man could move me. To the boy, I was a sitting duck. He came in fast. Two jabs knocking my left elbow into my ribs. A sloppy right haymaker missed by a yard. A left cross connected with my shoulder. I turned in to take the blow away. "It's all right," I thought. "No harm done. The boy just wants to show me that he can fight his own way."

The shot that came next made my whole left side crackle and burn. The boy must have dug his foot in and given me everything he had. All the wind left me. I stood there stunned. I warded the boy off with a panicked jab—nothing more than a paw to keep him out of reach. I wouldn't go back on my word. I wouldn't hit the kid. I thought, "I'll let him show me what he needs to show me." I would take a dive in the third. "Good shot," I said. "One more minute in this round. We'll stop when the second hand comes back around."

The boy was red. He bit his lip and darted his head behind his gloves but said nothing. He came forward with measured punches, quick and stinging. I planted my feet and blocked. I dodged with my upper body. The boy let his mouth hang open. "Good, he's starting to tire," I thought. Then he unleashed a flurry of punches that came so fast I couldn't tell what they were. He landed a couple on my soft midsection that made me fold with pain. He ended with an uppercut, right under my chin. My brain rocked back in my head, and I

felt dizzy with the kickback. I shook my head to get my vision straight. The boy kept coming until I caught him with a hard push. He stumbled backward and fell to the canvas.

“What the hell, Matthew?” I said. “That’s it. Round’s over.” I peeled my gloves off with my teeth and noticed blood coming from my tongue.

The boy jumped to his feet.

“Round’s not over,” he said. “A push doesn’t count as a knockdown. And you need three knockdowns. You know that.”

“No, round’s over. You took a headshot. You hit me as hard as you could.”

“I didn’t hit you, I *grazed* you. You moved into it.” He was mocking me, and I could see his eyes focusing on my outstretched arms. I held them in close to my body in shame. “Round’s over.” I said. The boy came at me with more swagger, darting back and forth and shuffling his feet. All the time staring at my arms.

My arms. The shame of them. Thinking how bright my scars would show in the dawn light of the gym. Disgrace. That time the boy came home, parking halfway on the lawn. When we had a fight. Him laughing at me. Charging at me like he is now. In my face, shouting at me. *You’re going to tell me how to live. Look at you! Look at you!* Him tearing the bandages off my forearms until I was Noah and he was Ham. I kicked him out. Threw him out by force and locked the door on him. He drove drunk on the highway all the way to his mother’s, and I became the bad guy.

Caroline and her sister putting around the character assassination. The disgraced teacher. The madman, the sadman. The idiot savant. Someone who can only read and drink and fuck. Stupid man-child disgraced by an affair with a student. And heartbroken? How could he attempt suicide over that? A failure even at suicide. Calling his mother instead. Embarrassment. A laughing stock. Caroline starting a town joke about the school including a castration clause in my contract. The boy laughing at me. The terrible shame. I put my arms up to hide myself. He won’t let me turn away from him. Facing what I’ve done. He’s picking away at my vulnerabilities. Tearing away at the weak spots. Flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood. Taking the piss out of me. Let it bleed bleed bleed. Open the skin and let it bleed. The punches came at me in a fury again. The boy more vicious and more cocky. The boy turned into animal. Boy at his worst. The boy’s violence is my temper. Me, my horrible, violent feeling inside. The viciousness probably from his mother. The underhanded. The ruthless. No way for him to win a fight.

I connected a sharp blow to his left shoulder. My first real punch. He staggered back and looked at me shocked. Then, like he wanted to kill me. Red face, veins in his neck, teeth clenched. "Round's over," I said, but the boy kept after me. The clock was behind me. I turned my head to look, and he took one shot to my body and one to the back of my head. I staggered with the impact, nearly went down. Before I could think, I sent a backhand that cracked across his headgear. The boy seemed to turn with it but still took quite a shock. I saw his eyes well up, his Adam's apple quivering.

Why I couldn't have stopped the fight there I don't know. Why couldn't I have fallen? Why wouldn't the boy stop fighting? "Matthew," I said, "this is enough." But the boy swallowed and came back at me, and I felt like this must be a nightmare I'd created. I felt then that I must vanquish the evil son, and the good would come out. Of course, it's stupid now. But life is made for us in the moments we can never imagine. We always try to explain it afterward, but our actions never make any real sense. It happens and then it's over and then it's happened and then there's nothing we can do to change what happened.

140 The boy came at me, moving quickly. I knew that this was no longer pretend. It was the fight of my life, and I would lose it to my son. God knows why, but I thought of Matthew as a baby while he pulverized my body. A fussy infant in the middle of the night. Me cooking formula for him at four a.m. Feeding him and rocking him to sleep. A father and a son. My boy. I could rock him to sleep.

The boy's movement was losing form. He was fighting sloppily. Dropping his guard again. More vulnerable than before. I began to let him in. Show me what he had to show me. He moved with quick combinations. Ribs. Shoulders. Chin. Chest. Arms. Gut. Picking my body apart. Never made whole again. A vicious shot to my head. I felt woozy and numb, like my body was in fragments. Those scraps of paper lying around my apartment. Half-finished writings on the backs of bills, envelopes, spiral-bounds. Dissertation chapters and manuscripts unfinished. Jottings. Nonsense. Nothing. The boy would put me to the canvas and end me. I staggered around the edge of the ring. Maybe I should have actually left Caroline. Then she would have gone through with the procedure. What did it mean to have a son? What does it mean now to say 'my son'? All those Christian myths of God-so-loved-the-World and This-is-my-Son-with-whom-I-am-well-pleased, but really the Greek myths of Father-eating-Son-because-the-Son-usurps-the-Father.

Chronos castrating Uranus. The order of the universe. Time turning our children into men. Time turning us back into children. I realize I will be gone soon enough. The boy my only trace on this earth.

I can't explain when the illusion broke. The boy that I hit wasn't Matthew, because I'm not a man that would hit his own son. Yet I can't make sense of the fact that he is no longer around. His mother's actions to remove visitation rights. The hospital bills that I had to pay on the boy's behalf: *Filer: Matthew Paulsen. For injuries obtained during altercation with Jonathon Paulsen. Covered Under: Jonathon Paulsen, Indian Hills College.*

I threw a few jabs, keeping the boy at reach. Not a boy but a man now. By his own definition. Or the girl's definition. Virile, cocky. A man showing his father his weaknesses. How I wished I wouldn't have told the boy that Hemingway bullshit—*We burn the fat off our souls*—because he was the one lean and sinewy, and me the one old and fat. *Stop the fight*, I felt like saying, because when we burn too much, we really immolate our souls, too, and then we are all eaten up and there is only so much flesh.

Me. So much hanging flesh. To hate this body so easily broken, to torment the flesh with charred remains of soul inside. Us fighting like this. My own son. A lifetime wasted. It's come to this. A body. Flesh hanging off bone. Nothing anymore. The spirit gone the feeling gone and the passion gone. A fighter on the canvas. The new champ stands where the old champ stood. Chronos castrating his father, the boy taking the piss out of me. Shots to the liver and the kidney and one square to my nose. A small swell of blood plugging my nostril. It's harder to breathe. Sweat on his face, furious and red. He would put me to the canvas and I wouldn't get up again. The son so loved the world, he gave his only father so that man should live. The boy my last trace on earth. My legacy. This is the fight of my life, and I will lose it to my son. A final gasp, one thinks. A surrender.

But then, a revelation! An old, flabby Foreman in the tenth. Moorer sprawled upon the canvas. Foreman praying on the ropes like he did. The next morning, Foreman delivered a sermon to his congregation. The message: don't let anyone talk you out of your dreams. But I had done that repeatedly, talked myself out of leaving for the boy's sake. Just for the chance to see the boy, I stayed. And here he was, picking apart my atrophied flesh.

If living is a winnowing down of the possible into what is, then I, too, had spent my life on the ropes, not praying, but being beaten. I have lost again and again, but this I will not lose. *You're a teacher. Teach me, then*, he said. I

had told the boy he had a glass jaw. As his father, I had told him not to be vulnerable. Protect your head, I'd said. Protect your neck.

In boxing lies the pain of becoming, the pain of what we become. That April morning, I backed the boy off with a hard jab. I threw a shot to his body to drop his guard down. I set him up with two quick lefts and unloaded a hard right hook to the base of his jaw.

The kid dropped like a rock. He lay unconscious and moaning there on the canvas. The moans were cries of pain, a series of low concussions that accompanied the ringing in my bones. I moved inside of those sounds, and, for an ecstatic moment, I believed that none of it was real. I stood over the boy and watched his shallow breaths go in and out. I realized that we would both survive this. I began to shake.

I took his head between my gloves and I shook him, and his eyes opened into an unfocused gaze. "Is this what you wanted to show me?" I said. "Is it?" I was screaming now, frantic, but the boy said nothing and closed his eyes. I laid his head back on the canvas and felt hot tears running down my cheeks. I began to shudder and lay down beside my boy, both of us completely and utterly devastated.

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It's Thanksgiving. I've already had my dinner, and the food wasn't bad. It wasn't too cheery over at Perkins with Ron, though, because he's estranged from his family, too, only more recently, so he still gets the heavy gloom. Cheryl the waitress gave us a slice of pie on the house, and she even sat down in the booth and ate a slice with us. Ron's got a daughter about her age, but they no longer talk, so I think Cheryl cheered him up a little.

Afterward, we parted ways, and Ron said he'd see if any of the bars were open. Ron knows I come up here every Thanksgiving, and he knows I come up here alone. I told him I'd call if I felt like anything, and really I don't feel like much. Mostly, I feel a little burning from the nips of Wild Turkey, and I try not to concentrate on how it's so cold up here. It's always cold this time of year in Iowa, and this season it's a little colder than in years past.

The old Union Pacific train bridge is on the outskirts of town, not far from my apartment. I like it because from up here you can see the whole town. I can look right down at my apartment complex and see my neighbors going in and out. Across town, I can see the neighborhood where we used to live—the boy, Caroline, and I. There's a strip mall there now, but there used to be this open green lot where I would take the boy out to play soccer. Sometimes

Caroline would come and we would put her in goal. After a while, the boy got better. He would give the ball a real shot, and Caroline would say something like *Oh geez!* and scurry out of the way, and the three of us would laugh. We used to be a nice little family with a home of our own.

What does it mean to have a son? You can't really describe it. A son is someone who has your blood in him. A son is someone who can shed that blood on a foreign land. He can die thousands of miles from home, and he doesn't have to tell you if he chooses not to. A son is someone who can serve his country. He can withstand great danger and emerge victorious. A son can do all the things you didn't and make you feel tremendous pride. A son can make you feel remorse and guilt all of the days of your life. A son does not forgive.

In the crisp November air, I take a long pull on the bottle of Wild Turkey. "Cheers to you, Matthew. Cheers to you, son. I love you." I feel the burn in my chest as my throat wells up, and I let it out. The steam rises up and vanishes. The breath that is my prayer for the boy dissipates into the November sky.