

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: HERE, TOO

 Jacob Thomas Sevick, Master of Fine Arts:
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I began working on what would become my thesis almost two years ago. At the time, I was becoming frustrated with the results of my writing and realized what was all-too-apparent to my professors and peers; namely, that my stories lacked a core sensibility, character, or perspective needed to anchor fiction.

This thesis is an effort to draw out that ‘I’. For months, I struggled to find ways to keep from giving the narrative ‘I’ a biography, hoping that sensibility would be enough to carry the writing. As the narrative developed, the question of ‘why’ became more central to the narrator. Why is the narrator telling the story? Why is he leaving? Why anything? In these three chapters, the unnamed narrator begins a series of departures and arrivals, each of which explore questions of home, absence, race, and how people define themselves in relation to place.

HERE, TOO

by

Jacob Thomas Sevick

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Chapter 1: College Park

Ever since I left Texas, I had done my best to move on.

It was a Sunday morning in February and I was in the final semester of my Master's degree at the University of Maryland. The coursework that had up to that time distracted me from the personal circumstances of my life long complete, I often found myself turning to media news in the hopes that it would distract me from the uncertainty surrounding what would happen and where I might end up after I left the protective sphere of the university. I was sitting in the living room of my rented house near campus and had just finished reading a feature covering the trial and subsequent sentencing of Dylann Roof. Roof had recently been given the death penalty for murdering nine people and shooting three others who had gathered for bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In the photo that accompanied the article Roof is shown crouching in a yard. It appears to be evening, and his jeans are faded, the leather of his boots visibly worn. Light issues from just behind the camera, showing a portion of the yard and the panels of a fence behind him. A pale blue towel is draped beneath a white sun hat and falls over the back of his head and onto his shoulders. His hair is cut just above eyes, which look tensely into the camera. His left hand rests on his knee, and from his right a confederate flag leans at a loose angle toward the edge of the frame. The article described how Roof had sat with the study group beside the pastor for forty minutes before he acted. He had listened, perhaps closely though doubtless at times drifted into review of his own purpose there, interjected once or twice, and had enough. After he shot all in the room but one, Roof attempted to take his own life but,

with an ounce of dark comedy, found he had run out of rounds. Instead, he walked away, assuming police would be waiting outside, that it would all end there. Yet, no one was outside. The streets were all but empty as he left, quiet but for the dizzily ringing in his ears. With daylight swelling the backs of his eyes, he got in his car, and drove.

Although I had long known of the incident and must have seen numerous images of the boy, perhaps the approaching change in my circumstances and the fact that I had no plans or sense of direction caused me to feel called out by the article. The longer I looked at his photo the more familiar the image seemed. Or rather, as I looked at the photograph the narrative disappeared, until all that was left was a boy in his yard. The photo itself said nothing to me, and was it not for the confederate flag and the knowledge of what this boy had done, there was little remarkable. I knew, but still could gleam nothing but the fact of a young boy posing as so many do, in an adolescent display of rebellion and knotted apprehensions. But I wanted it to speak, at least with a detail discoverable in the tilt of his head or position of his elbow that offered a glimpse the events that led to his actions. I wanted for it to make sense. Perhaps the problem was that, for me, nothing in the photo seemed so abnormal. I had grown up seeing such images and posturing, if not daily then enough to think them not so much conspicuous as tactless: a performative gesture, conspicuous and mostly hollow. But I knew.

My thoughts were interrupted the disconsolate cry of a solitary goose flying over the neighborhood. In late autumn and early winter it was normal to witness hundreds of them flying overhead in a tremendous and cacophonous announcement, their scribbled V patterns endlessly adjusting as the lead, exhausted, falls back into a supportive role, its position is taken by another. As the geese continued their southern migration, their

numbers inevitably dwindled until only a few stragglers remained to weather the cold. I often saw them loitering on a section of the university lawn where steam released from a nearby ventilation shafts had for weeks drifted across the road, melting a tongue of soil into the snow that gave the appearance of a hot spring oasis. There many would wander through the rising steam, murmuring soft and unintelligible syllables as they thrust their beaks into the earth to strip the sparse and yellowed blades of grass of whatever they may have held.

Watching the goose fly overhead, disappearing and emerging from behind the branches of a tree, its shepherd-crook neck straightened to an arrow as it urgently scanned the ground beneath as if all hinged on what it might locate there, I wondered how it had come to be left alone and what it had lost that caused it to break with the relative security of its group. I recalled that Joan Didion had written about recently bereaved geese that stopped eating and flew for hours at a time. The goose would change its course, embarking out alone to search for its lost companion on routes leading it farther adrift from its flock. Its call could sound for hours, its voice become hoarse as it continues to fly through exhaustion, refusing to land on its own, becoming increasingly disoriented and desperate, as if only to keep from landing would hold reality at bay long enough for circumstances to change, as if it were possible to outrun grief.

It was only once I looked away that I began to suspect I had seen or known Roof before. Some inner echo of my mother's voice spoke words uttered years before, words like 'young boy' and 'heartache' and 'other problems'. They were said in reference to another boy, one who had lived on our street growing up, but the words now attached themselves to the image of Roof, and he felt uncomfortably close. An anxiety at once as

light and ominous as mist enveloped me, and I remembered the sound of her saddened voice as she spoke at night, in the darkened living room of our house on Enchanted lane, caught trying to explain something at once horrifying and familiar, reaching for words as through a fog and coming up short, ending up with only vague outlines of thought, emptied-out phrases from a previous generation, not enough say much of anything at all.

In the days that followed what was soon referred to only by the name of the city, Charleston, I could remember a similar struggle with language in media coverage. The initial confusion surrounding the shooting had been seized upon to encourage all kinds of speculation. In any given outlet, at any given hour, innumerable variations in account affected even the most minor details of available reports, making it impossible to establish anything beyond something amounting to tragedy. In the accompanying photographs, there was an erratic and unnatural pattern of shadows cast by street lamps, patrol car lights cast on concrete walls, people huddled together, their faces hidden. It was impossible to piece together the shapes. Everything was just out of the frame. Watching closely, I could sense that something unspeakable was also going unsaid. Before long, it was revealed that the shooter was white and that the church served primarily African Americans and had roots going back two centuries; and later that there existed photos with him posing with the confederate flag and the gun he had purchased legally; and, still later, that Roof may have been influenced by his perception of the national response to the death of an unarmed black man at the hands of police. With each revelation, the questions raised by the massacre grew more confused and fragmented, the situation becoming even worse when Roof, the perpetrator, was linked to neo Nazi groups and had written a manifesto stating his intentions to incite a race war.

Over the ensuing months, tragedies of varying degree accumulated, dampening the effect of each. Eric Garner, John Crawford, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Gregory Gunn, Freddie Gray; San Bernardino, Ferguson, Staten Island, Baltimore, Dallas, Cincinnati, Montgomery. The repetitive litany of names and number of the dead, the abuses and backlash, and the narratives that guided through generations of human upheaval like a rosary of human suffering were offered as prayers to which the only answer was the silence that followed within minutes of having read them. Even the most acerbic reports, calls for accountability, restrictions, reform, empathy, and pleas for listening evaporated as it was displaced by another, collecting overhead like distant itinerate clouds that would pass unnoticed were it not for the steady and ominous accumulation. As one voice was cut off and isolated from another, everyone seemed compelled to identify where he or she stood, and it felt that in this confusion could be heard the surfacing cry of an entire history of human segregation and oppression. Evidently incapable of navigating the various intersections of events, I often hesitated before reacting, unable to engage. I was not sure of what I should say, what I could say, or what I had any right to say. Something I recognized but could not name stood between myself and the world I was witnessing; and I remembered how even the word ‘thing’ comes from the old English ‘thyng’, meaning “a narrative not fully known”, or the impossibility of pulling from the fragments a coherent whole. My words became first clumsy, then guarded, reactionary, and it wasn’t long until even ‘American’ seemed a suspicious designation: or an answer given too hastily or concealing a question of dubious intent.

I had heard that the fear of being ‘called out’ commonly refers to the anxiety that anticipates being exposed as complicit or, perhaps worse, found unworthy of having a response. And though I felt the need to orient myself in the midst of the upheaval, for years I had avoided any personal accounting of my circumstances or involvement in the national discourse. For the first time in more than a decade, I found myself at the same time desiring and yet unequipped to locate where I stood. I experienced myself drifting as though on a narrow river current where, just up the shore, a group of shadowed people has gathered but does not see me, nor perhaps should they. Instinctively, I would make as if to call out and discover that I was unequipped to speak, had nothing to say, or was afraid of what I might say and whether I had the right to disturb them, and a great silence comes over me such that I do not call out and, thus reduced, watch as I am carried farther and farther away from the human world. Perhaps I had not made the dedications been used throughout history to placate one’s ancestors and keep them at bay. Maybe I still had to discover the ritual words. It was easy to imagine them lying concealed, or more likely overlooked, lost somewhere in a faraway state in a garage in a box in some forgotten book, the contents of which lay hidden in the deep shadows of cultural memory; and, upon revisiting, gave the sensation of having stumbled upon a town heard of since childhood but never personally seen. Recognizing a whiskey bar with the sculpture of a jackal leaping out from the roof or, walking through the very park full of nothing but pecan trees and elms, it appears everything as being where it belongs, making it impossible question the reality of the town or whether indeed it is and always has been familiar; but the meaning has changed and, under such circumstances, how was one to

make sense of it? Or maybe a more precise question comes to mind: who is the one making sense of it?

I desperately wanted to be noticed, interrogated, exposed as an object under the scrutiny of someone willing to speak and interpret and draw conclusions as to who I was and where I stood; why I write with my right but throw left-handed; why I fiddle with the third button on my shirt when otherwise at ease; why, after two years at the university, I felt no particular warmth for the place nor could I if asked identify where I considered home. When I thought of the town where I grew up, why could I come up with nothing but stories told to me second hand? I was uncertain about the workings of my own mind, whether I was hopelessly forgetful, indifferent, or whether a part of myself I could no longer recognize was irretrievably scattered across various landscapes, and, in that moment, farther from me than ever.

A decade had passed since I last visited my childhood home, and in that time I had given it little thought. For years it remained intact and impersonal, like a mirror turned backward and placed against the farther wall in a cluttered garage, or a person whose name I had forgotten and therefore could not recall with any clarity what they had meant to me or who I was at that time. What kept me from returning in part was that soon after I left for university my parents had moved to another city, and so the house I would find would be that of a stranger. At the same time, I was afraid of who I had been, who I was. After so many years, were someone to recognize me, what would they see? I had transferred three times before completing my degree, and since then had spent time teaching abroad and working odd jobs in a number of states, driven forward not so much by the attraction of new places as by the relief of erasure, both personal and geographical,

that followed departure. What had begun as a desire for reinvention had over the years developed into a compulsion. For most of that time, I never questioned my motives for escape or why, as soon as I had become accustomed to the rhythms of a particular place, a restlessness that would, ironically, leave me house-bound for weeks at a time took hold of me, leaving me unable to leave my room and enter the by then familiar environment to confront the divisions and failed attempts at intimacy that have characterized every relationship I have ever had, all of which it seemed could be traced back to a fear as deeply set and irretrievable as childhood itself.

The house where I grew up was in a development where the land had, at one time, been a pecan orchard. It was a three-bedroom house with forked driveway leading to the garage and a tin-roofed carport, respectively. The large, sloping back yard surrounded by a chain link fence that sectioned off our yard from our neighbors on two of the three sides. Inside, a narrow hallway carpeted in amber shag cornered into a wide V angle, at one end of which was the boiler, at the other my parents' room. From what I remembered being told, it had had taken nearly a year for my parents to find a house they could agree on. The realtor was a member of the Episcopal parish where my father had been placed and had offered to help them find something in the area. She spoke frankly of her frustration, describing my parents as the worst couple she ever worked with. For months they looked. And looked. My mother was the kind of person who loved places with cave-like features, lots of rooms and cubbyholes where one could curl up, while my father held an aversion to enclosed spaces, preferring instead newer houses with wide-open and empty rooms that let in lots of light. Whenever they walked into a place where my mother would say, "Wow - this is great," Anna would turn reluctantly to my father,

anticipating the familiar grimace of discomfort and eyes averted in guilt my father would wear, and which I inherited, when he knew he was disappointing someone. It came as a complete shock when, in a final act of desperation, Anna showed them the house they finally moved into and they agreed. The house was located a heavily wooded development on a street named Enchanted Lane. The house had four bedrooms, a living room overlooking the driveway and yard, and a large dining room where the fact that one wall was made of windows and a glass door leading to the back yard, which my father appreciated, was made up for by the covered and screened porch that protected the room from excessive sunlight. Out front, beside the tin-covered driveway stood two large pecan trees that stood guard over an otherwise vacant field filled with the hum of grasshoppers and cicadas. Whereas the parts of the yard exposed to sunlight were full of thorny burs forcing my siblings and me to wear shoes and remain vigilant of falling over during games, nothing grew under the he two trees save for a thin veil of shaded clover, which remained cool to the touch even in the hottest part of the Texas summer. It was those very trees, my father said, that first attracted him to the place. When he saw them, he had glimpses of children running through the field. He fantasized the tree house that he could eventually help his children build, and perhaps a sandbox in the back yard where they would burry all sorts of treasures to dig up later. In an act of temporal acrobatics, he imagined looking back at what had become a good home full of fond memories. And to some extent this was the case, he said, though in the end the property had become as much a question mark as it was a comfort to him, and it haunted him to this day. He had moved nearly a dozen times growing up and had never developed a relationship with a place he thought of as home, he said. And while space never held much significance for

him, he had hoped that if he did enough, if he built the sandbox, helped us build the tree house, kept the yard mowed and watered, made it a game when a tornado came and everyone hid under a mattress in the bathtub, then it might for us.

And did it? To this day, I have never been able to sort out my feelings about the house where I spent so much of my childhood. My siblings and I were homeschooled until college. The school districts south of Dallas were notorious for dysfunction, having one of the worst reputations in the country, and private schools had been too expensive and lacked the diversity and inclusivity that my parents sought for their children. At first my father had vehemently opposed the idea of keeping my siblings and I at home, which recalled for him unpleasant memories of children kept behind closed curtains at home, denied access to the broader social world, and resonated with his own upbringing in what had been an itinerant and largely dissolute family. Nevertheless, he eventually gave in to my mother, a terse woman of German Lutheran descent, whose own view of education, now perhaps out of fashion, held that, properly guided, the human need to orient oneself to new surroundings provided the only structure necessary for development. Moreover, she believed that once this instinct was developed, one need not attend too closely to the particular form it took, which led to camping trips in state and local parks, to trips to the Mexican bakery or a Korean market downtown, where my sister and I explored the astonishing variety of dried fish and spicy salads, laughing as one by one we swim the emaciated carcasses through the air and into our mouths, sampling each in turn. My favorite of these was our trips to the Dallas Zoo, where while my brother and sister preferred to take in the full variety of animal life, the giraffes, tigers, gorillas, the largely bare, concrete exhibits of those animals brought more anxiety than pleasure. I wanted

nothing more than to remain at the edge of the flamingo pond located at the center of the zoo, for while the other exhibits held creatures that seemed at the same time aware of my presence and intent on ignoring me, as if I were an instrument or a symptom of their confinement, at the pond I felt I could both observe and retain my anonymity. I would sit with my legs dangling through the iron bars, watching the Caribbean flamingos, pelicans, and whistling ducks exhibited there, as well as the blue herons, mallards, and ibises, and half a dozen other birds all bustling about and apparently at home. Even then, though I would not have articulated it at the time, I was most comfortable when able me to remain on the outside. I could stay there for hours, despite the smell, in a silence I rarely broke except to try my hand at attracting their attention with a birdcall. Since the only vocal birds and thus my only model were the ducks, however, I was never able to attract the more elusive company of the egrets or blue herons perched in the broken shade of a few young trees at the edge of the water and had to settle for the ducks. I did not know it at the time, but I was later told that only a handful of these birds were a part of the exhibit. The rest, finding in the open habitat a suitable stopping point, had caused no end of frustration to those charged with the exhibit's upkeep. Thinking back, I wondered if it was the quality of the pond as a space for avian stragglers and itinerants that drew me there, where I could remain apart without being conspicuous. Although I would not have said so at the time, I never felt as though belonged in Lancaster, which was at that time the largest African American majority town in Texas. And whether it was my being homeschooled, white, soft-spoken, or simply alone, I was always aware of being just out of place, conspicuous even at home.

As time wore on these activities become less frequent until, in my teenage years, they virtually disappeared altogether. Left to my own devices, I began to seek out any opportunity that enabled me to abandon my domestic chores and leave the house. Every afternoon, while schools were still in session, I took my bicycle on routes that led me farther and farther from the quiet streets surrounding the neighborhood, eventually reaching as far as the Ledbetter commuter station, where every hour I could choose from a number of trains heading downtown and where, walking the streets of Dallas, I was only another anonymous body, hardly visible at all.

Eventually, I did make it out, although my sister, who had been accepted to small university in San Antonio, was the first to leave. And even though we did not know it at the time, her departure initiated what was to be a slow process of dislocation. Within only a few years of her departure, my siblings and I all left to pursue work or school, not realizing we would never come together in that house again, until at last my father, too, left for a new rectorship at an Episcopal church in Houston, leaving my mother to tend the house, repairs, and renovations needed to put it on the market. During that period lasting nearly two years, my mother found herself more often than not the sole inhabitant of a painfully silent house. Faced with the task sorting through a lifetime's worth of furniture, clothes, and other mementos, it was for her to decide what to discard and what could be preserved. My father tried to come down and help when he could, but the demands of the new parish kept him away for weeks at a time, condemning my mother to the unending and unreasonable task of excavating the site of her own abandonment. She began with the bedrooms, cleaned out the children's closets and drawers, the bookshelves, the posters. Soon all the rooms were empty of everything but the bare

essentials, making the house seem pitifully small and yet at the same time open and exposed, the empty rooms leaving no place for her to curl up in silence. None of those hiding nooks she had loved so much: the blue sofa chair she had cornered between a large hardwood bookshelf and a polished display of clay and porcelain birds, where she still sat at times with her white wine and plate of nachos she sprinkled with cheddar cheese and pickled jalapenos, but beside shelves that had been emptied and birds already packed away with other fragile items. Or the office she had made in the bedroom by walling off a section with filing cabinets, which because there was no longer any use and had been one of the first larger objects to go. Finally, there was nothing left but the garage, which she had been putting off for a number of reasons, but mostly because she enjoyed knowing it was there, a world of its own, one where reveries of an intact family could endure without interruption. My mother was a hopeless hoarder, and, over the years, nearly all of what she had collected found their way to the garage, where at least they would be out of sight. The large retractable door that faced the driveway and had presumably once opened to make room for two cars had broken long before, which meant one could only enter the garage through a door in the laundry nook at the end of the kitchen. The garage was full of cardboard boxes and blue plastic bins of clothes tattered from rot and damp books with pages that would crumble on opening. My father's carpentry tools from when he had been the student of a self-described "Bavarian" woodcarver, whom my father always suspected of having been a Nazi during WWII. A table with decade's old wood shavings, coiled in pods retaining traces of stain. A riding lawnmower that had never worked. I remember some furniture from my mother's grandmother that, despite the accumulate dust, brittle wood, and mirrors dulled and dusted with a rough white film, might still have

held bits of jewelry in its drawers and lace in its cabinets. She could hardly see the floor for all the camping equipment, flower pots, and half-empty bags of mulch; a box of old children's plates and cups featuring an assortment of prehistoric and cartoon sea-creatures, all unusable by now, but still alive, needing only to be woken up for the memories they retained to perfume the damp air, like plants in need of sunlight. And while it was true she too would have been unable to account for many of the bits and pieces that had accumulated, she often said, on occasion she would remember them and breathe a little more fully. It seemed cruel to her, then, to bear the burden of waking the past only to discard it. Sitting in the cloudy light that filtered through a small square window in the upper corner of the room, through which she could see little apart from water-stain and the ivy covering the outer wall, at first she felt as though crawling through a thicket or overgrown garden, comforted by so many affectionate objects surrounding her. I could imagine the contents dwindling daily, taken by the bi-weekly garbage service or less frequent bulk pick-up. It took her weeks to begin: days of sorting, filling up bags with dead leaves and blankets the damp more easily identified as garbage, knowing that the more she accomplished the emptier and more exposed she would be. Some pieces she handled with tenderness: the settee, dresser, etc., but the effort it would have taken to care for each item in turn was more burdensome than the task of throwing it out wholesale, and, since care was all that had gathered them there, any comfort she had felt proved short lived, replaced by a sense of a home coming apart.

Years later, describing that period, my father said that in those days she often called in tears of frustration, asking why he had left her there? And where were her children? Where was I? Was it not our home too? He told me how when he arrived with

the final moving truck after the house had finally been sold, he recalled an event that occurred soon after they had first moved in, when they were visited by a young woman who wanted to look around the house. I was too young to remember, having only just been born, but it was one of those stories that was told so often I can picture the whole thing, and it often seems as though I had been sitting on that old blue floral settee with wooden arms set on the back wall of the living room when it happened. Perhaps it was late morning on a weekday, probably Monday, as that was my father's day off and he would have been home. The slats of the window blinds were drawn, but I could still hear the footsteps of someone coming up the unswept porch and make out the shadow when, after a few moments of hesitation, she finally approached the door. She knocked softly and rang the two-tone doorbell. In my mind, I sat up with a start, but did not get up before I heard my father hurrying through the room in that way he had that I could never tell if he was frazzled, curious, or distraught by the disturbance. Happy to remain seated in this invented memory, I heard muffled voices as my father and the stranger spoke. The woman explained that her parents had been the previous owners of the house and that she had grown up here. Her parents had sold it without ever informing her, and could she come in? Eventually, they entered the room, my father a step behind the stranger, a young African American woman wearing jeans, a dark blouse, and a small black purse that hung from her shoulder like a swing at the end of its long leather rope. She came in without saying a word and, having entered, went no farther than the living room. She scanned the room abstractly, never landing on anything in particular, as though her eyes had lost their ability to adjust focus. It was as though she were looking through time, my father once said. She appeared unaware of the settee in front of her, the picture of the grain mill at

sunset hanging on the wall, the bookshelf with national geographic binders and volumes of Encyclopedia Britannica. He couldn't tell if she was attempting to mentally restore the room, projecting it item by item to its previous state, or rather whether she had entered a room already retaining her own, but dormant, requiring her presence to animate. I often wondered what shadows she encountered there, what relationships retained traces tied to that place, which we, who had only just arrived, would have been unable to locate, much less follow to their source. My father stood to the side looking helpless, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He told her how much he and my mother had liked the house. He explained that no one told him she had not known of the sale. He told her she could take her time. He offered her something. A glass of water? Perhaps she'd like to see the rest of the house? She nodded, asking if he wouldn't mind her taking a look around, and they proceeded down the carpeted hallway to the first bedroom on the left where just stood outside the room, looking in. My parents had taken the bedroom and temporarily turned it into a television room. My older sister was currently there, reclining on the couch and watching cartoons. The woman stood there for what seemed an immeasurable span of time before finally, still without explanation, she turned to leave, voicing a breathy thanks, looking down to the carpeted floor as she walked out and got into a black sedan where someone was waiting in the driver's seat.

Perhaps the dull ache he had felt at that time, and which returned, he said, whenever he reflected on the house was best understood by the fact that his moving away had led to the family finishing its transition without him. Everyone had left, one after the other, until it was only the he and mother in a moving van pulling onto Enchanted lane for the last time. He had never even met the buyers. Driving through the winding street of

that neighborhood covered in shade, it struck him that the house was on Enchanted Lane. Did that color why he agreed to purchase that house? Did the street name draw him into a hope that never was spoken? Almost a third of his life was lived there, he said, and yet if he had loved the house, it was because it contained his family, the family that called it home, even if he never truly had. It was the place that meant home, he emphasized, which was different than being home. And when the family was gone, he saw the house as he first had, a nice place with some potential.

Thinking back on that story, I was not sure what to make of either the story or the fact that, despite having no real memory of the event at all, I felt inextricably tied to the woman. My father said she never came back, though he often wished she had, if only so that he could satisfy his own need to hear her story, and to say what he wished he had said then, that he understood what it felt like to have one's life being pulled out from beneath them. When my father told the story, he never failed to emphasize the helplessness, sorrow, and respect he felt for this girl who, he said, had had the misfortune of seeing her house taken from her, sold while she was away, and yet still had the courage to return and reclaim whatever piece of it had belonged to her. He tried to imagine the circumstances that had led to her departure from that house all those years ago. Judging by her demeanor, they could not have been favorable, he said, much less happy. There was something there unfinished. She had come to reject the erasure of her own past and call her childhood back into being, and he said the scene troubled him to this day. It was as if she had succeeded in rousing it from the shadows and, her score having been settled, had left it free to follow him, reminding him of his own fraught departure from home, which he had tried his whole life to repress and, he said, considered

a negative template for his own life: a sort of meditation, a ‘not that.’ Our life would be different.

Who was she? And what did she think of us, the changes we had made, the space that to all appearances was so important to her? Did she see the house as transformed, taken away? What did my father mean when he said that the house ‘meant home’?

I glanced at the saucer in front of the adapter cord on the right and the rings of coffee foam that had dried to a sort of dust and formed geological patterns resembling those that follow tectonic drift by which I could trace the passing of time. I was not sure how to respond, how to make sense of what I had remembered. What did it mean? Who had I grown up with? Who was woman who had visited? And whose house? And where? Even as I recalled details of my childhood on Enchanted Lane, names, dates, and events that took place, I could not situate myself. The intimate details of that time were visible but impersonal, guarded, seen as though through a pane of glass. I swirled the remaining coffee until it reached the upper rim of my cup, hoping the gesture would erase the evidence of my neglect, before finishing the cold coffee in a gulp.

Needing to distract myself, I took mental note of the morning’s tasks.

Acknowledging that I had already shaved and made coffee, in that state I couldn’t be certain whether that meant I should be in a rush or rather that I had made time to go ahead and make another pot before going to work. I could not at that moment recall any of the morning leading up to my presence at the table, much less why on that Sunday morning I thought there was anywhere for me to go. Sometimes it is impossible to tell the extent of one’s exhaustion.

I found myself thinking about an essay by Martin Heidegger, which I had first encountered as an undergraduate student but had not taken to mind. In the essay, Heidegger recounts an anecdote in which that Aristotle told of the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus. The story goes like this: a group of foreigners, having heard stories of Heraclitus's prodigious accomplishments in philosophy, decide to visit Heraclitus at his house in hope of seeing the famous thinker, perhaps even at work over some new manuscript. To their surprise, they arrive to see an old man huddled in the cold over a stove, warming his hands. The travellers stop at the door, suddenly unable or unwilling to enter, at a loss of how to make sense of the unexceptional scene that they could imagine occurring in any home. To see the great man in this diminutive and vulnerable posture is almost unbearable, the threshold an insurmountable divide, and they decide there is nothing for it but to leave. Heraclitus, seeing their confusion and irritation, gently encourages them to enter, saying, please come in, "For here too the Gods are present."

That evening I couldn't sleep. Every time I adjusted position or when the fabric of my sock caught a poorly cut toenail or the refrigerator suddenly shuddered into silence, my whole body tensed. Night enlarged even the smallest change in environment. Shadows themselves became a vehicle of disturbance. Through the maddeningly thin windows of the house, I could hear the tree branches outside and the sound of a solitary car passing, the sweeping beams from its headlights was so intrusive that, I thought, it could have passed through the very room in which I lay. The radiator clicked against the edge of an uneven hole in the flooring like teeth grinding. I must have fallen asleep at some point, because I was jolted awake just before dawn by the violent clamor of

machinery as a garbage truck hammered the plastic bins lining the sidewalk back into position.

The room was still dark when I opened my eyes. From where I lay opposite the large bedroom window, the only thing visible was a white light without any discernible source illuminating the foliage of two young cherry trees in the yard. The trees had been planted by the owner of the house, a slight woman by the name of Reina Kakimoto. Originally from Tokyo, Reina had moved to the country a few years before and worked as a patent lawyer. She had a peculiar interest in mushrooms, which, I learned, she cultivated on large oak logs in the back shed she had injected with spawn. When I arrived in College Park and was in search of a place to rent, Reina, during the tour of the house, had spoken at length about the effect created by the position of two spotlights beneath the trees, making it clear that I should consider them the main selling points of the house, if not also grounds for my absolute trust in her. She had grown up with a similar arrangement in her own yard, and she described at some length her house on the outskirts of Tokyo, the long and meticulously kept garden with cherry trees, bamboo, and a pair of adolescent magnolias, which were her personal favorite with saucer shaped blossoms that heralded its thick leaves, and how, looking back, she said, it was strange that even though her parents had been very strict regarding its upkeep she had no real memory of anyone walking through the garden—or for that matter of ever seeing so much as a single creature land on the stretch of uniformly cut lawn. There was something missing in a garden empty of animal life, she said, and the abandoned landscape in miniature often seemed a portent, though she could not say of what. Even now, she said, the idea of stepping foot off the patio struck her as profane. The only creature she could recall every

having seen there was a small moth with white wings fluttering inches over the grass, frantically surveying the grounds as if in search of something vital it had only recently misplaced and, knowing that it is must be near, resigned itself to the neurotic and endless task of retracing its missteps. At night, however, she continued with increasing shyness, when the electric humming of the cicadas died down, there followed an hour of what she remembered as absolute silence in which, if one turned off the interior lights and drew the shades of the large living room windows, the spotlights directed themselves such that they revealed nothing of the trees trunks, the walls bordering the garden, or the pillars supporting the patio roof, and one saw only the slight knotted limbs and leaves, their cells swelling with light so that they seemed to glow from the inside, nearly transparent, appearing to hover like apparitions that had been unwittingly exposed. She often imagined that they were spirits of ages past and that by some mysterious power of attention she had summoned them and was able to keep them just this side of oblivion. As long as she held her gaze, she said, she knew they could not return to the shadows, and would be compelled to reconcile themselves to the disruptive yet deferential company of the young girl on the other side of the glass.

Still tangled in sleep, it took a while for my eyes adjust and I began to recognize where I was. It was still early. Mist was only just beginning to dissipate, muddying the white of the wood paneled houses as it rose from the icy concrete to collect over declining rooftops. Not having to teach that day, I turned over and tightened my blanket around my shoulders as if to protect myself from the morning. Were it not for a call from Marat, who as well as being an early riser was one of the few colleagues from the university with whom I engaged with some regularity, felt able to engage comfortably, I

do not know if I ever would have left the comfort and immobility of my bed. He was calling to confirm our appointment for our weekly lunch that day, pointing out sternly that I had missed the last one without bothering to notify him and that, though no doubt I had a reason, he wanted to make sure he wouldn't find himself in the position of waiting for me again. Marat rarely asked anything of his friends apart from their presence, but in this he was imperious. Whenever we met, he spoke in lectures full of digressions and leaps which could be as frustrating as they were insightful, and often it was only looking back on a conversation that I would be able to navigate the various avenues our discussions had taken. Whether it was Marat's directness or the matter-of-fact simplicity of his question, I was startled into confirming that, yes; of course I would be there.

Marat and I had met in his final year of his Masters of Philosophy at a bar near university where students often gathered when the afternoon classes ended. Always at ease in a crowd, Marat was going from table to table making conversation, eventually reaching where I sat in a corner booth. Looking amused, he asked whether I had always been one of those people who waited to be approached before I was comfortable enough to engage. We quickly became friends when he discovered that I had spent time teaching English in Central Asia. These days, Marat was in a lengthy application process for his green card. His student visa had expired upon completion of his degree, and for the last year he had heard little encouraging news from his lawyer, whom, despite regular reassurance and guidance through what was two appeals and a likely third, Marat could not help but suspect of taking him for a ride. His approved stay in the states having expired, he was in precarious legal standing. Ineligible for official employment, he waited tables at a small Georgian restaurant, owned by a family friend, where he had

invested money in the hopes that it would strengthen his application. Provided he was able to remain without being detected or detained, Marat once told me, his sustained presence greatly increased the likelihood that his status adjustment would be approved, whereas leaving could interfere with his application, and, what's more, once identified officially, the consequences for his having overstayed could well prevent him from ever returning.

Having confirmed our appointment and in need of a way to get away from my thoughts, I took a walk to Lake Artemesia, which was located in a park just over a mile from my house. Making my way through the neighborhoods east of campus, I passed streets bearing the reverent names of Yale, Princeton, and Harvard, all thrown together like props on a stage positioned to simultaneously enable one to recognize the artifice of the scene and yet remain at a loss to account for what one would find should they be removed. Despite the area being home to tens of thousands of people, the only place to get toilet paper was at the corner pharmacy. Portable construction fencing set in concrete blocks surrounded the shells of this or that stripped down building, looking bare and awkwardly fragile, and it was always unclear to me whether it was being demolished, renovated, or had only recently been erected. The city's efforts to turn College Park into a top college town led to a spike in property taxes and commercial development, bringing in a variety of new residents, most of whom were students, but which also included young professionals looking to live beyond the DC borders. A thin veil of ragged winter flora concealed the neighborhoods set back behind a series of chains and fast-food stores lining the Avenue sidewalks: a salad shop linked to a liquor store linked to a hair cuttery linked to Starbucks and the dozens of temporary apartment complexes, most of them

recent. The noise of construction thundered threateningly through neighborhoods where, just on the other side of more recent apartment complexes on Baltimore Avenue, a collection of homes that had weathered decades of redevelopment now sat on edge of collapse. Matted leaves collected along the curb, congesting the flow of water along the neighborhood sidewalk. Bowed chain link fences framed the weed-patched lawns where robins flew low and landed to pace in the shade of live oak, glancing up occasionally without concern at the broken and rusted toys decaying in the yard along side ferns settled in plastic and ceramic pots that appeared altogether misplaced and anachronistic.

I could never get a sense of the town, what it was. Time renewed itself in spirals, each loop erasing parts of the one before it, leaving as little evidence of its age as possible. Residential houses were bought up and sold, and every week saw new yard sales and driveways stacked with boxes of students coming or going. Generations passed through at an accelerated rate and rarely returned, though some visited periodically to participate in an alumni or sporting event. When I sat on the wood-paneled bench outside my house, as I often did either to escape the house or to enjoy the few late morning hours when the shade cleared, I would see old men in university colors wandering toward campus, squinting down at maps and shaking their finger at the page as if to contradict it. At these times, at least, something of the town's past articulated itself, though it was rarely accurate and emerged in contradiction to what was there in front of them; and just as one street came to resemble another, so the street-signs, curbside gutters, open garages and porch lights faded into the background, recalling a town that had endured so long in memory and yet today had proven irretrievably scattered, causing the world to seem suddenly fragile and undefined, as if about to give way. At those times, I felt a deep and

perhaps selfish affinity with them. So often, I found, people were most accessible when at a loss, when confronted by how so many of the certainties and pleasures we thought we knew came to so little in the end; and meanwhile sirens wined and a train announced its approach to the local station and power lines angled over an empty garbage bin where a hooded jogger led her dog across the street in shallow strides to where a sign read No Outlet, and all of this was natural and inevitable.

Making my way past the satellite fraternity houses to Paint Branch Trail, an off-road path that runs more than three miles around the campus and Anacostia tributary, I reached the concrete overpass leading to lake Artemesia. Birds darted through the dry underbrush that ran along the borders of the path that traced the nebulous contours of the small lake. Two men sat beside a cooler at the edge of the bank casting short fishing lines over the tangle of reeds in the shallows, where turtles could be seen peering out of the water. The break in the water's surface as they emerged dispersed ripple ringlets broken by the reeds. Inhaling the damp and muddy smell of the pond scum, I watched the reeds waver in the cool morning air, and just beyond them, to the horizon, where I could still make out traces of stars left over from evening. In the final moments before the sun ascended and stars retreated into the pale and distant morning blue, a sense of encouragement passed over me as I watched how even easily even the stars succumb to erasure. Looking into the brightening sky, how easy it would be to forget they had ever been there at all. As I heard the familiar tremors caused by the metro trains passing at the lake's westerly bank as it rocked to its final stop a mile or so away, I felt some solace in the knowledge that my presence there was no more than a brief variation of morning, and one quickly forgotten.

The lake, with its assortment of brightly colored benches set in lines along the bank or singly in recesses cut from the undergrowth, had at one time been the site of small neighborhood and business community called Lakeland. The area had been designed at the end of the 19th century as an exclusive ‘resort-style’ development for white professionals tired of what most historical texts refer to euphemistically as the ‘crowded’ downtown area. Intentions for the exclusivity of the development were never fully realized. When the University of Maryland was established first nearby, the area became a draw for many people—a majority of whom were African Americans—seeking work opportunities. Within only a couple of decades, the demographics had reversed, and the district sustained a rather robust African American majority until, during the 60s and 70s, a federal urban renewal initiative transformed the area. Now, the short footbridge across a meter-wide creek; the divided lines along the walking path so as to avoid confrontation between the cyclists and pedestrians; the spaces cleared for picnickers; and the lake, first meant to hold goldfish, now regularly stocked with bass and trout gestured to all desirable aspects of park-related spaces without following through, giving the impression that each of the lake’s fixtures had come as an series of afterthoughts, unconscious attempts to distract from the essential artificiality of a place.

I stopped at slight bend in the lake where a gazebo had been set up for local birdwatchers to strain for glimpses of finches, orioles, and ibis. I noticed a small wooden sign at the edge of a platform, which I initially mistook for an educational placard informing pedestrians of local flora and fauna only to discover a historical marker placed to commemorate Dervey Augusta Lomax, 1925 – 2008, who, I read, had served from 1973-1975 as the first African American Mayor to represent the city of College Park.

What were now the Lake Artemesia Natural Area and the College Park Metro station had once been the site of Lomax's childhood home, which he represented as a College Park City Council member for 27 years. His political and social vision, the marker read, had resulted in a successful urban renewal program for Lakeland that gave rise to the College Park Community Center and the Paint Branch Elementary School. The program, the apparent success of which the historical marker commemorated, had triggered the enforced displacement of two thirds of all the district's family households—many of whom were never able to return—in order to make room for low-income apartments, student developments, and housing for the elderly. According to one report, which was published in 2008, the very year of Lomax's death, by a firm specializing in history and historic preservation, the mass demolition of the area's architecture and the subsequent development had stripped the district of historical significance. The article left one with the disturbing if pointed sentence that the renewal project had left in its wake a Lakeland that 'no longer retained its integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, or association'. The Lakeland community has all but disappeared now, choked out by a more aggressive genus of developments. I wondered where those who had lived here ended up. Whether they had been pushed out to neighboring Hyattsville, which was experiencing a new wave of gentrification, or whether they had become scattered throughout Maryland. At the time of the article's publication, there existed no historical sites or resources in Lakeland. Even the commemorative marker could only be a source of considerable ambivalence, celebrating the initiative that had ensured the erasure of even its champion's home, the final traces of which were now concealed on the floor of the shallow lake.

Continuing around the lake, I took the path leading under the metro bridge to a small wooded area. I felt that I had lost my bearings or had reached a threshold, which spanned an entire history of erasure and neglect across the American landscape, and were I to engage or cross it would only bring me to harm. No sooner had I emerged than I noticed a movement in the undergrowth just off the path. A young spotted doe, frozen mid-step, eyed me impassively. This in itself was not surprising. Over the years deer sightings had become so common that they rarely drew attention, enabling them to forage undisturbed. Deer were often relocated to the area from DC, where at parks in places like Rock Creek park, near the border with Maryland, population numbers had grown so rapidly that they were now hunted, however quietly, to be used as a food source for local homeless shelters. As I watched the creature collect itself, half hidden in the dry underbrush, another movement caught my eye, and I was able to make out the shape of a second doe somewhat larger than the first. It stood only a few feet away, and though I could see deep into the forest, the winter having lain bare the shrubs and vines that in the summer months limit visibility, the appearance of the figure interrupted my line of vision, its figure filling out slowly amidst the gangly saplings before me as if pulled from another world. Struggling to adjust to the sudden shift in perspective, no sooner was I able to tell head from tail that, just beyond a tangle of branches over a rotting log, two more appeared. Their legs lay concealed behind the log, which lay significantly closer to where I stood at the edge of a cluster of damp leaves lining the sidewalk than to their own position, making them appear much smaller than they surely were had I seen them up close, as if they were only half-there. In a matter of moments, I discovered that I was yards away from a filial group of nearly a dozen deer. I held my gaze, my whole body

becoming tense. Fear that the slightest adjustment would hurl the creatures back into concealment and, perhaps, that I would share their fate kept me from moving from my position at the edge of the sidewalk. As a train approached, heaving itself through the park, I worried that the irritated rhythm caused by the cars passing overhead might scare them off. The deer did not seem to share my anxiety and appeared altogether unaware of the disturbance, which, while still new to me, had long been simply another part of environment. And yet, even after the train had passed and a sense of stillness was renewed and the deer, having either lost their patience or concluded I posed no threat, soon resumed foraging, displaying a somewhat exaggerated show of indifference and boredom, lifting an occasional eye to confirm I had kept my distance, I could not bring myself to relax. It wasn't until the subtle change in a jogger's gate as she approached on my left distracted me that I turned away. And no sooner had I done so, I heard a sound like television static and turned to see that regardless of what I feared, nothing had changed. A sudden flutter of wings caught in a tussle with the tree limbs above me broke the silence, causing a series of small branches to dislodge and fall to the icy ground beneath. I pulled my jacket close around my chin, guarding myself against the sudden chill of a breeze coughed from the dark mouth of the bridge. The deer turned to watch as I made my way back to campus. The elm trees that lined the old streetcar path and offered a pleasant summer shade had bared their branches and now appeared to lean away in aversion, as though they had come to recognize or expect something from me that I did not know how to identify, much less offer. I avoided looking up at the shops, the striped lawn chairs left out overnight, the broken line of cars parked along the curb, their windshields still heavy with frosted dew, or paying any heed to the pair of darkened eyes

that stared out from behind the screen of a wraparound porch as if in provocation. My head down, I committed my attention to the predictable and reassuring sequence of my steps reeling over the interchangeable sidewalk slabs until I arrived at campus.

Located on the bottom floor of the student services building on Campus Drive, the co-op where Marat and I were to meet could only be accessed from a stairwell which faced an infrequently used parking lot and a field where students often gathered under the shade of a few blackgum trees. Yellow bulbs hung from the ceiling in two parallel lines of three, providing was unusually frail light that dissolved at the farthest corners of the room, adding to the sense intimacy and enclosure that diverged markedly from the bare, impersonal shared offices and classrooms where I spent most of my day under the overhead lighting that cast no shadows and flattened every surface. The floors, uncarpeted, were stained and cracked. The exposed granite contributed to an overall sense that the founders had a deep suspicion of adornment, as did the exposed kitchen, the saran-wrapped assortments of dried fruits and nuts, and the colorful handwritten menus describing their organic wraps and salads through unevenly scrawled text. Whenever I needed to escape the office, I often retreated here to pass the time on a worn lounge chair in the corner opposite the kitchen where I waited for one of the lapses between meal hours when classes were in session and the staff would gather in the kitchen and address nagging conflicts with students or parents or recall a weekend excursion home or to a nearby lake.

When Marat arrived, a few minutes late, as usual, he ordered a spicy curry and beer while I ordered a wrap. Neither of us said much as we waited in line, our shadows spread out under the lighting like the stilled blades of a fan, and when we took our seats it

didn't take long for Marat to sense my distraction. I asked him if he saw the article about Roof's sentencing. He nodded, clearly disinterested, and I told him how, thinking back, Roof reminded me of my hometown in a way I could not place. Marat looked confused. He asked what I meant. I told him I did not know what to make of it, but there was more. Lately, I felt increasingly like a stranger in my own skin. I was losing hold of where I was. I told him about the woman who had visited my home and how, for the first time in memory, I had begun to doubt that I understood anything about where I had grown up. Marat shrugged sympathetically and replied that, from what he had seen, few people did. He advised me that though he understood my concerns, I should be wary not to trouble myself too much. Move on, he said, chuckling. Or, even better, don't. Regardless, he said, taking a slow drink from his bottle to wash down his curry, in times of crisis, it was impossible to determine the value of that crisis, much less its cause or the events that would follow. Even though the insecurity felt at these times could render it impossible even to describe the situation with any degree of certainty, a period of awareness rarely signals a fundamental change. All I could do, what I should do, was take stock and prepare to respond to whatever came next, taking care not to hide indoors in the hopes that it would pass. I asked what he meant, and, after a brief pause to take another sip of his drink, he explained that where he was from they had a saying that there existed two consecutive winters: that of the soul and that of the body. The former lasted as long as the freeze and composed what we normally understand as the winter months of December, January, and February, months in which no one left their houses unless under compulsion; alcohol consumption increased; and families would spend weeks wandering through the same heated room, often in silence, hoping for and dreading the possibility

that a neighbor would call and provide an excuse to go outside. The second, that of the body, arrives with the thaw when the foliage begins to color and recover, the earth softens, the air warms, and people leave their houses to begin planting the spring crops, abusing their bodies though it will be months before the spring matures and produces the food to replace the dwindling winter supplies. Or maybe he remembered it wrong, Marat reflected. It may have been that the first winter, when desire gives way to lethargy and the cold pulls vitality and warmth from the dry white-washed walls and hollow bones is the winter of the body. The second, then, came when one realizes that even faced with array of deep and textured colors, the songbirds, and the mingling smells of flowering cherry trees that seem to infuse everything with desire, it is not sustaining, and all one can think about is how much work and hunger awaits. All the while one feels the world recovering one its own, intoxicated with its own health and ready to abandon everything that can't keep up. At this time, all anyone can do is gather one's materials and, in an act of defiance, force oneself to go outside because, regardless of what awaits, it is the only hope for getting through the next year.

These ideas were centuries old, left over from the time when most of the population lived as nomadic herdsman in the hills of Central Asia, when the onset of spring required that they continue moving to whatever grazing land they could find. While the terms and the contexts of these sayings had changed, the meaning had remained largely unchanged. Even after the Soviets arrived and developed infrastructure, making villagers of nomads, turning the miles of grazing mountains into farmland, this mentality stayed rooted deeply within the cultural psyche, and over the decades relocated to the city, which in turn modified the notion of the dual winter, which, he said, soon

began to apply to any aspect of life subject to disturbance. Even the Russian-Soviet occupation itself came to be understood in these terms. When the Russians arrived, they were by default the only 'skilled' laborers, and for generations they guarded the knowledge of how to run local government and build the houses, shops, and roads now integral to daily life largely to themselves and performed all of the specialized work to sustain the privileges of the ruling class. It got so that in 1991, when the Soviets 'snuck out', as many put it, the relative few who remained behind found themselves marooned in increasingly 'foreign' villages and cities. As is natural, he said, many people were skeptical about this shift and retained a certain nostalgia for the prescriptive rule of the Soviet Union, pointing to shells of red brick buildings that dated back to the year the Russians left and showing newspapers where one encounters reports referring to the uncertainty of their new country's future, stunted by daily corruption and tribal bickering. Locals were compelled to learn how to construct the homes in which they already lived; to mix wool with mud for brick; how to organize a school; and how to weld left-over metal and paste those thin layers of concrete on the façade to slow deterioration. Some, especially Russian citizens who had themselves come for a number of reasons, including exile or opportunity, managed to immigrate back to Russia, while those who did not were over time compelled to renegotiate their relationship, not to mention their citizenship, within the new State. One can imagine the sense of being sidelined as they watched with more or less resistance as over the years their privilege waned, their voices becoming increasingly affected and outlandish. And it wasn't only the Russians shaken by the new circumstances. Other locals found that having to learn the quotidian tasks that had sustained their households and cities for nearly a century could be considered a gift, a

way for each to reclaim his or her home and nation, though they were often unable to say what that idea entailed or what would follow.

The town in which he grew up—now a small district in an irrelevant country, Marat said, had once been part of a vast and ambitious enterprise. Now little remained but a collection of tribes, families, or villages often appearing if not aimless, then at least as having an uncertain relationship with direction, itself an inherited myth. Everywhere one could witness the pervasive hold of nostalgia for times memory describes with an already familiar vocabulary, one that arrives quickly to the tongue, and at the same time it is difficult not to recognize of the inappropriateness of the words, now tainted and vulgar, as if over time they had succumbed to mold. These days it was impossible to know what to make of his region or predict its future, Marat said as I listened across from him, my eyes glancing up from the floor every few moments to catch his expression, directed elsewhere, caught in the stride of his subject and hardly registered my presence. Having been through a series of minor revolutions, the entire country had become suspended in a transitional state, having reached the point where no one could even be sure of his own footing or locate where he stood in relation to his own period. There comes a certain collective madness, Marat said, in which one simply wants to be told what is coming and how to meet it, often to the point where many might accept the prospect of another month of snow or even a decade of dictatorship, so long as it could be guaranteed. Marat explained that there was a special word for the time of winter's transition from one to the other, when the first has not ended and yet the second appears to have already begun and for the coming days or weeks it is impossible to tell which one it will be, and he went on

to describe one afternoon when he was a young boy and the days were getting a little longer and already in the afternoons you could see water sliding down the window.

It was a weekend day and his parents had taken the day off from work to spend the morning playing cards. Smells of stale black tea pellets in an old tin and days of cigarette ash made their apartment smell musty, because for some reason they kept the windows closed all winter and refused even to run the fan, which had gathered a thick layer of dust that they would unfailingly forget to clean before using it the coming months, causing the dust to cloud up and fall in a frustrating and exhilarating shower. He was never a card player, Marat said, but these games provided one of the rare opportunities to commune around a shared venture. He remembered the pleasure he felt pulling his blanket tightly around his shoulders, sneaking glances at the television between turns; and each time his mother reminded him to play, it was his turn, and they were waiting, he became so excited that he forgot what point in the game it was. Every time his father, remembering to drink his tea, reached out for his cup, Marat mimicked him, extending his arm eagerly from under his blanket for his own cup of hot, full fat milk sold fresh every morning outside the apartment, which had long gone cold and the fat thickened to create an immensely gratifying solid layer of film, which, Marat said, he still enjoyed to this day. His mother laid her cards beside the bouquet of crumpled candy wrappers slowly blossoming on the table. For months they had littered the house with candy wrappers. Sweets, the doctor recommended, often proved a suitable habit replacement for those with a mind to change, and had suggested his father indulge whenever he felt the need to have a drink. Before long, Marat said, wrappers could be found everywhere: wedged between the cushions of his grandmother's old settee,

fluttering off the table every time the door opened letting in a draft, and hidden between cracker boxes in the kitchen cabinet or under pillows. It got to the point where he remembered his mother began to habitually brush the back of her legs when she rose from a sofa, even a neighbor's, to ensure she hadn't picked any up. This never bothered them though, Marat said. It was better than the alternative.

His father had a way of crushing his cigarette that signaled he had come to some decision. His jaw shifted and he chewed at the skin inside his cheek as he summoned the courage to speak, and when he finally announced that he was leaving he never failed to assure them he just needed to go for a drive and would be back shortly,

Marat used to climb up on the kitchen counter to lean over the sink where a window looked out onto the courtyard and watch slush leap like a wave onto the sidewalk as his father's car pulled out of the parking lot. At that time, he said, just at the season's transition, the snow has already shallowed visibly. Small craters of melted ice pepper the unpacked snow, spreading like filthy lace over the courtyards and vacant lots of the city. Balconies decorated with bicycles, empty flowerpots, and a picnic table with water glasses sweating in the sun. A tired hammock thaws, loosening in the breeze. But despite the warmth, everyone remains suspicious. Nothing ends so simply. Over the years they had seen many alcoholic winters and many false winter-endings. Years of premature anticipation and unpredictable months leave many people numb to the changes, and they continue to wear their heavy coats, fur hats, gloves, and boots over woolen socks even as they walk over the slush and have to lean into the street to avoid the water dripping from gutters, trees, and the awnings that flutter like eyelids over the sidewalk. He would spend hours on that windowsill, watching the older students, who were released later in the day.

They kept to the edge of the sidewalks as they made their way home, trampling the buried gardens, watching the ground and testing the ice in front of them with the toes of their boots before committing themselves to a step. At these times such caution is everywhere. The duplicitous city makes a potential enemy or victim of everyone, Marat said. It becomes something to outwit. During the day, the ice melts under the strengthening sun only to refreeze come dusk. Marat enjoyed these days, and he reflected that children especially thrived on the not-knowing, as if there were something about their neighborhood's mysterious and constantly shifting space that pulled on their imagination. He and his friends would see a clear strip on the sidewalk or where tires had packed the snow, take a chance, and run. In the morning, he said, they would spend hours sliding unsteadily across sidewalks, their strained smiles unable to hide the stress of keeping balance until they reach the packed snow at the end. Some would come to a complete and graceful stop; others would find themselves under merciless ridicule as an unexpected patch of melted ice arrested their momentum and they lost their balance.

These days of early winter endings contain countless sub-winters within. Every resident sees a different side of the recovering city. The sun circles the horizon as if hoping not to be noticed. Because of this, Marat said, one side of the road is exposed to the sunlight and thaws more quickly. The trees on this side are naked and encircled with dark, wet rings of earth. On this side gather those able to seek out a reason to believe that winter has ended, that they are almost in the clear. They are happy to accept that the way things appear is the way they are. Bicyclers angle around mothers maneuvering covered strollers over the holes in the icy sidewalk, and elderly couples inching their way to the market hold onto canes or each other as if they were afraid of losing them. You have to

understand, Marat said, that winter there was not like it is in this country where the weather, seen from the comfort of one heated room or another, is almost avoidable, or feels as though it should be, and even the brief periods of pedestrian discomfort are seen as a problem that spring should already have solved. When one cannot hope to escape the dark and the cold, even indoors, and the house smells like coal and the dried sheep manure used to start the stoves and week-old sweat and bodies, then when for the first time in months the sun emerges, the crisp air and feel of the sun can make the street and others seem warmer than they are. Those caught in this perception are often the ones who, weeks later, you will find to be the most irritable and guarded, angry at the cold that never quite breaks.

The other side of the street, still thick with snow, offers its sidewalks to the melancholy. The teenagers, vagrants, and the lonely lurk in front of the dark apartment complexes and under snow-laden birch trees and slouch in the thicker shadows that seem to confirm the darkest of what they know and that the way things appear is the way they are. To those who insist upon the inevitability of the thaw, the people on the shaded side might glance at the stained surfaces of old and exhausted brick, the vacant playground, at soda-cups frozen into the ice along the sidewalk, itself caked with dirt and grime, and raise an eyebrow. They remember winter at its worst and they shiver at its ghost, each imagining that the shadow in which they walked covers the world.

Looking out, Marat said, you see an inversion of this scene. In the apartments above the avenue, those dwelling on the sunlit side experience a deceptive sun that rarely rises above the smoldering edges of the apartments across the street. Only in the afternoon, the sun peaks up over the rooftops and warms the apartments. The light draws

their attention more to the dark sidewalks opposite: an empty swing weighed down with snow that hangs unnaturally somber and still. You can imagine them, Marat said, shivering despite the sun. Through windows they would see only the hooded figures that plod through the snow, and they might believe this winter to be a long and cruel one indeed. They might leave the safety of their apartments only when necessary and, before locking the door, take a moment to anesthetize their minds and bodies in anticipation of a stubborn cold. If asked, they might be unable to recall the route they took to work, the smell of the winter fir, the color of the sky in daylight.

As the afternoon passes, the sky darkens. Heavy clouds sulk low to the earth. The temperature drops. Most retreat indoors to escape a haunting silence follows, pressing on windows and seeping through keyholes. This time of the evening had remained with him the most vividly, Marat said, and it was then that through the window he heard the crunch of a man's boots on the ice. It was his father, Marat said—although given what he knew of the scarcity of streetlights and given that he had already said his father always took the car, Marat could not be certain of this. Making his way down the sidewalk toward the apartment, he walked unsteadily alongside a hastily made sheet-metal fence covered in torn, outdated posters and telephone advertisements. Suddenly, he raised his hand and leaned forward to greet another man who was walking casually toward him. As the man approached, he says something indiscernible and, Marat said, his father dropped his hand, looking down guiltily as he continued, cursing when his shoe cracks through a thin layer of ice to a puddle.

Marat never knew what to make of his father's reaction: whether his father had thought he recognized the man or had merely hoped for a stranger's help or conversation,

but it was at that moment that he heard the sound of water falling. It began slowly, tearing through the snow and splashing on the ice and concrete. He rubbed his elbow on the condensation-coated glass to get a clearer view, the fogged window making it difficult so that he wasn't sure if what he saw was really rain or simply elbow smears. He unlatched the window and pushed his hands on the glass to force it open, stretching his arm out until he could feel the cool water prick his skin, while two stories below, fresh puddles formed. It was the first rain since the winter began.

What happens next, Marat said, I can only describe as this: In the dining room adjacent, mother sat at the stained mahogany table sipping her tea. Normally she did not drink that tea late, but at that point she knew she could be up a while waiting for father. The television was showing a living-room scene with two beautiful people – presumably lovers – arguing while standing on either side of a large reclining chair. No lights in the dining room, and the colors of the television wavered on the couch, the wooden floor, the beige walls, and the pictures they held. She wasn't watching but kept it on anyway. She found it comforting to have the scenes play in the background, showing the same characters as the day before, the same laughs, the same tensions and trite solutions that provide some sort of gloss for her own. Despite this comfort, her eyes scanned the room as if they could not recognize the furniture. She warmed her hands around her mug and tapped her fingertips against each other, as she often did when she was nervous. Scattered playing cards of the unfinished game still lay on the table.

She said to shut the window, that she felt a draft. She took a bite of toffee bar, catching the crumbs in her free hand only to brush them to the newspaper beside her. She sighed, got up, and carried the paper to the garbage can beside the counter where she

could see him but not the deep-set window. She wiped off the crumbs, and after a moment of consideration threw the whole paper away. Shut the window, she said, unable or unwilling to hide her frustration.

I can still see it now, Marat said, maybe too clearly for it to be real: how she returned to her chair and leaned forward onto her elbows. She chewed at her lip, checked the time on her watch lying on the table then, with a look usually reserved for arguments, turned it over decisively, angry, I suppose, at having allowed herself to believe he would hurry back and we would finish our game: that maybe my father had truly gotten control of his vice. After all, she had asked him not to go too far, not to stay out. Since he was going out anyway, she had said, just get the tea, the milk, the flour, and come home. It was true: old habits died hard; winter only ever seemed to end, and even then only for some and only in part. She shivered, certain now that that year was going to be the same as the others, full of false promises and relapses and nights spent in bed afraid that the door would open and just as she had given up would come the sound of my father's boots kicked off at the wall, the heavy steps, the 'Sorry,' breathed with a vodka and cigarette stench all over her face and her body, and his unhappy mumbling what might be best translated as, 'Old habits die hard,' which had become a favorite phrase of his for those times he left the shower curtain open or stacked differently sized tea saucers on top of one another in such a way he was just asking for them to break. And she, knowing the truth of the phrase would do as she had done for so long. She would take his head and clutch it against her breast to silence him, so as not to wake me, though I always heard everything, Marat said, how she'd say everything was fine, just be quiet.

But it was raining that day, I told her, Marat said, his tone rising with childlike insistence, and somehow I knew that meant he would come home. I never forgot the way she swallowed the dregs of her coffee, or the way her head cocked back to down it in one swift motion or the confusion I felt as she leaned back and, No, she sighed. It's snowing.

At this point, Marat smirked and shook his head, pausing and frowning in bewilderment at the students queuing at the register, so lost in his story he had forgotten they were there. Unsure of how to react, I tried to remain still, worried that the slightest action on my part might prohibit him from resolving the story, which seemed to have ended in the same way it had begun and left me unsettled at having been left behind or, conversely, having yet to arrive. After a few moments he continued, speaking deliberately, as if collecting himself. Most people can be understood in terms of the places that are closest to them, whether as loss or presence, Marat said, and usually it is the chronic presence of loss. His father did in fact return that evening. Marat had already changed and was in the bathroom, staring into the water-stained mirror as he brushed his teeth. He had caught himself in a moment of happiness, having forgotten altogether about his father. When he heard the door latch open, he spit out his toothpaste and ran out without bothering to rinse. I saw him in front of the door. He was bent over to take off his shoes, his hand extended out to the wall to stabilize himself. My father was rarely violent. More quickly drawn to quiet tears than to outbursts of anger, the most agitated he became was the tearful protests of a man who felt thoroughly let down by life and, by extension, me. Still, I always felt safe. My mother protected me less from a fear of bodily harm than the influence of a man who had never learned to cope with the deficiencies of being alive and who would, my mother feared, impress on me his own resignation and self-indulgent

brooding. He looked around the room with a glaze of uncertainty, like he had stumbled onto a house of ghosts or he had expected us not to be there any longer.

I listened as she consoled him, Marat said. I tried to get the feeling back, but I couldn't. At first I walked in to the door, heard the breathy sounds. I couldn't focus. I packed and unpacked my bags as if to leave, returned to their door, and left again. I went to the kitchen and poured some milk in a small pot, which soon boiled over, sticking to every surface in lumpy brown sheets, traces of which remained now matter how hard I scrubbed, first in a panic, then bitterly, as if even then I couldn't ignore the irony. The apartment had changed, had become large enough to contain worlds and I was lost there, making paperclip chains. Nothing worked. I returned to the windowsill, but the pleasure was gone. The streets were muddy with night. The lights bleary over misshapen earth.

In the years that followed, my father eventually did make good on his promise to turn his life around and commit to recovery, but only after my mother caught pneumonia; and it was with great resourcefulness and discipline he eventually succeeded until, months later, she passed away and old habits set in. Unable to care for me, he took me to live in the capital with my aunt and uncle, who graciously took me in and saw to my education while father, in characteristic resignation, returned to the bottle.

My life in the city was by most measures a model of consistency. My aunt and uncle had become wealthy pushing foreign gold mining contracts through the government, which, because the country was still a tribal one, was an undertaking by no means easy or clear. Dealing with the corruption that is to one extent or another present every level of our country instilled in them a belief that no good could be done by those already entrenched in a broken system, and so instead of the Russian school – which until

recently had been the school of the elites - they enrolled me in the International School, providing Canadian or American ex patriots to tutor me, though they never considered themselves complicit or accounted for the fact that these contracts and bribes were being paid out by companies from Canada and Germany, or the role that the American military base stationed there had on the very structures they criticized.

Often, the border between safety and vulnerability as thin and transparent as glass, Marat continued, his voice growing more insistent as his grip tightened around his beer glass; and I have found that it is most often the very states of prolonged uncertainty that create the best conditions for the stories and rituals that eventually sustain us to arise, leaving us free to continue on. It was during those first few years that for the first time, overwhelmed by the excitement of the city and the foreign houseguests, I began to lose hold of where and when I was, and often felt only a vague outline of a person. Everything I said or touched was unforgivably laughable and backward: the school uniform chafed my skin; my English was coarse and my vocabulary colonial; and my aunt and uncle were more like strangers or bodies rushing in and out of the house than family. The literal land of my country continued to recede into the protection of abstract memory, an indefinite 'out there', where it remains to this day. A few phrases or images were all that held my country together, but they could do so only if I did not submit them to close scrutiny, which would no doubt have exposed the fractures and traumas that nostalgia covered up. And yet it was then that, at least in my mind, having been severed from any sense of intimate security and, it seemed, from humanity itself, began the journey that was to lead me here.

I have heard, Marat continued, frowning as he searched for how to continue, that the word “genius” and “generation” share the same root, linking the genius inextricably to the family and the domestic realm. According to the ancients, long before the genius came to be internalized as an intellectual capacity or characteristic it was understood as a household god or a domestic companion, symbolized by the relationship between a fetus and its placenta. It was believed that every person has his personal genius that is neither within nor outside of the individual but that accompanies him from the moment of birth and under whose influence he either thrives or suffers. In this tradition, every birth is a double birth, and birthdays are occasions to celebrate this relationship between man and his spiritual double. For most of human history, ‘we’ is the preferred pronoun, and only from the sixteenth century do we see the ‘I’ begin to assert its influence. The modern “cogito ergo sum” would have been incomprehensible to the ancients, to whom it would have seemed more appropriate to say, ‘I am thought of, therefore I am’, which, when I think back to that that place, an act that confirms and sustains both myself and my connection to home, I cannot help but agree with, and it seems as if attention alone were the sole substance required to exist.

When he finished, Marat nodded and without making eye contact with me looked at his watch, wincing apologetically. He asked if I was headed toward the parking lot. I shook my head, saying I was going to stick around for a bit but that I would be happy to accompany him to the door. Listening to Marat describe his relationship to that scene brought to mind something Camus once wrote about friendship: that it is only our will that keeps other people attached to us – not that they wish us ill, but simply that they don’t care and that the others are always able to be interested in something else. Marat

nodded, saying that the same might also be true for places; only perhaps it was perhaps less 'will' that sustained the relationship than attention and care, without which one tends to be cast aside. When this happens, it is all anyone can do to keep from coming apart altogether. Perhaps that is why it is often easier for him to set out than it was to return. While places were patient, they could also be vindictive if neglected for too long. He returns home and his thoughts immediately scatter, as if his very presence was an affront to a town that had moved on and now spurned his memory. Whenever he went back, he was immediately recognized and called out not only by people, who were quick to notice that his skin had become lighter and his speech had changed, as had his dress and his age and his mannerisms unmarked by the changes that had taken place while he was away; but also by the very places he once knew that over time had been replaced, torn down, or simply abandoned. And yet I have to go back, or at least be acknowledge that I know very little about where I grew up, if only to recognize that the past I remember is only just that.

It was during that time with my aunt and uncle that I remembered and longed for that card table and that mug of chocolate or those nights at the windowsill. The memory of my father snuffing out his cigarette or mother's silence in the dining room became more important through its loss, and provided me a real and benevolent, if also tenuous presence against which I could locate myself and assure myself that I existed. And although I do not remember him coming home that night, the question has lost its significance. Indeed, if he had come home, the disruption that would have followed undoubtedly would have broken the spell. Just as the pleasure of the cold water on my arm now renders moot the fact or importance of whether it had indeed rained or was just

snow that had melted as soon as it landed on my arm, the act of waiting without any real expectation became a way for me to draw my father close and, through a sheer act of will, keep him near in spite of his absence. Thinking back to that night, I can still access a sense of something that is not me but rather has been totally dispossessed of my mother, my father, that windowsill, Marat said, and me, the one looking through a window for someone forever on the way home, if stumbling under the dizzying weight of his own inheritance. And on better days the particular images fade or condense into an intense vibration, and it is as though a giant steel string had been plucked in my chest, assuring me that despite the distance and the years, nothing or no one has or could ever leave me who has not already left, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for whatever traces remain and make room for me to live, however precariously, so far from home.

Before we parted, I asked if he had ever returned to his childhood home or whether he had any plans to. These days, of course circumstances were such that he could not return even if he wanted to, Marat said. When I asked if he wanted to, he shrugged, smiled, and as he stood to leave, said that, for him, this time of year was still too cold there. But what about me? What was my excuse?

I shook my head, unable to find an answer. As soon as I had seen Marat off, I returned to where Marat and I had been sitting only to find my chair occupied by tall young woman dressed in the university's red and black sweats examining the contents of her coffee mug. Without hesitation, caught by some inscrutable impulse, I turned and left.

I walked until evening fell. I cannot say what thoughts passed through my mind, only that I was determined to delay my return to that house, which had become suddenly repellant to me, and submit to the permissive attitude that walking inspires as soon as one

realizes it need never come to an end and one could walk this way into oblivion. I was overcome by feeling of suspension resembling how skydivers have described the moment during a freefall, when one reaches terminal velocity and the force of air resistance equals that of gravity. When this happens, I have heard, the body experiences a sense of stasis that contradicts what the mind knows, and at that moment despite the approaching earth, one feels with equal parts terror and euphoria as though one is suspended against the droning wind, and there is nothing awaiting below but an unrecognizable surface of colors, a patch of forest, a shadow cast by a featureless hill. I did not know this city. I was not even certain of where I was relative to its farther boundaries.

Eventually, tired and unsure of how far I had gone, I took a taxi to my small white house on the corner with two screened porches, one facing the road and the other jutting out over the basement entrance. On returning home, a rush of cheerfulness and good humor came over me as I set eyes on the pair of spotlights, which I had neglected to turn off, fossilizing the two cherry trees, and at that moment my thoughts stopped not on the house or the appeal of escape, but instead spiraled away, catching hold of something my father once told me. In addition to being the son of a military man whose job required that he uproot every couple of years, my father was kicked out of his home at age 15 for, among other things, protecting his younger sister from their abusive father in law. Most of his life from there on out could be characterized as the struggle between the desire to belong to a family and the protective instinct to detach himself from all ties. Once having married and begun a family, there was nothing more important to him than proving himself a better father than the ones he had known, and he told me a story about how for years after moving into our house in Lancaster he would go to work in the morning

already excited to return home. And yet, he said, most nights when he pulled into the driveway his feelings of inadequacy resurfaced, and he couldn't convince himself that he was wanted or could ever be wanted and that he had failed somehow as a husband and a father; and sometimes he would circle the block for an unknowable amount of time before he had the courage to come inside, though even then he was often sullen and unapproachable. This feeling came in waves, he said, becoming worsening as summer ended, and he could never uncover why he felt this way so often. That is until one day it occurred to him that the days on which he felt happy to pull in the driveway were those days when the sun was still up or, more significantly, when the porch light was lit. When the days were longer he didn't notice the absence of that signal; but when the sun had already set and he arrived to a house that to all appearances had already settled for the evening, he felt that we were all getting along just fine without him and perhaps had never needed him at all. All that it took was for my mother to turn the porch light on every evening, as if in invitation, for my father to feel that he was arriving to a house that not only wanted him, but was waiting for his return.

That memory let loose another of a flea-ridden sand box where pipes from a steel play set had broken and become rusted and two dark dogs barked on the other side of a chain link fence; a tree in the yard with rotted out planks hanging from a few loose nails where I had once attempted to build a tree-house; sand crabs scurrying between a thousand dark tunnels beneath the eggshell blue birdwalk on the Texas gulf where my grandparents lived; and, more vaguely, memories I could not readily claim or place: a woman leading my father through a house that both was and was not his—and each of these converged, creating a repetition or amalgam of a city constantly shifting form: a

place both familiar and forgotten that resisted my attempts to locate within its unstable features a clear image of what my life had been. It was then that an image of my mother materialized shaking her head as if to dislodge some unwelcome voice, and with photographic clarity I remembered the teenage boy with tired and angry eyes who had lived the two houses down and with whom I had on occasion shot bb guns in the field behind his house. I remembered that section of scorched earth in the yard of our neighbors across the street where a cross had been burned in the night. I could not recall much about that time. Only that the family who lived there was African American, the man a pastor at a local church, and that every morning I would see the woman going for a walk down the street, carrying a long stick to, she said, scare the dogs away. The day after the cross burning the police arrived but made no arrest. My mother said the boy responsible was a troubled child, had shown many warning signs, and the police had tried to shrug it off as an ill-considered prank. That afternoon, my mother went over to their yard to check on them and to offer to accompany the woman on walks if she felt uncomfortable. The woman declined, but it was weeks before I would see her walking again. And, just across the street, remained that scar of the cross despite the family having quickly re-sodded the yard and erased the damage, the ashes so conspicuously hidden just beneath the grass.

As I exited the taxi, my shadow splashed on the façade of my house like oil thrown down the sidewalk. The driver pulled away, briefly lighting the neighbor's boxwoods, as he turned left at the first stop sign. The lights as he departed cast my double along the wall onto the uncut lawn, and, with a mix of euphoria and terror, it struck me how easy it was to slide over the surface of things and, despite the nearness of the world

and the years I had remained in this town, how inevitable the fact that every trace of my presence there would be forgotten, as if I was hardly there at all.

Chapter 2: Manhattan

Looking to leave College Park for a while and gather my thoughts while still protected by the fact of my enrollment, I decided to reach out to a friend of mine, Laura, with whom I had been briefly involved a couple years prior. Our relationship had lasted for the few months when, having recently returned from teaching abroad, I was waiting to hear back from the graduate programs I had applied to and needed a place to stay and learn what it meant to return and live once again in my home country.

Laura possessed a fondness for lost souls that made her incapable of turning anyone away in need of assistance, a quality which at the same time caused a certain impatience and at times intolerance toward anyone who appeared smug or who, for one reason or another, was content to let the world alone and watch as it passed rather than throw themselves into the breach. These days, Laura was still living in New York where she worked as a librarian, serving those who came to the library for assistance in a range of issues, from resume and interview skills to dissertation research, literacy development to afternoon exercise classes, which she held in the library's second floor conference room permanently surrounded by a border of tables stacked with chairs inverted so that it gave the impression of a fortification defending the participants from whatever was waiting outside the library walls. When I called and described my recent anxious state and my need to clear my head and escape from College Park, she said I was welcome to come. She would be attending a conference the next weekend in Utah, anyway, and would need someone to house sit. Providing I would feed her cat, I would be welcome to

come for a few days. She hoped I would understand, though, if she preferred that I leave before her return, which I did.

When our conversation ended, I felt more at ease than I had in months, lifted by the possibility of departure and grateful for the boundary she had drawn and that we would not be meeting. Both in her work and in her personal life, Laura's involvement with the problems of others came at a cost that often frightened me in its severity. Her work brought her in contact with the most personal details of the library's patrons and, whether she was helping sort out a resume or working through the complexities of a green card application, required that she maintain constant composure and flexibility as she dealt with the diverse and fluid set of needs. The hours she spent going over the tinniest aspects of punctuation and word choice dissolved the moment when, having completed a session, the patron left the building, leaving her in a state of suspension. She seldom spoke of her work, and when she did she used only abstract terms to what a given day had held. A shortness of memory, she said, was all that allowed her to survive. If she dwelt too long on the particulars, she said, the volume of what she had done and left undone would be enough to drive her mad. All she could do was wait for her concern to fade, erased by sleep or time as the demands of one day supplanted those of the last.

She rarely saw the results of her efforts. Having been herself brought to the country at a young age without paperwork, the problems posed by someone's possible expulsion from the country or outstanding rent payments was constantly on her mind. On certain days, the pressure of her charge would mount, exposing her to a compound of indeterminate stories, traumas, and hopes that both were and were not her own and in which she had become hopelessly entangled. She would focus in and enlarge the most

insignificant aspects of domestic life and could spend hours cleaning the bathtub, the refrigerator, or scouring the bottom of a frying pan on which she discovered a layer of mold-like grime. She was plagued by panic attacks, which came suddenly and kept her awake deep into the night and which would, upon its conclusion, throw her, wasted, into paralytic sleep. Upon waking, she described the return to consciousness as entering a state of absolute confusion. Unsure even of who she was, it often took her an hour to get out of bed. Her whole identity lay repressed under a dark leaden blanket through which she could catch only glimpses of the previous day. For the rest of the morning, often with little success, she would strain to recall the sequence of events or movements of her mind that could have put her in such a state.

Sometimes all it would take was the sight glass I had recently washed unknowingly returned to the cabinet with droplets of water clinging to its edges for her to find herself beset by a series of insecurities. Her mind would spiral, overwhelmed by the need to defend herself against anything that seemed to threaten her sense of control, straining to direct all of her anxiety into the stubborn frying pan, the steel wool, the sharp smell of vinegar, unwilling to admit there could be another source for her distress. Soon, my presence became a source of disturbance, a trigger reminding her how little influence she possessed over even the most insignificant aspects of her life. She would retreat to her room, tearing tissues from her bedside table to soak up, one by one, the evidence of disorder. I would often sit stupefied on the couch, wondering what had just happened, my eyes drifting unconsciously over the pages of a book, the words as inscrutable as the patterned grain of the table beneath. The physical tethers that kept my thoughts and emotions from getting away from me broke. For a moment, the entire house entered a

kind of sympathetic stasis. It held its breath, sharing the silence in which we were suspended as no one stirred from the bed or rose from the couch or ticked away seconds. Eventually, after minutes or hours, the bedroom light came on and restored a sense of space. I would hear a glass of water land a little too hard on the end table. The windows relaxed enough to let in a few sounds from the street, and the cushions calmed beneath me and straightened its shoulders for better posture. Upon hearing the hopeful yet shy banter of a bag of chips being opened, I eventually made my way to the room. I took a seat beside her on the bed, glancing over every few moments as she lifted one chip after another, chewing slowly, her eyes glazed as she stared into nothing. I said nothing, afraid even that to reach out and place my palm on her sweat-soaked back in an effort to calm her shakes would be to physically measure and confirm the distance between us. The only reassurance I could offer was the unspoken promise that soon I would be gone and there would be nothing I could do.

The office for the Chinatown bus service was small. A single desk stood at the end of a room lined with half a dozen chairs on either wall and just enough space between them to walk through, provided one carried only a single piece of luggage. The man working at the desk wore short dark hair and a white polo shirt, its collar twisted in absent-minded neglect. He took my phone without looking up and checked the display for the receipt copy I had downloaded earlier that day. He scanned a passenger printout, saying nothing as he crossed out my name and wrote my ticket number and date on a poorly cut rectangular piece of paper before sending me around the corner where the bus was waiting. The two men lined up in front of me were young and well dressed and spoke with a distinctive Andalusian lisp. Ahead of them, a woman in a dress in an orange

dress leaned onto the extended handle of her luggage as her dress whipped violently in the wind. As I watched, amused by the colorful display, I explained to a confused man with Slavic accent who had arrived after me that yes, the bus was bound for New York and yes, it was probably normal for them to have us wait outside the bus without explanation, to which he gave resigned grunt modulated to convey equal parts disappointment and familiarity.

The sun had already begun to set and a wind chilled the streets where we huddled awkwardly in line. Standing there, I submitted to the relative anonymity of lines. Put at ease by the idea that at that moment, turning impatiently to the driver, the luggage compartment, to the line extending along the bus, none of us belonged anywhere. And how much hope there was to be safe, as it were, between lives, wondering whether it was worth losing one's place in line to run to the deli across the street to avoid having to make use of the bus toilet and gamble on the presence of a hand sanitizer dispenser, afraid that the worst would happen and despite the fact that our luggage was already packed the bus would not depart, or worse we would be left behind.

We soon boarded the bus, passing the hand-written slips of paper to the driver who stood outside the doors. I took a seat next to a nervous looking woman. She had a pleasantly round face and appeared to be of Chinese descent. Her dark hair was up and bound in the back with a small leather strap pierced by a wooden stake, its subdued color earned by years of use complimented its wearer. She looked down at her knees as I crossed in front of her, angling them toward the aisle to clear the way to the seat by the window. Shortly after I sat down, she touched my arm with a hand covered with a white, bandage-like glove worn to protect burns or eczema, and asked if it was my first time on

the bus. It was not, I said, to which she nodded and relaxed visibly into her chair, as though the fact of my having returned was sufficient endorsement to put her at ease. The bus filled slowly. People stumbled over suitcases as the later-comers maneuvered to the back. A few groups had congregated outside and stood looking up at the bus windows, waving their goodbyes. I could not see whether their farewell was returned, but their presence punctuated the departure and offered a sense of confirmation. Behind and to my left, a middle-aged couple murmured quietly to each other, their voices melting together into a low and inexact language. The doors slid closed. The engine shook the bus to life. Before leaving, the bus driver, who wore a reflective yellow vest and spoke in an unnerving high pitch, addressed the passengers, explaining there were many people with many different backgrounds on the bus, and that remaining calm and showing understanding was the only way to have a successful trip. To that point, if any problems arose he would pull the bus over and would not hesitate to call the highway patrol. On another note, he continued, lowering his chin, it was his duty to inform us that the toilet was not flushable, so if we could all keep that in mind when considering how we utilized the facility, he guaranteed it would be appreciated by all.

My neighbor frowned to me, the presentation having evidently made her skeptical of whether she had misplaced her trust in me. Compelled to reassure her, I smiled and shrugged, hoping the casual gesture would confirm the driver's comment as merely a general statement of truth unrelated to our specific presence here, on this bus, with these people, myself included. As the bus pulled off the curb and turned the corner of H Street, everyone became silent and subdued, as though comforted by the knowledge that we could rest easily now. No matter what else was going on outside in the world, whatever

might happen would not do so yet, for we still had hours before the bus stopped and we would be sent out again, only this time the street would be different and the hour would seem arbitrary and fantastic. For the moment, suspended in transit with the countless others whom I would never meet but with whom I was nevertheless connected at that time, the circumstances of my own life began to recede; and though our reasons for travel were inevitably as disparate as our lives, I felt some comfort in the idea that an impulse as old as humanity to leave what we knew behind to pursue an indefinite yonder could at that time be a binding force.

It didn't take long to leave Chinatown and reach the edge of DC, where the landscapes shifted as the city descended slowly into untended wilderness. After a half hour or so, the woman beside me turned and, whether from anxiety or neighborly sentiment, she began to inquire into my family – if I had a wife, children, and where they were. I smiled, saying I had none of my own, to which she nodded, seeming to set the information aside as she waited, her mouth half-parted, for me to return the question. No sooner had I done so than she began to speak to me about her daughter, and for the next couple of hours we discussed what it meant for her to have a child in this country and this world at this time, and the questionable inheritances of humanity. Our conversation was not unpleasant, and we quickly established and maintained a congenial tone of reserved intimacy. More and more, she said, she had been questioning what it meant to bring a child into this world. Her husband worked for the World Bank, and though admittedly his work provided an enviably comfortable life, it remained a source of some ambivalence for the both of them. Together they had a daughter of three years, she said, her face becoming more animated as, without prompting, she took out her phone and displayed a

picture of a slight girl in a blue and white dress posed beside an old wooden rocking-horse with tangled yarny hair that seemed a product of another era. I did not respond at first, save to affirm that her child was a beautiful one. She asked what I did, and I told her that I was teaching and working on a novel, though due to a variety of circumstances I was currently on leave from the university. She looked surprised. Her eyes opened wider as she smiled, telling me that she was pursuing an MBA at the same university and was currently on her way to attend a conference at Columbia. It must be difficult for her, I said, being both a Master's student and a mother, to which she agreed reluctantly, grimacing as if to say this was not the first time she had considered my statement and had already determined it too easy a description, and even a dismissal. I was embarrassed by my own lack of experience becoming so abruptly apparent. I didn't respond immediately, having learned over the years that you have to approach people gently and quietly or they tend to pull away.

It isn't all bad, she said, placing her phone back into the inner pocket of her purse and adjusting into the seat. In many ways, the opportunity to study had made it easier for her to accept motherhood. It was a relief to get away—even vital, she affirmed, as if she were reasserting herself into her own story. From the start, having a child was an immeasurably difficult decision for both her and her husband, one that to this day she could not say whether or not she thought admirable or even justifiable, though she suspected that it was neither. I nodded, offering that from what I had heard, the uncertainty and doubt surrounding a parent's culpability and whether or not by making certain choices one was irrevocably harming one's child seemed to be one of the most common, even if, admittedly, not the most acknowledged experience of parenthood. She

nodded distantly, pausing as if to consider whether or not to say more. It certainly wasn't easy, she eventually agreed. It was one thing to want to escape one's child, if that was the right phrase, she said, and another to actually do so. The decision to apply for an MBA was not made carelessly, but even filling out the application forms caused such excitement that she became frightened, and her entire body seemed as though it could shatter at any moment.

Even her husband was doubtful of the wisdom of their arrangement, finding his allegiance torn between wife and daughter. The problem was not that they could not afford a nanny or day care or that she was under any pressure to remain at home, though her husband undoubtedly thought that would be the best course of action and had assumed she would want and choose to do so; more, it was that she had no roadmap for how to proceed. The arguments they had, and there had been many, both knew were symptoms more than anything else. Fights had become a way distance herself from her thoughts in order to face them head on; to exorcise, or rather externalize one of her arguments and have it embodied in him, to hear the words coming from another mouth confront her, naming an uncertainty that wasn't fully hers until it had had been put on her by someone else. She had known plenty of parents who felt similarly. But nevertheless, she insisted, the circumstances surrounding her own decision made her feel uniquely culpable. It took her days to finish the application. She must have read the same lines over a hundred times over, always wondering whether she should continue the process. She would wander the by then spotless house for hours looking for toys left out, laundry crawling over the hamper, or anything to reassert a measure of investment and control over the house, as if such acts were the only thing keeping it from collapsing.

These days she is away as often as she is home. Even now, in her second year in the program, it still surprises her how the moment she leaves her house she is greeted an overwhelming rush of relief and self-indulgent pleasure, and how this relief only heightens the guilt that invariably accompanies her out the door and continues to stalk her for a while until, at last, it releases her and she feels light again, though it is incomplete, dampened by the shadow of awareness of an object that is never gone but rather receded into the background to wait for her at home. When I asked why she thought it was still so difficult—whether she knew or had any desire to share, though I had no right to ask—she reassured me, saying it was fine, she had spent a lot of time in therapy where her counselor encouraged transparency, emphasizing naming the issues we want most to conceal as a way of coping and learning to live with them. Over the last year, she tried to tell the story whenever she had the chance, hoping that doing so might endow her with some sense of control and normalcy. The truth was she couldn't say why she felt this way, though part of it had to do with her sense of her own knotted self and having not yet learned to unravel, if that was the right word, her particular circumstances as wife, student, headstrong, mother, immigrant, woman, professional, aging, daughter, healthy, etc., even as she tested the links and breaking points in each. Over time, she had gotten better at tuning out the pressures of her home life whenever she was away, even as the chord, though loosened, remained attached at both ends. And in certain moments of silence, she could still hear it in the background, only the vibrations were more muted now, softer, even seductive, and in certain moments felt both freed from and called back home.

Our conversation had lasted about an hour or so before reaching a lull and, without warning, she looked at me, visibly tired, as if to see if I had anything to add. At that moment, though, I could think of nothing to say. I tried on a smile, opened my mouth as though to speak but finding nothing. She took deep breath, signaling the end of our conversation, and said she was going to close her eyes for a while. It was a night bus, after all, and her conference would begin in the morning. Surprised, I nodded quickly. Of course, I said, and, perhaps too nervously, repeated, of course, hoping she did not see my disappointment. She adjusted, moving slightly from side to side as she sank deeper into the chair. When she closed her eyes, I turned to look outside where in the growing darkness passed some fields, dark outlines of old wooden houses, trees, and the fence posts in the distance, suspended there and where, unless the bus followed a sharp bend in the highway, it seemed they might never leave my window. I was sorry to lose her company. I was not tired, but I wished I were. As I looked into the double image displayed in the dark window, the echoes of her story faded. A plastic bag rustled somewhere behind me, and soon I began to hear fragments of conversations that must have been taking place throughout, but of which I was only now aware. Without her company, the bus appeared no more than a hollow place where human voices gathered for a moment in anonymity only to disappear again, and I longed to be pulled like my reflection outward into the phantom landscape, where the borders of my body might begin to blur in a way similar to how, at the farther edges of a candle-lit room, shadow develops a texture similar to that of mist or ash.

The highway widened and then narrowed again at the edge of the city, merging into a single lane under the Lincoln Bridge where our progress came to an abrupt halt. I

leaned against the window, hearing the sounds of horns of the tightly packed traffic softly through the glass, and as I looked down at the flashing brake lights that decorated the streets I was reminded my departure from the city after I had been accepted to the University of Maryland. It must have been around the same area where, in the middle of the day, I encountered heavy traffic where the roads were undergoing repairs. Cones narrowed the left lanes, signaling that I was to merge right. Unused to driving in such conditions, I was having some trouble finding a way in to the slow-moving line of bumper-to-bumper traffic. In Texas, you found highways leading you into the city that often consisted of as many as ten lanes, some half again the width of those found in the northeast. Even a space the length of two cars signaled that the other driver was unwilling to let you in; and yet at that moment, looking for some way in, it seemed as if by some Eastern magic drivers managed to fit full-length cars into spaces no longer than a few feet. Eventually, in an apparent gesture of generosity, a man with graying hair and a short trimmed beard in a dark green sedan waved for me to pull in front of him. I nodded thanks before discovering that, whatever the man's intentions, there was not yet enough space for me to merge. The man continued waving as the traffic moved, but instead of remaining still to extend the space between the two cars, the other driver elected rather to keep moving with the traffic in front of him, as if he were caught between two impulses. As he moved, his gestures became more impatient and insistent until soon his expression described a certain furious bewilderment, as though he could not understand why I had not merged. Unsure of what to do, I kept pace along side him, hoping the gap would eventually increase. But rather than easing the tension, my hesitation became the source of even greater frustration for the man, who began yelling and pointed to the space in

front of him into which I was apparently meant to wedge myself as if forcing myself in, although apparently welcome.

The bizarre image of the man so insistently urging me to merge into a space he nevertheless kept impossibly narrow stuck with me for years. At the time, I considered the encounter confirmation that New York had no place for me, and for the first time in years I fondly recalled the sprawling spaces of the southwest, welcoming stretches where the mind could spread out for miles without intruding on anyone. As the bus pulled beneath Lincoln bridge where narrow slopes littered with paper bags and shattered bottles framed the traffic below, I wondered if there might have been more there than I was allowing. Certain places make it impossible to keep one's distance. The driver eventually gave up. He continued on with the traffic. I didn't blame him. I had reached the point where the cones made it impossible to continue on and was forced to a stop. When I finally merged, I wanted only to move on, to drive the preceding months into the past they it could become nothing more than another story of a place I knew little about and into which I could not maneuver. I waved briefly at the driver and avoided looking in the rearview mirror, focusing instead on the out of state license plate of the car inching its way in front of me.

When the bus pulled over to the curbside in front of a Bank of America near Penn Station, there came a noticeable a shift in the tenor of those passengers not headed to the bus final stop in Chinatown. Immediately upon stopping, any sense of solidarity that might have existed now proved circumstantial as people maneuvered and contorted themselves in the cramped and narrow aisle, pulling bags from the overhead and pushing ahead, stepping into the heavy foot-traffic of 7th Avenue, struggling retrieve their luggage

while at the same time avoid being knocked over in the competition with fellow passengers or pedestrians competing for sidewalk-space. When finally I managed to rescue my bag, my mind was swirling. Large screens that stretched across the block advertised perfumes and television shows flashed silently through the night. I made my way to Laura's apartment, nestled on Lexington Avenue between an Indian fabric store and a bar where the muffled bass-heavy music was already leaking into the street. A short wrought iron fence that jutted out more than a yard into the sidewalk caged the entrance. After a grappling briefly with the latch that stuck from years of concurrent use and mistreatment, I entered into to a small corridor with a staircase and a wooden bench holding six baskets—one for each of the tenants—each containing a varied assortment of mail: ads, bills, a brown paper package bearing a hand-written address, and a copy of NY magazine, all carefully bundled together. The apartment had no lift, so I had to walk up the four flights up the red-carpeted stairs that leaned inward and with each step creaked, the planks sagging perceptibly such that it seemed they might at any moment give way. The dusty white walls held no photographs or landscape paintings, mirrors or other decorations often found in such buildings. The sole ornament hung at the top of the first flight of stairs, a Mossant hat manufacturer poster print advertisement by Leonetto Cappiello portraying three outstretched arms capped with white gloves tipping their bowlers in greeting or, perhaps, to scrutinize the brand.

I proceeded to my friend's fourth floor apartment, marked only with the number '5'. On the right side of the entrance was a closet full of shoes, book bags, and larger luggage containers stacked one on the other. The entryway opened up to the kitchen and the living room, as well as gave access to a balcony nearly half the size of the apartment.

Directly in front of me was a square bedroom too small for any elaborate furnishing. A queen size bed with purple sheets set about six inches off the floor with its headboard centered at the window took up most of the space. At the head of the bed was small steel end table holding a tissue box and a glass bowl containing a variety of pens, a yellow sticky-note pad, NYC condoms, and an assortment of creams. On the wall by the doorway a black dresser that came up to my shoulders. Three candles and an incense box on the windowsill beyond which I could see over the edge of the apartment's balcony to the blue-rubber mats covering the concrete floors of a small playground tucked away from 28th street bustle, protected on one side by a catholic church with its various shades of brown brick resembling the texture of bark, and on the other side, a large, red-bricked elementary school building stood attached to the church, its presumable sponsor. A black steel fire escape angled down between the ornate and tall windows of the cathedral like a crack that had developed over time into a chasm.

Immediately, fears that I had perhaps not yet acknowledged were nevertheless confirmed. As I set down my bags on the faded plum blue sofa, it occurred to me that although Laura had moved, I still had hoped that entering would transport me to another time in my life, and yet despite the fact that every conceivable space had been filled with bits of furniture and household items you would only expect in a more spacious apartment, I couldn't recognize any of it: a white desk-table with red legs and a vase holding plastic and paper lilacs and chrysanthemums, a dinner table with two polished wood folding chairs at the center of the wall opposite the sofa, the cushions of which had reached the end of their endurance and had begun to barb, a lamp in the corner by the balcony behind a pot overflowing with vines that tangled themselves around the legs of a

footstool, a waist-high bookshelf topped with cheap whiskey, tequila, and a curved wine bottle display piece that rocked if you tapped the bottle, a wooden coffee table with a peeling and water-stained finish, and a single-drawer mahogany desk. Every wall was used, not a space unattended, as if the room was shared by multiple people and each was intent on making their mark with what must have been Manhattan sidewalk plunder—the discarded and thrown together remnants of other people’s outworn lives. From the available evidence, I could not recognize Laura or, for that matter, any clear personality in what could have been a hoarder’s room were it not for the deliberate organizational care that was apparent everywhere. The strange logic that governed needed no human justification and came together through its very variety. The Indian incense, the Victorian end table, descending lines of Uzbek Atlas patterned wall hangings, Japanese rice-cooker— all were jumbled incoherently together. For a moment, my nerves were calmed by the thought that I, too, was only another discarded object finding a space there, surrounded by the things of a distantly familiar person, and as I studied, alone, the habitat of this person, searching for signs of her routines, the more absurd and comical my presence became, and the room that had seemed at first safe was overshadowed by the specter of Laura’s absence.

I set down my bag and went to the balcony, hoping that it might prove a place where I could spend some time with a book and my thoughts. The apartment was located in Curry Hill, and the air outside still sharp with frost carried the thick, warm smells of cumin and coriander mingling with the acerbic scent of diesel and other fumes released by trucks delivering goods to the local shops, busses, idling taxis, and even the chimney of the church that sent its own unidentifiable fog into the overcast sky.

I slept well that evening, put at ease by the idea that I was beyond the reach of anyone I knew. Though I awoke more than once to sirens or people calling to one another on the street below, I fell quickly back to sleep. I hardly stirred until the sun appeared between the school and cathedral and coaxed me awake. Soon after I arose, I went for a walk up Lexington Avenue past the corner Indian market, its glass walls flooded in stickers portraying various spices and wares, torn and peeling, as if advertisement was an afterthought and they served the primary purpose of concealing the shop's interior from passers by. I turned right at the corner by a café with a brunch line extending out the door into the cold march morning on 31st Street, where I noticed the banner emblazoned with a lion signaling a branch of the New York Public Library. Set back into the sidewalk, the building was easy to miss, despite its appearance stark contrast to the Mediterranean restaurant, Irish pub, nail salon and a handful of other stores, all of which held banners describing menus and ratings, happy hour and weekend deals in full color. The unadorned brick façade advertised nothing, and, if viewed from a distance, even the hours posted on the glass door faded into the wall behind them. Betraying its age, the library had all but withdrawn both physically and in its presentation, as if in silent protest against its new and obnoxious neighbors.

I stopped in to pass some time in the willing company of books. Upon entering, I was confronted by an overwhelming and repellent mix of odors—white paint, chlorine, and the sour scent of decomposition that provided sensational evidence that it was a place not long for this world. The whole first floor was no larger than a diner and had lost any of the charm it may have once had. The cinderblock walls were painted a thick and nauseating teal that sunk into the pores of the bricks as if trying to suffocate them. The

space allotted to the books was less than that taken up by the rectangular tables bolted to the floor and grey plastic chairs surrounding them. At the front desk, three librarians stacked returned books with disquieting carelessness and chatted with each other colleagues with such ease that, as I looked around the room, it began to resemble a waiting room for some obligatory public service than a place of learning, a place people came following some compulsion deeper than desire, it was easy to think that I was witness to the transformation of an institution into one of the last places of refuge for stragglers and vagrants.

The room held no more than a dozen people seated at the scattered tables, legs crossed delicately at the ankles under their tables where one man snored quietly behind a newspaper and the rest leaned over phones, computers, planners, books, typed at the computers, or stood by the printer for their order to clear. Five computers lined the back wall where a pamphlet board advertised discount health-care plans and city colleges, and scuff marks scribbled the floor like charcoal blotting that traced each chair's history of use. People mumbled to themselves with restraint that seemed more habitual than deliberate, and every ten minutes or so looked up as one of the librarians, came through the reading area, scanning to ensure strict observation of the library's no-sleeping policy.

It wasn't long before I felt the need to interrupt my browsing and step out for some fresh air. At the entrance to the library, a white, middle-aged man who I came to know only by his first name, Adam, stood beside the copper-plated book-drop, hungrily scrutinizing pedestrians as he waited for someone out on a smoke break to share a cigarette. Half-hidden by a denim hood, his neglected red beard seemed to smolder against the muted brick wall and was streaked with all of the various greys and oranges of

ember so expressive I found it hard to look away. His worn features were gaunt and jagged as limestone that over the years had been desiccated by wind and sand. I apologized and explained that at long last I had quit smoking. Hearing this, his expression became almost playful. I'm sorry, he said, I hate to see that happen to anyone. I replied that it wasn't all bad. Only mostly. This seemed to satisfy him, and he leaned back against the brick wall. You don't have to tell me, he said, nodding; he'd quit four times in his life, though never here—not in New York. It gets too cold to quit here, he said. But, then, it probably made little difference whether he smoked or not. The whole city was a gasping lung. The air got so thick at times you can hardly see through it, and sometimes he thought the city itself was evaporating. Between the factory smog that either constitutes or joins the thickening clouds, the exhaust from taxi cabs, SUVs, not to mention the delivery trucks, the charred oil from street vendors, steam streaming from coffees, fresh hot dogs, sandwiches – you name it – even the exhalations of the pedestrians in their more benign but not altogether healthy habit of breathing the city air, winter has always been at least partially characterized by these various greyish clouds of smoke that sulk along the avenues. When it comes down to it, winter being what it was, it would definitely have been easier to stay indoors whenever possible, he said, leaning back against the wall and examining the thumbnail of soiled leather that crowned the tops of his boots. In some ways though, smoking in the winter connected him to the city otherwise so brutal and only too willing to ignore you; and come to think of it, he said, the times he had tried to quit were the same as those when, for one reason or another, he found himself in the southern states, though he was not sure how or why the two were connected. Most recent was just a couple of years ago, when he did a brief stint in

Savanna, down in Georgia, and had fled just as quickly. He paused, his expression tightening as if he expected his grimace sufficient to communicate both his contempt for the city and also the reasoning for, or at least the substance of this evaluation.

Somewhat hesitant, I mentioned that as chance would have it, I had an uncle in Savannah, and as a child had visited on a couple of occasions. I could not remember much from these trips, save that they were largely pleasant, I continued, but I was interested to hear his impressions of the city. His expression leapt from contempt to pity and surprise. He seemed reluctant to speak at first. He shook his head and with his hand traced a sinking spiral. The city could be hospitable to visitors, it's true, he said, but it wasn't as simple as that. Visiting was one thing, but Savannah had an uglier side and little patience for newcomers who got too comfortable and overstayed their welcome. Suffice it to say that even being homeless, which he had been for some time by that point, he no longer felt any desire to venture south for the winter.

His resistance increased my curiosity and, suspecting he needed only some encouragement to speak and feeling a bit chilly myself, I asked if he would like to join me for a cup of coffee at a bagel shop I had passed on the way over. He agreed with a shrug, and as we made our way beneath the abundant scaffolding with blue and white tarps and horizontal steel beams that split the sidewalk, I asked how he had come to be in New York, and he began to fill me in on some of the details of his life.

Adam had spent the greater part of his life in Philadelphia, just west of the city, where his son still lived. His family had lived in various parts of the city going back three generations, he said, dating back to when his grandparents had emigrated from Hungary a year after their marriage. Arriving in New York, they made their way west, eventually

finding themselves in Philly where they decided to settle. As far as anyone knew, they had never left the city again. Adam himself had spent his whole life there until about three years ago, and to this day he still owned two houses—houses he hadn't seen since he left and which he admitted may have been repossessed by then. When he found himself with the time and the energy to let his mind wander, he said, he often wondered about the state of them and whether he would ever decide it was time to go back. He was pretty sure his son, whom he also hadn't seen since he left, still lived in one of them near the center of town, though as to the other—the one he and his wife had lived in, he could not say. The house itself was located in a smaller neighborhood on the outskirts. The street had begun as a kind of lower-end retirement area and followed along a little runoff creek bed. The area was full of strange and uncommon varieties of reptiles, salamanders, snakes, turtles, and others like bobcats, foxes, coyotes and deer, all of which added to the sense that they had escaped the city. Just a few years before he had moved, a couple of consecutive floods caused by poor drainage in the creek made the property value plummet, forcing the elderly, who had gone there for an effortless retirement and could not maintain the houses, to sell them off to go elsewhere. That was when he and his wife, having raised their son in her parents house and eager to take advantage of the newly cheap housing, put down on a little three-bed, two-bath house and a large yard out front which though they didn't own it felt like theirs. In those first years, and possibly never since, Adam said, he felt his future settle, relaxing around him like the pleasant embrace of a well-worn armchair. He was married, had a son entering high school, he was making money, and would swear that, lacking a better term, he was happy. This didn't last,

though, he said. Of course it didn't. Sometimes God throws you a curveball and it hits you right in the hip, and when that happens you still have to get up and get to first.

By this time, Adam and I had arrived at the café. I ordered a black coffee and he a cappuccino. We took a red and white plastic table in the corner by the entrance. The sheen of the matted surface collected the light in muted orb-like pools. The smell of warm bagels and coffee eased me into my seat, and the pleasant atmosphere withstood even the ambient chatter of the dozen or so diners and the occasional draft from an open door, and so Adam and I were able to continue our conversation without difficulty. Like all of the men in his family, Adam had been raised a carpenter. Of his earliest childhood memories, he said, none were as acute as the scent of wood shavings coiled in every corner of the two-car workshop garage, the sweet sting of wood-stain, and the various grades of sandpaper, he remembered, that his grandfather, interrupting his work, would on occasion use to caress Adam's chin, which, Adam said, would send both of them into rare fits of laughter as they ran through the garage until eventually they collapsed, panting on steps leading up to the kitchen entrance. When Adam was fifteen, he dropped out of school to help his father in a construction job that he worked to support his own furniture design and repair shop.

Adam spoke of this part of his life with firmness and pride, saying that he'd worked every day of his life and, until recently, had made it a point never got out of bed for less than a hundred dollars. Even after his father died and he met his wife and they had their first and only child, Caleb, he continued contracting work to developers and homebuilders. In many ways, that was another life altogether, he said, belonging to another man and another place. When he thought about those afternoons in the workshop

and his father bent over the detailed engraving of a grapevine climbing the side of a cherry wood desk, he noticed that the more time he spent in the memory the less real and familiar it seemed, until every detail had the suspicious and imprecise quality of something seen in a movie that had inserted itself into memory, possibly without realizing it, and he had adopted as a prosthetic for his own.

When I prompted Adam to speak more about what had led him to leave his home for Savannah, he became noticeably uncomfortable. He rocked his shoulders from side to side as one does when trying to maintain balance. I didn't press him any more, only softened my eyes and looked down at an angle to the square-tiled floor speckled with strands of black like pubic hair, relying as I had for so long on the inscrutable compulsion that betrays people into telling their stories to strangers, even those that they had long decided to keep hidden, as though everyone was only waiting for an excuse to unravel. We sat under this silence for a while, and it wasn't until I was halfway through my coffee that Adam finally picked up the conversation again, light-stepping around the subject as if unsure how it would react or how close it was safe to approach that which he only recently had thought to have died. He told me that he had once heard that when a man describes a place he's lived or has some connection to, no matter how significant it was or whether he's only heard about it or lived there his whole life, that he's only ever describing himself, and if one listens closely he can learn more about the man than the place. I nodded in agreement, though before I could respond, Adam continued. But even if that's true, he explained, then the fact nevertheless remained that he was attempting to describe a version of himself that he had long been trying unsuccessfully to get rid of.

Sometimes, Adam repeated, when you least expect it God throws you a curveball and hits you right in the hip.

It was a Tuesday night about three years ago, and he had just gotten home from a late night working cabinet repairs in a new complex downtown when he got a visit from two officers whose names, if he had ever noticed, he had since forgotten. They asked if they could come in and, having been seated, informed him that his wife was murdered in front of an ATM, and twenty-six years of marriage were reduced to a small collection of ash placed on the coffee table. Some days exist in a vacuum, he said. He remembered it was a Tuesday, and though he could clearly recall the smallest details of that day, such as where he put the keys – on the sofa table beside the cork coasters – he had no memory at all of what had happened the day before. If pressed, he wouldn't even be certain that it had been a Monday. Within weeks of her death, he received a life insurance check for \$100,000 dollars, he said, and the combination of losing his wife for money and at the same time receiving a sum the likes of which he had never encountered had been devastating. He didn't have a bank account that allowed that kind of transaction, so he ended up spending nearly \$4000 to get the check cashed. He bought a P83 pistol and carried the entire sum in a briefcase. It's true you feel invincible carrying around that much cash and a pistol, Adam said. And for weeks he felt like an undead man— invincible and decaying. Describing what struck me as Karamazov spree, he said spent thousands every day on lottery tickets and the most expensive whiskeys, gins, and champagne he could find.

It is terrifying how quickly things fade – and not just the money, he continued. The spree had marked the beginning of what became the relentless task of keeping what

he knew from settling into memory, and at the time the indiscriminate spending of what he could not see as anything other than blood money had become a prerequisite for acknowledging her disappearance from his life. A practice similar to the scattering a loved one's ashes. When he finally sobered up, he discovered in a moment of devastating relief that all her belongings had disappeared from the house. At some point in the few weeks prior, he realized, he must have gotten rid of them, but to this day he could not remember doing so. In the following days and weeks he searched the local pawn shops and thrift stores, he could find no trace of her clothing or books, her favorite, sky-blue coffee mug or her porcelain animal collection with its vibrantly glossed hummingbirds, the matted squirrels, rabbits, and nesting foxes arranged on a set of polished mahogany shelves he himself had made, her belongings not so much missed as conspicuously and at times painfully absent. What was strange, though, Adam said, was that even with so many things gone, the house felt smaller than ever, constricted, as if filled by a thick and invisible fog.

“You know. I mean, you get it, right?” he asked. I did not respond right away, allowing the question to hang in the air. I thought he would soon pick up where he left off, but no sooner had I looked up to see his eyes trained on my own before it became clear the question was meant for me. He was waiting for an answer. I glanced at the cashier. I did not know what to say. Adam did not look away. Intent on holding me there, his eyes did not waver from where I sat, shifting, hoping he might say something to release me from the discomfort that accompanied being called out. Grasping for something to say, I eventually managed to mumble that I could only imagine. That, when it came down to it, what else could anyone do? Only listen and absorb but not understand.

That, whatever the case, I was listening. He looked skeptical and continued to press, and it soon became clear that he would not continue unless I shouldered some of the burden. I told him that, strange as it was, I hadn't ever lost anyone very close to me—acquaintances, yes, as well as more or less distant relatives. I understood very little, I said. But I could try and imagine. This did not satisfy him. "You've got to know, I can see it," he said, scrutinizing me as though the sorrow associated with loss were something written on the face, visible to anyone who knew what to look for. After some strain, I admitted that a couple of years ago I had lost my dog, a golden retriever by the name of Paul. I could not say why that came into my head or why, at that moment, I could not simply confirm that yes, I understood. I hadn't thought of my dog for years. Part of this was because of how long ago it was, and also because it was a subject I had long avoided. He didn't respond right away, and I immediately regretted saying anything at all. My face warmed and began to flush in admonishment of my transgression. It was all I could do to suppress the impulse to make some excuse and escape the conversation before Adam responded. That's something, he said. It isn't a lot, but it's something. When he asked how it happened, I explained that one day I was taking my retriever, on a walk and, seeing a squirrel across the road, it lunged into traffic and was hit squarely on the head by a semi so hard that it forced the leash from my hand.

Adam whistled and offered a consolatory nod, and to this day, I cannot decide whether it was his generosity, sympathy, or simply the act of telling the story after so many years, but, unnerved by some compulsion that put me at odds with myself, I continued, explaining that, in many ways, the particular circumstances that surrounded the death of my dog were a curious inversion of his own, for while his wife had been

killed in his absence and then he dealt with the body in the aftermath, I had heard the last thin cry of life forced out of my dog; though, to my unending shame, I could not bring myself to touch the body or even call animal control to take it away. Doing so would have meant admitting to some vulnerability or guilt in myself I could not face at that time. Instead, I left him there on the side of the road, the same road that I took every couple of days to the local grocer, believing that if I only withdrew, it could be as if none of it had occurred, or at least remain open to question. At this, I paused. I looked up at Adam, hoping that he might take over. But he said nothing. Only waited, his gaze cast between us at the center of the table. For two weeks, I continued reluctantly, I passed his corpse lying there, slowly swelling on the ground. Every time I went to the grocer, I walked past, unable to make myself take another route, and this continued until finally all that was left of him was the stain of decay smeared on the road, presumably a sign that some conscientious driver had pulled over and dragged him into the overgrown verge, though I never dared look. Later, I learned that in various places at various times, the verge was also known as the ‘devil’s highway’ or ‘hellstrip’, both of which seemed disturbingly apt, for in it I find the reminder of a certain cowardice that continues to haunt me.

When I stopped speaking, I realized that my forehead was moist and that at some point the skin on my face had begun to swell. Adam, having listened with a fixed and inscrutable expression that lasted the entirety of my explanation, pursed his lips and shook his head while he let what I had said settle. That’s bad, he said eventually. Yes, that’s bad, but what’s worse is when you realize how easily all that fades. I agreed, relieved and somewhat taken aback by the ease of his response, admitting that despite

everything—my affection for my dog and my shame at having betrayed that—I did not remember being particularly unhappy. In fact, I often felt strangely uninhibited. What surprised me were those times when I opened the door to go outside, how acutely I perceived his paws not-slipping and scratching the hardwood floor to beat me out, amplified a hundred times in my mind, and how over the next few days these instances increased, occurring most often when I left or entered the house and was greeted by a rush of absent sounds that moved me deeply and seemed much more real than the body lying less than a mile away.

It is strange how some of the most complex emotions are tied to the simplest things, and Adam, having regained his confidence, leaned forward while his right hand obsessively removed the plastic lid from his coffee cup and snapped it back into place. He described how at first he too was spellbound by what was no longer there, and would spend hours on the porch or in the living room sofa listening to every absent noise—the tea kettle trembling on the stove, a sigh of boredom, the tap running in the morning. Whenever he found himself alone or in silence, which happened with increasing frequency, he would get up and walk across the carpet into the kitchen only to realize she wasn't there, and she wasn't upstairs either. Adam said he remained in that house for nearly a year before he finally decided to leave Philly for the first time in his life. He probably should have left sooner. Still, his departure marked the beginning of what was to become a lifelong task of reinvention, or of erasure. After all these days he had no social security card, birth certificate, and his license out of state and expired. He had gone to Kansas and Alabama working odd construction and painting jobs, unsure whether what he was outrunning was his future, his past, or both, but telling himself regardless that he

was a working man and that to keep ahead he had to keep himself active. For a while he carried his wife's ashes – wanted to get them tattooed on his neck, he said, but his son would not let him. These days, he carried a picture of her in his wallet.

He brought it out, careful to confine his shaking fingers to the edges of the photo as he removed it from the fold. I examined the photo while he continued, explaining that the more he moved from home to tent, carpentry to labor jobs, her memory became more muted became until, Adam said, he forgot how to listen for it. He devoted the whole of his attention to his sweat-soaked blanket in the morning, the relentless need for food or cash, the compulsion to move from one bridge, alleyway, or stoop to another and leave it in turn, the question of where he would go next and how quickly he could forget from one moment to the next the itch of his beard, his aching back, and the understanding that what he sought was the life of an insect— to wake in the morning without memory and work or walk until he was too tired to think, and then to vanish for a few hours and begin the day over again. Although his lapse in memory kept her at bay and seemed a blessing at the time, it was a mixed one, Adam said. To this day, his most acute struggle with that period of his life was over his willingness to listen to those parts of himself that held her, and whether or not he still could. The closest he ever got to the sensation of her loss was through hunger pain, which for obvious reasons was not something he liked to seek out. And besides that, he continued, the physical rhyme was only that, an empty representation of what left in the wake of her absence.

The string of jobs and cities accumulated until in Birmingham he met a young woman who for one reason or another had taken pity on him. Her dream was to get married in Savannah in a historic church on 4th street, and without dwelling on it they

soon became engaged. Only two weeks after they arrived to Savannah, she left him for reasons he still did not understand and returned to Birmingham. And yet, Adam said, that wasn't what soured him to the city. He didn't hold grudges, and he expected that she made the right decision. After she left, he still thought he still might have a chance in Savannah. Anyone who has been there could speak endlessly about the beauty of one of the country's oldest cities whose famed images of the gloss-leaved of magnolias in bloom, the oaks and cedar elms dripping with Spanish moss, the touring hearse's that circle tourists around the city's many haunted sites, and the second largest St. Patrick's day festival celebration in the country, were relatively well-known. He admitted that once, in Chippewa Square where in the 1994 film, *Forest Gump*, the famous scene of a feather falling to land on the bench where he then sat was shot. Covered pedi-cabs and horse-drawn carriages constantly circled the cobblestone courtyards scented with sweet southern jasmine and magnolia, and at first it was like being transported to another, almost storybook world that had been sustained through the years of famine, hurricanes, war, and social upheaval while suffering nothing more than the negligible degradation of film.

In some ways Savannah came as a revelation. When he first arrived, he was struck by the idyllic and easy-going pace of the charmingly named the Hostess City, a place prized enough that had been spared even from General Sherman's scorched earth campaign that characterized his notorious March to the Sea, which brought so many southern cities to the ground. For most of Savannah's history, Adam explained, the only way anyone would get to the city was by deliberate choice. It was on the way to nowhere, and once you arrived there it was clear that the character of Savannah had been shaped by

this fact. It was a hospitable city, yes, but one that invites you in for lunch as long as you are on your way by dinner, and was unwilling to adjust its character except for tourists and except in the most superficial ways. It wasn't until he found himself living under the 516 bridge on the edge of town with no job, no fiancée, and paralyzed by Savannah's insufferable heat that his sense of the town changed and it came to feel like a place resigned to stagnation. Immediately upon leaving the downtown preserve, what at first seemed a refuge brought back the unshakeable restlessness and anxiety he had been dodging ever since he first left Philly. Or maybe that came later, Adam considered, but regardless, one scene in particular in Chippewa Square continued to stand out in his mind.

It was as oppressive and lazy a summer afternoon as any other, and he was sitting on the very bench on which Forest Gump had sat listening as an elderly man picked the chords of a folk song, Adam said, when he was approached by a black man whose name he never learned but who had lived briefly under the same bridge where Adam had been sleeping. The man always wore the same Army surplus pants and a white linen shirt in the late stages of disintegration and spent his days limping unhurriedly through the city, offering to guide tourists to the reputed stop of the underground railroad which was rumored to be located beneath First African Baptist Church, after which he would describe at length the difficulties that still faced the community and ask for a small contribution both for the church and for his services. He was certain the man was going to ask for money or complain that this was his territory, and Adam was more than ready for him to start a fight. Understand, Adam said, by that time he hadn't had work in weeks and was going crazy searching for a way distract himself from the tireless siege of

emotions connected to Philly and his wife's death. It was something about Savannah's heat, watching it weigh everyone down over the course of the day, softening them into putty. This was evident in the wilt of the trees, the descending scent of jasmine that seemed pressed, and the sidewalks so busy in the morning becoming less populated as the day progressed, the pedestrians slower, dressed in glasses and caps. What people there needed was a good freeze to harden them up again, Adam said, but Savannah would never offer that. Looking up into the magnolias, one experiences a failure in depth perception, watching them bleed together as if melting in deceitfully visible waves. In that environment, time melts together too, and there was nothing Adam could do to hamper it. For the first time in years he had started drinking again and had even taken it upon himself, somewhat absurdly, to chastise everyone around him for not taking control over their circumstances and what he could only understand as an inexcusable lack of initiative and discipline. None of this went over well, as one could imagine, especially with him being a white man as well as an outsider. He'd been run out of two vacant buildings west of segregating line of MLK and was in danger of losing the bridge as well. Instead of speaking, though, the unofficial tour guide placed an unmarked plastic bag beside him. He must have noted Adam's bewilderment because after he set the bag down, he chuckled and winked, saying Adam didn't look good himself, and limped off without saying another word. When Adam looked down, he saw the bag held three pieces of fried chicken and half a six-pack of beer.

In Philly, Adam continued, you find yourself homeless and things get desperate. They get real is what they get, and you either get hard as ice or you won't make it through winter. In Savannah, though, something takes you down and they expect you to

sit and enjoy the breather. They'll even join you. In Philly you ask for a dollar and they'll spit in your face; in Savannah, they'll give you one and then another just for the trouble of asking. And it was the audacity that got me. At least when the city is against you, it screams and you can scream right back, but that blend of sympathy for the general and indifference to particulars just silences everything; and the idea that this man could assume without knowing anything that he was in need of something or, moreover, that the guide could possibly provide it was too much for Adam to handle. In his mind, it communicated indifference not to the circumstances but to the person. Though Adam admitted he opened the beer, he sat with the box for nearly an hour before he was able to open and eat it, and he could only get through one piece in before bout of nausea wrenched his stomach and he left the box, still full, on the park bench and right then made the decision to head back north.

In many ways, Adam said, it was the very fact of slowing down, of being unable to work for money, or even food that did him in. The longer he remained alive, the more he couldn't help but think that it was impossible for anyone to ever really face the tragedies of the past, much less live in the same room with them; he could only fight to keep them in the background, just out of sight or they clouded everything. Sometimes a man just needs a place that will keep his attention turned away from what he cannot face and provide some barrier, a layer of polluted air between him and the traces of what he's lost, a kind of blinder that allows him to see himself as a man, even if only a partial one, because when it comes down to it you aren't worth anything without her, or someone, something—anything that can help orient you. You hardly even exist, and the part of you that does is always in danger. And, he said, he didn't mean to suggest that his story was

extraordinary and, thinking back, he was sure that he was unable to see the Savannah that many others did, but sometimes you find yourself in a place where there's nothing to do but either cry or rage, and with those choices there was nothing he could do but leave. The truth, Adam said, is that if he were General Sherman, he would have had a harder time not burning that city to the ground.

Outside, dusk had settled comfortably, spreading calmly through the streets. A discord of lights littered the café windows, the yellow lamplight and fluorescents with those from the streetlights and traffic outside. Adam said he should go if he wanted get a spot at the men's shelter; and as we stepped out onto the sidewalk that evening to go our separate ways, each of us expressing the hope that we would meet again, possibly at that very Manhattan library, I had the sudden sensation of being thrown out of a dream. The city was all around us again. A train passed beneath the city, causing the sidewalk to shudder and for a moment the whole of Manhattan was in danger of breaking apart. A group of construction workers in reflective orange vests and protective glasses gathered around a section of the sidewalk where one of them leaned into a drill chipping away at the concrete, dust spraying like sparks under the white light of the construction spotlight that disappeared at the edge of the lamplight. A man opposite us in a blue suit and loosened tie leaned on the window of a car and lit a cigarette while in front of him a small, impatient terrier unable to hasten its owner onward wheezed against its collar as it strained toward one of the square tree plots cut out of the sidewalk at regular intervals.

After Adam and I parted, I started down 3rd Avenue. Slowly the sense of place came into focus, though it seemed preferable and perhaps more natural to have been absorbed into Adam's story, of which I was not sure how much to believe, and to have

disappeared altogether. And yet there I was. The smothered sky gathered all of the city lights together in a muffled blend of purples, yellows, and reds consolidated and absorbed by the night, impossible to disentangle. How formidable the city felt at that time: the rhythm of traffic signals, the pace of the pedestrian traffic, and the window-side tables where people sipped wine, occasionally looking up absently and took note of who was passing outside, the scent of burnt vegetable oil—all presented themselves at once in overpowering discord. And yet, in that state, what lay behind each lit window of an apartment building where dozens of cloistered lives and misfortunes were gathered, no longer seemed wholly alien, only distant, and even from where I stood it seemed possible that one need only soften one's eyes for the obscure logic of the lit apartments would organize and a constellation would emerge. I could not say how long I wandered through the neighborhoods, only that as I continued, half-dazed, perhaps stopping to get something to eat or browse the souvenirs of a museum shop, and how close it all seemed at that time, or at least containing the possibility of closeness, were I only to respond to an invitation.

It was not until I returned to the apartment that my thoughts settled and I could begin to disentangle myself from the effects of our conversation. I do not know what I expected, but upon entering the apartment, I was surprised and unsettled to find that nothing about my relationship to it had altered in the slightest; and, if anything, Laura's absence was more acute than before.

I was able to find a kettle in a cabinet above the refrigerator and prepared hot water for some tea kept in a small wicker basket by the stove. I prepared a cup of Jasmine, and as I returned to the balcony once more, I felt the impulse to postpone my

flight the following afternoon and wait for Laura's return. Once this idea settled, I could not shake the possibility of being there to watch her enter, possibly place her keys end table, lay out her scarf and coat over the back of the dinner chair as the apartment gathered around her and each object emerged in relation to another, myself included. Only to occupy a shared space, if only for a day, would be enough to make sense of my time there, I thought, and without that I feared I would never be able to describe where I had been or what any of it meant.

A string of bleary brake lights lined up outside the apartment. The check-cashing shack on the corner had shut off its red neon sign and barred its door, though the lights inside still flickered and would continue to do so throughout the night. A deep pulsing of bass-notes drifted up from the bar below, increasing in short bursts as a group of women exited, grasping at one another's arms as they laughed down Lexington Avenue. Although there were still many people out on the streets, no one looked up to the balcony where I stood. My thoughts wandered back to Adam and whether he had managed to get into the shelter, and yet I imagined him wandering the streets to the point of exhaustion, asking passer-byes for a cigarette until on the steps of some cathedral steps, I thought, he pulled his hood over his head and waited, patiently or not, for another night to pass.

Chapter 3: Savannah

The next morning, not ready to return to College Park but needing to leave New York and perhaps motivated by my encounter with Adam, I called my uncle, who had lived for a time in Savannah. I had long wanted to return there, having only the faintest memories from one or two early childhood visits. I had a long-standing invitation from an old acquaintance of his, a man my uncle inexplicably referred to by his full name and title, Chaplain Andrew Krey, whom I had never met but who oversaw an international seafarer's house called the Maritime Bethel, dedicated its services to the seafarers on board the many merchant ships that stop at Savannah's port, located near the Garden City docks just outside of Savannah and was always in need of help. My uncle readily agreed, and when I asked what I would likely be doing there, he explained that the Bethel's primary purpose was to provide a 'home away from home' for the international merchant marines that passed through on their shipping routes, and most of the work amounted to little more than being on hand.

My flight landed at the Savannah airport in the midafternoon, and upon stepping out from the air-conditioned terminal, I was hit by a combination of humidity heat so oppressive that I immediately regretted not checking the weather forecast in advance and considered returning indoors to reevaluate my decision. After all, at that time I felt no particular allegiance to Savannah. Fortunately or not, before I had time to change my mind and go back inside, my attention was drawn a man in netted red cap, the logo of which I could not discern, faded blue polo shirt, and baggy jeans, waving to get my attention as with his other hand he put out a cigarette on the sole of his boot. He

introduced himself simply as 'Ben,' explaining that he worked for the Bethel and that the Chaplain had asked him to meet me at the airport and give me a ride there.

He was a small man of Filipino descent, wiry glasses, and a torso curled slightly like a shovel or as though it had been shaped by the seat of an old car. I asked him whether it was always this hot, and though he didn't answer directly, his smile left the answer unambiguous. After a somewhat hurried introduction, he led me to a large, grey-blue van, the side of which displayed a large sticker of a blue woman outlined in white standing next to a large collie, waving a blanket to the horizon. When I inquired about the image's origin, Ben explained that it came from the statue created by sculptor Felix Weihs de Weldon of Florence Martus, which stood on the Savannah river bank and was the symbol of the organization. As the story has it Florence, the daughter of an ordinance sergeant and civil war veteran, had as a young woman determined to greet every ship that passed through the Savannah port. Her unswerving enthusiasm for the position was something of a myth, Ben explained. Every day she stood at the riverbank and waved a white handkerchief during the day and a lantern at night to welcome ships to port, and it is estimated that, without missing a day over her forty-four years between 1887 and 1931, she had greeted more than 50,000 ships and upwards of a million seafarers, many of whom never were to learn her name, before she passed away to be buried at the Laurel Grove Cemetery on the west side of Savannah, in the northern section, among the scentless red azaleas and myrtle, where other whites were buried.

Ben spoke hurriedly, which often causing him to stutter. In the rare instance that he became silent for a long period of time, he would without warning let out a guttural 'Hup!' that combined the most startling components of a hiccup and a gasp. He said were

many rumors surrounding Florence's intentions in her unofficial work as greeter. Of these, the most common was that she had fallen in love with a young sailor who had set out to sea on a trading voyage. On the day his ship was scheduled to return, Florence went to greet her beau at the dock only to find that he had vanished without leaving so much as an article of clothing or book behind. In fact, the ship no longer seemed to hold any record of his ever having been aboard. After weeks of fruitless inquiry, the story went, she moved in with her brother at the lighthouse and swore that if he were to return or if someone were to find her beau and convey him to port that she would be there to meet him.

Regardless of whether or not this is true—others have suggested that she was there with the dubious motive of soliciting gifts—Ben said he didn't much care to speculate about her motivation. Personally, he was more inclined to believe the explanation Florence herself reportedly gave in which she described her motivation as stemming from a deep-set loneliness. As a younger woman, she would go out to greet her friends working the river, and she was surprised to find her greeting returned by passing ships, the blare of steam horns and whistles that resonated through her body as the bank. Perhaps she became dependent on the attention, the gratitude shown by a simple wave of the hand to those who despite, or maybe because of their daily presence, are so often and easily ignored. But facts are rare in cases like this, Ben said, negotiable, and anyway didn't belong to her anymore. In his mind, it was enough that she was there and that people who had not seen land in weeks or months understood that when they reached Savannah she would be there waving her handkerchief to each in turn. He had heard it said that even on stormy nights many sailors chose to remain on deck, leaning on the rail

as they squinted through the rain in search of that warm yellow light swinging welcome on the shore.

Her sculptor, Felix de Weldon, was most famously known for his work on the Iwo Jima memorial—also called the United States Marine Corps War memorial—located in Washington DC. The memorial recreated the iconic photograph taken on February 23, 1945 capturing six U.S. servicemen in dramatic postures raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi at the Battle of Iwo Jima. The memorial was by far de Weldon's most well known work, Ben said, but he had always preferred the Waving Woman and her story to that of the flag raising. His intuitive preference was confirmed when he watched the footage taken of the flag raising and nearly missed the moment of the photograph, and what he had long assumed to be an image of a dramatic and drawn out struggle was, he came to suspect, only an instant in a staged event. He later confirmed this suspicion, at least in part, when he learned the simple fact the iconic photograph of the flag raising did not preserve a moment of the first but of a second raising that occurred when 2nd Battalion Commander Chandler Johnson ordered his men to replace the flag with a larger, more impressive one. He didn't say this in criticism or to dismiss the significance of the event, Ben assured me, lowering his chin so that his eyes settled just above the thin rim of his glasses, only to help make sense of why the Iwo Jima memorial's story and its stature continued to diminish, supplanted by the physical sculpture itself, while at the same time the Waving Woman had come to be a more central figure, referring no longer to the statue but rather to kind of companionship that was personal to him, just as it must have been to her and to the seafarers for whom she watched and waited.

At this Ben paused for a moment and smiled shyly. I asked him what he thought it was about the statue that caused him to gravitate to it, whether he had ever tried to describe it before. Although he couldn't speak about symbols in general or how other people related to them, in his case, Ben said, the reasons were quite clear. Apart from his own role, which he saw as analogous to that of Florence, before coming to the states he had served one term on a merchant ship as an OS—an ordinary seaman—and had experienced firsthand the effects of solitary life at sea. His duties were primarily custodial and he was constantly on call. Merchant ships were always trying to cut costs and crew-counts were often so low that it was common to work twenty-four hours without significant rest. The monotony of the sea, exacerbated by lack of sleep, affects the mind in astonishing ways, he said. At times, periods came when no one would make eye contact one another, making it possible to doubt one's own existence. The only way he could make his sanity hold out from one port to the next was to focus on the smallest tasks. That was not always possible though, and at certain times the only thing to do was anticipate the next stop, and he would often pass hours creating intricate fantasies where family, friends, and even strangers would amass at the end of the gangway in full fanfare, ready to carry him off like a prodigal son. Arriving to port, he searched for signs of recognition in the smallest expression—a friendly look from a stevedore or a visit by a chaplain—to confirm his existence.

As we drove, the landscape shifted. Tastelessly polished airport facilities collapsed into manicured marshes where a few scattered herons stared into the water as if something beneath its surface had given them pause. I watched as the bird lifted its foot to offer it back to the water, its beak angling downward but seeming to search for nothing

and content simply to wait. The sun shown thickly above the dense tree line on the other side of the marsh. Driving along the road that cut through the marshes, I was reminded of lake Artemesia in College Park, and it occurred to me that the scene before me could not have developed naturally but must have been contrived from some misguided idea of natural harmony that was lost to me. As I watched the scene slide past, I wondered what the landscape had looked like before. I remembered reading about how the Savannah marshlands had been receding in recent years due to rising sea levels, which encroached on the shallow water and made it increasingly brackish. These manufactured landscapes were becoming more common as small havens were used to make up for the natural and human induced erasures, which sent creatures searching for a suitable home. No sooner had I thought this than the heron's blank stare became something else altogether, more anxious, as though it had misplaced an object of such importance that every ounce of attention and energy had been dedicated to its recovery.

I asked Ben whether it was his experience as a seafarer that led him to Savannah to work for the Chaplain, whether he was attempting to locate something about that part of his life. He shook his head, saying he took the job at the docks because of its proximity and because his qualifications made it an easy and natural fit. He told me he had spent only the last three years in Savannah. Before that, he worked as a hospice care professional in Chicago doing home visits for the terminally ill. There, he acted both as nurse and as de facto family counselor as sibling rivalries gave rise to arguments as to who had been closest to the deceased, who had been there the longest, worked hardest, slept least, loved most, and therefore had most earned the right to mourn. Ben said he was in high demand there, and with a hint of pride, I thought, noted that should he ever return

to Chicago he would have no difficulty finding work again, having only moved to Savannah so that he, his wife, and his son could live with his father in law, who owned a store near the port that sold petrol, pizza, and domestic beer and was fading from a long struggle with diabetes and so spent his days sitting behind the counter, looking with the upward-drifting eyes of one who had reached a disassociated point in his life, and the world around him had become blurred and cloudy. The store, the register, the sound of the tin bell on the door, and even the warmth communicated by a touch from his grandchildren—all were losing their hold, as if evaporating, and there was nothing to be done but allow it all to disappear.

In fact, it took a while for Ben to adjust to the move. When he and his family first arrived, he was rarely home. Ships arrived at all hours, and he found himself working twenty-four hours a day, sleeping in the van in two or three-hour increments while passengers shopped or took advantage of the Bethel's complimentary WiFi to download enough movies to sustain them until the next opportunity to go ashore. To this day, Ben said, he could not say for certain whether he spent his days in the van as a way to avoid seeing his in-laws house or whether he was trying to make all that he could in donations offered by the seafarers. They needed the money of course, but even on slow days when the likelihood of being called for work was low, he still found himself in the van circling the docks. It was true that he missed living in Chicago, but he did not harbor any bitterness toward his wife, whom he never ceased to have the highest respect and affection for. Her family, though, had never seemed particularly fond of him. Most likely, he said, they were wary of his time at sea, specifically the rumors of lechery that surrounded the profession. And yet, he explained, if he felt distant from them the reason

had less to do with their ability to involve him than it did his own sense of dislocation which, at least in part, reflected an unquestioned assumption on his part that Savannah was no more or less than a brief suspension of his life, and that when his wife's father died they would return to Chicago. When on the half-hour trips to the shopping center with those seafarers—many of whom were his countrymen whose time at sea often lasted the better part of a year before they were granted leave amounting to as little as a month or two—he became absorbed by how many of them spoke about their homes and families, the way a word could cause a face to soften with nostalgia. It often happened that over the course of a single ride, a passenger relating his story would become so engrossed in the task of imagining home that it was as like watching someone weave his home from the insufficient threads of memory. You could see them making it up as they went along, compelled to embellish those facts they could not quite recall in order to retain their connection with a life that seemed increasingly 'out there'. He told me how over time he, too, began to refer to his life in Savannah in ways similar to how he had heard the seafarers describe their own experiences in the city as a brief sojourn. But you should never underestimate the privilege of being able to call the land on which he stood home, he said, regardless of how it seems at a given moment. At that time, he was unaware of the extent to which he had committed himself to a belief of a Chicago no more real or accessible than the seafarers' imagined home-lives; and yet this belief had nevertheless become a significant source of comfort and remained such until, increasingly, he found himself avoiding the topic of Savannah altogether, and spoke instead about the Chicago he had left or the one awaiting his return. It wasn't until he learned that his son had been spreading rumors that he was in an extended extramarital

affair that he awoke to the realization that the life he had imagined had, rather than helping him transition into the city he had more than willingly entered, only increased his sense of alienation from both his family and his chosen life, placing them in an inaccessible and imaginary space, their comforts seeming less and less real. And while other people's fictions he could accept as having spawned from the necessity of work or the devotion to family, seemed to sustain them, Ben spoke of his own as being little more than a stubborn refusal to take responsibility for his life. It was then, Ben said, that he began to understand his task as one of actually being here and present for those who might call on him.

I know it isn't a big deal, Ben said, but it still feels wrong that the Waving Woman was placed where she is on East River Street of the Savannah waterfront, separated by a seldom traversed bridge from the ports located in the industrial town of Garden City. Most people passing through did not have the time to take a trip to the city center where their watchwoman waits; and so if there was something he appreciated about this job now, he said, it may be that when the ships arrive he was there, physically, waiting in the van just outside the ships to welcome the seafarers to shore, the majority of whom are Filipino, as he was. And although the Bethel pays little and required him to be always on call, he continued, he found some consolation in that fact.

We continued driving until we reached an overpass leading into a heavily wooded area where, around a slight bend, we came upon a red traffic light warning of an approaching cargo train. The crossing had no barriers to keep us from a last second dash across the tracks, and for a moment, an unshakable certainty that he would attempt just that sent pulsations of fear and excitement over my body. As I watched the train

approach, it occurred to me how fragile our presence here was and even then, at the moment of my arrival, how easily we could be erased from the world, leaving no trace but a body rapidly fading. The tremor of the train settled and it came to a clamorous stop, cutting off the road. Although the inexplicably halted train gave no signs of movement, Ben didn't appear at all disturbed as he tapped lightly on the steering wheel to the rhythm of a pop song played quietly on the radio even as cars began lining up behind us, halting any thought we may have had of turning around to find a new route out. Noticing my discomfort, Ben assured me that such stops were common occurrences here, adding with an amused tone that the train would sometimes remain suspended there for as long as half an hour, occasionally inching forward or in reverse, as if reconsidering whether or not to continue on. Most of the time it was harmless enough, he said, but you have to have some patience or it could feel like the world was restraining you. The hardest thing was to learn how to wait. Sometimes if the seafarers were running late it could get ugly as they faced the possibility that the ship would set off without them. He recalled one man a few years ago—a young man, no older than twenty-five or so—whose wife after years of marriage had just given birth to their first child. This was the man's last cycle before he was scheduled to return, Ben said, and he was so focused on getting home that he had not wanted to leave the ship. His shipmates eventually talked him into it by telling him he owed it to his wife and newborn to get some gifts for to take home. By the time I dropped them off at the mall, Ben said, he had already gotten my phone number, tested it, and given me his own contact information. He proceeded to call every hour or so and confirm the pick-up point and time. I was on schedule until I one of the crew I picked up at port had left his ship identification card in his room and we had to turn around and go back,

losing us about twenty minutes, which although not unusual can be stressful for the seafarers, who try to get every minute they can off the ship and so schedule to return at the last moment possible. The man called over and over to check up on my progress. Though I tried to ease the tension and keep my own mood light, as I explained the situation away he maintained a seriousness rare in a person his age. When I arrived he hardly said a word, only slid open the door and asked whether I had anyone else to pick up before taking them back to ship. On the way it happened that a passing train cut us off about four minutes out from port. At first the man just sighed and looked at his watch, but as the minutes passed he grew palpably tense as the possible though unlikely consequences of returning to a vacant dock and finding himself marooned in a foreign and unsympathetic country became more real. Every few seconds, he would glance over as if accusing me of somehow conspiring with the train to keep him from his ship and his family. His impatience turned frantic, and he hounded me about other routes and where the nearest embassy was should he be marooned here without a valid visa. Soon it was too much for him. Without warning, he slid open the door, and as he approached the tracks I swore that he was ready to climb over the connection between two cars and run home, or at least to the docks, exhibiting the kind of helplessness and panic one often sees in a child who fears he has been forever abandoned. Instead he threw himself down on the railing, crawling beneath the car directly in front of us.

When that kind of thing happens, Ben continued, reality sets in, and there's no escaping how much they rely on their life at sea and yet how inconsequential and erasable they nevertheless remain. For the most part, no one and nothing depends on them but their families, and they do so from the other side of the world. Any one could

take another's place like, Ben supposed, it is with anyone else, yourself and me included, even though it is true most people don't have to confront it so directly and are able to live that much more comfortably. And it is only at those times when upon finally pulling up to the line checkpoint window and setting eyes on the angled cranes and masts like antennas behind the stacks, they often seem singularly relieved and even lighthearted. When the train finally moved, it only took a minute to catch up with the desperate seafarer. When they finally arrived, to port the young man handed his shore pass and ship identification card to the guard with a smile and enthusiastic gestures, telling them all he had purchased—soda, chips, jeans, and perfume for his wife, and a new cradle for his son. The prospect of being left behind purged him of all ambivalence, if only momentarily. On occasions like those—and one sees it often enough—they leave the van quickly and rarely look back as they finally walk up the steel gangway and disappear over the lip of the ship's hull.

It wasn't long before Ben pulled into the vacant lot of the International Longshoremen's Union office where we followed a stretch of pavement around the east side of the building. A squat redbrick house lined with unkempt boxwoods that appeared to have been built in the early 1970s. Absent signs or markers, the structure gave no real indication of its purpose. It took me a moment to reconcile the modesty of the domestic building with what I had come to imagine as much more remarkable. Outside the house were parked a van identical to the one I had arrived in and two other cars, a sun-paled tan sedan and a green hatchback, one belonging to Ben and the other to the Chaplain. Grey and copper colored squirrels foraged without fear of interference on the half-acre lawn. They chased each other in long bounds into the edge of the lawn where thin forest of

longleaf pines drew one's gaze upward toward the sky that seemed to waver in the heat and the breeze.

We entered through a side door beneath the tin roof that shaded a square portion of the driveway and entered a foyer with two couches and a card table. Two men sat lost in their computer screens and did not seem to notice our entrance. The foyer opened up to a kitchen an adjoining call-room where three full size cherry-red telephone booths containing wooden stools and mounted phones took up most of the space, the rest of which was claimed by three computer desks and a large white shelf holding a few Savannah ball-caps, puzzles, key-chains, and abridged bibles called *WaterWords* containing every one of the hundreds of biblical passage in which water was mentioned. Ben led me to the office where a large, middle-aged man with gray hair and broad shoulders wearing a bright yellow shirt sat at a desk typing out figures on an old receipt calculator. He brought me to Chaplain Krey, who with militaristic formality and precision stood and immediately held out his hand, greeting me with an impressive Boston accent as resonant as a steam horn. Welcome, the Chaplain said. He took me by the shoulder and turned me toward the door. He asked few questions, instead showing me the rest of the Bethel, including room in which I could stay for a small fee, which, he said, would easily be covered by donations. He then proceeded to explain how to use the phone booths, the computers, and the surprising variety of phone cards with rates benefiting the disparate regions of the seafarers for whom they were meant and that we provided for a surcharge of fifty cents which, he said, elbowing me painfully in the shoulder as if I were now an insider in some grand conspiracy, I would be allowed to pocket.

Before taking me to see the port, he introduced me to the other resident staff member, who was named Larissa. She a frail woman with thick dark hair braided and beaded at the ends. The chaplain said she had worked with the Bethel since it's founding and was in charge of maintaining the house as well as running occasional errands. She turned from where she sat at one of the computer desks and waved briefly in acknowledgment, her fingers typing a silent greeting in the air before returning to the keyboard. The chaplain smiled, explaining that Larissa had seen dozens if not hundreds of volunteers pass though, and I would forgive her if it took her some time to warm to my presence. I said understood, and the chaplain took me outside to his personal car.

We drove along a street primarily used by semis transporting goods from the docks. Soon, after only a couple of miles, we arrived to the entrance at gate five where, the chaplain said, most of the traffic was focused. Beyond the razor wire fence stood a maze of containers and a colony of trucks maneuvering through the stacks. Absent of any visible human influence, large portal cranes controlled at remote offices skated on legs connected by a steal overhead beam. They moved between the stacks like anxious sand-crabs scurrying across a ruinous and deserted beach, anxious to get from one tunnel to the next for fear of some potentially unforeseen predator lurking around the corner. What many people don't know, the chaplain explained, pulling into the parking lot in front of the checkpoint, is that approximately 90% of the world's goods are still transported by sea. Of that, nearly 70% is transported in shipping containers that arrive stacked in rows on these large commercial vessels reaching lengths of four hundred yards and drafts of just over fifty, boasting container capacities surpassing 17,000 units. With the technological revolutions of the last decades, he said, it seemed that many were content to

assume the entire world exists on the level of the virtual. People forget about people, yes, but it is the veracity of space that has really suffered. It has always been easier to look past or from a distance at the places that need our attention most in order to sustain any life at all.

At that time, he said, Savannah was host to the largest single container terminal in North America; and only Los Angeles could claim to export more. At any given hour the whole area quivered from trucks and trains roaring through the policed checkpoints to a network of distribution warehouses and highways leading inland to Atlanta. The sharp aggressive clatter of container steel as the cranes release them to the trucks made a sound that gives the impression of a confined explosion. It was easy to forget amidst the clamor and the goods in constant exchange that each ship is populated with upwards of two dozen men and women, the chaplain said, his voice rising with the enthusiasm common in those who for one reason or another are encouraged to speak of a topic they feel strongly about. Most of those on board have abandoned any prospect of a stable family life for the adventures or salary of the sea only to find that they have sentenced themselves to a drifting prison for spans of up to two years at a time. Of course many enjoyed the work, but it wasn't an easy life. Driving through the pandemonium of the port terminals, whose patterns are known only to a select few, he sometimes got the sense of being on a covert rescue mission on a contested border, which has only gotten worse since the September 2001 attacks. It wasn't long ago—a decade or two at most—that seafarers would have days, even weeks in Savannah before their ship would be ready to set off for the next port. These days, the rise in automated shipping cranes and integrated tracking systems often leave them with no more than a few hours at dock before they

must again depart for Halifax or Jacksonville, and when you add the new regulations that determine who is allowed to leave the sovereign ships for shore leave, the chaplain said, you can imagine that having only seen the oppressive surfaces of water and sky or the industrial ports with no natural beauty, or a break from the smell of diesel or the drone of machinery that could felt and heard no matter where one went, many of the seafarers were anxious to simply get their feet onto solid ground and escape, if only temporarily.

These days no one is allowed to set foot on the port, he said. The Georgia Port Authority runs shuttles restricted to all but the stevedores working the docks, so there is always a great demand for transportation to and from the ship. This was especially true here. Savannah's port was one of the only ones near enough to the city shopping centers that it was possible for them to go ashore to shop, despite the tight schedules leaving only a few hours shore leave before they must again return and prepare for departure. After getting through the checkpoint to the docking bays, it was common to see groups ranging from five to twenty waiting at the top of the gangway like marooned men, their paper shore passes already signed, waving to get the attention of every passing car that doesn't look like it belongs to the port on the off chance of it being independent cab whose driver had obtained a port transportation license. He explained that crew members often saved the Bethel's phone number, and hours before arrival would call to request rides to go shopping at the local mall to pick up souvenirs and comfort food for the ship or to stop by the CVS where there a Western Union enables them send money home to their families in the Philippines, Montenegro, Croatia, Ukraine, Russia India, Korea, China; other times, they are content to purchase phone cards or locate a space with internet access so as to call loved ones, whom often times they haven't spoken with in months. The idea

was, he said, that the Bethel house and its two acre, park-like setting outside the gates of the labyrinthine stacks of the container terminal provided a kind of temporary sanctuary for the nomadic seafarers. He said there they could find phones, internet, firm ground and the thin forest of longleaf pines that after months of horizontal expanse drew one's gaze upward. The idea was that they would feel lifted by a sense of expansion and dissolution, both of which signaled the presence of the Divine.

It was impossible not to be carried away with the excitable chaplain as he described driving in silence to and from the docks, the seafarer's house, and the shopping mall and listening to the foreign chatter in the bus as he picked the seafarers up from outside blend with the static sound of plastic shopping bags, the overwhelming cacophony of colognes, and the inevitable requests for fast food burgers and fries. He admitted, though, that these days his enthusiasm might have less to do with the job itself than with the opportunity to take a break from the rest of his work, which having begun as spiritual outreach now consisted primarily of fundraising and politics. He didn't like to admit it, but with the federal cuts in funding and increased suspicion of foreigners, the reality of what it took to keep an organization like his alive caused him to wonder at times whether the value of his work amounted to anything more than that of providing a discount taxi service. It was when he returned to the port that he could access something gratifyingly human in the work that remained and kept him committed to the project.

While he spoke, parked outside of the gated checkpoint, my attention was drawn to a small and unassuming plot of land to the left of it. It was easy to overlook the garden. Its borders were marked by a decorative white picket fence that could have easily been a remnant from the colonial era. Its central and most noticeable feature was the doleful

cypress tree that shaded half a dozen unadorned gravestones. Noticing my distraction, the chaplain explained that this area of Garden City used to house three major plantations: the Brampton, Givens, and Telfair. Early residents of the area were farmers and mill workers, many of whom eventually found work in the rapidly growing cotton and shipping industries. He said that this plot marked the burial sites of some of the slaves who had worked there. It was protected and maintained by the city, though he admitted his ignorance of the region's history and could tell me no more. That part of the city's history was a story few told, he said, though if you knew what to look for you could find traces of it everywhere. Even Florence Martus was laid to rest in a segregated graveyard, he said, and sometimes it seemed like the whole city was just a sprawl or collection of more or less hidden divisions that had spread out over the years. The borders were sometimes as clear as MLK Boulevard or the street at the border of the designated historic town center where on one side of the street houses stood in historical green and umber colors while opposite they were mocked by their ramshackle tie-dyed neighbors; and somewhere among Savannah's fractures, though he couldn't say where exactly, you could locate the ports.

He asked if I wanted to enter the port, but because of the abruptness of my decision to come to Savannah I had not applied for the requisite TWIC—Transportation Workers Identification Card—or the Georgia Port Authority card, which, the Chaplain told me, meant I would be unable to pass checkpoint. He suggested that should I end up staying there for a while, it might be worth applying for the cards to get wider access to the port so I could visit the ships and learn how people lived and worked there. I said I would consider it, but that I would likely not be there more than a couple of weeks and

would be most comfortable in the limited role of transporting seafarers from the Bethel to the shopping mall, Wal Mart, or downtown. The chaplain nodded, saying he understood the difficulty of these kinds of commitments, adding that I would nevertheless find plenty to do to fill the days.

Although I applied for the Port Authority card a few days later, I did not use it in the end. I told myself that boarding the ships would be presumptuous, a kind of service-based tourism, but the truth was that I did not know how to reconcile the desire to be of some use and the need to protect myself from the risks that attend involvement. I did not even tell anyone that I had received it, and though the port authority was required to inform the chaplain upon approval of the identification badge, he never mentioned it either. When I went to the office located on port property a few minutes' walk from the Bethel to apply for the card, I was surprised at how easy it was. I was the only person in the room apart from the man working behind plexiglas with a rounded opening at the base through which he slid the necessary application forms. I filled out the paperwork establishing my identity for background checks, paid the fee, and reluctantly posed for a photo. Less than a week later, I received the card that, provided I carried no unlicensed passengers, allowed me access to the port. But no sooner had I looked at the card than a fugitive feeling lit the room. In a moment, I was unsure of where I was. Who was that conspicuous blond boy refusing to smile at the camera? Where was he? And what was he hiding? The photo spoke of someone else, a person seen by someone else, evidencing a gaze I could neither claim nor dismiss, but one that compelled to escape.

Ever since adolescence I had been uncomfortable with the evidence of photographs. There was always something insidious and unrecognizable in the still

images, perhaps if only because the undeniable fact of the fact of the image spoke louder than any qualification I could make. It was as if the camera had made me a parody of myself, and so I avoided them as much as I could, and if ever a camera was present I became hyper aware of every move I made. As a teenager, anxious to assert some control over the ways my image might be used or I would be remembered, I would scrutinize every angle of my posture and tilt of my head such that, rather than manufacturing single moments, my every movement had become a series of poses for posterity, and in none of them could I recognize myself. In more fraught moments of self-consciousness, I could go days without leaving the house or contacting a soul, which, being homeschooled was never a difficult task. I had longed dreamed of discovering a way to be absorbed into the surrounding space and become nothing more than an anonymous and unrecognizable presence, which I thought might protect me from having to face myself as an object for scrutiny. Although I eventually grew out of this, something of this suspicion of my image remained, even grew to accommodate other forms of representation. If over drinks or through office gossip I heard of a circulated story in which I played even the most minor part, something in my stomach would harden unbearably as one confronted by an estranged double whose presence put me at risk, and the subsequent repulsion would often be enough to send me into a nervous fit.

When the chaplain and I returned to the Bethel he remained in the car, explaining that he had other obligations and that Ben or Larissa would be able to answer any questions and explain the most common routes, pick-up points, and anything else I would need to know in order to begin. I walked in to find a hastily drawn map on the kitchen counter Larissa had left. Its rapid pen strokes illustrated a series of landmarks and

businesses in place of street names: and arrow pointing left at an overpass near a burger joint; right at the freeway exit following a deep curve; right when at a large globe tucked behind a used furniture store, saying that if I had questions or got lost that I should call en route and she would be happy to redirect me.

Not having access to the port meant Ben was responsible for most of the driving and was always in a rush to get from port to pick-up points. The Chaplain briefly stopped by on occasion, but his visits were brief and only came en route to other obligations. I spent most my days in the house where my duties consisted of providing phone cards and giving permission for visitors to make use of the facilities. On rare occasions Larissa would offer to pick a group up at the port and hand the van over to me so that I could feel a little more useful. By the end of my stay I had learned the routes and pick-up points: the five flags at the mall, the ambulance parking section by Wal Mart, the curbside of Ross where, turning at the avenue intersection and passing by one or another wireless network store. When time came to return to the Bethel, I looked for a group gathered with carts full of stuffed plastic bags. Once I knew what to look for I could always recognize the way one would lower his chin and kick at the curb or how they would congregate, passing the time with a display ease or boredom that I thought it must have had something to do with the amount of time they spend alone or in silence, but I never asked anything beyond what could be answered by a group—what was bought, how long they had been at sea, when they would return. Few of them spoke much English, and those who did I tried to engage in conversation only to give up after a few minutes. The difficulties that must have arisen and the guardedness one often feels when

communicating in a foreign tongue drew them understandably back to their shipmates and returned me to an uneasy silence.

On some days, when by chance or weather conditions made it impossible for ships to maneuver the narrow riverbank the ports were empty, I was permitted personal use of the van. It was on one such slow and mournfully fog-soaked day about a week into my stay that I first managed to make it to Savannah proper. The road into town was lined with liquor stores, barbershops, and a meat market fully fortified with red brick walls and windows barred like county prisons. Passing over the Talmadge Memorial Bridge, named after segregationist governor Eugene Talmadge, which crossed a river dividing Savannah from Garden City, I first saw the port in its entirety. An unsettling silence had come over the docks. Abandoned trucks were parked near the warehouses, their wagons empty and skeletal. In the distance, two pillars of charcoal smoke caterpillar their way into the clouds. In weather like this, ships lined up at sea as they waited for the fog to clear. If the schedule was tight, they might skip the port altogether and proceed to their next destination.

I parked on outside of an old motel and made my way through the historic downtown. The streets were lined with cedar elms and magnolias draped with Spanish moss hanging motionless on the windless day. One of the first designed cities in the U.S, Savannah's grid-like pattern of ten-house streets were interrupted by dozens of public squares that cut off all but one city road, lightening the traffic, and on days such as this, instills the sense of being in a preserve. I made my to Chippewa Square, and had I not looked up its precise location and instead relied on Adam's description I would never have found it. The few miles separating it from the port town spanned centuries, though

in which direction it was difficult to tell. Even with my map, it took me a few moments to accept that I had found the bench Adam described. Surrounded by churches and a large white mansion with a large iron fence bearing medallions of men long dead which, the historical plaque read, dated back to the early 19th century. In the center of the square was a statue of James Oglethorpe, who established the colony of Georgia in the eighteenth century and had been Savannah's primary designer. An elderly couple wearing the kind of large dark sunglasses you expect on those afflicted with blindness occupied the bench, and I watched for a moment as they silently tossing bits of crackers to the sparrows that gathered around them. The thick fog was still thick and lingered on every wall, and indeed wherever one looked. It was easy to get the impression that the city existed in only a half-real state. Buildings seemed to blur around the edges; and I began to feel this affliction in my own body such that even the slightest breeze, in clearing the air would, I thought, do away with me as well. I looked back, half expecting to see Adam slouching there, when a sudden onset of vertigo that sent me to a vacant bench across the park. There I remained in a state of bewilderment, unsure of where exactly I was or how I had come to be. My stomach with colored impressions of a city at odds mixed and became indistinguishable, one from another; and it seemed that only given the clarity of distance could I grasp what up close was only a loosely bound collection of physical memories or memories of lives lived elsewhere, lives lived here and then abandoned, and lives that history has never acknowledged and remain only indefinite traces of absence.

I returned to the Bethel in a state of confusion, as though I had lost some personal heirloom on which I had never set eyes. For the next week I spent most of my days in the house, an interloper, and my eventual departure was constantly on my mind. Days passed

with little to mark them except for the growing sense of postponement, while the ever-fluctuating faces of seafarers came and went with little to distinguish one from another, leaving an impression similar to an effect that I learned from a photographer acquaintance of mine by the name of Austin Monroe that occurs when the shutter speed is slowed so that the buildings, fire-hydrants, and benches—all objects not subject to movement—remain clear and sharply defined while the people walking past blur, often to the point of transparency, each step of one merging with another, and it seems that by entering the camera's view they have initiated and ensured their own erasure.

I met Austin on an extended layover in Istanbul. Mistaking him for a local, I had asked him for directions to a café I had read of that was said to have exceptional coffee. I became aware of my mistake as soon as he responded. Though I apologized, I soon learned I was not alone in my assumption. Apart from his similar physiology, Austin was all but fluent in Turkish, and I soon became familiar with his social ease, which, because of his preference to live with a local family rather than rent his own apartment, had enabled him to conduct himself in such a way that few were ever aware of his country of origin. For a week, he and I met nearly every day. I was surprised how easy to walk with him down the cobblestone streets and circle the occasional stairway where above us laundry dripped down to the soapy sidewalks, washing out the asphalt and soil that held it all together. He was a quiet man who, although not shy, spoke with a certain measured and almost monotone rhythm that I admired, recognizing in it the tendency of one who, when he speaks, does so with deliberation and care, as if each word carried hidden a hazard within it that only he could identify, and if he were to misspeak would take revenge on him in the response of another.

I never saw Austin without his camera, and our walks were characterized by his frequent stops to take photographs of bored children and old women squatting on their porches or along curbsides. Holding his camera at his waist, he took opportunities to admire the rusted frames of windows or the spires of a mosque or a group of cats lounging in each others arms on the other side of the road, all the while snapping dozens of pictures of the unsuspecting men and women from whom, to all appearances, he had overlooked for the architecture. This technique was the source of a lot of great personal ambivalence for him. Whenever I ever followed his gaze only to realize that I, too, had fallen for his distraction, he became embarrassed and would mumble incoherently at having been discovered. Trickery, he explained, went against his ethics both as a photographer and as a man—the two qualities he said he held in highest regard. But he couldn't stop himself. And after the photo had been taken, the one thing that might redeem his deception was to show the image he had captured to its subject for final judgment, and yet this simple act had become impossible for him. There was nothing he feared more than the possibility that when a person saw their photograph they would not recognize themselves or what he hoped to capture, and rather all they would see was some semblance of themselves, stripped of identity and context: a bored woman sitting on a blue and white stool outside of a salon; a waiter with a crooked collar holding a tray of tea; a man putting out a cigarette on the stoop of his apartment, looking as though he were about to vomit. What use was photography if it didn't give people back a piece of themselves? he often asked. When he first arrived to the country he had shown the photos, promising to take a posed one should they allow him to keep the original. Over time, it became easier just to keep them in the dark. At times he defended himself saying

he was, in some sense, protecting their own best interest. What people want most was to see themselves in the best light, he said; and who could blame them? In moments of perhaps greater sincerity, though, he admitted that he was possessive of his images, which in his mind became something distinct from the person whom it captured and were deeply personal to him, something he protected and held close to the chest.

The ease so fundamental to his wellbeing and productivity required that he maintain distance from his subject. A shortness of memory, the ability to forget his transgressions was what allowed him to continue his work. I could relate to this necessity in my own life, and shared a similar fear of others. Perhaps this more than anything else accounted for our friendship, serving as a reminder that the very qualities that offer the possibility of human intimacy are the same that delineate its limitations.

In the days leading up to my departure from Savannah, one evening remained particularly clear in my mind. It was a slow day at the port. The only ship was one docked at the Imperial Sugar port, and Ben had already made plans to take a group to the shopping mall. As he had nothing to do in the interim, he asked if I wanted to join him and grab a bite to eat while we waited for them to finish. I agreed, and Ben said he would swing by after he had picked them up from their ship.

After a friendly greeting, I made a few attempts to begin conversation with the chief engineer, a stout man with a ready smile, but it did not amount to anything. His English was poor and I was tired, so after a while he struck up a conversation with another crewmember. Ben chatted with them for a while in Tagalog, but soon he too turned his attention to the road and turned up the volume to a familiar song playing on the radio.

At the restaurant, Ben ordered brandy and a New York strip. Not having had brandy in years, I opted for the same. We began to talk, and after our drinks came I asked him whether he missed being at sea. He waved as if to bat the question away. That was another life, he said. What did he mean? I asked. He smiled guiltily, saying that leaving that job was the best decision he ever made, and he has never looked back. Although it might seem natural now to see him working in a capacity that reconnected him to his past, it hadn't always been that way. If he had attempted to do so as a younger man, he could never have handled the continued contact with his former profession. Only now, after years of having lived a different life had he begun to feel at ease with the constant reminders of the sea. During his first voyages, he said, nodding toward his plate, whenever his ship came to the States, he would always set out alone and ask to go to a restaurant for a New York strip. He didn't have a family at that point. Shopping was more of a vanity than an act connecting him to people back home. Anxious to get away from the company of his shipmates, he preferred to be alone, or at least surrounded by strangers. He was surprised at how few took advantage of it. The simple act of sitting down at a crowded restaurant for a well-cooked steak settled his anticipation of departure. His thoughts drifted to mingle with the ambient conversation of people going about their lives. On his first circuit—one of only two he ever made—he was at sea for thirteen months, during which time he only left the ship on three occasions—once in Mexico and twice in Savannah. It took a while to get used to at first, he said, but they say that eventually you spend so much time on board that the steel enters the bones and even your thoughts harden, and over the years are eaten away as if by rust.

I asked whether proximity and time had brought him close to his shipmates. He frowned, raising his left cheek in an expression somewhere between consideration and offence. I explained that I imagined the bonds formed by those circumstances must be potent, inaccessible to those like myself who had not shared the experience. It was difficult to say, he said. It was possible that on his first voyage he may have imagined himself as having been on intimate terms with his shipmates. People often assume that proximity creates the conditions for intimacy, but when he thought about it he doubted that he had ever been close with anyone, even at first, and imagined the same went for the rest of the crew, though he could not speak to that. At that time, he was the only first-year on board—a lowly OS who still had no insight into the side effects of life at sea, though he soon began to appreciate the reserved nature of his shipmates, which he at first he had mistaken for contempt. You have to understand, Ben said, they spent weeks or even months on board in which they saw the same dozen or so faces, doorways, and meals. Some would even stick around for a year at a time, and those that didn't were unceremoniously replaced. Prolonged proximity also leads to a kind of blurring of vision. The amount of time they spent together broke down their ability to sustain any belief in their individuality; and, Ben said warningly, if you didn't maintain a certain distance then you courted the risk that all your shipmates' faces would, upon closer inspection, begin to dissolve into their various components: the upward bend of a nose, the fold of wrinkles, and squints that pleated the skin around the eyes. When he first began, Ben said, he looked forward to the downtime when everyone gathered in the small lounge to smoke and watch music videos or Victoria's Secret fashion shows on the television. He had heard that the community formed on board was supposed to be the defining characteristic

of life at sea, a bond secondary to none. And it is true that at first he enjoyed that lounge immensely, Ben said, spending every free hour there with his new fellows; but over time these ritualized gatherings seemed increasingly rote, bringing to mind memories when as a child he would attend mass with his mother and father where he stood, knelt, chanted, and stared blankly at the altar or the robes of the priest without understanding or even feeling anything but bored and somewhat bewildered. And yet, Ben said, at the same time he understood that somehow the rites being performed were significant, even if opaque, and for years he joined them in the smoking room, thinking that with a simple shift in attention he could access the hidden meaning of the silent gatherings or share the communal knowledge and loss that at that time seemed almost sacred. For what else could it have been, Ben asked? What else could compel everyone to commune in the lounge and still ignore each other's presence? At first he thought that the confined living situation would force his shipmates and he to learn everything there was to know about each other, establish that who they were could not be reduced to their roles on board that ship; that their pasts that separated them would at the same time serve to bring them together. Most of the time the opposite happened, he said. The fact of our being there and our particular ranks and assignments, our islands of origin, our families overwhelmed everything else and cut us off from one another. It was as though upon entering the room one had to concede that there was nothing to be done, Ben said, and that after this port or the next it was unlikely that any of them would ever see each other again, so there was no reason to do anything but smoke and ponder this or that bikini'd woman or, if nothing else, watch the bikini but still labor to remember a home that was itself an imaginative space or a fantasy. I learned that it was easiest to go straight to my room, Ben said, either

to read or search for glimpses of radio signals among the ambient noise of the airwaves. If for any reason I found myself back in the lounge to smoke or because I couldn't spend another minute on my bed, I was overcome with the urge to laugh or to slam a chair against the poster-strewn walls illustrating laws and cartoons that dissuaded waste dumping and in some way rebel against what seemed an unforgivable and inhuman silence. To this day, I still remember the smoke-filled rooms and how vacant I felt at those times, he said. I avoid boarding the ships as much as I can, and even when I do I try to remain on the gangway, in the open air.

After finishing the meal, he asked for the check and, despite my protests, insisted that he pay. Well, he said to me, that's everything I have. What about you? What are your impressions so far?

What about me? No words but a series of images, messages, or pieces of an unsorted life converged in an overwhelming cascade. I looked around at the table, the crumpled napkin, and the pooling condensation around my glass of water, lost as to what I could say to justify my being there. Nothing interesting, I said. I said that I had nothing comparable; all I had were speculations and observations born from the outside. In that sense, I replied, I could sympathize with the peculiar clarity that distance allows, having been away from home for a while. Often it seems that people can only truly be generous when the stakes are low, making it a privilege for those who are already out of harms way. If one looks closely, one sees expressions of this dynamic in any human interaction, be it a lover's quarrel or a traffic jam. It is at those times we are at our most vulnerable that people tend to lose their capacity for generosity.

Ben listened with his eyes focused on his empty glass, and when he looked up there was something remorseful about his expression, as if he had heard something that had let him down. After a moment, he nodded. Then what brought you here? he asked.

Chance, I said, trying to smile. Is that all? he asked. I shrugged, not sure what to say or where to begin. I wasn't even sure if I knew the answer. Why was I there? I was lost, I supposed, but who wasn't? I searched for some explanation, but heavy seconds passed. If it were not for Ben releasing me from his question by rising to use the restroom, who knows how long I would have sat there, an awkward smile on my face, unable to conceal the discomfort I felt at the burden of having to explain myself.

The drive home was silent. After dropping me off at the Bethel and returned the crew to their ship, I entered the Bethel both heartened and ashamed. It seemed an opportunity had passed me by. When we shook hands goodbye the mood became suddenly resigned as each of us returned to our respective lives, which we carried with us and, on occasion, held it out foolishly saying, 'here,' as if sharing could do anything more than expose the degree of our separation.

For the next few days Ben and I saw little of each other. In some ways, I avoided him, remaining in my room when I heard his car pull up as he picked up the Bethel van. I am not sure whether it was my inability to say anything after our dinner together or whether he felt he had said his piece and had no desire to do so again that all our subsequent conversations were awkwardly stunted, never moving beyond questions about what had happened since last we met. The simple act of articulation had exposed us unequally, magnifying the things we do not and cannot account for, which ironically, and perhaps perversely end up defining us. It was as if because we could not introduce

ourselves again for the first time that we lost something, and in some small way each of us knew something of which we did not want to be reminded.

Soon after that meeting, I elected to leave Savannah and return to Texas. When the time came, both Ben and Larissa volunteered to drive me to the Garden City airport, dropping me off at the same point at which I had arrived. I was in an unusual mood. The prospect of my departure had come as a relief, as though all ties to my time there had already been sectioned off, suspended in time and place that was mine alone. When we pulled up to the curb, both of them got out to. Before I could say my goodbye, Ben pulled a small bag from the back of the van and pulled out an old Polaroid camera. I tried to protest, expressing my discomfort, at which point they both laughed, saying the photo wasn't for them anyway, but rather for my own use. Ben handed me the camera, saying that all he wanted was for me to take a picture of them. They took their positions, and I waited for a woman and her child to pass so I could get a clearer shot. The airport terminal sign was visible behind them, and through the doors I could just make out the line of people at the ticketing stations. Ben and Larissa stood two feet apart from each other with their arms out as if embracing the empty space between them while I stood at the end of the Bethel van on the other side of the camera lens. I took the photo, and as soon as the fuzzy gray of the still undeveloped picture shot from the camera, Ben retrieved a felt-tipped pen from the van and, placing the photograph on the hood, he began to sketch. He handed it to me, and I could see the wisp of hair, the glasses, the striped shirt, all of which identified the effigy as my own. He told me that stories happen to the people who tell them, and just because I insisted on leaving nothing behind did not mean that they could not make their own mark. I studied the photo half-hoping that I

might locate something there I could call my own, but all I could see was traces: the purple outlines, the bangs, the glasses beside their stark and confident forms. As I looked, I was seized by a sense of loss that I could not place hidden in the outlined space. They returned to the van and began inch forward, merging with the slow-moving traffic. I placed the photograph in my wallet as the harsh cry of an airplane ripped the sky. As I turned to enter the airport, the doors slid open to a rush of crisp, conditioned air.