

Fall 2017

The Otherworlds of Men

Aaron Morris
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_etds

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morris, Aaron. "The Otherworlds of Men" (2017). Master of Fine Arts (MFA), thesis, English, Old Dominion University, DOI: 10.25777/0cj7-ax31
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_etds/36

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

THE OTHERWORLDS OF MEN

by

Aaron Morris

B.S. May 1998, Wichita State University

B.S. May 2000, Wichita State University

M.B.A. May 2002, Baker University

M.A. May 2009, University of Houston

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

August 2017

Approved by:

John McManus (Director)

Janet Peery (Member)

Luisa Igloria (Member)

ABSTRACT

THE OTHERWORLDS OF MEN

Aaron Morris
Old Dominion University, 2017
Director: Prof. John McManus

The Otherworlds of Men is a collection of short stories that draws equally from the traditions of speculative science fiction dystopias and western noir. The stories often have a plot grounded in gritty realism, similar to the stories of Annie Proulx, Daniel Woodrell, Cormac McCarthy, and Jim Harrison; however, the main character typically is typically injured by a psychic wound that leads to a speculative, otherworldly occurrence. The characters experience time travel, out of body experiences, wormholes to other worlds, spaceflight, distortions of relativistic physics, and, in one case, a character is haunted by Geronimo's ghost. The characters experience these otherworldly adventures as coping mechanisms to help heal their unseen wounds. The speculative, dystopian aspects of the plots were influenced by writers such as Robert Heinlein, George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ray Bradbury.

Copyright, 2017, by Aaron Morris, All Rights Reserved

This thesis is dedicated to all writers, struggling to live a life of the mind.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the director of my thesis committee, John McManus, for his feedback and hard work on this manuscript. Thank you to Janet Peery and Luisa Igloria for being on my thesis committee, and providing valuable critiques during the writing process.

I'd also like to thank my family for their loyalty and support as I struggle to find time to write, while balancing their needs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PROVING GROUND	1
SOUNDINGS	14
SUNSHINE MAN	35
STARLIGHT	57
EIGHT POUND TEST	79
VITA.....	101

PROVING GROUND

Dust blanketed everything, and so did the noise. The Chinook's twin motors shifted into lower gear. Voices, previously obscured by the turbines, shouted foreign, indecipherable phrases at Groat. The speakers sounded familiar, but the only words Groat understood, booming through the dust: "Go find Murphy's feet and put them in bags."

The helicopter, with medical staff onboard, landed near the Military Freefall students who stood gathered on a DZ in Yuma's Proving Grounds, close to where Geronimo had embarrassed the U.S. government with repeated escapes. The Jump Master covered his mouth with his arm, inadequate protection against the desert, coughed twice, then shoved a few translucent waste bags into Groat's hands. "His feet landed over in Little Baghdad."

Groat couldn't comprehend the Jump Master's order over the rotor noise. He imagined the helicopter rapidly chanting its human name - chinook, chinook, chinook - both as a declaration of an evil, machine intelligence, and to distract him with its turbulent chatter. The helicopter sought to delay him from finding Murphy's feet, and reuniting them with his torso, sprawled with stumps of legs bleeding in the desert. Murphy's top half screamed and beat its hands upon the dust until someone stuck it with a needle of morphine and loaded it onto the helicopter's cargo ramp.

Murphy's screams pried Groat from the Chinook's hypnotic chant. He ran toward the whitewashed walls of Little Baghdad, waiting one hundred yards away in the desert. He searched for lost feet among the freestanding walls and fully constructed empty buildings, designed to simulate the landscape and street patterns of the Middle East. Power lines loomed above one of

the freestanding walls, and a streak of red marred the whitewash. Groat realized Murphy had clipped the power lines during the jump before slamming into the wall with both legs. The parachute had drifted across the bulldozed and plowed dirt near the drop zone. The deflated canopy fluttered slightly, its forward movement halted by riser lines tangled in a creosote bush. At the bottom of the red-streaked wall rested a combat boot with a bloody, purple stump extending above the laces.

He put the boot and leg into a medical waste bag, transforming the stump into a delirious, red mass. He knew the jump had happened in the dawn light before the winds gained intensity. The sun had fully risen, so it had to be at least 0930. The desert often grew windy after 0900. He reasoned, for a moment, that he should go look by the brush: Murphy's foot had probably drifted with the parachute, he thought.

He looked across the DZ to where the helicopter waited in the distance, shook his head to clear his thoughts, and realized that a combat boot with someone's leg inside it couldn't blow across the desert. He looked on the other side of the wall, and found the second foot had landed perfectly upright. The tan boot sole had planted in the dust, as if Murphy had done a gymnastic vault over the structure in some macabre Olympics and stuck the landing for a perfect ten. The gymnast foot had a bit more of Murphy's leg attached. This leg was not purple, but the same sunburned color as Murphy's skin. A bone protruded above the boot. A bit of tendon, still attached to the top of the bone, waved like a flag in surrender. Groat collected the second appendage, and put it in the bag with its mate. Next to the impression in the dust left by the boot, a mass of red had congealed with the consistency of gravy left on the stove too long after breakfast. It jiggled at him, as if sentient and from a parallel universe. What was it saying? Did Murphy need this stuff, too? He nudged the gelatinous part of Murphy with his foot. It resisted

the kick, and restored its congealed shape. For a moment, he thought maybe if he kicked it in just the right direction it would wiggle across the desert to Murphy and make him whole again.

One hundred yards away, the helicopter still churned dust. Inside the vehicle, Murphy's top half slouched in the medic's lap, lost in an opioid dream, while his stumps bled despite the tourniquets.

"Move your ass, Groat," the Jump Master yelled with his hands cupped around his mouth. The words muted across the distance of the empty field.

Groat left the gravy shape and sprinted toward the Chinook with the legs and boots inside the waste bag. The severed feet kicked against him with each stride, as if trying to spur him to gallop faster, in a hurry to reunite with the rest of Murphy. Then, in the middle of the run, he saw Geronimo's ghost for the first time.

He didn't think it was actually a ghost; instead, he thought time had ripped. Somehow, Groat was able to see through time. Geronimo, inside the rip, cradled his murdered wife and two dead babies. The dead woman's clothes were torn from when she'd fled Mexican soldiers through the green spikes of ocotillo that grew along the wash. The vertical cliffs of Castle Dome rose behind the family. Groat and Geronimo's landscape existed in the same blank spot on the maps, somewhere between Yuma and Gila Bend.

"I'm sorry," Groat said, extending an arm toward the bereaved warrior. He hoped his words served both as condolence for the dead family as well as an apology for yelling 'Geronimo' moments before parachuting into the desert. Maybe he was really talking to Murphy's torso and feet, separated from each other by poorly situated power lines. Maybe he was sorry he became a Military Freefall student, sorry he had come to the desert at all.

He tossed Murphy's bag of parts into the Chinook and climbed in behind them. He collapsed on the pile of camouflage packs, exhausted despite the short run. The double rotors picked up speed and the dust churned into an impenetrable cloud. He breathed through his shirt to avoid choking. A piece of grit lodged between his molars and he sucked on it, enjoying the moisture his mouth created around the tiny rock. When he opened his eyes again they were airborne, flying with forward tilt, moving away from Geronimo's dead family, toward the sunlit buildings of an airfield teeming with people and activity.

"Sir, as I said before, we can't allow visitors in the ICU right now," the charge nurse told Groat. He nodded in acknowledgment and walked through the automatic door, leaving the hospital. He tried to light a cigarette while standing in the landscape bed that created a border between the hospital's parking lot and the one that served the K-Mart and twenty-four hour fitness center. The wind had picked up. The lighter's flame blew out and the town of Yuma shimmered through a haze of unlit butane.

Murphy had been suffering in ICU for over a week, struggling from shock and blood loss. Groat had few friends at Military Freefall School other than Murphy, so he hung around town each afternoon following training, and visited the hospital often. He wanted to help Murphy. Regardless of their friendship, he wanted, if he could somehow, to prevent a senseless death. The rational part of his brain knew this might be pointless, having heard phrases like 'massive blood loss', 'internal bleeding', and 'drug induced coma', but the instinctual part of his brain knew, too.

He tried to light the cigarette, and again the flame extinguished. Distracted, he missed the approach of a few Military Freefall students. They stood in the neighboring parking lot, out of

uniform, dressed in shorts and tank-tops. Their arms pumped from the gym as they squinted in the sun and blowing wind. Johnson stood in front of the pack as the de facto leader. He was tall, lean, and had broad shoulders. He had what the military would call a command presence, possessing a serious expression and charismatic manner, to go along with his imposing build. “Groat, how’s Murph?” Johnson asked.

“Not good,” Groat answered with a shrug. The other students rarely spoke to him, so he appreciated their effort. His circumstances for attending Freefall were unique. His fellow students, all active duty military personnel, didn’t ask why a college graduate, a civilian from the State Department, had come to the desert for jump training, and he didn’t tell them. He had grown disconnected from his classmates, and alienated himself further with stupid phrases, like ‘grad school’ and ‘analysis.’ Governments needed minds as much as bullets and bodies, he thought. Bodies were conditioned not to ask questions.

“We’re hoping for the best,” Johnson said, looked at his shoes, then turned away. Groat nodded in thanks as the young men left, and tried to light the cigarette for a third time. Frustrated, he put the lighter in his pocket.

Murphy was different from the other students. He came from Southie, as far removed from the Oklahoma cattle ranch where Groat had spent his teenaged years as you could get. Despite the differences, the two men, first generation college graduates out to see the world, developed a bond and friendship. Murphy was the only person at Freefall who Groat felt listened.

The instructors at Jump School partnered Groat with Murphy because they were both civilians. Civilians rarely attended military schools, but Murphy needed the training for his job as

an engineer at the Natick Soldier Systems Center outside Boston. Groat had signed up as part of his training as a Foreign Service Officer with the State Department. He wanted the excitement.

During training they fluffed parachutes, jingling the metallic reefing rings inside the canopies. They daisy-chained suspension lines, wrapping nylon around wrists and elbows to form neat coils, resembling the rattlesnakes that slithered into hangars searching for shade. Groat developed a perpetual weariness as the training continued during the summer in Yuma. They woke early in the desert, often arriving at the Proving Grounds by 0300 in order to complete the workday before the heat reached an intensity that made life outside dangerous. The heat acted like truth serum. Each degree above 100 seemed to result in a confession. Once, Murphy cursed the Old Testament as the source of violence experienced in his childhood. Murphy said his father, fifth generation Irish stock in South Boston, had cited ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ before striking him. “He hoped to bring the world back into kilter with blows from his belt, I guess,” Murphy confessed. Murphy shuffled his feet and changed the subject. He said something about an action movie soon to be released.

Groat teased him about his parachute rigging technique to lighten the conversation. He teased him about Boston to lighten it further. “When you drive around Boston, do you park your car in Harvard Yard?” He mimicked Murphy’s accent, r’s hanging in the air as unfinished as the business with his father in Southie.

“Fuck you,” Murphy said and smiled. He daisy-chained the remaining length of suspension lines in the time it took to draw out the vowels of his mock insult. The Zylon material of the suspension lines had turned a dark yellow from exposure to the sun. Murphy tested a line with a sharp tug. It broke. He set it aside to be replaced later with a new, undamaged line.

Murphy's parts weren't as easily replaceable, Groat thought as he kicked at the stones in the xeriscape bordering the hospital's parking lot. The charge nurse who had politely turned Groat away left the hospital at the end of her shift. She started toward her car, then altered course toward Groat, who still kicked at the round stones.

"You should go home and get some rest," she said.

"I'm leaving now. Thank you," he said. He wanted to help Murphy, but he also wanted to make people understand the sacrifices that some made for the government, for the common good. He wanted people to understand the sacrifice that his fellow Freefall students would soon make; walking ghosts who would die alone in deserts around the world. They would die in places like Kandahar and Iraq. He knew that his preparation to serve as a Foreign Service Officer could result in dangerous deployments too, but nothing like combat. Regardless, training in Arizona should've been benign for all of them. No one was supposed to die in an Arizona hospital next door to a K-Mart and a fitness center.

The nurse touched him on the shoulder and turned away. She didn't seem to notice when Geronimo approached in his Locomobile Model C, and drove through the K-Mart that didn't exist in his time. Groat had seen pictures of the car taken during a parade for Teddy Roosevelt's inauguration. Geronimo was dressed in ceremonial garb, like a campaign puppet. Governments always needed minds and bodies, Groat thought. In Geronimo's case they also took his dignity.

Geronimo must have felt the same disgust about the parade. Groat knew his last words, as reported by his nephew, were: "I should've fought until I was the last man standing." Perhaps this terrorist of another age thought revenge for his dead babies justifiable, despite decades of unreciprocated peace offerings. Even his last words stolen to become a movie cliché.

“I’m sorry,” Groat called toward Geronimo. The warrior merely drove his Model C and waved at an unseen crowd gathered in the past. He supported Roosevelt’s campaign based on unkept promises. Promises intended to allow his return to Arizona, but he never did.

Groat returned to work at 0300 the next morning. The sectional door of the main hangar had already been rolled open. The light from the hangar illuminated a slice of the desert. Beyond the light, a flat expanse of black led to the dark shadow of a mountain barely visible in the moonlight. Groat parked his jeep, and a K-Loader motored by, carrying a pallet for an upcoming airdrop. The K-loader drove down the service road to the runway, where an enormous C-17 waited. An APU, providing electricity to the aircraft, emitted a high-pitched whine. It was audible from hundreds of yards away. Groat walked into the building, entering the brightness through the large opening.

There weren’t any people in the hangar, and the sound of the APU was muted. Type V pallets loaded with supplies were stacked in orderly rows, ready for the operator of the K-Loader to put them on the C-17. Soda machines lined the back wall, advertising a sugar rush in colorful logos that glowed at the top of the machines.

The smell of coffee percolating wafted from the office area next to the hangar. Groat followed the scent, ignoring the glow of soda machines; instead, craving the warmth and alertness from a cup of coffee. The office area was empty of people, too. He poured the coffee, and steam rose from the top of the styrofoam cup. He blew lightly on the liquid, still too hot to drink, cradling the cup in both hands. He thought the desks and computers ghostly in the absence of people. Briefly, he wondered if he had grown afraid of the dark. The chattering of voices

echoed from the high bay at the rear of the building, drawing Groat away from the empty desks toward people and companionship.

In the high bay, an orange and white cargo parachute draped from a hook near the ceiling, stretching nearly eighty feet to the floor. Johnson stood on a scissor-lift, while two other Freefall students waited at ground level.

“Geronimo! Look out below,” Johnson said, as he shook the folds of the parachute and bits of desert fell out. Small rocks, sand, twigs of scrub brush, and a few spiders were trapped in the folds, dropping to the hangar floor after Johnson shook the canopy.

One of the soldiers on the ground got hit on the top of his hardhat with a spray of falling sand and small rocks. The sand and pebbles cascaded to the ground, reminding Groat of Murphy parachuting into the desert, breaking into parts. Groat wondered how Murphy was doing today.

The soldier hit with the sand cursed, then the others laughed. Annoyances and discomfort were always fair game for jokes in the desert. The offended soldier pulled a rigger’s knife from a pouch on his right leg, and triggered the blade to spring open. He smiled broadly at Johnson. “If you had more hair, then I’d climb up there and scalp you, motherfucker,” the soldier said.

Johnson laughed. “Do I look like Custer to you? You ain’t scalping shit. I told you to look out,” he said.

Groat laughed with the others, but he felt bad about it. He understood American history and politics well from his graduate classes. He knew the difference between the Sioux in Montana and the Apache in Arizona. He should’ve been appalled at the Custer references, but, instead, he laughed at the scalping jokes along with the others. He wondered if he was really any different from the enlisted men. Hadn’t he yelled Geronimo every time he jumped? Perhaps men all through time were more alike than Groat wanted to admit. Maybe war and death were an

inevitable outcome of human interaction. Maybe Murphy's dismemberment had been predetermined by those same destructive fates.

Johnson winked and pointed at Groat, recognizing his presence in the early morning hours, including him in the team. He fluffed the parachute again, precipitating a shower of twigs and rocks that bounced and rolled after impacting the ground.

Murphy died two days after Groat's last visit. After he got word of the death, Groat spent afternoons alone fishing in the canals on the Imperial National Wildlife Refuge. The canals stretched miles away from the Colorado River, providing necessary irrigation to grow lettuce and dates in the fertile, black soil beneath the dusty surface layer of the desert.

He knew the desert to be full of life when given a little water. Wild burros appeared at dusk, tentatively stepping along the canal's edge. The fish grew hungry in the desert, too. They fought for food to maintain life, exploding in action on top of the water as soon as the sun started to set and the air rapidly cooled without the presence of low-lying clouds to maintain heat.

He shrugged on his wind breaker as the temperature dropped, picked up his rod, and tossed an artificial bait into the water. The clear blades of his buzz bait gurgled on the surface, emulating an injured fish that struggled to swim as he slowly reeled the line back to shore. His cast and retrieve became hypnotic, like he whipped himself in penance with the rod and line. He atoned for Murphy's lost feet, and other things that weren't his fault.

Long shadows grew along the canals as the sun set and a group of wild burros shifted in the sparse grass near the water. They grazed on the opposite shore, drawn to the thin, wet ribbon snaking through the dryness. A coyote trotted along the high fence that marked the border of the

Proving Ground. The coyote stopped and flicked ears at an unheard noise. Geronimo and his soldiers appeared. They had painted their chests battle-red.

The coyote trotted away, and the burros continued to browse, but Groat was frozen by the presence of the ghostly apparitions. The fishing line became slack, and it drifted in a lazy arc with the slight current in the canal. Geronimo and his soldiers rode past as the horse's hooves showered dust behind them. The soldiers sat in saddles with eyes forward. They looked determined to reach their destination - to unite in a common cause. Groat raised a hand in greeting, and hoped for a sign that Geronimo could see him. Instead, Geronimo kicked his heels against the horse's flanks, and the party accelerated up the bank and away from the water.

The slack fishing line drifted further until a bass exploded on top of the water and the line stretched taut. Groat jerked the pole and set the hook. The fish pulled on the other end of the line, fighting with all its energy. He felt its struggle, strong and defiant, but invisible to life above the water. The unseen fish broke the water's surface, and entered the visible world with a splash. It continued to fight, resisting every inch, until dragged onto the sparse grass and the world of air.

The weekend following Murphy's death, Groat went with his fellow students across the border to Los Algodones to celebrate the final phase of Freefall. He sat alone at a table, a quiet echo to their laughter. The salt and lime on the tortilla chips irritated his lips, and the Dos Equis did little to quench his thirst.

Johnson approached Groat, stealing a chip from his plate. "Come on. Join our table," he said.

"That's alright. I'm going to eat real quick, and go buy one of those Prada purses at the market - for a girl back home," Groat said.

“You know those are knock-offs. They should call them Nada purses not Prada,” Johnson said. He laughed and grabbed another of Groat’s chips as he moved toward a larger table, effortlessly joining the group’s conversation.

Groat remained alone, and ordered a platter of enchiladas. He enjoyed the red sauce and melted cheese until it reminded him of blood, then he shoved the plate away. Some of the young men stumbled toward a woman, and gave her money to assuage their grief about Murphy. She walked away with her newfound customers, leaving a hungry kid behind. The kid begged the border guards for fried onions dipped in salsa. Others from the Freefall crowd went to the *farmacia* to purchase vials of Deca, ampules of testosterone, designed to make bodies stronger.

Groat didn’t feel morally superior, or able to make better choices. He understood his fellow students’ desire to fuck, and not be fucked, to grow bigger, stronger - to use their bodies as shields. A beast inside of him wanted the same thing. It drove him to the gym each morning; made him jump out of planes in a desert. It made him come to Mexico in search of adventure. The difference with him was fear and circumstance.

Bodies got what they needed in Mexico, then walked back across the Rio Bravo bridge. Groat hurried after without admitting, even to himself, his fear of being left alone in a foreign country. Two young women on an adventure from SoCal walked past. One of the students pulled his pants down around his knees, semi-erect penis crooked to the left, and waddled after them, howling. The frightened women hurried across the bridge. The student’s buddies, still fully clothed, grabbed the pant-less soldier from behind and pretended to sodomize him vigorously in a chivalrous gesture toward the women. “Oh, you’re so sexy soldier-man,” they cried, dry humping with mock lustful abandon, laughing. They stopped when the women had crossed into the border station, right before the exposed soldier got mad. He pulled his pants up, stumbled,

then fell forward in a heap. His howls had turned to drunken laughter. In the desert, grief looked like laughter.

The Freefall crowd continued across the bridge, and bragged about future exploits. Groat stood on the center of the bridge for a moment, and the moon rose over the riverbed. Geronimo, mounted on a dappled horse, appeared in the water, facing him. Random violence, inexplicable casualties, grief articulated with aggression - did Geronimo understand? Groat waited on the bridge until he could no longer hear the Freefall crowd's laughter. Then, he turned away from Mexico - away from Geronimo. He walked across the bridge, and headed back toward the Proving Ground.

SOUNDINGS

Long before the Coast Guard declared his Grandpa Mickey lost at sea, David spent his childhood in a suburb outside of Boston, living with his parents. Growing up in an Irish Catholic household with an Old Testament name meant a life of discipline. His family valued structure in the home, and his father had no qualms about enforcing the rules with a belt, or, more frequently, a harsh word meant to embarrass David. He lived in the kind of town where people drove trucks with Patriots stickers plastered on rear windows, and worked at jobs that involved the word mill. People in the town made things with their hands, created goods with value in the real world.

His father had once rushed home from work, and found David daydreaming with a book. He grabbed the book out of David's hands and tossed it aside, like it was trivial, a luxury to enjoy after finishing the real work.

"Clean your room. And go get a gallon of milk before dinner," he said, "And you could help with the laundry instead of lying around all day. Do you expect your mother to wash your dirty underwear with skid marks?" His father always ended sentences with passive-aggressive questions, and laughed like he made the funniest joke in the world.

David wasn't sure if his father intentionally tried to insult him, or if it was just his unique sense of humor. Regardless, he didn't want to hear about skid marks. Shame and resentment grew inside him with each of his father's jokes.

He rode his bike to the corner market and bought milk. He didn't think his father meant to hurt his feelings. He thought it had something to do with his paternal grandmother, who had verbally abused her entire family, calling her daughter "The Slut" after she got pregnant in high

school. She called her daughter names, even twenty years after the unplanned pregnancy. David's father tried to make a joke out of everything, and some of the verbal abuse, so prevalent in his family, had leaked into his humor. David remembered the Christmas before his grandmother died, when his father had wrapped up some adult diapers for her present. He had laughed for several minutes after she opened it. The annoying kind of laugh where he had to wipe spit from his chin. Embarrassment and anger clouded his grandmother's face at the joke in poor taste. Was this his father's way of paying her back for years worth of insults? Did a similar shame and resentment grow inside of David toward his parents? He wasn't sure when it had happened, but, at some point on that bicycle ride to pick up milk, he wished his father would die. He felt bad about the fleeting wish, and didn't think it would amount to anything.

After the altercation with the skid marks, David spent more time at the library, reading and studying in an effort to avoid his father and the accompanying insults. He read novels, sci-fi mostly, and also began to read magazine articles about science. He read about exploration, both in space and adventures to remote areas of the Earth, like the Arctic Ocean.

His intellectual curiosity, and the rigid laws of his childhood, led him in middle school to the study of math and science. The mathematical structure of the equations soothed his mind. If you knew a few of the constants, then the motions of the universe were solvable. He craved the predictability. He wanted to understand the entire universe and thought if he had the right equations, then such a vast understanding might be possible.

His parents, like most of their neighbors, worked at manufacturing companies. They bounced between different managerial positions, working their way up the career ladder. David's obsession with the abstract concepts of physics seemed odd to them, and to others in town, who worked with tangible items. The lack of understanding confused him, because he saw much of

the same constancy in physics that others found milling a metal bracket on a water jet. If one applied the right equations, then the results were never a surprise.

He began to rely on calculations even more after the Massachusetts Highway Patrol Officer told him his parents were killed in an automobile accident on I-95. The patrolman came to the house where David had spent the night with a friend. He had been playing Risk and watching Star Wars movies, while his parents crashed on their ill-fated anniversary. The officer told him the tragic news.

“I’m sorry, Son. They’re both deceased. The car...” said the patrolman, leaving his explanation as unfinished as the lives David’s parents had led.

Unable to speak, David nodded at the patrolman, who stood waiting on the porch with a neatly creased hat held down by his waist. He wondered if the deaths, especially his father’s, were his fault. Had the resentment grown inside him to such a degree that he really wished his father dead? Had that fleeting thought somehow left the metaphysical world and changed the calculable physics of the natural world, such that his wish caused the masses of metal to accelerate into a collision with such force that the equation’s only natural solution equaled the death of his father? The patrolman waited, while David gathered his overnight bag, formulating equations, searching for answers as he packed.

He accidentally wished his parents to death right before his freshman year of high school, so he went to live with his maternal grandparents in Gloucester. In direct contrast to his father’s family, who were full of insults, David’s maternal grandmother had the rare sort of innocence that one finds in a seventy-four year old who still believed in Santa Claus. David thought this

belief in the Christmas spirit wasn't naiveté, or the musings of a simple mind, but rather a choice to find good in the world despite the hardship she had encountered.

"Wake up, David," she whispered one morning after he began living at her house. "Mickey wants to take you fishing," she said, stroking his hair, gently easing him from the dream world into the waking world. Everyone called his grandfather Mickey, even family. David would have never called his grandmother by her given name, only Grandma.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, nodded at Grandma, then sat up on the edge of the bed wearing his underwear and a t-shirt from an Irish punk rock band. Grandma smiled, and her eyes watered, full of pity - not quite pity, exactly, but something very close - then she turned on the lamp and left him to get dressed in private.

For the first few seconds after waking, David forgot his parents were dead. He remembered only after he put his second leg into his pants. He pulled the jeans over his hips, realizing that he dressed as an orphan for the first time. He had wished it true.

He went outside, where Mickey gathered fishing equipment and filled two coolers with ice. Grandma stood with a forward tilt in her posture, as if she leaned toward the future with continual hope, keeping an optimistic stance. David appreciated his grandmother's positive outlook, but it still surprised him given all she had gone through. After all, he wasn't the only one bereaved. Grandma's daughter had died last week, too.

David thought Mickey expressed less optimism than Grandma, and a less complex understanding. He seemed satisfied as a commercial fisherman, as if fishing completed his needs. Mickey piled all of the gear together, while shorebirds shrieked in the early morning light, squawking over the top of each other like excited school children eager to have their voices heard above the rest.

Mickey stood, resting in a slumped posture with shoulders hunched around his neck. He placed his hand on Grandma's shoulder. He seemed to derive support from her compact, sturdy frame, as if she provided a necessary ground to the earth that a man, who spent most of his life on the water, desperately needed. Without Grandma, Mickey would long ago have drifted away with the ocean's currents.

David helped to load the boat, then waved goodbye to Grandma after they pushed off from the dock. Mickey directed David to sit in the bow, to act as ballast, so the boat would plane out to a horizontal level despite the slow speed mandated in the harbor. He loved sitting in the front. The cold spray hit him in the face, energizing him each time they pitched over a wave. The morning, perfect: sea spray, squawking shorebirds, and the rising sun. He felt guilty after a few minutes, remembering his orphan status. He shouldn't be happy so soon after wishing himself an orphan. He didn't know the equation for luck, but worried that his presence would prove dangerous to Mickey. We won't catch any fish, he thought.

When the water brightened from cool gray to cerulean blue, Mickey turned toward David and announced they had passed the continental shelf. "Would you look at that water. It must be over a thousand feet deep now," Mickey said. His skin had the color of worn leather, reminiscent of the cushioned barstools that he sat on at the dockside bar, and his face was marked by deep crags. David imagined the same crags and canyons underneath the ocean's surface. He studied Mickey's face, hoping to learn the secret topography of the ocean floor.

Mickey steered the boat with the throttle set at idle, commenting on the color phases of the water, drifting with the currents. "You know, Davie-boy, many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it's not fish they're after. That's Thoreau who said that - another fine product of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," he said, winking at David.

David wondered if he had misjudged Mickey, thinking him a simple man. Perhaps Mickey's inner life was as complex as the topography on his face, possessing more answers than the secret locations of fish. David picked up the Shimano reels, and gave each a crank to make sure they spun freely. He had been fishing with Mickey for most of his life, and knew the importance of well-maintained gear.

A few hours later, they had nearly caught their limit. They stored dozens of tuna in the coolers, iced down to protect the fragile fish from the hot sun. He and Mickey both had lines in the water, hoping to catch one more. David reeled in a large tuna, and pulled it onto the boat. It flopped and wiggled, tangling lines.

"Hold it still," Mickey said.

He moved toward David with a baseball bat embedded with spikes, and clubbed the tuna to death. Seagulls shrieked and swooped inches above the deck, instinct directing their flight toward death to find food. The tuna's blood mixed with the water, swirling into a mass of red fluid, which moved in rhythmic circles around David's boots. The motion of the boat and gravity determined the movement of the low-viscosity fluid, David thought. He wondered if blood had pooled like this when his parents had died.

Mickey tossed the dead fish into the cooler. "Just one more until our limit, Davie-boy. Put another blue runner on the hook," he said. He smiled and slapped David on the back.

"Go on, now. Get the blue runner," Mickey said again, wrinkling his brow. David realized that he had been standing still, lost in thought about viscosity and gravity. It seemed his frozen posture had worried Mickey.

David nodded and hurried to the bucket to get a long, thin Mackerel. He threaded the blue tinted fish, nearly as long as his forearm, carefully on the hook, placing the barb just behind the

dorsal fin. He knew this would keep the bait securely on the line, and allow the best chance of hooking into a large sailfish. He thought it would make Mickey happy to end the day with a sailfish.

While David was baiting the hook, a large wave struck the port side. The boat rolled about its longitudinal axis, rocking until it returned to a stable center. David lost his balance during the boat's movement. He stumbled, fell to his knees, and dropped the fish. The hook nicked the meat of his hand just inside his thumb, and a few drops of blood dripped in the saltwater. His blood mixed with the tuna's. Using his uninjured hand, he put pressure on the bleeding. He always brought bad luck, he thought.

Mickey didn't notice David's stumble or the nick in his hand. He held the center console, braced against the errant wave. When the boat stabilized, he let go and pointed starboard. "Look, Davie-Boy," he said. Four humpbacks breached the surface. One slammed its fluke hard on top of the water, then a fifth whale surfaced and spouted. Warm air from the whale's lungs condensed into a spray of water. The exhaled mist blended with droplets of water blown into the air, reflecting the sun. Yellow and white light bent through the prisms of water droplets, forming clusters of small rainbows above the whales. Then, as quickly as they had arrived, the whales vanished. The mist settled back to the ocean's surface, and the day returned to the bright yellows and blues of time spent offshore fishing.

"Did you get a look at that, Davie?" Mickey asked. His words were short and clipped, like a marathon runner out of breath. "I'll tell you a secret, Davie. Sometimes the whales talk to me," he said with a half smile.

David wasn't sure if his grandfather joked. Was Mickey teasing him?

Mickey continued with a solemn expression, “They’ll tell me where the fish are hiding. I’ll talk back, sometimes, too. I’ll thank them for their help, then tell them my troubles and such. You can try it sometime. Get whatever’s bothering you off your chest. The whales will understand. Seeing the whales is good luck.”

David nodded and grunted with his lips held tight together. He wanted to promise Mickey that he would talk to the whales about wishing himself an orphan, but his throat swelled and he couldn’t speak. He scanned the ocean’s surface, hoping the whales would re-emerge, but knew whales could hold their breath for over an hour. The sighting had been so short. He wanted to spend more time with the whales. He wondered if they could understand his troubles. He didn’t even understand his feelings himself.

“Where do you think they’ve gone, Dave?” Mickey said. “Home to dinner no doubt. Same place we should be heading. We’ve had a great day. Best not push our luck.” Mickey stowed loose lines, preparing for the return journey.

In the months following his parents’ accident, David began to question which physical laws were immutable. If a child's parents could be taken away before their time, then what else in the universe remained flexible and dependent on fate rather than a rigid set of laws? Could a wish change crash dynamics, and alter the rigidity of metal in automobiles? Could bad luck alter the course of time? He continued to study in an effort to find one unifying equation. He wanted to discover the series of constants and formulas that would explain everything to him. Show him why he had been orphaned. This irrational drive to understand the world around him helped David excel at physics. He earned early admission to MIT, learning of the offer during the fall semester of his junior year at Gloucester High School.

“We’re so proud of you, David,” Grandma said.

Mickey clapped him on the back, nodded twice, and led him outside. He handed David a set of keys, and pointed to the driveway where a primer colored Chevy Nova waited. David felt happy, grateful. He knew what a sacrifice Mickey made to purchase a car on a commercial fisherman’s salary, even an old Nova still in primer.

“Take her for a drive,” Mickey said.

After the hugs and thank you’s, he drove along Highway 127. He drove past Ravenswood Park and stopped at Rafes Chasm, which overlooked the Atlantic. A few whitecaps crested the gray water, and waves crashed loudly against the mute protest of the rocky shore. He liked the choppy seas and overcast skies. It was like a typical New England autumn, he thought. It reminded him of a Homer painting, and he considered the landscape beautiful despite the saturation of gray. The gray did something to enhance the other colors - the blues dove deeper in the color palette, the whitecaps glowed in contrast - and his emotions churned, equally enhanced. He wished he had brought along a camera to capture the moment.

Amid the whitecaps, a spout of water sprayed into the air. Three humpbacks surfaced with mottled, slick backs resting inches above the water’s surface. “I got into MIT,” David called out to the whales. “I think Mom and Dad would be proud.”

He wondered where the whales came from. They were unseen moments before, hidden underneath the water, living in a very real world, but invisible to him. What happened in this other world? he wondered. He imagined the whales living ordinary lives with jobs and families. Once an hour they surfaced, spouted water, and bridged the boundary between their watery world and his. After breathing in the world of air for a few short minutes the whales submerged,

leaving David in the world that he knew, returning to that unknown world lived in a different medium beneath the waves.

He waited until the whales left, then returned home. He felt lucky just to see them.

Before David's junior year ended, Mickey was lost at sea. David never learned what happened. There weren't any radio messages. The Coast Guard never found wreckage. Mickey simply didn't come home from a tuna fishing trip in November. It happened at the end of the season, when the waters offshore became rough, but it shouldn't have been a dangerous trip. He was always diligent about checking the weather and maintaining contact with shore. After he failed to come home at the appointed time, David and Grandma waited nervously for a week as the Coast Guard explored the waters off Gloucester. C-130 aircraft flew in grid patterns over the vast ocean with crews scouring the surface for a tiny white craft rocking on the horizon. They never spotted the boat. They never found Mickey.

David remembered the thought he had about Mickey drifting with the waves without Grandma's grounding. Had his thought influenced the physical world again? Had it changed the weather, changed the ocean's currents, so that Mickey was unable to navigate familiar fishing waters? David equaled bad luck, he thought.

He hid in his room during the memorial ceremony held in Mickey's honor a couple weeks after the Coast Guard declared him lost at sea. He didn't want to be at yet another ceremony for a dead relative. He wanted to be alone; yet, the feeling of being alone in the world left him terrified. He wanted to understand why his family members kept dying. He wanted to understand why everything upset him so. What was wrong with him? Buried deeper than the grief, deeper than the lingering shame instilled by his father, was the desire to hear the whales'

voices. He wanted the sea creatures to talk to him, like they had talked to Mickey. More importantly, he wanted the whales to keep him from feeling so alone.

Grandma found him in his room. “Sweetie,” she said, “don’t you want to say hello to Mickey’s friends?”

David shook his head with a grunt, almost a moan, communicating like an animal. He hoped Grandma understood his sounds meant both ‘leave me alone’ and ‘I don’t want to be alone.’

Grandma had never taken algebra or physics. She had never learned Greek letters, but she seemed fluent in David’s grunts. “Davey,” she said, “You’ll be OK. You’re worrying folks some, now. You’ve got to be strong.”

Her advice often anticipated David’s thoughts, steered his actions in mysterious ways, but seemed like obvious guidance after the fact. She pushed her arm against the nightstand, making an entire body effort to keep herself vertical, demonstrating the reserves of strength that she asked David to call upon within himself.

He realized Grandma worried about him. Her shoulders rolled forward, and her spine remained set in a curved posture. The bags under her eyes drooped, as if a different gravity constant pulled the tissue on her face down toward the grave. She had grown tired; yet, she still had the innocence in her eyes as she talked to David.

David nodded, reassuring Grandma, then followed her into the living room to make a brief appearance, shaking hands with Mickey’s friends, filling a plate with ham and potato casserole that Grandma’s neighbor had cooked.

A man introduced himself at the end of the buffet, and explained that he worked at the marina where Mickey had serviced his boat and purchased ice for tuna trips. “You’re the spitting image of your mother,” he said. “Mickey spoiled her rotten, you know.”

David picked at the potato casserole with his fork. He had steeled himself for discussions of Mickey’s life, but the mention of his mother caught him off guard. He couldn’t think about two deaths at once. He felt the familiar lump form in his throat as it seized. He couldn’t talk. He forked a bite of potato casserole into his mouth, and mumbled sounds like the letter ‘m’, as if he were a child learning to speak for the first time.

The man from the marina squeezed his shoulder and moved away. David mingled with the crowd, shaking hands, muttering noncommittal statements like, “Thank you for coming.” He avoided long conversations after the incident at the buffet. He shook hands with everyone at the service, appearing sociable, but, at the same time, he made a contradictory decision to avoid people in the future.

In the months following the memorial ceremony, David moved deeper into the study of physics, searching for structure, searching for an equation that would hold the right answers. He didn’t realize that his questions interrogated a world beyond physical phenomena, related more to the metaphysical. Not really. Not in the subconscious part of his brain that tried to sort out his place in the world. He thought he could discover answers to all the questions. He thought he could figure out where his loved ones had gone. He thought, somehow, he could discover a way to talk to them. He would write an equation that would allow radio waves to travel through a different medium, like sonar traveling underwater. He studied obsessively, searching for constants and equations that governed the gravitational pull on his grandmother’s face, the crash dynamics of automobiles, the effect of lunar cycles on wave height, hoping to understand the

cyclical nature of the sea's moods. If only he could decipher the ocean's temperament, then he could calculate back in time. Back to the time of Mickey's godforsaken voyage, and figure out what happened. David wondered if maybe he could still save Mickey. He wondered if the calculations would show where the boat drifted. Maybe he had shipwrecked somewhere, and awaited rescue? David knew these thoughts were irrational, but he still pondered the possibilities. He continued to search for answers, alone.

While cruising town in his Nova, during the beginning of his senior year, his mind traveled to Jupiter. He drove down 127, out past Ravenswood Park, and the droning sound of tires lulled his consciousness as trees moved steadily in his peripheral vision, hypnotizing him. He drove, somehow, but wasn't present in the operation of the car. His subconscious continued to drive, even as he felt himself slipping out of his body. He floated inches above the car and flew through the trees, leaving his body behind.

He flew past the autumn foliage, and up into the atmosphere, accelerating until he left the bounds of Earth's gravity and the space around him grew dark. He moved across the darkness with the Earth's blue swirl below his feet, the sun shining faintly to his right, and a pinprick of light in the distance. He traveled in an elliptical orbit around Earth, accelerating during each pass as the planet's gravity assisted his plight, until he maneuvered away from Earth, and across the deep stretch of blackness where the only reference visible was the pinprick of light. He focused his path in its direction. It moved in front of him, growing larger. David realized that his trajectory would intersect the light. As he approached, it grew in size, glowed brighter, then turned red. He knew when he saw the red swirling mass in the center that he had arrived at Jupiter.

His flight took him toward the swirl, then left, above Jupiter's equator. He entered the atmosphere, pounded by winds a hundred times stronger than a category-five hurricane. He tried to breathe, and gagged at the smell of rotten eggs and window cleaner in his nostrils. Ice pelted him for a few minutes, then the atmosphere turned to steam. It felt reasonably comfortable on the skin of his ethereal, space-traveling self, like he relaxed in a steam bath at the gym. He splashed down into some surface liquid. His ears popped and it was a strain to breathe. It felt like the time he went snorkeling with his parents as a child. His child self had dived down a dozen feet, looking for brightly colored fish, and his lungs felt as if they would burst before he swam back to the world of air. He felt like that now, but he wasn't a child any longer. And his consciousness had traveled far beyond Earth's waters.

He swam in Jupiter's liquid, moving his feet in lazy eggbeater circles, occasionally pumping his arms as he tread water. A large whale surfaced beside him, swimming easily through the Jovian liquid. It looked at him with eyes glossy and black, pupils the size of David's head. He swam over to the whale and stroked the mammal's slick back.

"I'm here. Can you understand me?" David asked.

The whale, in response, spouted a spray of water and emanated a powerful bellow at a loud volume necessary to call to other whales across vast oceans on a planet over a hundred times larger than Earth. David wondered if the whale called to other whales, or if it communicated directly to him. What's it saying? What does it want? he thought.

Before the questions could be answered, David traveled back through the fabric of space and time, back to his real body that drove the primer-colored Nova down 127. It seemed that he had been gone months on a journey, yet the car had traveled little distance past Ravenswood Park.

He shivered and turned into Rafes Chasm, stopping the car. His stomach clenched and his neck cramped as he tried to process the experience. He looked past the rocky shore to the empty sea, boiling in another imitation of a Homer painting. He searched and searched, but found no sign of whales.

David's problem solving abilities continued to develop at MIT. He enjoyed toiling away with pencil and eraser, working through a challenging equation several nights in a row, blowing thin lines of coiled eraser material aside. He would brush the paper clear to see the answer revealed. In an instant, he would know he had finally solved a tough problem. An epiphany brought forth with his breath on the paper, like a spring breeze blowing the fog away from Gloucester Bay to instantly reveal the sparkling ocean. He liked working on paper best. He enjoyed the tactile connection to his work, but he also liked solving problems on a computer screen. He imagined gears and cogs turning and clicking together in the space between his mind and the ether, until the gears aligned like tumblers unlocking a safe that held the answers.

He knew he spent too much time studying, so he joined a few clubs, trying to socialize as he imagined a college student should. At one gathering, hosted by the astronomy club, a fellow student made an effort to reach out to David, handing him a beer.

"Hi, I'm Kenzie," she said. She told him that she was a double major - engineering and political science, and that she grew up in California. After offering the introductory information, she tipped her beer in a sort of salute, offering David a chance to speak.

"I'm David - from near Boston," he said, then faltered. He wasn't used to casual conversation. He hoped he sounded normal. He failed to understand that Kenzie waited, giving him another opportunity to speak.

A few other students approached, and introduced themselves to Kenzie and David. David was the only one that grew up in Massachusetts. He felt like he didn't belong in the conversation.

He wandered from the group, and sat on a couch, picking at the beer's label. The label felt wet in his fingers, slipping from the condensation covered bottle, like a blue runner slipping off a hook. He felt incapable of sharing his life with others. He didn't want others to notice his solitude, and it seemed more apparent in a crowd. He didn't want to be at the party. He wanted to go fishing with Mickey, but that was impossible. David left the party and went back to the library.

At work behind his computer screen at MIT, dialing and twisting the mental tumblers, he solved equations related to Jupiter's atmosphere. He calculated the atmospheric pressure on Jupiter at three Earth atmospheres, similar to what whales experienced in the depths of the ocean. He proved the existence of liquid droplets in the lower atmosphere, and postulated a new kind of liquidity on the surface. According to David's calculations, Jupiter was the most logical place in the solar system to host life.

His faculty advisor, Tu, served as the Principal Investigator on a mission to Jupiter. "David," she said at the beginning of his sophomore year, "I can see you're interested in Jupiter. How would you like a position as my research associate? It's a joint position with MIT and the Harvard Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory."

David accepted the offer, and dove deeper into the study of physics, deeper into his calculations of Jupiter's atmosphere, working hard to impress Tu, searching harder for answers.

He lost himself in his calculations, and Grandma got weaker. She had deteriorated rapidly in the years after Mickey was lost at sea. They had shared a symbiotic relationship, like whales

and barnacles. They needed each other to live. Just as whales breathe air, but live in water, Grandma breathed Mickey's atmosphere. She lived on land, while he worked on the water, but they needed the same air. The doctors said it was congestive heart failure, but David knew better. It took three years, but she drowned in Mickey's absence. She died a short time after David's spring break during his sophomore year at MIT, while he worked, busy with calculations.

"I'm proud of you, David," she had told him after learning of his new research position at the Astrophysical Observatory. The last time David saw her, he spent most of his spring break fixing things around her house. He learned of her passing after he went back to school.

When he heard the sad news, a lump in his throat ached. It ached in the spot where his clavicle fused to his sternum, but the hurt was more interior than any bones. He felt it at the cellular level. It prevented him from leaving his dorm room before noon. He obsessed over the one equation that he knew to be true: David equaled alone.

He moved deeper into his studies after Grandma died, working until after midnight at the Observatory, searching for answers. He wrote equations about Jupiter's climate. He studied. Somewhere in his mind, he still connected the metaphysical with the physical constants he worked with. He imagined whales on Jupiter, reasoned that the atmosphere had evolved into a state conducive to life. Humpback whales could survive in that climate, he told himself. Maybe it wasn't just whales, he thought. Perhaps his grandparents, his parents, and everyone that he cared about had traveled there. He imagined continents floating in the vast Jovian seas. What if Jupiter held land masses for people to live on, and air to breathe? Maybe they're not dead, after all, he thought. The logical part of David knew it was irrational, but he still wondered if everyone had gone to Jupiter to live.

David knew Tu appreciated his work ethic and zeal for solving the Jovian climate equations.

“David, I’d like you to be on the mission team during the orbital insertion of the Explorer probe,” she told him, after they had worked over a holiday weekend at the Observatory.

“Thank you,” he said, sincere in his gratitude, ecstatic to be on the mission team for a probe sent to Jupiter. He had worked his entire life for such an opportunity.

As the probe’s landing date neared, he and Tu drove together to the mission control center at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland. They worked long hours on console, listening intently into their headphones for the tell-tale radio beep of a successful probe landing. David worked at a computer screen surrounded by men in crisp suits. He disliked working in front of an audience. He preferred to work in silence and solitude. Nothing great was ever written in a large room, he thought. He recalled the quote from a writer, and thought it applied equally to solving math problems and hacking code. He had to go deep inside himself to look for answers, and he found that easiest in quiet solitude surrounded by four close walls.

On the second day of working in front of an audience, he tried to catch Tu’s eye. He thought she would sympathize with the plight of working in front of people. She gave David the latitude to work from places of quiet when at MIT. “It’s fine to work alone when you need to concentrate, David,” she had once told him, “but try to have some fun, too. College is supposed to be about making new friends as well as deriving equations.” Her brow had furrowed when she told him this, wrinkling her forehead in the same folds as Mickey’s when he had been worried about David.

Tu didn’t look bothered by the crowd at NASA Goddard. She focused on the electronic screen in front of her, intense concentration on her face. David rubbed his arms, hoping to warm

his skin that had grown chilled from the over-cooled room. He folded his arms tight, protecting himself from the conditioned air, and turned his attention to the large screen on the front wall. He focused on an icon moving in a steady, elliptic route, approaching an orbit around Jupiter. The computer in front of him beeped twice.

He placed the headphones on his head, and listened for the radio beep. Instead of an electronic noise, David heard a call, like a humpback's song, moaning into the headphones.

The whales called to him, he thought. They asked him to be a friend. Maybe they knew about his family. Maybe Jupiter's inhabitants wanted to keep their existence secret. He thought that if he told Tu or the Mission Manager about the whale song, then the creatures would receive unwanted attention. Would it lead to their extinction? He didn't want to be the cause of another death. Again, a humpback whale moaned into his headphones.

Tu walked the aisles between the computers, watching the data screens at each station. "Is everything OK, David? Do you need some fresh air?" she asked. Her brow furrowed.

David stretched, yawned in an attempt to look bored, shook his head, and told Tu, "I haven't heard any signals." No sounds at all, he thought. Leave these whales alone. Let something in my life live. He hoped he communicated all of that and more with his shaking head. He hoped the whales understood, too.

David wondered if others felt this way. He didn't want to be the only person who hoped the whales would talk, explain life, prove that humans weren't alone in the solar system, and, by extension, prove that he wasn't crazy. More than anything he wanted the whales to talk to him. He wanted to hear a voice from beyond the range of normal communication. He wanted to speak to a place and a being others thought impossible. If he could communicate with Jupiter's inhabitants, then could he talk to Mickey? Or Grandma? What was the dividing line that made

others think such communication impossible? Long distance didn't prohibit communication. He knew that. Was it time or death that prevented contact with Mickey? Could these barriers be surmounted? If a probe allowed the voices of Jupiter's inhabitants to travel through space, then could he invent a device that would talk to beings of the afterlife just as easily?

He wondered if he had imagined the noise. He realized his rambling thoughts wouldn't make sense to Tu, or anyone. Maybe there weren't any whales on Jupiter. That would be silly, wouldn't it? He put his hands on the over-ear headphones and pressed hard, hoping to draw the sound closer, as if this action would also bring Jupiter close enough for him to touch and interact with the life forms he imagined there. He listened intently for several more minutes. Finally, another moan called into his headphones.

On the main screen, a small dot representing the Explorer probe moved in an orbit around Jupiter. A message flashed in the ribbon bar at the bottom of the screen. It indicated a low frequency transmission emanating from the surface. Did the others see it? David wondered.

Tu continued to walk up and down the aisles, ignoring the main screen. She stopped to talk to a scientist from the University of Colorado. "We had *eight feet* of snow in Boston last year," she told the scientist. "It was like living on another planet."

David pressed the headphones tight against his ears. Why hadn't Tu and the others heard the sound, or seen the message on the screen? He covered his head and pressed the headphones as tight as possible. He pressed so hard it hurt. He listened until he heard another call, like a humpback's song, lost in the ocean, alone, calling to others from across the seas, calling in a frequency and volume that allowed sound waves to move through the unnatural medium of space. They're calling to me, David thought. Perhaps they have the answers to the equations - the answers to my questions. Maybe the creatures could teach him how to communicate across

impenetrable barriers. Maybe he wasn't alone. He pressed the headset tight against his ears. Ocean waves roared, like the sound of a seashell pressed against a child's ear. Underneath the roar of waves came the faint sound of a humpback's haunting moan. It called to him, like a ghost lost in the ether. He tried to decipher the sounds. He wanted to understand what the whales said to him, to solve the problem, to communicate across the barrier, but he couldn't. He failed to understand their voices. He failed to communicate entirely.

After years of trying to solve the equations, years of watching his family die, and suffering the accompanying guilt, he refused to miss his chance. He would answer the call. The call would tell him why he was alone. The whales would tell him what had happened to Mickey. David stood beside his console, and mimicked the whale's song, moaning into the air. "I'm here," he said and moaned again. "Swim toward my call."

People in the control room turned toward David. Tu, with eyebrows raised, said, "David, do you have a reading? What are you doing?"

He moaned as loud as he could, not in answer to Tu's question, but calling across the solar system, calling toward the source of answers to his questions, hoping the creatures understood. He pushed the headphones tight against his ear, listening for another sound. They had to be there, he thought. The crash of ocean waves roared in his ears. He pushed the headphones tighter and tighter, listening desperately for one more sound.

SUNSHINE MAN

Cody Trench was a normal person before he enlisted in the Army. He spent summers at the lake with his friends and his girlfriend, exhilarating in the freedom of youth. After a year of active duty, training for combat in the desert, he'd grown tired of heat and light, but most of all, his mind wearied from battling the dark shadows that crept forward, blanketing his thoughts with a heavy, foreign blackness he grew too ashamed to try to explain. A shame he was unable to make clear, even to himself, but he knew it was amplified by the randomness of violence around him and the blazing heat of the desert sun. The sun followed him, bringing with it a depression strong enough to eclipse his former happiness, freezing his passions with an incurable paralysis. He didn't want to be in the desert anymore. He wanted to regain his previous state of mind, when summer had been his favorite season. He wanted to go back and fix things with his girlfriend, Angie. He wanted to go home.

While flying above the desert, he couldn't hide from the light when the cargo ramp of the C-130 opened. Air, still hot 15,000 feet above the ground, assaulted him in concert with the shriek of the ramp's hydraulics. He retreated with the shadows toward the nose of the aircraft as a line of light advanced in the cargo bay at the same speed but opposite direction of the lowered ramp. When the metal platform clanged to a stop, Cody knew the sun had found him once again.

The sunlight reached the Military Freefall Students in the aircraft at the same time, but others seemed free of the debilitating effects. Most sat against the walls, perched on mesh seats that folded down, legs twitching nervously in a rhythm that didn't match the aggressive heavy metal music they used to get pumped for the airdrop. Cody sat apart, avoiding contact with the

others, shrinking into himself, edging further toward the dark interior of the aircraft as well as the shadows inside his mind. In the darkness, his barracks roommate and training partner, Jennings, grabbed his shoulder and spoke to him.

“Do you ever think about alternate universes? Time travel? That sort of thing?” Jennings asked, referring to a sci-fi movie the pair had watched in the barracks the night before.

Cody wondered if Jennings could sense his nervousness about the first jump, if he made conversation to assuage his fears. Cody tightened his bootlaces, waiting with strings held taut, like he deeply pondered the time travel question before answering, “Sometimes I think about stuff like that. I like time-space anomalies, but what about relativity? Time dilation and length contraction? If you really traveled back in time, then wouldn’t you shrink to a tiny mass?”

“I think it’s the other way around,” Jennings said. “You would stretch until you were a long, thin string.” He extended the straps of his harness as if to emphasize the point about stretching.

Cody held his mouth open as if considering another thought, then shook his head at Jennings. Their jump instructor, Sgt. Blake, approached with clenched fists and a red face, visibly angry at the light-hearted conversation.

“Hey, Einsteins: shut the fuck up and pay attention,” Sgt. Blake said. “Stand up, Trench. You’re jumping now.” He pointed at Cody, then walked away with the suddenness of a vertical wind gust in the desert, the chilled atmosphere the only remaining evidence of his presence.

Cody stood as ordered, then triple-checked equipment for the jump. Radio transmissions echoed over the loudspeaker: “Jump 512 - turn North; Heading 180. Clear to drop over Sidewinder DZ.”

He knew the run-in to Sidewinder would take three minutes. In less than five, he would be suspended over the desert floor, drifting with the winds. He regretted his decision to join the Army, but regrets would never change what had happened, or the choices he made; and, in his mind, it was never that simple. He wasn't sure which choices were good or bad, which decisions had steered his life toward the Army, toward jumping out of a plane. Maybe he had something to prove to himself. Maybe he wanted to prove that he could live up to some misguided notion of masculinity that took root in his mind as a child in Oklahoma; but, as he waited in the cargo hold of the aircraft, an inexplicable shame returned. He didn't think he could live up to these standards of manhood. He didn't want to finish parachute training. He didn't care if he failed. He didn't want to go to the Middle East, or wherever they would send him. He wanted to go home.

He wanted it so bad that as he stood in the shade of the plane's interior his mind traveled back to the time he had last visited Oklahoma. He imagined his legs began to melt, turning into a liquid mass with the consistency of silicon lubricant, dripping in the metal channels of the cargo bay floor. His legs flowed over the greased, metal locks, and pooled at the rear of the plane. His upper body began to melt, too, expanding as he traveled back in time, just like Jennings said would happen. When Cody's liquid mass reached the sunlight shining in the aft portion of the cargo bay, time dilated. Free of the constraints of linear time, his mind traveled back to those moments of regret.

When last on leave from the Army, before Freefall, Cody had stayed at Angie's apartment. He stayed away from windows, waiting for the sun to set before venturing outside. On weekends, he retreated to bed in the early afternoon with curtains drawn and eyes hidden from the brightness. He woke early, at two or three in the morning, had coffee, then visited

twenty-four hour grocery stores, fitness centers, and dry cleaners - performing life's required errands under the cover of a cool, black sky.

While on leave, he retreated to Angie's couch by mid-morning, flipping channels in a mindless search for fulfillment, curtains drawn tight to obscure the brightness of day - a strange state considering his previously active lifestyle. He wasn't always a creature of the night; he'd just grown weary of the sun. He'd developed a sense of heaviness, like gravity pulled so hard on his body that he might fall through the crust of the earth.

In the back bedroom, Angie talked on the phone. She walked from the privacy of the bedroom into the kitchen, cradling the phone between left shoulder and ear, opening curtains to admit sunlight. Cody knew she talked to her mother, who didn't approve of him. He wondered if they talked about him.

Angie opened the curtain over the kitchen sink, then the one by the breakfast table, allowing lines of light to edge into the living room where Cody reclined in front of the television. She opened the curtain over the sliding glass door, rustling plastic until the metal rings scraped to a stop in the track above the door.

"Good morning," she said, placing her hand over the phone for a moment to keep from interrupting her mother on the other end of the line.

She wore white scrubs with colorful cartoon characters printed on her shirt. Cody liked the scrubs she had purchased for nursing school. It was as if she wore pajamas, but the kind that could be worn in public. He imagined that she took a cuddliness reserved for home and spread it out into the world. He grunted and raised his hand slightly, hoping she could see the signal flare of his hand. He wanted the gesture to mean 'Good morning, and, Oh, by the way: Help me before I fall through the crust of the Earth.'

She hung up the phone, then marched toward the couch with arms and legs stiff, like a toy soldier. She mocked the war movie he had watched the night before, speaking in a parody of the lead actor's voice, "Get up, Cody. I have to go to work. Get up, sir."

"I've been up," he said, leaving out everything about the heaviness and the Earth's crust.

"Well, get up again. You can't sleep on the couch all day."

He groaned and said, "Go away." He positioned one of the throw pillows to block the light. He wanted Angie to understand he meant the opposite of his words. He wanted his actions to mean: 'Hold me. I hurt. I need you,' but her expression looked wounded. She didn't seem to understand any of his unspoken language.

She pulled the pillow away, then started doing a comical jig. She skipped in place and moved her arms in an exaggerated see-saw motion across her chest, while singing, "Wakie, wakie. It's a Monday, Monday - a brand new week."

Cody bit his tongue. He forced himself to scowl, trapping his sunshine in a dark bunker. Angie shared her happiness like the scent of baked cookies meant for everyone's enjoyment. He didn't want any happiness cookies this morning. He didn't deserve any.

"Come on, Cody. You can't veg on the couch all day. What are you going to do?" she asked and pulled on his nose. "Are you going to practice your guitar? I haven't seen you play in a while."

He shrugged his shoulders upward through the entire range of motion, as if he were a turtle attempting to draw into its shell.

Angie sat on the edge of the couch, making room for herself by bumping Cody with her hips, wiggling into position. She asked him to get off the couch every morning. She told

him that his attitude brought others down. She told him life was what he made of it, and he needed to make a decision to live again. She said these things every day, but he didn't listen.

She said, "We'll get through this," with frustration constricting the words in her throat, as if her voice didn't believe the sentence it just uttered. She picked up his hand, held it near her mouth like she spoke into a microphone, then said, "Try to get up today, please. I love you." She kissed him lightly on the knuckles.

He squeezed her hand three times in response, communicating 'love you, too' in secret code. He didn't know why he couldn't answer her out loud. He wanted to tell Angie he loved her, but he didn't have the energy to speak. Maybe he was afraid of ruining something if he said it out loud. Sometimes he wasn't sure if love was even real; although, he wanted it to be. Part of his mind rationalized that love - the capital L kind of love - existed only as a myth, like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. Something that should be left behind for more practical matters. He worried, afraid that if he said the words out loud that he would be forced to leave the peaceful, innocent world behind and be forever consigned to more adult matters, like preparing for Freefall school and eventually deploying to the Middle East. He held love at bay in a convoluted attempt to keep the looming thoughts of war out of his mind.

Angie patted his hand. "Have you thought about applying to Oklahoma State?" she asked. "You could start next year after you finish your tour of duty. They have English Lit and Music Performance. Do you still want to be a singer or write lyrics?" She left the couch, and turned on the lights, adding even more illumination to the apartment. "My sister works in admissions, you know," she said.

He wanted to discuss career possibilities with her, to tell her he didn't want to be in the Army anymore. He wished he could talk about his former dreams of being a songwriter, but he had set those thoughts aside as childish, just like love. He wanted to be happy, but he didn't have the energy to be counseled. Instead, he pulled the pillow over his head, like the sight of her annoyed him.

"Forget it, Cody," she said in a way that made him lose hope. She bunched her hair into a scrunchie, fashioned a quick ponytail, then grabbed her backpack. "I've got clinicals over in Tulsa. Do whatever you want." She shut the door and left.

Sgt Blake screamed fucks and goddamns at the Load Master. The Load Master, prodded by the Sergeant's cursing, jumped to action and deployed the extraction parachute as directed. The fifteen foot circle of ribbon strained briefly against the thin air, 15,000 feet above the Yuma Proving Grounds, before yanking the pallet free of metal locks and pulling the load with ammunition and supplies along the tracks in the aircraft's metal floor. Three orange and white cargo parachutes inflated above the pallet when clear of the aircraft's wake.

The rapid inflation of the large parachutes reassured Cody. He thought he might be too scared to jump the first time, but he was even more afraid of quitting. He wanted to be able to handle any situation, and he wanted to make his family proud. He patted his reserve parachute hanging low around his belly, and grabbed Jennings by both arms. They yelled "Get some" into each others faces. Cody hoped the actions and yelling would make him brave enough for the impending jump. He breathed deep, inhaling the metallic, oily scents inside the aircraft. The smells of oil and silicon strangely comforted his unease.

Sgt Blake scratched his neck, consulted his checklist in a laminated pocket on his forearm, then raised his fist, signaling another soldier. The soldier wobbled forward, struggling under the load of two, forty pound rawinsondes used to measure wind conditions. Sgt Blake nodded and the soldier tossed the rawinsondes off the edge of the ramp. The white, cruciform shaped parafoils inflated, then the soldier signaled a thumbs up to Sgt Blake.

With all loads deployed, the sergeant raised a closed fist again, and screamed 'Go' three times. The soldier nearest the ramp, who had released the rawinsondes, gave his fellow students a double middle finger salute and fell backwards off the ramp. The next soldier, his buddy, followed suit by pulling down his pants and spreading his cheeks toward the remaining crew before tumbling headfirst off the ramp. The soldiers still onboard laughed and extended hands in front of their eyes to block the assault from the brown eyeball and exposed red nut sack. Jennings motioned to Cody to hurry up as the newest Freefall students walked to the end of the ramp as a group. Cody didn't follow the team. The students jumped, but he remained rooted in place, alone in the cargo bay with Sgt Blake.

Cody regretted the way he had acted around Angie that morning, upsetting her before her first day of clinicals in Tulsa. Despite the regrets, it still took him another hour to get off the couch. He forced himself to walk to the bathroom, where he turned on the shower. She was right, he thought. He had dreamed of being a songwriter once. He joined the Army instead, doing what others thought practical. Time to grow up, he had told himself. He tested the temperature of the water with his hand, took off his clothes, then stepped underneath the stream.

He closed his eyes and the water splashed his face. He bowed his head forward and the water streamed on the back of his neck. He massaged the cramping muscle with his right hand, and a migraine formed behind his eyes. He didn't want to be there anymore. Everything hurt.

His pain grew, and he imagined his arms contracted and legs shortened. In his mind, he shrank smaller than a fly-fisherman's lure, swirling around the shower drain in Coriolis effect until he rushed forward through a stream of time. He imagined future events in deserts he had yet to visit around the world, stomping on a scorpion that scabbled across a mountain trail, ducking from explosions and flying shards of metal. Friends he hadn't even met yet would die in his arms, screaming for their mothers. From this point on, he thought, time would sweep him helplessly forward, like a mayfly caught in the current of a stream, flowing down the mountainside through the force of gravity, streaming faster and faster toward a low point.

He remained in the shower, exhausting the hot water, obsessing over the future's dire possibilities. He had promised Angie he would pick up some cat food and potting soil, but he didn't feel like moving. He thought about how he had messed things up with Angie. Why was he always so unhappy? Why did he have to ruin her day? He wanted to be happy, like her, but somehow he never let himself.

Eventually, he showered, dressed, and drove to Murdoch's Lawn and Garden, determined to at least complete the errand Angie had asked him to do. On the drive, he listened to Americana artists with poetic lyrics, like Ryan Bingham and Lucinda Williams. He dreamed briefly of writing songs equally powerful and moving. A part of him still wanted to write something of lasting importance, even immortal, like one of Dylan's songs or a Stones' song, but he quickly dismissed the artistic cravings. He had never written anything great, and doubted he ever would. He silenced his inner voice, concentrating on the drive.

The chemical scents of herbicide and pesticide supplies in Murdoch's smelled oddly sweet, and Cody thought the mountainous stacks of bagged fertilizer and grass seed were oddly reassuring. This store had all the supplies necessary to grow an orderly, green lawn. A stark contrast to the packed dirt of the deserts he dreaded. He retrieved the kitty litter and potting soil, carrying a bag over each shoulder to the check-out line. His former high school English teacher, Mrs. Kaminsky, waited in line ahead of him.

She waved, then stepped up to the counter and put on glasses that dangled from a chain around her neck. She signed a credit card receipt for a large container of weedkiller, then took the glasses back off. After Cody paid for his purchases, she asked him what he was up to, asked about the Army and his duties. She asked about Angie, then asked about Cody's family. After all the pleasantries, she said, "What are you reading these days?"

"I'm reading a book of Jim Morrison's poems and a biography of John Wayne. I'm not really writing anything now." He turtled his shoulders for the second time that day, then looked at his feet.

"That's nice," she said, but the tenor of her voice accused him of something, like he was wasting his time with Jim Morrison. What was wrong with him? Couldn't he even choose the right books?

"I have a couple volumes of poetry in my car that I think you'd like. Be a young gentleman, and carry this weedkiller to my car," Mrs. Kaminski said.

Outside, leaves fell from the trees, drifting toward the earth, slowed in their descent by aerodynamic drag and light autumn winds. The winds held the leaves aloft, preventing them from crashing to the ground, easing them gently to the Earth - intact and unhurt. The

drier, brown leaves crunched under his boots. The yellow leaves, more recently attached to trees, still wet with the moisture of life, didn't crunch, but yielded to the pressure of his step. Crows called in the trees surrounding the parking lot, screaming at each other with loud caws echoing back and forth between the branches.

Mrs. Kaminski brushed a few leaves off the trunk, opened the lock with a key, and asked, "Do you still plan to enroll at Oklahoma State?"

He shrugged and said, "Maybe after my tour is over," then loaded the defoliant between the spare tire and a leather bowling bag with Kaminski stenciled on the side.

Her voice sounded forced as she reached into the back seat, moving some groceries around with a clatter of cans. "They have a good English program," she said. She stood and handed Cody a book of Jim Harrison's poems. "You can't find this one anymore. It's some of his early stuff. There's lots of hunting and fishing in here. I think you'd like it," she said. She chewed on her bottom lip, like she wanted to say something else. "It's like a universe," she said finally, and held the book in front of her with two hands like offering it to an altar.

Cody shuffled his feet, embarrassed at the universe speech. He thanked her for the book and left. He drove back to Angie's, and thought about Mrs. Kaminsky's comments during the drive. How could a universe be contained in one book? He wondered about the scale of the universe and his mind tumbled with possibilities.

Cody waited in the back of the plane to jump, and Sgt Blake's fucks and goddamns became a monotonous roar, like the turbofans from the C-130 buzzing in his ear. Time dilated and his legs shortened several feet. He imagined Angie standing before him. She hugged him hard and said, "I love you."

It surprised Cody to see her. How did she get here? He didn't know she was coming to Yuma. How did she get on the plane? He squeezed her hand three times, "love you, too" in secret code. She waited, as if expecting him to verbally answer. He stewed, mad that she wasn't listening to him.

Time dilated and Cody felt his head melt like one of Salvador Dali's images of drooping watches he had seen in the Oklahoma City Museum. He held his hands to his head, hoping to mold it back into the proper round shape. He thought he made some progress reshaping his head, but his temples pounded with a fierce migraine. Angie's image faded away, and he waited alone in the back of the C-130 with the screaming Sgt Blake. He wanted jump training to end. He wanted to go home.

Cody wanted to fix things with Angie, to say he was sorry. He arranged the potting soil and kitty litter in the kitchen, so she would notice he got off the couch and accomplished something. He wanted to congratulate her on completing her first day of clinicals, to say he loved her with his words when she came home. He didn't want to use the secret squeeze code. He selected an upbeat jazz station and microwaved frozen spinach and feta cheese, making a dip that Angie enjoyed. He wanted to show her that he had been productive, that he could be happy.

Angie came home, and smiled at the spinach dip. She looked tired. Her new scrubs were splattered and stained, but she smiled anyway. Spinach dip wasn't the final solution, but it was a start.

He squeezed his eyes tight and tried to pull the pillow over his face. Angie giggled and blocked the pillow. Her kisses traveled down to his eyebrows, and she licked, like she was the momma cat and he was a kitten in need of a bath.

Cody rolled on top of her. He held her forehead to stop the cat licking. Continuing the animal game, he pretended he was a goldfish and sucked in his cheeks while puckering lips. He kissed against Angie's face with goldfish-lips, pretended to eat tiny flecks of fish food from her cheek. "You're tasty. Better than spinach dip," he said. His voice sounded clipped, as he struggled to talk with his cheeks pinched into a fish face. She laughed again. For a minute, he almost let himself be happy.

She said, "I love you."

He squeezed her close, breathed into her hair so she wouldn't see his face, and patted her shoulder three times. 'Love you, too,' in silent, secret code.

"Can't you even say it?" she asked.

"It hurts so bad," he said suddenly, inexplicably.

Her breath exhaled, worry almost visible in the moonlight.

He kissed her body to change the subject. He touched his forehead to the fleshy part of her lower abdomen. She shut her eyelids. Her lips slightly parted. A glimpse of white teeth. Her fingers trailed against the nape of his neck. She began to moan then, as if she transformed his pain, expanded his hurt to infinity, until an explosion contracted everything back upon itself. He heard her call his name. He said nothing. He lay there becoming small, smaller, vanishing inside himself - into his own nothingness.

The room became a window, a patch of desert, stretching brown until red rocks rose like dragon's scales from the dirt. Whitewashed facades exploded, ordnance dropped from planes

above, in the end - an ecstasy beyond knowing. Small dust particles floated in the air, reflecting the same light that illuminated the swell of her quivering thigh. Each dust particle floated, distinct and separate, like thousands of tiny, sparkling worlds moving through the air, swirling just out of his reach.

Sgt Blake shoved Cody forward, screaming even more fucks and goddamns. Cody tried to concentrate on his jump training as the sunlight struck him full in the face. Below him, seven white parafoils deployed and swooped in unison above a thin road paved through the desert landscape. He knew the road's elevation flowed up and down with the terrain, following the natural gullies of the desert. This allowed the road to remain in place during monsoon season; otherwise, it would quickly wash away with the torrential rains, and cease to exist. Sgt Blake continued to curse, insulting Cody toward the edge of the ramp.

Cody sat in Angie's kitchen paralyzed by a cup of coffee. His leave of absence was almost over. He knew Freefall school would begin in a few days, and he wanted to do something fun. He wanted to make up with Angie, but on his final days in Oklahoma, he froze, unable to move, like the stream of time had paused and the universe had stopped expanding. In those paralyzed moments, he wondered if the universe had begun to contract and the flow of time would soon reverse. The contracting universe would force him to relive his entire life. He would have to face the desert sun over and over again. He thought the expanding and contracting universe must cause his dreamlike mixture of memories, current thoughts, and future life to collide in a random jumble inside his once orderly mind.

He sipped the coffee and cradled the mug, gaining comfort from the small globe of warmth. The coffee helped to organize his thoughts. He imagined a new concept of time distinct from the traditional metaphor of an unstoppable river that flowed in one direction; instead, he imagined time as an explosion of all events at once. He existed in Angie's kitchen, and he also existed in some distant, future state, crushing a scorpion under the heel of his tan boot as it scabbled across the desert trail. He shivered to expel thoughts of the desert, panicked further, convinced he had run out of time. His anxiety eased somewhat when he realized it was Sunday. He didn't have to leave today.

He stretched his arms above his head to ease the continual cramp between his shoulder blades, and walked inside to find Angie still asleep in the bedroom. He pulled his shirt off, slipped under the covers, and waited in the dark for her to wake.

He wasn't tired, but he liked to lie in the dark. In the darkness, unable to control his racing thoughts, he collapsed inside himself, like a black hole imploding and sucking everything in with it. He imagined that he grew into the ultimate darkness from which even light couldn't escape.

He fell back asleep and remained in bed until well past dawn. He woke to a brightly lit bedroom and the sound of Angie's flip-flops smacking on her heels as she walked. The flip-flops sounded vaguely reminiscent of hips slapping together in a steady rhythm. Jealousy flared as he imagined Angie in the next room with some past or potential future lover. Some Jody, as the soldiers he knew would say, was in there fucking his girlfriend. Some imaginary other lover, who was more *everything* than him: able to produce more hip slapping sounds, able to draw more smiles from Angie, rather than collapse her smile into a tight-lipped frown. The imaginary lover brought Angie to orgasms more intense than those she experienced with Cody in real life.

He resented her ecstasy in the next room. He posted a losing score of Angie's smiles to this invisible adversary, and quickly lost ground.

Angie left the invisible lover, and entered the bedroom. Cody kept his head under the covers, unable to face her smile, worried that he would chase it away.

"It's time to get up," she said.

He groaned, communicating nothing and everything.

"What do you want to do today?" she said.

He sighed, a simple exhalation of air, but he hoped it said, 'leave me alone or gravity will trap you inside this black hole,' and maybe also said, 'I'm trapped in this gravity well. Pull me out. Help.'

She walked away, shoes clicking on the wooden floor. He felt glad to be alone and distraught that she had left him. The faucet in the bathroom gurgled. The click-clack returned. Covers were peeled from Cody's face, replaced by a warm washcloth. Angie bathed his face slowly, holding his head in her hands. Her hands were so small they could fit in a coffee cup.

He shoved her arm away.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. Yeah, sure. Just nothing. Or something like that. He shook with an anger he didn't understand. The woman beside him, the only woman he had ever loved, Angie, placed hands on his tight shoulders. She displayed a professionalism in her blinks and whispers: like the nurse she trained to be, skilled in CPR; a figure coming to revive his diseased heart - infected not by a virus, but by his refusal to live and be happy. She couldn't calculate aerodynamics and drop zone footprints. She couldn't discuss ripstops and shot patterns with him.

She hadn't felt the crushing yoke of playing the dutiful son and soldier, but she knew people. She knew emotions. She understood figurative and literal hearts. Angie had hearts cold.

"Tell me what's wrong," she said.

He gave a complicated sigh, more cathartic than bronchial, and massaged the cramp in his neck.

"Nothing. It isn't anything," he said.

After a while she sighed too, and turned away. She understood people in a way that Cody could never comprehend, possessing an emotional intelligence that helped her navigate the complex feelings associated with her sick patients. She understood the simple things that made people happy and sad; however, she couldn't alter Cody's refusal to be happy. Cody knew Angie's gift of emotional intelligence wasn't the problem. He had constructed large walls around himself, forcing her away from him. Part of him didn't want to be happy. He knew that sounded crazy, but he couldn't help it.

He sighed, stood, and gathered his shirt. He thought the breath was sufficient to communicate the intricacies of the collapsing universe, the reversal of time, her infidelity with imaginary lovers, and the suck of the world's deserts.

"Are you OK?" she said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He resented the worried look on her face, the expressions of concern. He hated himself for chasing her smile away. He pulled the t-shirt over his head, then made his way to the kitchen.

He sat at the kitchen table with his coffee and tried to catch his breath. The warm liquid did little to relax the tightness that constricted his chest. He felt like one of the ratchet straps that secured the pallets in the back of a C-130 aircraft had become strapped across his chest, squeezing the air out of him. He couldn't breathe.

Angie appeared in the middle of this, and drank a glass of orange juice by the sink. Though she led an inner life partly mysterious to Cody, he knew her private repertoire and the routine of her home. Each day he knew more and more about her. Angie, for instance, believed that remembering her parent's anniversary was a daughter's duty. She believed that Sunday dinner with family was required. This you could discuss. Cody didn't know what Angie believed about the Big Bang. Their cosmogonies seemed to be moving apart, pulled by different gravities. Angie moved toward a dutiful life of family, work, and helping others. Cody fell inside an abnormal gravitational well of regret, mostly of his own devising. He had created this, his own hellish universe, and he didn't know how to make it stop. He wanted to go back to a time before the Army. A time when he acted normal, and said 'I love you' without hiding his face and squeezing three times. He wanted to be a normal person again.

He sat with his coffee untouched in front of him, and tried to breathe. Angie fixed herself toast. Cody decided to have a good day and forget about Freefall, forget about the future, but he couldn't help it - anger enveloped him. He didn't understand why he was angry, but found his frustration manifested in a fury at Angie's toast. He bit his lip. He shouldn't say anything, he thought. He knew the toast was irrelevant to his anger, but he lacked the ability to organize his thoughts. He couldn't think. He hated that toast. He wanted the toast to go away, to simply vanish and cease existence by flowing back up the stream of time.

Angie smiled. She's always smiling, Cody thought. Was she laughing at him?

"What time did you wake up?" she asked.

"I don't know. 0300, I think," Cody said. He realized after speaking that he had used military time. He said a few phrases in Arabic. Angie nodded, ignoring the rambling.

He woke earlier each day. His schedule constructed to avoid daylight. "Why don't you keep normal hours?" Angie had asked him one evening. He shrugged, unable to explain his version of normal. He didn't want to tell her that life in Oklahoma felt like prison to him and part of him *wanted* to go to Freefall. He didn't tell her that part of him wanted orders to go to the Middle East, because he was afraid that wouldn't sound normal either. When he was in the Army he wanted to come home, and when he was in Oklahoma he wanted to leave. Nothing he wanted sounded normal, he thought. He sipped the coffee. Shocked by cold liquid, he wondered how much time had passed.

"Are you OK?" Angie asked again.

He smirked because he realized Angie didn't understand that the universe had started to contract and all time happened at once. "An hour doesn't matter anymore," he told her, hoping that explained everything.

"I don't understand why you're rambling about time. Do you want me to call someone?" she asked.

He shook his head. He didn't want to do anything. Exhausted, he collapsed his head on the table, then grew angry that he wasn't doing anything productive or even fun during his time off. The worry upset his stomach and he rushed to the bathroom.

He rocked on the toilet and realized how everyone that you saw walking around town - at the dry cleaners, at church, at the grocery store, wherever - everyone that you saw shat and fucked, but you never saw them doing it. Shitting and fucking were these silent parts of our lives that everyone had in common, but we never saw each other do any of it. We saw each other do all the other activities of life, like eating, shopping, working, and reading. He realized that he'd never seen Angie shit either. He imagined she secretly had glorious shits when he wasn't home.

He collapsed his head in his hands and massaged his scalp. The scalp massage did not soothe his anger and his thoughts continued to swirl, like galaxies spinning in circles. Angie had an invisible, imaginary lover. She had invisible, imaginary shits without him. She was leaving him behind. Maybe he was the imaginary one? he thought. Maybe the black hole had sucked him into an alternate universe and that was why time was all fucked up. Maybe Angie's boyfriend in the real universe was mad at him because he was her imaginary lover in this time-reversed, backward big bang universe? Maybe in this universe we all took shits and fucked in front of each other, he thought. There was no hiding here. He moaned and an infinity of stars traveled through miles of his intestines.

Time dilated and Cody's body stretched the length of the Will Rogers Airport from the Cinnabon to the Route 66 Grill. He stood with a duffel at his feet, waiting on a Southwest Airlines flight that would take him to Yuma, Arizona, to Freefall School.

"I love you," Angie said holding him tight.

He patted her back three times.

"Can't you even say it? Say something. Say anything," she pleaded. "If you can't say I love you, then say I hate you," she said, grimacing, daring him to answer.

"I don't hate you," he said.

"How would I know?" she said, shrugged, then collapsed her shoulders and head, communicating exasperation through flaccid trapezius and rhomboid muscles.

Cody thought her shoulder girdle fell parallel to the trajectory of her respect for him. Her desire for a relationship was collapsing, like a parachute deflating on a windless day. He simply had to say three words to stop the descent, to breathe life back into their love.

“Say it one time before you go to Freefall, please,” she said.

He tried to answer and his courage failed. “I did say it,” he said instead. He shook, angry that she never listened to him when he spoke in code. He grew even angrier at himself for his cowardice. Why couldn’t he just say it? Would he be a coward in battle, too? He turned away and walked down the jetway.

Time dilated and Cody’s feet turned to liquid. His liquid feet poured between the metal rails running the length of the C-130. The cargo ramp opened. Desert mountains flashed by outside. He lifted his foot, so its liquid wouldn’t spill outside the aircraft. We’re low, he thought. We’re just above the mountains. His stomach cramped deep in his intestine. He inhaled, gaining comfort in the familiar, oily smell. The bright sun lit the cargo bay, and the ramp clanged open.

Sgt Blake screamed long strings of curses, like he would never run out of fucks and goddamns. Cody didn’t wait to be shoved forward again, but ran to the ramp’s edge and leaped out of the plane. He jumped and arched his back hard into the proper skydiver position with arms and legs trailing, just like he had been trained. Wind attacked him from all sides. The brightness of the sky, the sun, and the desert floor coalesced into one spinning tan and yellow image. In the moment of freefall, Cody wasn’t sure which way gravity pointed. He didn’t know which way was up. Just as he thought that universe expansion had reversed and time was running backward, he now imagined that the gravity vector had reversed and he was falling into the sun.

His parafoil finally deployed and the force of the risers yanked hard on the harness to correct his sense of gravity. Below him, seven white canopies swooped in unison above a thin road paved through the desert landscape. He recognized the tan soil of Yuma as he drifted up and to the right in a slight thermal inversion rising off the desert floor. He drifted with the winds, like

a leaf floating in an unstoppable river of time. Suspended in full view of the sun, he closed his eyes and tilted his face up, letting the rays warm him. He didn't want to sink into a black hole. He wanted Freefall training to end. He didn't want to deploy to the Middle East. He wanted to go home. Everyone is always safe at home, he thought.

An orange color invaded the barrier of his closed eyelids. He opened his eyes slowly, and grasped at the sun's rays with his index finger and thumb, like he picked petals of a giant she-loves-me-not flower. He pulled the sunlight petals apart, separating the light into threads, then he pulled the threads into subatomic particles of light. "She loves me," he said as he separated the last particle.

He savored the warmth, floated in the wind, and dreamed of falling into the sun to become cosmic matter spread among the stars, like the tiny particles of light he held in his hand. He hoped those light particles would shine down on Oklahoma, warming Angie's apartment.

The thought of spreading his energy into the cosmos and back to Oklahoma made him smile. He extended his hand toward the sun, feeling the energy on his palm. He grasped at the sun and squeezed his hand three times. "Love you, too," he whispered out loud. He hoped Angie would find his particles in Oklahoma, and know to pull him free of the darkness, to mold his light back into human form.

STARLIGHT

Less than forty-eight hours after Colt's eighteenth birthday, he volunteered to ride a bull in the Pretty Prairie Night Rodeo. He made the decision impulsively, because his older brother Root had signed up for the Marines the day before. They intended to enlist together on Colt's birthday, but he backed out, leaving Root at the enlistment center alone. Colt didn't want to get duped into military service for years. He didn't want to be shot in Afghanistan, or wherever, fighting wars that made no sense to him. He didn't want to get on the bull either, not really, but he felt trapped. He wouldn't let his brother down again. He wouldn't back out. He refused to be a coward twice in as many days, so soon after becoming a man.

"Are you going to be a pussy, or cowboy up?" Root said as they stood in line to volunteer. He slapped an open hand into Colt's chest, attempting to grab his nipple for a titty twister.

Colt pushed Root's hand away. "Quit it, Fuckers," he said.

Root laughed and placed his index fingers above his head like horns. He danced around, pawing his long, skinny leg in the exaggerated motions of an irritated bull. "Moo. I see me a pussy cowboy," he said and tried to hook Colt in the back with one of his finger-horns. The other young men waiting in line for the rodeo chuckled at Root's antics.

Colt pushed the fake bull aside, taking the ribbing in good humor. He didn't decide to volunteer for the rodeo based entirely on teasing. Perhaps he wanted to flee complicated demons that he himself didn't understand, hoping to unburden an indescribable force weighing his life down in small town Kansas, just like the real bull would try to buck free of his weight. More

likely, he did it to prove something to himself, to live up to some misguided notion of what it meant to be a man, or maybe to prove something to his father, who wasn't even at the rodeo.

He wondered if maybe his decision to ride the bull had something to do with the future, one he didn't fully understand, but wanted to influence through the force of his own will, rather than playing the victim of fate. He dreamed of controlling the future, because he had no power to change the past.

Colt signed his name before Root committed to the rodeo, and an hour later the announcer motioned him forward for his turn in the long round. His fingers trembled with equal parts fear and adrenaline as he stepped forward and shook hands with the man. He also drank too much caffeine, slamming a large Monster Energy in an attempt to look cowboy cool around Root and the others. The announcer pointed him toward the starting gate, then spoke into the microphone, telling the crowd to give a hand for the cowboy from Greenfield, Kansas. Colt pulled tobacco from his lip and threw it on the ground, replacing it with a mouthguard. The caffeine mixed in the pit of his stomach with nerves and the aftermath of the brown, liquid saliva that he had accidentally swallowed while chewing the wintergreen tobacco. He trembled with nerves, he needed to vomit, but he wouldn't back out. He refused to fail Root again.

Two young cowboys positioned a Brahman bull near the starting gate for Colt's ride. The announcer continued to speak into the mic, building anticipation in the crowd. The smell of livestock filled the air and metal chutes clanged. The two young stock handlers prodded the skittish Brahman into its final position. A semi-solid brown mass of shit had smeared on the rear haunches of the bull from being constrained in the tight chutes. The bull snorted, tossed his head, and a long, string of white snot protruded into the air before landing on top of its thickly-

muscled, brown neck. The bull tried to rear up, so the livestock handlers threaded a rope through the top part of the chute, constraining the bull to a horizontal plane.

Colt climbed over the rail. Root stood on the platform above the chute, pressing against the bull's flank with the heel of his boot, spurs tilted up to prevent contact with the hide, pushing to gain the necessary space for Colt to mount. He took advantage of the space gained by Root's pushing, spread his legs wide, and straddled the bull's barrel chest. The wide splits pulled the tendons in his groin, and a cramp developed in his left hip flexor from the strain of the stretch. He threaded the bull rope around, pulled it tight, then rubbed his gloved hand up and down vigorously on the trailing edge of the rope. He rubbed fast, generating heat, so the rope's glue would become tacky and partially adhere to his glove during the ride. He wrapped the rope around his left hand, adjusted his testicles with his right, then pulled his body tight against the closed fist. He flexed his core as rigid as possible, then raised his right hand in a loose figure four position above his head for counterbalance. Finally, he nodded to the handlers to open the gate.

Colt sensed time slow as the gate opened. He tracked each quiver of the bull's shoulder muscles, trembling in anticipation of the opening chute, as if that second on top of the trembling bull lasted ten seconds in his mind. He tightened his legs as the bull pitched forward and rolled right immediately out of the chute. He threw his free arm back to counter the pitch, but his pockets drifted right of center from the roll. The bull quickly changed directions, turning left into Colt's roped hand, while kicking hard in the air. His hip pockets cocked off-center in the direction of the kick, and the force jerked his roped arm straight. Something popped, then he flew through the air, landing hard on the arena floor. Flat on his back, he couldn't breathe.

In the prone position, he looked up at the night sky and squinted in the brightness of the arena's lights. The impact with the ground had knocked the breath from him, so he remained still

in the plowed dirt, which felt soft, like babies' hair or the material of spider webs. He pillowed his head in the softness, while his vision alternated between the blackness of night and the bright arena lights, reminding him of twinkling Christmas tree bulbs. He struggled to breathe, he couldn't move. The riderless bull continued to buck, and its rear hooves descended toward Colt's head. It seemed to him that a mass of light, shaped like a long thread, formed from the arena's spotlights, and flashed toward the bull. The light nudged the bull off balance, pushing the danger away, so that the hooves hit the dust several inches to the left of Colt's head. After saving Colt, the flying light ascended vertically, disappearing into the night sky. Confused, head pounding in pain, Colt shut his eyes.

With eyes closed, his presence faded from the rodeo arena, he fell deeper and deeper into the dirt's softness until the world was unable to contain him. His consciousness no longer existed as an eighteen-year-old man, but, instead, dreamed of the Christmas season when he had been a six-year-old. He dreamed of a past time, when his mother's car had slid off the road during a December ice storm, skidding into a concrete culvert, killing her on impact.

The events of that ill-fated December blurred in Colt's mind, and he didn't remember where the Christmas tree came from or who decorated it, but one week after the funeral, the six-year-old Colt had wrestled with his brother, jumping off the couch in imitation of his favorite pro wrestler on television, knocking the elder brother against the shiny, decorated tree, toppling it, and spilling water from the stand all over the carpet. Tinsel scattered across the floor, and mirrored ornaments rolled down the hall. The tree-topper fell against the wall, breaking in half.

His father barged in, angry at the mess. He never struck Colt or Root, nothing that would leave a mark, but doled out creative punishments designed to embarrass them. That December,

his father made the boys pull down their pants and lie face down in the mess they had created. “Stay there, and think about what you’ve done,” he said and walked into the kitchen.

Colt remained on his stomach. He turned his face, hot with embarrassment, to the left, so he wouldn’t have to look at Root. Colt’s mirror image reflected in the shiny surface of a Christmas ornament, an image trapped inside the red globe with silver wire attached to the top. He waited for a few minutes, playing the staring game with his reflection in the red sphere, until someone knocked at the front door. He stood and started to pull his pants up.

“I didn’t tell you to get up,” his father said as he walked into the room from the kitchen to answer the door. Some of the neighborhood boys waited on the porch. They wanted to play football. “Colt can’t come out right now,” his father told them.

Colt wondered if the neighbors could see across the hall to where he and Root waited with naked bodies pressed against the carpet. He moved, hoping he could edge away from the door, longing to stay out of sight. The movement of his nakedness against the carpet tickled his penis, and he trembled a prepubescent tingle years away from an erection, but just in time for dirt and shame.

His father slammed the door. “Clean this mess up. Stop acting like little babies all the time. You need to man up,” his father said.

Colt stood quickly and buckled his pants tight. He helped Root lift the tree back into place, and began picking the tinsel out of the carpet. He held one of the pieces of tinsel in his hand, turning it back and forth. It sparkled. He thought it looked like starlight that he could hold in one hand.

The memories of that Christmas lingered, but Colt's consciousness returned to his eighteen-year-old self in the rodeo arena. Pain: it burned inside his arm like a unbreakable vow, promising to remain with him forever. A knot of flesh bunched near his shoulder six inches away from where his tendon should have attached. His right hand instinctively massaged the injury, fingers encircling his arm, searching deep to ease the pain. Hooves churned brown dust, saturating the air with an unbreathable cloud. One of his first thoughts after regaining consciousness: What was that flash of light? Had it really pushed the bull aside? Colt thought of guardian angels and other impossibilities through the fog of a building concussion.

The bull trotted back into the cattle chutes, and a rodeo clown moved quickly to secure the gate. As Colt lay in the cool, plowed dirt of the arena, he wondered more about the light. Did anyone else see it? If it was a guardian angel, then why had it saved him, but done nothing to save his mother so many years ago? The tendon in his biceps throbbed in pain. He didn't feel like thinking about light or angels anymore. More importantly, he didn't want to think about the loss from childhood, or his father's idea of punishment. He didn't want to think about breaking his enlistment promise to Root. He buried all those thoughts deep, concentrated on massaging his arm, knowing he couldn't change the past.

A rodeo clown, dressed in make-up and an orange plastic hat, helped Colt to his feet. "Get up, kid. You almost had him," the clown said. A second clown handed him his hat and bull rope, then told him good job. Colt collected his equipment, nodded thanks, and dragged the bull rope out of the arena. The metal bell clanged with each step. Thoughts pounded inside Colt's head in the same rhythm, questions and accusations ringing louder than any rodeo arena, injuries so deep they would never leave a scar.

Colt collapsed into a funk after falling off the bull. He spent several weeks inside, a fog clouding his thoughts, and grew angry at the sun inching through the blinds, invading his apartment and desire for darkness in equal measure. The re-attached tendon was mostly healed. He had full use of the arm again. His scar itched, and he removed the bandage to scratch.

He wanted to accomplish something, to travel the world, but not with the Marines, like Root. He wanted to be brave, to experience adventure around the world, like a character in the Hemingway stories he read during high school; instead, he fell off a bull. He hoped he wasn't like some of the men in the books who acted brave, but were cowards at heart. The truth lying hidden underneath his skin, like a pulled biceps tendon, invisible to others, but a pulsating pain to him, since he knew the truth.

A knock pounded at the door, and Root shouted, "Open up, Cum-bubble. It's time to go."

Colt hated when Root talked like that. He didn't take it as an insult, and he knew Root didn't mean it as one, but the crude speech embarrassed him. He didn't want his neighbors to hear, and think he belonged in the same category as Root, who was turning out like their father. At least Root had the courage to follow through on a commitment to the Marines, Colt thought, admonishing himself for feeling superior.

"Ok, hold on," Colt told Root as he opened the door, "We'll get there."

He grabbed his duffel and a case containing his compound bow, following Root to the parking lot. Root had a new truck, purchased with his enlistment bonus and money won at Pretty Prairie. He had made it to the short round, earning third place, while Colt had groaned in the bleachers with a pulled tendon.

Root made a left at the light, merged on the highway, leaving Greenfield behind and driving the nine miles out of town to their father's ranch. The road traveled past the concrete culvert that their mother's car had struck that ill-fated December. Colt always imagined the worst when nearing the scene of the accident, envisioned her still alive, not dying on impact, but trapped inside the car, suffering, with the jaws of life coming too late. His courage always failed at the last moment, and he averted his eyes from the culvert, choosing instead to look at the wheat field across the road.

"Do you remember that Christmas?" he asked Root.

"Of course," Root said, staring at the road ahead.

"Do you ever think about how Dad punished us for knocking down the Christmas tree?" Colt asked.

"Which Christmas tree? I don't remember knocking over a tree," Root said.

"You know, the one where he made us lie in the smashed decorations for punishment?" Colt was surprised that Root didn't remember.

"No, I don't remember anything like that. It probably wasn't that big of a deal. You've always been too sensitive," he said, "crying about every time daddy spanked you." He punched Colt on the shoulder. "You need to man up."

Colt thought about how Root's words were the same as his father's. He wondered if Root really didn't remember or had just absorbed the lesson. Had Root walked away from that episode forever resigned to be a man in the manner of their father?

They crossed the Walnut River and the flat, fertile land gave way to rolling grassland and brown pastures veined with dry creek beds. Herds of cattle grazed near trees, instinctively shading themselves from the building heat of the day. They turned off the highway and the truck

bounced on the ruts of a dirt road. A coyote, startled by the noise, jumped from the high grass growing along the road's shoulder, and trotted across the open. It disappeared into a field, red and gray fur perfectly suited for blending into the landscape. Its tail vanished last, tucked between its legs in an upside down question mark.

Over the crest of the hill from the coyote, Colt's father waited with the gate held open. He bore himself with a unique kind of physicality. He moved sideways, in a non-linear manner, with his right eye positioned forward. His left eye—blinded in a childhood accident with a pocket knife—focused on nothing, a milky orb sighted off on a different plane, increasing Colt's feeling that his father possessed a distorted worldview. Half of the options that Colt could see were invisible to his father.

He nodded in greeting as they drove through the open gate and parked in the field. "There's my new Marine," he said to Root, shutting the gate. "A tour in the Marines is something that you can hold on to for the rest of your life. I wish Colt would do something other than lie around reading books with his head in the clouds," he said. His tone condemned reading both as an act of laziness and cowardice, lacking practical application in the real world.

Colt had suspected they would begin with a comparison about the Marines, and other passive-aggressive insults directed at his manhood. He opened the case containing his compound bow and assembled razor blades into an arrow's broadhead. Distracted with his thoughts, Colt nicked the meaty flesh near his thumb on one of the sharp blades. A trickle dripped from his hand. He pressed the wound with the tail of his shirt.

"Your head was in the clouds again, wasn't it?" his father said, noting Colt's concern over the bleeding hand. "It's just a scratch. It won't even leave a scar."

Colt left Root and his father at the truck, walking down a hill toward cottonwood trees, which swayed beside the creek. Grass covered the hillside with greens and yellows so precarious Colt worried it might crumble to dust, trapping him alone in a desert void of color. Leaves rustled in the breeze, like whispers of people talking, then fell gently to the ground, already decaying. He wondered if the falling yellow leaves indicted his courage, like nature itself was calling him a coward for not joining the Marines. But he knew it was a mistake for Root to join. He wished he could undo Root's enlistment, protect him from future harm.

Colt found the tree with a deer stand strapped to the trunk. He climbed twelve feet above the ground to the platform, leaned against the tree's trunk, and the metal deer stand squeaked with each breath of the cool breeze. The wind brought a sulfurous smell from a natural gas well across the fence. Field mice hopped in the grass below, playing games of life. The sun sank low on the horizon, bathing the farm with a soft, orange light. Calves, separated from their mothers during the course of the day, bawled on the hillsides, as the herd gathered to face the coming night. Canada geese honked high overhead, and the first star shone in the darkening sky.

A furious buzzing sounded from a fly caught in a spider's web hanging in a crotch of the tree above Colt's head. The fly beat its wings furiously, while the spider sat on a strand removed just far enough from the trapped insect to avoid being shaken off by its prey's desperate thrashing. The fly continued to struggle, wrapping itself tighter in the web until it could barely move. Then, the spider spun additional threads to expand the web, steadying the structure against its prey's death throes. Once the fly exhausted itself, the spider

scurried towards it, and wrapped a cocoon of sticky thread around the motionless insect body, forming a lump in the middle of the intricate web.

Colt marveled at the web and the complexity in which the spider killed its prey. He thought it cruel with the insect victim thrashing in vain to escape certain death at the will of the spider, but not simple-minded killing. He thought of the Jim Harrison essay he had read during College Prep English class: 'What webs of deceit the spider spins out of his big hanging ass.' He wondered if he would ever be able to forgive himself for deceiving Root, for abandoning him at the enlistment center. He wondered if it even mattered. He thought perhaps his fate, and that of Root's, had already been predetermined, just like the fly's.

Distracted by the spider and its prey, he started when leaves crunched below. A yearling doe stepped forward, lifting a front leg high, pausing to scent the wind, then stomping down hard to crush the leaves underfoot. She seemed aware that something had intruded into the life of the creek. Colt realized she stomped to warn other deer of the scent of human. Her eyes flickered, and her white tail switched, as she searched for danger.

He decided to let the little doe walk past, so she could live more. He didn't want to shoot her, but he raised his bow to practice aiming. He drew the string, anchoring the arrow's fletching at the corner of his mouth, and sighted the doe's chest cavity through the circular piece of rubber used for a peep site. He waited in the stand while the doe stomped below. His left hand relaxed, loosely holding the bow, while his right arm strained taut to hold at full draw.

He strained and the tension produced an unexpected anger that rose inside him, like a gusher of natural gas from the well across the fence. He couldn't stomach his inability to stop his family from dying, his impotence against time's slow march, his powerlessness to

keep Root out of the Marines. He wanted to resist any notion of predetermined fate. He wanted to leave, and influence the future through the strength of his own will. He didn't want to be there anymore. He didn't want to be anywhere, really, but he knew he couldn't abide the feeling of helplessness.

His left arm cramped around his injured tendon, and, in his frustration, he lost his grip on the bowstring, accidentally releasing the arrow. Startled by the string's twang and driven by the cramp, he dropped his left arm that held the bow down towards its natural hanging position beside his body. The movement caused the arrow to drift off target from the doe's chest, striking her low at the belly line, slicing through the white fur of her undercarriage.

The deer stumbled and ran into a briar thicket. Part of her guts drooped out from the hole slashed open with his poor shot. The whiteness of the intestines mixed with shiny blood that pooled on the green and yellow vegetation under the thicket. He wanted to climb down and shove the doe's guts back inside her belly - take back his misdirected anger.

In the long minutes it took the doe to bleed to death, the glow of the afternoon sun vanished. The cottonwood swayed and bucked with the wind, and Colt held on to the trunk twelve feet above the ground, moving in concert with the creaking metal deer stand and the rustling leaves, frozen as solidly as the fly in the spider's web. He wanted to save the doe, but his desire arrived too late to alter her fate. He couldn't stop the dying.

Root would leave for Basic Training in a week, but Colt wasn't in the mood to celebrate with him. He didn't want to deal with the crowd at the bar. He thought it a mistake to join. He wondered if Root had any options left. Was there a way to undo the commitment? Was there a

way to delay deployment or request a safer assignment? He didn't want Root to leave. He worried that he would never see him again.

He fretted about the going-away celebration all afternoon, pacing and dribbling spit from his chew into an empty Dr. Pepper bottle. Finally, the sun set, and in the darkness, Colt dressed, then drove to pick up Root.

"Beer me," Root said as soon as he walked out of his apartment.

Colt reached into the bed of the truck, grabbed two beers from the cooler, and slid behind the steering wheel. He passed one to Root.

Root positioned the bottle cap on the dash, then held it in place with his left hand while slamming the longneck with his right to pop the cap.

"Don't tear up my dash," Colt said. Little nicks and stains like a bottle cap imprints on his dash bothered him.

"Is it OK if I breathe, or will you need to steam clean the truck?" Root laughed, licked his finger, and tried to put it in Colt's ear for a wet willy.

He hated when Root did stuff like that, but he didn't want to draw too much attention to the action and risk it becoming a habit.

Root chugged the beer in four long gulps, burped, then took out a can of tobacco from his rear pocket. He thumped it with his thumb three times, packing the tobacco. The scent of wintergreen filled the cab, and he placed a large wad in his cheek. He positioned his mouth over the empty beer bottle, spitting a brown, runny liquid into the glass.

Colt drank slower. His gums tingled. He cracked the window, so he could light a cigarette. He put the cigarette in his mouth, flicked the lighter, held the flame near his face until the paper and tobacco lit. He inhaled, and the smoke irritated his lungs. Twice he

coughed, small, throat-clearing exhalations, then he took another swig of beer to calm his throat. The alcohol washed over him, like gentle ocean waves approaching a white, sandy beach.

Unclear events followed at the bar: a spilled drink, someone called Colt a pussy, a shove. He didn't shove back. Root arrived in the middle of this, slamming a bottle into the top of some guy's head. The shattered green glass shimmered in the air reflecting the lights from the dance floor. Blood, deliriously red, dripped down the guy's face. The broken glass dropped, scattering across the floor, mesmerizing Colt. Why didn't he move? he wondered as he watched a single piece of the green bottle slide across the floor and come to rest at his foot. Would he always need others to fight for him?

Root leaped about the semi-conscious bully, like a pagan celebration of death and destruction. The man struggled to kneel on all fours, and Root mounted his back like riding a bull. He waved his hat in the air with his right hand, while the crowd cheered and counted aloud.

Would he ever live up to the standards of small town manhood? Colt wondered. Did he want to? he asked himself as the crowd reached eight and Root dismounted, kicking his adversary in the ribs.

Colt moved slowly, like jogging through chest deep water. He imagined growing smaller and smaller, entering the glass at his feet. He moved slower and slower, becoming paralyzed within the glass, like a bug trapped in amber.

After Root's fight they left and went to another bar. Colt drank shots of Tequila, embarrassed by his failure to act during the fight. After closing time, they drove to Root's apartment.

"You know, there might be a way to back out," Colt said, hoping Root wouldn't join. "We can talk to a lawyer."

"Why are you so worried? It's going to be fine. I'll see you tomorrow before I go." Root got out of the truck and waved to Colt as he drove away from the apartment complex.

He stopped at the traffic light. His head was in a fog from drinking too much. He thought about what Root said. Maybe he did worry too much. Tons of people joined the Marines. It wasn't like they all went to combat, Colt thought.

He turned onto the highway, and accelerated up to speed. He looked down for a moment, fumbling with a cigarette he dropped in his lap. When his attention returned to the road, there was a car parked without any lights on the highway. By the time Colt reacted, it was inside his braking distance. He stomped on the brakes, and tires squealed, but he still slammed into the rear bumper of the stalled car with enough force that he lifted off the seat, shattering the windshield with the top of his head. He flew above the hood, and it seemed to him that the light from one of the headlights illuminated him, like a solitary figure in a spotlight on a dark stage. The light bent into an impossible shape, forming something like a lasso, lifting him from his position above the hood. The lasso of light steered his flying body away from the glass and metal, depositing him gently into the wet grass. It was inconvenient, but otherwise harmless.

He rolled onto his back in the ditch. Sirens sounded and people gathered around the accident. His neck hurt as he struggled to his feet and paramedics made their way toward him. His truck had twisted into a u-shape around the car that had been left unattended on the highway.

The headlights of his truck were pushed into the grill. Bits of glass littered the black asphalt, with no remaining evidence of the life-saving light.

Colt spent one day in the hospital following the car wreck. It was the same day that Root left for Boot Camp. He didn't get to say goodbye, to see Root off in person. They talked on the phone a few times during the months that Root was at SOI, learning how to be a rifleman. Colt thought about guardian angels during this time, wondering if the flash of light he had seen during the wreck had saved him. He wondered if Root had a protective light being too, watching over him as he handled live ammunition at Camp Pendleton in California.

Root deployed to Afghanistan after his training, and Colt continued to work for his father. He worked late each day, saving money, hoping to attend the university the following fall.

On one of those days he worked late, Colt parked the truck near his father's barn. Shadows lengthened across the yard. He had picked up a load of corn from the co-op, and he needed to unload it before dark. He carried the fifty pound sacks of corn from the truck, stacking them in the barn next to an old Massey-Ferguson tractor that dripped oil. The oil pooled beneath the aging tractor, staining the concrete floor and gumming up the exterior of the motor with a black, dirty film.

The oil began to shimmer in a liquid haze, like a desert mirage. Colt felt dizzy, he had a migraine. He stopped moving, and breathed deeply, trying to relax to control his headache. The shimmering oil began to grow, covering his vision with a dark, cloudy film. He felt his mind slipping out of his body.

His soul projected through time and space to Afghanistan, to Nurestan Province, as if his consciousness left his body standing in Kansas, traveled back through time, and somehow

walked in ethereal form behind a line of soldiers on the opposite side of the world. Colt's astral projection trekked a few paces behind Root on a well-built road.

Tall rugged peaks of shale towered above, and a game trail wound through the brush beside a flat dry creek. A few coniferous trees grew along the waterway, struggling to survive in the harsh environment with scant moisture available outside of the rainy season. Black birds called from the tree's branches. Colt thought the birds looked like common crows from Kansas. Above the crows, a kestrel circled lazily, and the sky glowed with the purple gradients of a high country autumn.

They walked along the road until the soldier in front of Root took two steps back and one to the left, high-stepping like a parody of a dance move. A camel spider scabbled across the recently graded road. Its uniform tan legs and body blending with the color of the dust. The spider left the trail and clambered under a rock, hiding from the soldiers. Its homogeneous coloring and fumbling gait gave the appearance of a strange, alien being. Nurestan province was an otherworldly place.

"Holy shit, those fuckers can kill you," Root said to the soldier who narrowly avoided stepping on the camel spider.

A gunshot echoed in the mountains, and the Americans scrambled off the road, taking cover in the ditch, lying on top of the rocks. Root crouched behind a concrete culvert, installed by the American Army Corp of Engineers to aid drainage in the wet season, preventing the road from washing out. He clutched at his shoulder. It developed a spot of red, wetting the uniform as it spread.

Colt wanted to push Root down, protect him from the shooting, but he couldn't do anything in his ethereal form. He raged against his powerlessness in the situation. He yelled, but

Root didn't answer. It seemed that no one could hear him, no one could see him. He couldn't physically move Root, or take effective action to change the situation. He worried Root would die and never be seen again.

He looked for the strands of light that would save Root, but none came. Was he supposed to be the light, act as Root's guardian angel? Was his astral essence supposed to warp into a Kevlar blanket to cover Root, protecting him from the bullets? Had he failed Root again? As if in answer to Colt's questions, Root's chest sprayed in vivid reds from a second bullet impact, and he fell back abruptly.

Colt waited on the trail, and life sped up. It felt like a time-lapsed photograph with the sun rising and falling in rapid succession, whisking him forward in time. The firefight ended. The bodies were removed. The soldiers left. The camel spider scabbled out from under the rocks and resumed its activities. Still, Colt remained on the trail while the sun rapidly moved through its arc. After a half-dozen sunsets, time slowed again, and Colt stood under a night sky. Individual stars twinkled, and galaxies spread across the blackness in a cloudy smear. He reached up and grasped at the stars, longing to reach the light.

The desert trail faded, and Colt was reunited with his body, returning to the real world in Greenfield, Kansas, leaving Root behind in that other world.

Back in Kansas, he still held a sack of corn by the tractor. Had he traveled through time and space to see Root die? It was as if his mind had experienced a week's events, but his real body had experienced mere seconds holding the fifty pounds of corn. The scene felt real to Colt, not like a dream or an imaginative placement of images connecting the dots between scant facts, but more like a memory, as if he had really traveled to Nurestan in ethereal form, and had failed Root again, letting him die beside the culvert.

Somehow he knew his out-of-body vision was real, and his father had probably received the news of Root's death. A light flickered and the curtains covering the kitchen window fluttered. His father peered out with that one good eye. Colt didn't want to face that eye.

His father shuffled sideways across the driveway, zipping his jacket as he walked. "Colt," he said, approaching slowly, "I just received a call from Root's CO. I'm sorry. His unit came under fire in Nurestan. I don't know what to say. Root didn't make it." His voice choked up on the final sentence, and he grabbed Colt's shoulder in a gesture of comfort as well as support to help him stand. He never uttered the word 'dead,' but Colt knew what he meant, having witnessed Root's final moments.

His father led Colt inside, muttering something about line of duty. They took off their coats and hung them on the backs of chairs at the kitchen table. A jar of sourdough bread starter rested on the table. Colt sat down, and picked up the jar, turning it back and forth in a nervous motion. White globules floated inside a cloudy mixture. The globs seemed to defy gravity, moving in slow-motion, damped in the fluid like a hydraulic shock.

"Your grandpa got that in California," his father said, taking the jar.

Colt knew the story, but his father told it again anyway. He talked about the dust bowl years when they had almost lost the ranch, when several extended family members lived together. How they had piled almost twenty people in three cars and driven across Route 66, along with thousands of other people from Oklahoma and Kansas. Carloads of people fled from the dust, searching for hope in California. His father talked about the car overheating somewhere, so they had to climb a fence to get water from a farm pond.

"Your grandpa got this sourdough starter in the Central Valley. The guy he got it off of said it dated all the way back to 1880," his father said, handing the jar back to Colt.

Colt tilted the jar, teasing the globules to one side, then set it on the counter. He thought about the fermentation, how part of the bread starter lived and breathed, and had been living for over one hundred years, part of the same living substance that had been with his grandfather in California, his mother before the accident, and his father on the ranch. What all had it seen? What would it see? It could still be alive one hundred years from now with much of the same substance, containing additional flour and water that Colt would add, that his unborn children and grandchildren would add. The immortal being connected the past to the future, a living organism that provided the same food to generations, linking Colt's ghosts, memories, and dreams with those of his ancestors and his future progeny, creating a timeless collective consciousness transmitted through bread. Bread that would never die.

Colt wanted the bread starter to tell him the past, to reveal all of its mysteries, but, more than that, he wanted the fermentation to bubble into the future, and tell him what would happen, how to control it, and change the outcome to his satisfaction. Who would fight for him at the bar now that Root had died? Root probably knew Colt couldn't handle a bar-fight on his own, and belonged more to university life than small town Kansas. Root had known Colt's limitations, but hid them from others, protected him. Colt didn't want to think about his shortcomings compared to Root, or feel the loss and pain anymore. He didn't want to be there. Everything hurt, and he wished the bread could help.

"Your mother loved making that bread, too," his father said. His voice sounded gentle, as if attempting a larger conversation, an apology of sorts.

Colt wondered if Root's death would change his relationship with his father. He doubted it. He imagined that his father would never understand his decision to leave the ranch and go to the university next fall, would never understand his desire to live a life of the mind.

His father continued the dust bowl conversation, but changed the subject from bread. He talked about how it got too dry, even for bugs, in Kansas. He said, "There was a hatch of millions of spiders, but no water, no vegetation, no other insect life." He talked about how the spiders shot threads of webbing into the air, catching the strong winds blowing across the plains, using their webs like parachutes to fly away from the dust bowl, instinct driving them to migrate to a place with more moisture, leaving the plains, just like the humans, but the dust drove the spiders east with the prairie wind, rather than west toward the ocean. "The spiders came down in Arkansas and Missouri," his father said, "Imagine it: millions of spiders descending on threads used as parachutes, riding silver strands into the hills of the Ozarks. I heard the residents thought it looked like angel hair, as if millions of angels were descending, trailing their silver hair behind them, sparkling in the sunlight." He picked up the jar of bread starter again, turning it in his hands.

Colt nodded and stood. He didn't want to talk anymore. He didn't want to think about Root, or his mother, or bread, or spiders fleeing the dustbowl. He wanted to be alone. He grabbed his coat and walked outside.

The sky was so black it took on shades of purple, twinkling with a bewilderment of stars. Individual stars shone like pinpricks of light and galaxies smeared in a cloudy, white brushstroke against the blackness. Colt reached up, positioning his hand near a cluster of stars, which dangled over his head like tinsel from a Christmas tree. He imagined he could grasp the starlight in his hand. In his mind, he pulled gently at the light, unzipping the universe. He pulled one thread of starlight at a time, hoping to find an impossible life unmarred by hurt and loss. He wanted the starlight to lift him, to spirit him away to a better

place on a strand of angel hair. He continued to grab at the night sky, unzipping individual threads, until he held a handful of strings.

He threaded the starlight into a diaphanous web, then, the wind gusted, and the web evaporated in his hands. He grasped, desperate to capture the vanishing starlight, closing his fists on emptiness. A lump in his throat ached, and leaves clattered across the barnyard.

EIGHT POUND TEST

Chris had spent the entire day dreaming about leaving Missouri. He wanted to travel to exotic places that he had read about in books checked out from the library, places like Hemingway's Cuba or maybe the Himalayas. He wanted to experience adventure in a place far beyond Ozark Valley. He didn't want to end up desperate, stuck in a small town with a stifling job, simply passing the time like his neighbors. He felt guilty about the thought, but hoped he deserved a better future than others in town.

He continued to daydream, while Principal Nelson spoke to the crowd of rising freshman at Ozark Valley High School, sharing information about lockers, bus schedules, and extracurriculars. He didn't listen to any of her speech. His mind wandered to topics like polar expeditions crossing the arctic, sailboats circumnavigating the world, and missions to outer space. He dreamed of places and adventures beyond the ken of Ozark Valley's citizenry. Chris didn't know exactly what he wanted to do in life, but he was certain he didn't want to remain in the town.

As the principal concluded, a choir eased onto the stage. Among the red-robed members was a tiny boy in a wheelchair, who slumped over the armrest. He was maneuvered next to a microphone. He had to use his twisted arms and hands to lift his head, since his neck muscles were too weak to manipulate a normal-sized head. It took an entire body effort to turn between the choir director and the audience.

The presence of the boy in the wheelchair unnerved Chris. It made him feel selfish for spending the day dreaming of adventure and travel. He couldn't imagine the boy's life, wondered

how he'd accomplish anything after being bullied by fate into a body that wasn't whole. Chris thought that even living a dull life in Ozark Valley would be preferable to the kid's lifelong ride in a wheelchair.

He wanted to level the playing field for the kid, to give him a fighting chance. Chris wondered what it would be like to have to use twisted arms to manipulate his head. He couldn't imagine, so he simply turned his head back and forth through the power of his own neck muscles.

Chris could tell the kid had a rough time in life, but it still disgusted him to watch the misshapen limbs struggling to move the big head around. The choir sang, and the boy's lips moved in a face framed by long fingers impossibly jointed. The boy's voice was indiscernible from the choir's harmony. Chris wasn't sure if sound came from the boy's mouth at all, or if he just lip-synched without making any noise. What would such a creature sound like? he wondered.

The song came to a rapid decrescendo, ending abruptly at the same time that the choir director brought her thumb and forefinger together in a cessation to her hand's flourish. The kid smiled at the audience with crooked, yellow teeth. Under the cover of applause, Chris whispered to his friend Alex, "I feel bad about it, but I think that kid's deformed body is disgusting. Don't you? I don't know why, but he looks so happy." Alex nodded and shrugged, then bowed his head and closed his eyes, drifting off to sleep in a sitting position. Alex always fell asleep when he sat down.

The choir walked off stage behind the curtain, and a man wheeled the boy off stage. The principal dismissed the crowd. She proclaimed excitement for the school year that would begin in two weeks. A murmur grew within the auditorium as people stood, maneuvering to leave,

crowding toward the exit in a tight formation with a few stragglers trailing up the aisles in long thin lines. The crowd was shaped like a comet bursting forth into the night. At the head were two older boys, Colby and Wilson, who pushed and elbowed their way out the door. Chris wondered if the shoving to be first into the open was their way of trying to escape Ozark Valley. Did they have the same goals in mind as him? Did everyone else want to leave town and travel? He wondered if he should be more aggressive at times, like Colby and Wilson. Instead, he trailed with the stragglers in the comet's tail, letting the flow of the crowd set the pace. He stopped to talk to Alex's parents.

Alex yawned, rubbed sleep from his eyes, and asked his mother, "Can I ride home with Chris and Berg?" Everyone called Chris's grandfather Berg, even family.

"If it's OK with Berg," his mother said. She stood with the perfect posture of a small woman used to commanding respect from the rowdy schoolchildren she taught, a five-foot oak towering among the bent and gnarled pines of Ozark Valley, Missouri.

He turned away, embarrassed for Alex, as his mother gave him a big kiss and told him to be good. They left the auditorium after most of the crowd had gone, like particles of dust forgotten in the comet's wake.

Outside the school, a few dry leaves blew across the parking lot; the first victims of the coming autumn. Several mothers of rising freshmen stood in groups, smoking cigarettes with faces chiseled into deep gullies by the wind and lips drawn around unfiltered Camels. Small children, younger siblings of Chris's peers, scurried in the women's gravity, stomping on dead leaves to hear the crunch. The leaves didn't know enough to move out of the way, to escape the stomp.

Chris walked past the children and ill-fated leaves to find his grandfather already waiting by the truck. Berg stood with his back to him, hunched over to block the wind, lighting the same brand of cigarettes as the women. He took the first drag and released a puff of smoke, nodded in greeting, and opened the truck's driver-side door. He folded his long legs under the steering wheel and pulled the door closed. A cloud of dust drifted from the slammed door, like Berg's truck smoked cigarettes too.

"You're riding bitch, Chris," Alex said when Berg climbed in the truck, out of earshot. He laughed and shoved Chris toward the passenger side.

Chris flipped him off with a hand held behind his back, and Alex tried unsuccessfully to grab the offending finger. They piled into the front seat. Berg shook his head at their laughter. He reached underneath the column to spark wires, and get the truck to start. His body bent in half under the steering wheel, so his voice sounded strained, like he was out of breath.

"That sure was a nice program. I think you boys will have fun in high school. Choir sounded real pretty today, too. That little midget boy was cute, singing away in his wheelchair. It warmed my heart," Berg said, while still struggling to start the truck.

Alex chuckled, then shifted in his seat looking nervous. His voice sounded strange also, not like he was out of breath, but more like he was about to laugh or cry and he was just trying to hold it all in.

"Sir, he's not a midget," Alex said, "He has muscular dystrophy. He moved here this summer from Springfield. When we start school next week, he'll be in the ninth grade with me and Chris." Alex pointed for emphasis.

Berg raised his eyebrows and snorted a sound of disbelief upon learning the kid would be in the same grade. Chris was surprised about the kid's age, too. He would barely be three feet tall

stretched out. Berg sat up from underneath the steering wheel, listened to the truck engine roar to life, nodded twice, and placed the unfiltered Camel in his mouth. His lips twisted in a puzzled grin, which allowed smoke to blow out of the corners.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “Midgets is the little folks like what they have in the circus. That little cripple guy was sure cute, though. Looked a bit like a puppet. I was half thinking the whole time that somebody was up under the stage working his arms around with cables and such. I mean, even his face didn’t look real. Kind of puckered like.”

Alex opened his mouth, then shut it again without saying a word. Chris chuckled a little, used to Berg’s irreverence, but he was embarrassed for laughing at the handicapped kid’s expense, so he bit his lip and sucked in a lung full of smoke. He tried to stifle his giggles and avoid laughing. Alex’s eyes watered from a similar struggle.

“I tell you what,” Berg said, “Those midgets are fun little guys, too. I’d like to have me one as a pet. I could teach him to dance around and do flips and such after dinner. Better than the goddamned t.v. I tell you what. Maybe if he was a real talented midget I could teach him to juggle bowling pins. Maybe even light them on fire. That would be something. I know a lot of folks that’d pay good money to see a midget juggle flaming bowling pins.”

Alex squirmed in his seat, looking horrified at the disrespectful humor. Chris was used to his grandfather’s jokes, and knew they weren’t mean-spirited. He clamped his mouth shut and tried not to laugh. Berg put the truck in gear and draped his left arm over the steering wheel. He looked relaxed, yet in control and ready to alter the course of the universe with a mild movement of his wrist. He took another drag, blew smoke from his mouth, and eased his foot off the clutch until the truck began to move. Chris inhaled, hoping to suck in more smoke as penance for

giggles, but the windows were rolled down and the wind blowing through the cab replaced the tobacco with the sweet, alfalfa smell of cut grass.

Alex's eyes watered, until tears fell while he laughed. His laughter infected Chris, and he lost control, too. Soon they all laughed and rocked the truck's cab as they drove down the road. Chris laughed so hard that he didn't even realize his head rocked through the power of his own neck muscles. When he finally recovered, the truck's tires hummed on the long, rolling highway between miles of endless pine trees.

The road followed the natural terrain, often crossing back and forth over the Missouri state line, winding its way through the hills. They passed a sign that read 'Welcome to Arkansas - The Land of Opportunity', and Berg flicked his cigarette butt out the window. Alex fell asleep with his head nestled in the crook of his right arm.

After arriving at home, Chris quickly changed into old clothes and asked Alex if he wanted to ride down to the river. They fastened fishing poles to their bikes with string, taking care to tie the poles to the center of the handlebars, so that the bikes remained steerable. The county had graded the road, so riding through the freshly churned dirt proved difficult. Eventually, Chris realized that he expended more energy riding, and hopped off to push through the soft, red dirt. He imagined himself like that guy who had to push the ball up to the top of the hill and it always rolled back down to the bottom before he crested the hill and then he had to start all over. Chris hoped he wouldn't be stuck pushing his bike around Ozark Valley for eternity.

Halfway through the struggle to the river, a cloud of dust appeared on the road ahead and the high-pitched whine of motorcycles echoed against the pines. Chris moved to the side of the

road to let two Kawasaki dirt bikes pass. He squinted in the bright sunlight. Alex sneezed. The motorcycles buzzed past and the riders stopped a few yards up the road before circling back. Astride the dirt bikes were Wilson and Colby, the heads of the comet who had escaped the auditorium first. They pointed at Chris, laughing.

“Let’s run across the field,” Chris said.

“Stay calm. They won’t do anything,” Alex said.

Chris would’ve known that was a lie even if Alex’s voice wasn’t shaking. He felt like that puppet kid at the school concert - helpless and too weak to move.

Wilson, the smaller of the two boys, rode at full speed, then turned at the last minute, squeezing on his rear hand brake. The motorcycle slid, kicking the red dirt at Chris in a shower of dust and small rocks. He wiped the dust from his eyes, and spit to clear his mouth. Wilson laughed, and sped away on his motorcycle. Chris wasn’t sure if Colby laughed, but he revved the engine and performed the same type of power slide that showered more dirt and rocks; a red insulting mass that lodged in Chris’s hair and collar.

He closed his eyes to escape the dirt, and his bike and all of the fishing gear was yanked from his grasp. He didn’t want to be victimized by the bigger boys. He didn’t want to be a weakling, to let others determine the outcome of his property. He wanted to be in charge of his own fate.

Colby’s large back receded into the distance, driving away on the motorcycle while holding the stolen gear. He couldn’t balance very well, so he kept stopping. Chris ran after him to collect his stuff, hoping he could be the bully for once. He reached down and grabbed some rocks from the road, hurling them in Colby’s direction. “Give me my stuff back,” he shouted. He cursed when the rocks fell short of the intended target.

Alex scrambled off the road through a gap in the fence with his bike in tow. Now he wanted to run across the field? Chris thought. Chris focused on Colby, picking up more rocks to throw, so he didn't notice Wilson's motorcycle speeding back down the road. Wilson slowed down some before hitting him, but the front tire slammed into the back of his shoe with enough force to lift him up over the top of the handle bars in a sort of cartwheel. He landed on his back in the mound of dirt left by the county road grader.

His back ached and it was difficult to breathe, so he lay in the road for a moment to catch his breath. In some strange way he enjoyed the coolness of the dirt. He wanted to lie still until the older boys left. He wanted to disappear and hide. He lifted his head above the level of the dirt mound on the side of the road to see that Colby had tied his bike behind the motorcycle with a length of thick nylon cord, dragging it down the road.

"See you, pussy," Wilson said, laughing once more and revving his throttle. The bullies sped away with Chris's bike trailing behind, breaking bits and pieces of his fishing gear off on each bump. His belongings were scattered in front of him for over a quarter mile.

Alex straddled the barbed wire fence. His jeans were ripped and his arm trickled a small thin line of blood. He sat on the fence post with his arms and legs bent in a crooked pretzel shape, trying not to impale himself on the barbed wire. He looked just like that puppet kid twisted in his wheelchair. At least he kept his bike, Chris thought.

The next morning Chris asked Berg for a ride to football practice. They were holding two-a-days in the week before school started.

"Where's your bike?" Berg asked on the drive.

Chris shrugged and didn't answer. Berg's face darkened a shade deeper than his normal sunburned face, and he turned with his shoulders, more than his neck, twisting inside the cab abruptly. He told Chris that if he tore up his bike then he would have to earn money for a new one. "I ain't made of money," he said, dropping Chris in front of the school.

Alex rode up and parked his bike about the same time Chris was dropped off.

"Was Berg pissed?" he asked.

"Yeah, a little. He wanted to know where my bike was. I didn't tell him what happened," Chris said.

He walked down the sidewalk to the football field and passed the puppet kid and his dad. The dad sprawled on the grass with his hat over his eyes while the kid sat in his wheelchair using both hands to hold his head up. The kid watched the able-bodied boys, gathering on the football field, with a strange expression. Chris wasn't sure if he was embarrassed or worried the kid would infect him, and he'd become a cripple, but he walked wide around the wheelchair, stepping off the sidewalk and crunching through the dry grass.

Colby and Wilson leaned on the short, chain link fence surrounding the field. They sneered at Chris, but he acted like nothing happened. He should confront them and demand payment for his bike, he thought. Instead, he said nothing, and simply put on his helmet, then walked onto the field. He slapped his helmet three times hard, hoping to drive thoughts of cowardice from his head. He wondered if he lacked basic courage. Why didn't he confront them? Would he always be a coward?

Practice went fine for the first few minutes, then Coach Brainerd walked over and gave the fat kid a kick. He cried a little. It wasn't a loud cry, simply a little bleat like he didn't want to hasten the inevitable by drawing attention to the issue.

Brainerd growled down at Fat Kid before turning his ire on the rest of the team. “Goddamn it, boys! Every one of you is going to stay here and do burpees until somebody can teach this fat fucker to block.” Brainerd’s potbelly shook underneath his tattered blue jersey from the inertia imparted from kicking Fat Kid. It looked like the wave pool at Oceans of Fun was hidden underneath Brainerd’s shirt, and would bust out of his belly at any moment and drown everyone. Chris found himself wishing for Brainerd’s belly flood as relief from the August heat.

Fat Kid continued to bleat, until he cried and snot drained from his nose. He flopped down in the grass, and his cheeks and belly shook with each sob. A mixture of whitish colored snot and tears drained on the ground giving the dust its first moisture of the summer. Coach Brainerd didn’t seem to notice the tears, or maybe he didn’t care. Chris wished he was big enough to knock Brainerd on *his* fat ass. He didn’t care what happened to Fat Kid, he just wanted to hurt Brainerd.

Brainerd eventually stopped tormenting Fat Kid and ordered hitting drills. His version of the drill involved squeezing his belly behind the padded sled and telling everyone to run and hit it. If the sled didn’t move, then he hit the player with his clipboard. Most of the time, he hit the boys whether the sled moved or not. Chris got hit three times in a row. In spite of the helmet, his head hurt. He wanted to make Brainerd stop being a bully. He didn’t want to feel like a weakling, but he didn’t say anything.

Practice ended and a single file chain of dirty, defeated boys retreated to the locker room. Alex and Chris collapsed on a bench and Fat Kid walked into the shower. He was naked and his belly hung down so far it covered his dick. Wilson laughed as he walked by, poking his huge round stomach, and saying, “Look at that! We should change his name to Dickless Fat Kid.”

Fat Kid got in the shower and cried some more. He turned on the water and sprayed some on his face, so no one would notice his tears. Wilson and Colby started kicking Fat Kid's clothes and duffel bag around. Colby threw the oversized clothes on top of the storage mezzanine. Wilson couldn't reach that high, so he tossed Fat Kid's books into another shower stall and turned the water on. Chris wondered how Fat Kid would tell Brainerd what happened while naked. Would Brainerd laugh at Fat Kid's vanishing dick? Fat Kid stood in the shower with his shaking shoulders the only evidence of crying. His face remained hidden in the stream of water.

Chris watched the torment and did nothing, weak and helpless, like that puppet kid again. He wanted to be big. He wanted to get up, knock Colby down, and then go knock Brainerd down. It's not so much that he wanted to save Fat Kid, but he just wanted to force somebody down. He wanted to be big and strong enough to hurt them, make them cry, laugh at them.

The next weekend, Berg took him fishing for an end of summer celebration. He borrowed an old pole, so Berg took the opportunity to lecture him on taking proper care of equipment such as fishing poles and bikes. He suffered through the lecture, then got lost in the rhythm of cast and retrieve; tossing out the lure, reeling it in slow, listening to the white buzz bait chortle on top of the murky water with each retrieve. It sounded like laughter. All of the fish laughed at him, like he was the one that looked like a puppet. Even the fish thought he was weak. He tossed the bait out again, and the laughter sound ended with a loud pop as a largemouth bass struck the lure on top of the water. He pulled back hard to set the hook and the line broke at the point where he had tied the lure. With the sudden decrease in line tension he fell backward into the boat, sitting down abruptly on the blue cooler that held the Cokes, sandwiches, and water.

Berg jerked his head around and looked at him with a shocked expression. “Damn, Chris. That was probably a five pound bass. You should tie on better next time.”

“Yes, sir,” Chris said. He nodded, then cranked in the excess line while holding the end with his fingers to keep from reeling in the entire spool.

Berg looked at his line. “You should’ve switched that spool to an eight pound test line,” he said. “That’s too light. You’re rigged for crappie, not bass.”

Chris nodded. He picked up a different rod and reel, stored in a rack on the side of the boat. The new rod was rigged for bass fishing. He concentrated as he tied on a lure, chanting to himself as he tied a fisherman’s knot: “Pass the line through the eye, twist six times, back through the loop, pull tight...”

Berg interrupted his concentration with a grunt. A cigarette bobbed up and down in his mouth while he talked. It looked like the choir director’s baton as he said, “That’s the thing with bass. They may be one of the smaller fish in the river, but they fight like hell. You need a stout line to haul in a big bass. Not like catfish, on the other hand. There’s some big, ugly mud cats in holes down the river, and if you tie into one you may strain a muscle pulling them up to the bank, but there ain’t no fight in them. They just let you drag them out of the water. Seems like since they’re so big that they would have ten times the fight as bass, but that ain’t so. The fun in fishing has nothing to do with the size of the fish you catch, but the fight it’s got in it. See now?”

He grunted again and turned back to cast a spinner bait underneath the branches of a submerged tree, expertly hitting a branch so that his bait appeared to be an insect jumping off the tree and into the river.

The shiny metal lure gurgled as it traveled through the water. The gurgling of Berg’s lure sounded like someone whispering “cripple, cripple, dickless, dickless” as it was reeled away

from tangled weeds and dead branches swaying in the current. He lifted his lure into the boat and took a long drink of Coke. He swallowed and his stubble-covered Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Chris's buzz bait reached the edge of the boat, still chortling and gurgling. The noise of his bait sounded like the fish were laughing again, like the joke was on him and not the crippled kid.

After school started, the kid in the wheelchair made a fast impression on everyone around town. While at the lumberyard Berg flirted with the cashier, and she mentioned the kid and how he was so funny. Berg accidentally let the Puppet nickname slip, so the cashier grabbed his left arm and laughed. "Puppet, that's funny," she said, winking at Berg.

After they left, the cashier told a few friends and everyone in town started calling Puppet, Puppet. At first Chris was embarrassed to say it at school, but it became a badge of honor for Puppet. He seemed to relish his town mascot role, sitting in his wheelchair while making jokes about it. He said things in his strained, squeaky voice like, "Puppet pulls the strings around here."

Chris had Puppet in American History and Algebra. The teachers assigned him to retrieve the books before each class from a little bag strapped to the back of Puppet's chair. Puppet worked hard in math. He told Chris he wanted to join the Navy and become a nuclear engineer on a submarine, so he needed to get ahead in math. He used his hands to help turn his head in order to look at the equations on the board. No one told Puppet that you had to pass a physical to be in the Navy. Chris wasn't sure of the number of pushups and sit-ups required to pass the Navy fitness test, but he was pretty sure a two-handed head turn would disqualify a person.

American History was taught by Coach Brainerd. Brainerd concentrated on pieces of Missouri's past that he said weren't written correctly in the book, like how foreign traitors lied and said Missouri was part of the Union. "Everyone knows Missouri was Confederate," he said. If he caught a student not paying attention to his garbled explanation of the South's glorious past, then he threw a textbook at them. Alex had a huge welt above his right eye from a textbook impact. He got hit when he fell asleep in class, and the swelling took two weeks to subside. Chris never slept in Brainerd's class. He was afraid of getting hit by a flying book.

Brainerd didn't throw books at Puppet. He mostly ignored him. Chris once heard Brainerd whisper in the halls to some other teachers, "Feel sorry for that weak little cripple. Makes me sick to look at him." Puppet didn't do well in Modified American History.

One Monday, Puppet didn't come to school. Brainerd told the class that Puppet had lung problems and had grown so weak over the past weekend that he had to go to the hospital in Springfield to have fluid pumped out of his chest. Chris worried about Puppet, but he didn't know what else to do.

Puppet got out of the hospital quickly and came back to school the next day. He came in late, so he skipped Modified American History. Chris had picked up extra worksheets from Brainerd's class, and brought them to Algebra. He placed the worksheets in the appropriate folder in the bag strapped to Puppet's wheelchair.

"The lecture was mainly about how the jayhawkers were traitors that caused the Civil War," Chris told Puppet as he eased the history worksheets into place. "I think this assignment is supposed to be on Chapter 3," he said pulling out the Algebra textbook and folder. He snapped the bag shut.

Puppet lifted his head and swallowed twice before he spoke. “Thanks for getting some extra worksheets, Chris,” he said. “You’re a good friend.”

Puppet sounded genuine, but it surprised Chris to be called a friend. Hadn’t he been one of the first people in town to laugh at the Puppet nickname? He had laughed behind Puppet’s back, but the nickname and jokes weren’t supposed to be hurtful. He didn’t bear any ill-will toward Puppet. Chris knew this separated him slightly from people like Brainerd, who preferred a world uninhabited by weaklings such as Puppet and Fat Kid.

He placed the Algebra text and folder on the desk. Chris was always kind to Puppet. He was kind to Fat Kid too, but he didn’t stand up for either of them around Brainerd. In some strange way, Chris appreciated the weaknesses of Fat Kid and Puppet, because their mere existence made him feel normal. Did that make him a good friend? It didn’t seem like an admirable quality to appreciate another’s weakness in a selfish attempt to blend in with the crowd.

“You’re welcome,” Chris said, finally, unsure of what else to say. The thoughts of friendship disturbed him, distracted him from concentrating on the math lesson.

Chris daydreamed during the lecture, and thought about being an astronaut, walking on other worlds. In his mind, he left the bounds of the classroom, rocketing across the night sky in a space shuttle. It wasn’t like Colby and Wilson’s comet, bursting forth into a tiny universe contained in Ozark Valley. Instead, Chris flew across the night sky, the glow from his rocket boosters illuminating those underneath him, surpassing the bounds of Earth’s gravity. He accelerated toward another world that looked very similar to his own. He entered this alternative world and descended to a place on the planet akin to Ozark Valley. It had the same road cut through sandstone cliffs, along with twisted pine trees sprouting along the hillsides.

Puppet waited on the ground, but, in this alternative world, he was as an able-bodied boy. Chris recognized his face. The same wisp of dark hair formed the start of a mustache above his lip, but his body was tall and gangly. He had long limbs that moved constantly, as if he vibrated from a huge reserve of internal energy that his body couldn't contain.

"What's up?" the tall version of Puppet said, and threw a football at Chris in a perfect spiral.

Chris watched the laces turning during the longitudinal rotation of the ball. It seemed like the ball spiraled in slow motion. He kept his eye on the ball until it impacted his hands. A perfect throw. A perfect catch.

Chris gripped the ball tightly with his right hand, grasping just aft of center, and cocked his arm back for a throw.

"Go long," he said to the tall version of Puppet. Chris released the ball and watched it spiral through two rotations, then he felt himself spinning the same revolutions per minute, spiraling back across the space he had traveled across space moments before, arcing back to Ozark Valley and Algebra class. Puppet grunted, struggling to move his head around with his hands to see the equations on the board.

After returning to school from the hospital trip, Puppet joined the marching band. His doctor had prescribed physical activity. For therapy, Puppet began to play the bass drum. He struggled to lift the furry headed baton and strike it against the huge drum in a four-count. During marching practice the band director strapped the oversized drum to Puppet's wheelchair and one of the majorettes, Janine, got assigned to push him around in formation. Chris and Alex watched the band practice at least twice a week, primarily for Janine.

Her ass swished around so much that sometimes Chris caught a glimpse of green bloomers underneath the short majorette skirt. Puppet became an expert at keeping time on the bass drum. Chris kept time by watching Janine's ass swish around.

Berg came to all of Chris's football games and sat at the fifty yard line. He sat perched right on the edge of the bleachers, taking in all the action. Puppet came to all the football games too, since the band marched at halftime. Principal Nelson had a soft spot for Puppet, so she let him be the scorekeeper. He changed the electronic scoreboard, tracking all of the action, only to rush out with Janine and her swishy ass during halftime to guide the marching band with an unerring four-count. Puppet began to put some of his silly jokes on the scoreboard, "Puppet for president. Puppet pulls the strings around here," and so on. Puppet's dad adopted his son's pride in the new mascot role, and started referring to himself as Geppetto.

Eventually, Puppet became the second chair drummer. Janine must have got tired of pushing the chair and having everyone stare at her ass, so Geppetto took over. He pushed Puppet around with a big smile on his face. Unfortunately, Geppetto had a flat, ugly old-man ass and his pants always sagged, showing a hairy plumber's crack. The band was out of step after Janine quit.

Berg took a cue from Puppet's scoreboard slogans and made a homemade bumper sticker that he proudly displayed in the rear window of his truck after homecoming. It read, "Puppet for President – His arms may be crooked, but at least he ain't."

Berg drove Chris and Alex to the final game of the regular season. They looked for Puppet prior to the game, so they could show him the new bumper sticker.

"Where's Puppet?" Berg bluntly asked Principal Nelson.

She replied that Puppet was at Washington Regional, down in Fayetteville, Arkansas. She told them that his lungs had filled with fluid again, and the doctors struggled to drain it quick enough. Chris had a bad feeling about Puppet. He wondered if Puppet would be in the hospital more than one day this time. He wished that the tall, gangly Puppet of his imagination would run out onto the football field, and throw perfect spirals.

Berg thanked the principal, then told Chris, "Go on now. Do your best." Berg ushered Chris and Alex down to the field with the other boys. He shooed at Chris with his hands, then put a Camel in his mouth. He must have realized he couldn't smoke on school grounds, because he put the lighter back in his pocket. He left the unlit cigarette in his mouth, bobbing up and down.

Chris trotted down the stairs and looked up at Berg, who sat in the bleachers surrounded by the townsfolk. The people around him were as bent and gnarled as the short-leaf pines that sprouted near the cliffs. Most of the men, and even the older boys, had become starved and stunted from limited choices, bullied into working at Tyson's chicken or Walmart for slightly more than minimum wage. Chris sensed their helpless desperation, and resignation to fate, emotions and situations he wanted to flee. He thought the hopelessness showed even more clearly in the women, with faces drawn in tight lines from the eternal pucker of lifelong nicotine addicts. The people reflected the cliffs and trees, he thought. Everyone looked rugged and weathered, especially in the places that were difficult to shelter inside. He didn't want to be like them. He didn't want to find himself sitting in those bleachers years from now. He wanted to leave Ozark valley. He wanted Puppet to be able to leave Ozark Valley, too.

The next day, Berg took Chris to the hospital in Fayetteville for a visit. Puppet sprawled on the bed with tubes inserted into his thin arms. Above his head a bag of fluid was strapped to a

metal pole. A small cross hung on the wall behind his bed. Berg didn't smile the entire time, but stood with his arms before him, holding his hat by the brim, while he looked down at Puppet. The cross above Puppet's bed seemed poised and ready to control the pathetic marionette dying below. Chris watched Puppet, listened to the beep of the machines beside his bed, until the nurse said visiting hours had ended.

Berg took him to the hospital twice that week to check on Puppet and his family. After one trip, Berg seemed to be in an especially good mood at dinner. "Chris," he said with a mouthful of homegrown tomato, "Puppet's mom is a fine woman. She's a bit of a talker. Talked my ear plumb off today. I didn't quite know how to take her the first time I met her, but she grew on me and we got along fine after that." He took a few bites, then said, "Let's go on out to the river tomorrow and try for bass."

"That sounds good," Chris said. He thought the fishing would be a nice distraction from thinking about Puppet's struggle.

After they cleared the dishes from the table the phone rang. Berg answered, nodded without saying much, then placed it back on the wall receiver with a grunt. "That was Puppet's mom," he said. "The boy passed on this afternoon." Without anything further, he walked out on the back porch and lit a cigarette. Chris washed the dishes, while Berg paced and smoked on the porch. He didn't know what to think about Puppet. Despite his frail body, he didn't expect the kid to die so soon.

He went to bed, and left Berg outside. He slept with the window slightly cracked open for the cool breeze, and smelled the moist night air and a hint of smoke from Berg's cigarette coming through the window. The frogs croaked and bugs chirped in a loud, endless rhythm, which kept him awake. He listened to the noise while he stared at the ceiling and thought about

how Puppet would never get to enlist in the Navy. He wouldn't even get to play in the marching band for the football playoff season. He would never get to do anything he had hoped to do.

Chris didn't have a career planned, like the Navy, but no matter what he did with his life, even if he stayed in Ozark Valley and worked for Tyson's Chicken, it would be more than Puppet got to do. He reflected on Puppet's death and realized that fate could attack with more cruelty than schoolyard bullies, that life could be even more difficult and tragic than it was for people trapped by poverty in the Ozarks. He tossed and turned beneath the covers, and managed to fall asleep before the frogs stopped croaking.

A few hours later, Berg turned the light on and woke him. "Ready?" he asked simply.

Chris squinted to make out his form in the bright light. "For what?" he asked rubbing his eyes to dull the light and fight off sleep.

"Fishing. It's after three. Get on up if you're going." Berg walked back out of the room and fumbled around the coffee pot. Chris visualized him scooping grounds of Folger's by the crisp swish, then heard the gurgle of water percolating.

He rolled out of bed, surprised that they were still going fishing after the news about Puppet last night. He slipped on jeans and boots and met Berg in the kitchen. Berg gathered some sandwich supplies and Cokes into the cooler. Chris helped him load the truck and hitched the boat trailer to his pickup. He shivered in the late October breeze and decided to grab a heavier jacket. They finally left the house before dawn and arrived at the reservoir just as the sky started to glow a faint orange. The water reflected the light through vapor rising above the lake. It looked warmer than it felt, Chris thought.

They launched the boat in the water and drifted away from the dock. Berg tried to tie on a white Rooster tail. Chris thought through the process as his fingers slowly moved, ‘Through the eye, twist six times, back through the loop, pull tight...’ Each time he got to the final step Berg fumbled and dropped his lure.

“Goddamn it. My fingers are too fucking cold to tie on right,” he muttered, trying one more time to make the knot.

Chris turned around to give him some space and began casting his bait. Eventually, the water gurgled behind him and he knew that Berg had tied on a lure and started to fish.

The sun rose and he lifted his head up, allowing it to hit him full in the face, soaking up its warmth. Berg jerked his pole and water splashed beside the boat. He fell over into his chair. A bass splashed on top of the water, then swam away with its tail moving back and forth in powerful strokes.

Air whistled through Berg’s nose. He said, “Fuck. I lost one. I should’ve tied on better.” He rapidly rolled up the excess line causing the tip of his pole to shake. “Goddamn it. I accidentally grabbed my crappie rig. This doesn’t even have eight pound test,” he said, cursing as he threw his pole down on the boat deck.

Berg continued to curse, while another bass exploded on top of the water, engulfing the lure on the end of Chris’s line. He set the hook, reeling in a largemouth bass. Once the fish was near the boat, he lifted it with the remaining length of line. It flopped and wiggled on the blue outdoor carpet that lined the boat’s deck. Chris pressed his foot gently on top of the fish to hold it steady, and unhooked the buzz bait from the largemouth. He grasped it firmly behind the gills with his right hand, and placed it in the live-well.

The sun had risen to the point that an orange ball sat just above the horizon. Tendrils of moisture rose from the water behind Berg. Chris thought the dissipating vapor looked like hundreds of fishing lines descending from the sky. He imagined the lines guided the actions of Berg, and everyone around town, synchronizing hundreds of complex marionettes in a perfect four-count.

Chris didn't want to be guided by a mysterious puppeteer, or the vagaries of fate. He wanted to be the master of his own destiny, not bullied by others, and not victim to circumstances beyond his control. He shook his arms and legs violently, scattering the fog around him, hoping to yank free of any controlling force.

If he stayed in Ozark Valley, then he knew exactly what he was going to become, but, if he didn't, then his future remained unwritten. Even though the unknown was worrisome, it was far superior to what he considered a life of mediocrity, growing gnarled and desperate in Ozark Valley. The choice for him was easy - face the unknown. He would control his own fate. Maybe he would never enjoy the exotic adventures that he dreamed of, but the thought of remaining in Ozark Valley was intolerable. He owed it to Puppet to try to do something extraordinary. He danced across the boat's deck like a marionette gone wild, scattering the vapor rising from the river, pulling at the imaginary wires above his head, breaking every line he could find with a sharp snap.

VITA

Aaron Morris
Old Dominion University
English Department
5000 Batten Arts & Letters
Norfolk, VA 23529

ACADEMIC PREPARATION:

MFA Candidate in Creative Writing, Department of Creative Writing, Old Dominion University.

Concentration: Fiction

Thesis: The Otherworlds of Men

Advisor: Professor John McManus

BS in Health Sciences: Department of Biology, Wichita State University, 1997.

BS in Aerospace Engineering: Department of Engineering, Wichita State University, 2000.

MBA, Baker University, 2002.

MA in English Literature: Department of Humanities, University of Houston, 2009.

HONORS AND AWARDS:

“Proving Ground” Writers at Work Contest. Spring 2016, Finalist

“Soundings” Dickseski Prize. Spring 2017, Winner