All We Shall

As for Kentucky, she writes, I’ve heard some lovely things. I’ve heard they’ve got the Irish down there, hidden away like berries, eager to be sweet.

She writes at a small, round table in her living room where the light is strong. Outside the pines sway heavily in the wind. On her front lawn sits the painter’s truck, a white truck covered with paint spills, and she thinks it odd that painters always wear white, and never gray, or blue. Against the green grass the white seems bright to her even now. She listens, too, for the sounds of paint being scraped away from the walls of her house, the steady knocking at the wood. Her landlord, a retired police officer, has decided to have the house painted—summer work, summer chores. Yesterday, after returning from her trip to the coast, Maine, six days of driving across the span of the country, she found the northern face of the house sticky with paint. To the south the wall was still dirty and gray, shedding its skin, and it made her feel sad, the difference—a sudden rush of sadness.

Change, she writes, alters my vision of things. Classes start next week, and I’m anxious, unsettled. It feels odd to be back.

She is writing to Conor, almost old enough to be her brother, Ian, who has recently died. Conor is her student, the one with whom she had an affair, last semester, during the spring while the snow began to melt. A night class, so that at
night, with the thin pages of their texts turning through the pages of British poetry and prose, into the increasingly warmer months, March, and then April, the snow had seemed to recede by itself with nobody watching. Each morning they woke, a little more would be gone.

And before each class, the light seemed to linger, stretching out the days, making each one just a little bit more long. The class would meet once a week to discuss the major works; most needed to fill an elective, and this was available: McCarthy: Brit Lit II TH: 7–9:30. Some were expecting a man, probably a beard, maybe a little tweed. Instead she had given them tits and ass and long, red hair which came from her mother's side. She wore lingerie beneath her skirts and sweaters. She carried a portfolio full of their weekly papers, their brief, sometimes honest, always stilted efforts toward understanding. When asked by a thin, balding woman who sat in the third row if she were married, she had replied, “Sometimes.” And then she had looked to Conor, in the back, leaning, his legs propped against a chair, and turned crimson.

It was a question, like the one about her age, she would often leave unanswered. A spiritual marriage, she thinks—wedded to the extreme: reason and lust, heaven and hell, sister and brother. Among her lovers, she preferred the androgynous.

“Colleen,” Conor would say, his hand in her hair. “I love calling you Colleen.”

This morning, when she woke, pulled from her Halcion and sleep, she was greeted by the painter, outside her open window, scraping away. She sat up clutching her sheet and asked what time it was, then lay back down to watch the light. She was afraid to rise fully, to begin the processes of her day: water for the coffee; food for her English setter, William Butler, whom she simply calls Billy; the wide, empty desk, waiting for her to start a chapter, this one on
Blake, the one she should have finished in May before she left for her parents’ and somewhere, along the way, cracked up. Instead she returned briefly to her bed, to the calm quiet of her pillows where nothing but the patterns of sleep might take hold: the quiet of premeditated, undisturbed quiet, until the rhythm of the scraping began to alarm, the rattle of the shifting scaffolds, the vision of this man dressed in white scraping at the sides of her house. She rose quickly, found her robe where she must have left it, on the floor beneath the foot of her bed, and gave the man a show. He was a polite man, she realized, because he turned away, the scraping stopped, the moment he noticed.

“Thank you,” she said. She turned to face the window, partially dressed, and said, “Would you like some coffee?”

She took Billy for a run, a hard run, seven miles to sweat out the sleep. She ran hard down San Francisco, across Santa Fe, into the campus and on through the mall with Billy at her side, loping along, panting and happy. In Maine, along the coast, Billy had run in the ocean, his paws steeped in the tide. There she had watched from the rocks, had sat with her father, finally talking. Ian, who had moved home during the last months, until his blood count forced him back to the hospital, in Portland, and then Indianapolis, of all places—Ian was dead now. Eight months worth at twenty-four from testicular cancer. “Cancer for the nuts,” he called it. The cancer had spread up and into his throat like ivy. The house was covered with ivy, across the long, open porch, where her mother sat, watching the water and rocks, the remains of her family.

Colleen sat with her father on a rock, watching the water, and her dog splashing at its borders. “It was good to visit,” Colleen said.

“Can’t you find a job a little closer?”

“It’s over,” she said, thinking it was. “I’m better.”

“Ghosts,” he said, seriously. “You mustn’t worry about
ghosts. If they’re going to bother you, they will. Ian, he’s a good ghost. I remember him with his hair.”

Ian’s hair, red, like their mother’s, had fallen in sheets. It had fallen away with the weight of his muscle until he became bones, covered with skin—opalescent, opaque. When she left in November, during Thanksgiving break, she had kissed him good-bye, gently, on the head—the smooth tender dome of his skull. And then he had said, “Find yourself a man, Colleen. The kind you want to be with,” and that’s when she knew he thought he was going to die.

“I like you this way,” she said. “You’re growing generous.”

“I can’t think,” he said, pointing to the door. “I can’t talk. I can’t.”

And later, during Christmas, after he vomited Hi-C and stomach acid, she would bathe him and make him rinse his mouth. She would bathe him with a sponge and talk to his blood cells, nonsense whispers, talk talk talk about one being connected to another and another, like words in a sentence, or poem, and Ian would smile, nodding with the rhythm until he began to drift. At night, when he couldn’t sleep, she would come into his room and there they would tell all the jokes they could remember until each was no longer funny. Sometimes she would run a bath and watch him while he soaked, in the water with candles to hide the scars, and there wouldn’t be any talking now, just the water and light, and the understanding that he knew he was going to die and that somehow, for some reason, it just wasn’t good enough. And she would think of their Granny’s, in Clonmel, where they had spent their summers—across the ocean far, far away. As far away, it seemed, as Flagstaff, Arizona.

*If you put an Irishman in bed with a naked woman, what does he reach for first? A beer.*

It began St. Patrick’s Day: slowly, at first, in her office,
nipping at a bottle of Jameson’s, just for the occasion, grading papers, nipping, sitting back to stew, her feet on the desk, the outside growing dusk in the cool parade of March—all those people passing by her office window in jackets and boots, and the ROTC boys, bellowing by . . . *She won’t do it but her sister will!* She could feel the cold from her window, which was closed, seeping into her office, and the fresh, wildly surreal edge of danger this night seemed always to evoke: if you wanted it bad enough, anything could happen. Tonight, a night when people foreign unto themselves embraced because they wanted to, as if prodded into desire by St. Patrick himself—the celibate straining for relief. Like the dogs, or a naked man standing in a field alone, the moon seemed to howl, and she knew now where this was headed, and she knew it was the whiskey. That sweet, Irish whiskey. The whiskey had made her wet, and she felt it, slowly, in her office with the growing dusk. She felt it spread inside her like a dream.

Wine, Yeats wrote, comes in at the mouth. *And love comes in at the eye.* At the bar, Spanky’s, she recognized her students, her colleagues, the new director of rhetoric and composition, Demain, who couldn’t wait to bed her down. She giggled at the thought, imagined him beneath her, designing a rubric by which to measure his efficiency, her pleasure, that which she had learned thus far in the mountains. “But it’s lonely in the mountains,” he might say, and she giggled further, nursing a green beer, telling herself to go slow. There’s always time. And slowly she watched the people, the people in green clothes and hats, the students with their legs in their jeans, wonderful legs, and hair—all these beautiful people. She was speaking with Joel, from the history department, and Misty, his narcoleptic wife, and someone from philosophy; she was describing her house, the fading paint, even, and how it looked in the snow. The little gray house on the white snow. She was nursing her beer, telling herself, slow, slow, and caught Conor’s eye,
which caught hers. And later, she’d catch it again, from across the bar, and still later, when he came sauntering up, easily, mug in hand, wearing fatigues and a sweater and his long, decidedly long hair, to where she stood listening for the rhythm of his voice: Kentucky. And then when he finally said, “Hey, Dr. McCarthy,” his voice like fine, lovely wine, she realized Conor was drunk. So beautiful and drunk.

Once outside, on a long, quiet street, she watched herself stumbling into him, dizzy with grief.

*I look at you, and I sigh . . .*

She reaches for her tea. Billy lies in his corner, thumping his tail, and she waits for the balance, the equipoise. The painter is still outside, sitting now on the open tailgate of his truck, eating a sandwich. He eats slowly and studies the walls of the house, his measured progress, and she thinks he must be a kind man—the way he eats his sandwich, the way he looks away when he sees her looking. He seems embarrassed for having wakened her.

*If it had been any different, Conor, would we still be the same?*

The problem is how to breach the distance. Ethics aside, the space between them has been unbearably brief, a space trespassed upon by the very breadth of their skin, their seemingly endless supply of tangled flesh. Coming, she would see Ian, the white of his skin depleted of cells, blanched and ethereal. Her sheets were the color of hay, the color of early morning light, when the sun is still a dim and slowly rising figure. She would watch the light rise over his body, the curve of his shoulder, his hip, rising up and over the sill into her room becoming the light of day. On the morning after, in March, in the clear light of reason, she had risen first to shower: cold water, the color of ice, and when she returned to her room, shaken, still naked and weak, she had pulled the covers from her bed and watched him sleep. Eventually
he woke, and just as he began to say her name, Colleen, she 
drew his finger to her lips. There, she felt it flutter, as if 
against her ribs.

*I was raised a Catholic girl, blessed with purity and light. 
And you . . . And you? You, I think, were merely blessed.*

Ian died in Indianapolis on the fourteenth of January: his 
family in attendance, in the hospital, wearing white surgical 
masks and rubber gloves. Once removed, the gloves left a 
faint powder on your skin, and you could smell the rubber, 
still on your fingers, hours later like condoms. The funeral 
and wake followed on the eighteenth, near their home, and 
after, on the twenty-first, classes for the Spring semester 
began. The timing considerate, Colleen said good-bye and 
caught a flight.

Where Ian had been before, Clonmel, he had gone to clear 
his head—at their Granny’s, herself now gone, haunting her 
own house where Ian had lived alone reading his books. He 
had left the States, had washed out of law school, had gone 
to rinse himself clean of torts and briefs and rules. “If I’d 
stayed,” he told Colleen. “If I’d stayed, the sins of the flesh 
. . . they linger.” He still had his hair then, and she knew he 
couldn’t stay, either. She knew that he belonged far away. 
They should be distant, separate. And later they had needed 
ilness to fill in that distance—something inexplicable and 
random. A swollen testicle. Something people could believe 
in and feel sad about.

Outside, the painter stops. He pokes his head in through the 
living room window and says, “Excuse me, Miss?”

Startled, she tries to remain polite.

“Can I use your restroom?”

“Of course,” she says, straining, uncomfortable, but 
knowing at the same time it’s not exactly his fault. She 
expects him just to step on in through her open window.
Instead he climbs down the ladder and walks around the house to the front door, where Billy waits to receive him, like any other ordinary house guest.

“It’s okay,” he says at the door, apparently rushed. “I’ll find my own way.”

And now he is brushing past her, down the hall, and to the left.

After her run she took a bath. Conscious of the painter’s presence, she drew the blinds. She drew the blinds and ran a bath, deep enough to soak, reading through the stacks of her mail. She saved for last a letter from Conor, now at home and looking for work. A boy with a degree. He told her about the chiggers and heat, the hot wet heat that made you sweat, always, persistently, which was so unlike the desert mountain air. He told her finally in the closing paragraph all about his soul, the way he felt it growing now, like violets, and how you never know what you’re going to love until you have to. He wrote elliptically, as if precision might be too much, the way after the need was over even the slightest touch would make you flinch, scream, even—thin skin, he wrote. I love your thin skin, Colleen, and he was right, it was excessive, more than she wanted, and she found herself alone, in this tub with the painter somewhere outside and her dog, Billy, lying on the rug watching her read. The letter grew wet, pages and pages of ink, until some of the ink began to bleed and she felt as if she might really scream, just might really let go and do it until she realized she couldn’t remember the last time she had screamed, that the last time was something she had been told about—a foggy, oddly curious anecdote. In Maine, she was told, near the water and rocks where she had screamed at the sky, during a storm, one night after dinner: pot roast, potatoes, wine. And now if she did scream the painter would be sure to intrude, and she was beyond that now. She was beyond everything but her-
self. So she pulled herself under and listened for the water, the pages in her hands: clutched above her waist and dripping into the tub.

The letter was old, two months, and she knew he would be waiting. He would be watching his mailbox, every day, hoping for something to drop inside. Something with his name on it. Anything with his name and the handwriting she had used to correct his papers, over and over again. In her office, he would be shy, sullen. He would say, “Yeah, but, what the hell?” and she would say back, testing, “Yeah, what the hell? This really sucks,” and he would lighten up, eager to receive—advice, hope, promises. His presence, disquieting as it was, gave her something to watch for during the long silent times between her classes: an unexpected encounter on the lawn, at the café—a hopeful look over a double cappuccino. “Dr. McCarthy,” he might say, “all I want to do is pass!” and she would say, just as rehearsed, “All we ever do is pass. We have to try harder.”

Meanwhile, Demain, of Denver, is sniffing at her skirt, however metaphorically: inviting her out, stopping by to chat, searching, always, for a glimpse down her blouse—a patch of pale, sullen flesh. At times she thought it sad, this man of the praxis with no one to listen, let alone feel; a man in need of encounter, regardless. Other times, she thought him hopelessly comical, a man whose sole purpose in life was words, the encouraging of bad discourse, as if words and one’s ability to abuse them might in fact be enough. Which it wasn’t, ever. Words, even those well-placed, were merely things to take you places—like sex, a mode of transport. All great writing is sex, and all great sex is touch, and where it pushed you to. What you wanted was idea—the inexpressible core you felt in the bones of your feet. The knot in your belly, the heart in your throat. What you wanted was Conor walking down the mall with his jeans torn at the knees, a long trench coat and his life packed in a
bookbag, smiling and saying, “McCarthy, we gotta do a beer! We just gotta!”

*How was I to know?* she writes. *How were you to know? How were we to know already that sweet taste of ourselves?*

*Conor, Conor, Conor . . .* say it long enough, and you grow convincing.

When I was little I was a girl; I was young and little and still knew more about others than myself. So too with Ian, a boy, my brother. Together we looked alike. We looked alike, Conor: skin, eyes, hair, the same freckles. We’d swim in the ocean or play IRA and were it not for our genitalia, who’s to say who we were? Who’s to say, Boy, over there, and, Girl, there. See? See them both? Can you even see them underneath the sun? *Underneath the moon?*

*Can you even see them?*

Desire, she thinks, is a mode of transport. And she will tell him he took her places lovely and beyond reach. But she is back now, she writes. *I’m back.*

Where she went in Maine she’s still uncertain. It was a land of heavy medication, clean linens and long, quiet walks. After her release, her mother would bring her tea, toast, would ask her if she’d like her to sit. “It’s been just too much,” her mother would say, and Colleen would nod, holding her words, still unwilling to give them up. She held onto her words for six weeks, writing only the briefest of messages, and when she finally did let go, when she finally did let go at the sky, after dinner, standing on the rocks outside dressed only in her robe, she prayed to God for lightning. She prayed to God for a swift, catholic and apostolic glimpse of eternity—here, in her breast, which she bared even for God: a steady, throbbing target. Here where she wanted to be struck, like Leda, taken into a white rush. She wanted to come to God on a swift rod of righteousness and lay herself clean, there upon a table of blessedness and light,
there upon a table where the sins of the flesh lay heaped damp as clover.

And while the storm was fierce, the waves high as herself, there was still no lightning. Only rain, inexhaustible, and cold.

When Ian came back, it killed him. She will have to be careful. She will have to labor slowly—to embrace the realm of idea when only it is safe. Words, she thinks. I’ll have to measure my words . . . and what she remembers is that first class, back in January, searching the dark sky for something to say, and the cold, and Conor, timid and pale in the last row wearing a green sweatshirt, raising his hand, and the tremendous weight of all that responsibility. And she remembers telling herself, I can do this. I really can.

Outside, the painter is moving a ladder. It is a long, wooden ladder, and still his clothes are white. When he swings the ladder near the window she catches his eye, and he sees her, looking up from her table. He watches her wonder about the color of things. And he knows, too, that she knows what he’s thinking. She knows that he is hungry. You’re painting my house, she wants to tell him. You’re covering it up and I don’t understand your clothes and you’re still out there and now he smiles, opening his hand, briefly, to wave. For a moment he loses his balance, and the ladder quivers, slightly, just overhead.

Where I’ve been, she will write, is where I am.

. . . and what you must understand, Conor, is I loved my brother. I loved him the way a boy loves the moon, the way a girl drinks from the sea until she’s bloody and full. And I wanted to. And I want you to find it. I want you to find a woman, the kind you need, the kind who’ll rip your heart out and rub it slowly over the skin of your body.

Over your knees, Conor. Over your bones.