

## The Return

The field, writes St. Matthew, quoting Christ . . . *the field is the world*. By definition fields are typically enclosed—a field of battle, a field of wheat. And that which encloses—a highway, a fence, a set of theoretical constructs, a shield bearing a Red Cross, or the circumference of a coin . . . that which encloses is also that which defines. Like a book caught between its boards, like a body dressed in linen, a field is any given area visible through the lens of humanity, and that which occludes this vision—malice, or ignorance—is that which also describes the limitations of the human eye. For a photographer, depth of field—or perspective—is measured by manipulating for a given image the amount of darkness visible—a phrase from *Paradise Lost*. Thou shalt not worship any graven images, we are told, because God—and any god, at that, including the god of free enterprise—is a jealous God. Sometimes it's enough to make the people of this world wonder: this human failing, jealousy, so carelessly attributed to the divine.

What happens when a boy disappears?

When a man has a boy, things happen, and in this manner Stephen evolved into another man. He no longer smoked in the apartment, lest he put at risk his baby's health; then he quit smoking, like that, should he die prematurely on account of it and leave his child stranded. He chewed gum and gained weight and went to the gym and pumped iron like a college sophomore until the seams on his clothes began to split. He gained weight, and mass, and strength. Sometimes, going through a door, it was difficult not to brush against the jambs.

And it was nice, what happened next: R and Stephen's union had been based on a youthful sensibility they had each outgrown, and then it had been reborn into a union based on adult heat, and now, after the arrival of Gulliver, they traveled slowly through a kind of second honeymoon. They lay in bed, and they talked in bed, and in the

bed they brought their perfect baby with the magic heart to sleep between them. And the figure which had so often come between them over the years, R's old college chum, the guy who'd since become a vice president, had been relegated to the past. In the past the guy and R had played house together until R decided she liked Stephen, even though she didn't *really* like Stephen—he was becoming too set in his thinking about matters which disagreed with her own; and he was, well, kind of snobby. He was, well, *so certain*—but Stephen, he was more sexy in the irresponsible bohemian sort of way. He was, unlike the vice president, often unavailable, and this lack of availability was essential in understanding Stephen's relationship with R. R was a woman who wanted a man most when she did not have him. She liked the challenge of it. Look at what I can do, she said. She liked the getting of her way.

R's way, which meant *my way or the highway*, and which made a union with Stephen problematic given that she could not always change his course. She had a nasty habit, for example, of correcting one's English; mid-sentence, at dinner, and typically in front of others, she'd stop him and recommend changes to his diction.

No, you mean *reveal*. Not *betray*, Stephen.

Yeah. Thanks.

Too, and conversationally, she had to be at the center, which was fine so long as one didn't have anything to say. More and more, he just bit his tongue, and after a while he began to be really bored. It became boring, like arguing about the First Amendment, or talking about the Oscars, this constant need to be at the center of the world. Look at me, R seemed always to be saying. *Look at me!* But with Gulliver, that hunger to be always at the center shifted perceptibly. The baby was now the center. The baby was what they looked at. And Stephen began socking away money for his son's college fund; he began taking fewer trips for himself and instead went to visit other college art departments for the honorariums. He came home earlier from the university than he used to, and he avoided the pretty students who took nude pictures of themselves, especially the ones who stopped him on the lawns in spring, and then he began avoiding anybody who was female. Anybody at all, should he be giving off the wrong signals.

I have a son, he told the world. Stay away.

Then he found out R was doing all over again the college chum/vice

president during lunch while their baby was at daycare, and he blew his top.

What the fuck, he said. Are we not grown-ups?

It's nothing, R said.

Indeed.

You don't give me what I need, R said. He at least needs me.

He said, Buy him a vibrator.

She said, You don't think I'm smart anymore.

He said, Get another master's degree.

She said, You used to think I was smart and now you don't listen to me.

He said, I still think you're smart when you aren't being so stupid. What, you want to marry him? Not *me*, okay. Fine. But *him*? You want *him* to raise your kid? You want to marry a guy who goes after *partnered* women with a kid?

No, she said. No. I want you. But I want *all* of you.

And he said, Well, fuck me, R. Just fuck me blind.

And then he left. He kissed his son good-bye and went to Texas and spent eight months working on a ranch. The flyover, that's what people in the media called anything between New York and LA. He went to Texas and disappeared into the flyover.

Weekends he didn't visit home (a Chicago hotel, so that he might see Gulliver), Stephen went with the cowboys to the strip joint in Amarillo where the skinny girls who did meth with teased hair and gapped teeth danced in front of the fat, married men just like the real strippers on TV, and they'd get all liquored up, as was the fashion, and back at the ranch Stephen would take a cold shower in order to wash off the smoke and cheap perfume. R began sending letters, asking when he was going to return. There was a girl on the ranch, the owner's daughter, who was sweet on Stephen, and they flirted with each other patiently—like horses circling in a corral, high-stepping up to nuzzle each other's heads. Aside from this love of horses, what did they have in common? The girl was pretty in her jeans and boots. Stephen thought, What do we talk about in ten years? He thought, I am not a cowboy. Though sometimes when he and the girl went riding he thought about becoming one. He could change his life and become something other than what he was. People did that, right? They changed? At night, though, he missed his son. Sometimes he

and the girl went riding to a reservoir fed by a tributary of the Red River. He'd chew on a blade of grass. The girl, being a cowgirl, knew how to seat and collect her horse. She'd chew on a blade of grass and gaze at the dusty points of her booted toes, and then one day on the bank of the river she said, out of the blue, I went away once. To college. I'm not doing that again.

I know, he said.

You're going to go away, she said. You're just a tourist. That's okay.

Okay.

She said, You should go back home to your wife and son.

She was right, too. Gulliver was growing up and it would be useful for Stephen to be around more than every third weekend in a hotel. He wasn't going to be an absentee father. Enough said.

So he went back and forgave his wife, who in many respects, especially emotionally, *was* smarter than he was, and he said, This doesn't have to end.

I've been saying that for months, R said. What, you finally read your mail?

And after a while they were happy again, and Stephen's book came out, *McClellan, Texas*, and two or three people in two or three circles took some notice. In the book there is a photograph of the pretty girl in jeans seated on a mustang. She has the horse's reins in her teeth; she is tugging at her gloves; the neck of the horse, preparing to buck, is curled up tight as a muscle. That was a real success, that photograph, and it had now become a part of the permanent record: first, he was going to leave R, and then she became pregnant, so they partnered up. Then she had an affair with the same guy she always had an affair with, and he left her, but only temporarily, because he knew R wasn't going to marry the guy she'd had the affair with. That's *why* she'd had the affair. To accept what you had was to admit failure for not having what you did not.

People said about old lovers that so and so was like a brother, or a sister, and this made sense to Stephen, despite—or perhaps because of—the twinge of incest the sentiment evoked. It made sense, though: *family*. He knew R better than he knew his father, whom he never really knew at all. Once, when they were twenty, Stephen had nursed R through a bout of food poisoning so severe it had caused her while vomiting to shit all over the floor. That, she had said. That was love, your not leaving me after that! And she had nursed him, too, when he

was in need of nursing. He could be a needy guy, he knew that, especially when the light was bad. The dark winter skies. And too, she had been his first girl: the first time, doing it, having no idea where to go. He was nineteen and all ribs and terrified out of his mind. They were at a house R was watching for the weekend. A rich couple's house. R pretended it was theirs and walked around, at twenty, in a green silk robe which belonged to the married woman now off in Vienna, or Rome, and they drank two seven-dollar bottles of champagne (because she was twenty, and he was nineteen) and they watched cable TV because it was new then and had sex on it. Then she leaned back on a set of pillows, as if she were a courtesan, and the robe parted like the parting of the sea, and she took Stephen who could not stop trembling and undid his belt and slid off his clothes and pulled him inside her body—and he had thought, going there, She's smarter than me. She knows everything.

She was sexually experienced; he was sexually naïve. Her pubic hair was gold, like an old, Roman coin, and she had a mole beside her navel he used to call the North Star, and then she taught him the location of other constellations, and certainly marriages have been formed on shakier platforms than that. They liked the same books, they worshiped the same teachers who had taught them how to read. Too, he loved her body, all lonesome highway and curves. He loved the way she carried her body, like a boxer, on her toes. He loved the way she'd stand in the cafeteria at the ice cream table, hip cocked, as if to express all the sexuality of the world into a single dish.

Why did she become an abortion-rights activist? Because she could.

Because this, according to R, had become her passion.

Fair enough, he supposed, but it spelled trouble from the start. Not that Stephen wasn't pro-choice. But it spelled trouble, this career track of hers, if only because it required her to spend time in circles which would not give Stephen the time of day. Then she took to referring to Stephen in public as her *partner*, lest anybody even *think* they might actually be married; she went to poetry slams celebrating anger and injustice; she talked about the Cycle of Violence, because she knew a lot about it now, violence, having become officially left of center. Having a child had made Stephen move simultaneously to the left *and* to the right, while R, as her reputation and stature grew, set up a permanent camp along the left bank of the Chicago River. She'd

say things like *Tax the rich motherfuckers* in order to get a laugh; and she'd say *Corporate Welfare* as if it were equivalent to child molestation, and as if her office (and her salary) were not funded by the revenues of corporations. In a restaurant she'd look at a table of men she did not know and say, *Two o'clock: Fat White Men Alert*.

He thought, Why is she becoming so hateful?

And one day he said, I think you should start listening to some of the things you say.

And she said, What, now you're suddenly for capital punishment?

He said, Can you imagine if I said something about *fat white women* at a restaurant? Can you imagine what you would do with that? What, pray tell, does being fat or white have to do with being an asshole at a restaurant?

Pray tell?

I don't get it, he said. This boilerplate speak.

Pray tell? she said.

You used to think for yourself. Now you dish out the propaganda.

*Pray tell?*

She had a point. To help her make it, he stopped going to restaurants where R met up with the Women, which meant Stephen and R also stopped eating meals together. When he came across her friends, at the El stop, at the bookstore, they began to give Stephen the evil stink-eye. He was one of *them*. One of *those* who wanted to give his son trucks. Probably he wanted to start a *Take Your Son to Work Day, Too*, and he was tired, really, of the stale and bitterly clichéd drift down along the politicized banks of American prosperity. Identity politics, he reasoned, were at their core selfish, premised on the *getting*, and not the *giving*, and he and R, they were splitting at the seams like his shirts. He went to the gym, he lifted his weights (typical man); he stopped smoking and gained weight (*great, now I'm a fat white male . . .*) and came home early to pick up his son at the daycare and take him to the park. At the park, they chased birds. At the park, they threw pebbles into the puddles and the snowbanks. At the park, he'd lift his son into the sky, like a bird. At the park, they became imperfect father and beautiful son.

And then R had an idea. They should go to Rome for Christmas. They should go to Rome and make up for all their arguments and make up some vows, too, and state them, albeit privately, in St. Peter's Cathedral. *Or maybe at the Forum?* It would be fun, a trip to

Rome. A lark. She loved Italian food. She wanted to travel more. She said, at the supermarket in the aisle for bread, Take me to Rome, Stephen, and I'll love you forever.

You've always loved me forever, he said.

Yes, she said. But I'll show you how. She said, lifting her shirt, flashing him like an undergraduate, I'll really show you how.

And she had laughed. She had laughed and put her hand to her heart, as if it hurt, laughing so hard like that, and Gulliver said to Stephen, Why Mommy laughing like that?

She's happy now, Stephen said.

Why she happy?

Because we're going to take a trip.

This is what happens: a man has a son, he becomes a man. He becomes responsible for something other than himself. He becomes the guardian and the caregiver and the very voice of God. He becomes the father he once had but never knew in order to assume responsibility for all the risk of the world. Having only one life, he must understand that to live out this life he must also live with the decisions he has made long before the arrival of this understanding. So living, so *accepting*, he becomes older and wiser and a source of light. Then he kisses his mate in gratitude for this thing he holds in his arms which weighs seven or eight pounds: this life, which will grow into a boy, and then someday a man.

He kisses this woman and says, He's perfect.

He looks like you, she says.

Like us, he says. He's made of us.

2

The recent storm. The anxiety, thank God, was finally passing—

He felt the wind kicking off the lake through his tangled hair. Passing by the Wrigley Building, which he might have visited, he had stopped to admire its skyline before walking on. The sun was out in the blue Chicago sky. He did stop by R's office, Michigan and Madison, and there he said hello to the Women, and he hugged R's bangle-wristed boss, a local politico of whom he was deeply fond, that power scarf and set of heels notwithstanding. In R's office, he kissed R on the forehead. He said, shutting the door, knocking his bandaged hand

against the knob, I haven't been very easy and I want you to know I know this.

She said, So, you've been busy thinking?

Sometimes I want it to be okay to be happy. So yeah, I took a walk—

Her phone rang, and she said, looking at it, I should take this. She said, picking up the phone, This is R.

He stood, waiting, and R said into the phone, Can you hang on a moment? Thanks. She placed her hand over the phone and said to Stephen, Tonight. Okay? People are coming tonight—

I know.

She said, I'm glad. I'm glad you've been thinking. But I've got to take this.

Okay, he said, and he left.

On the way out Cheryl at the front desk teased him about his tangled hair. There was a photograph of his behind the desk. He knew that here there were no secrets. The people here knew R's lover, and how he dressed for work, and what they ate for lunch. Stephen felt suddenly exposed and shy, as if he'd been caught sneaking out of a strip joint by a neighbor or, worse, colleague, and walking to the door, he saw R's bangle-wristed boss talking on the horn from behind her desk. She caught his eye, and waved; she turned and came around her desk and closed the door. In the elevator, he understood that R was going to become that woman. Ten, twelve years out, she'd be a mover and a shaker. R, she'd make the ideal congressperson. A good one, really. It was a comforting thought, actually, and he was proud of her, R, and the things she would do because she believed in them. Stephen believed in God, or at least he tried to, and Providence; R believed in Social Justice, and Equal Rights, and Equal Opportunity. These were possibly far more useful things to believe in if only because they were more practical. These corridors of power, having been bequeathed to her, they were hers to make.

He caught the El, walked down the dirty North Avenue toward his street, taking the wrong one. Get a clue, he told himself, laughing. He found it, his street, and he saw the Garcia boy chatting it up with two girls. Yo hey, the boy called to Stephen, looking tough, and Stephen waved and said hey back. He turned the key and passed through the door. In the living room several messages blinked on the machine: the first from a woman who was on the ground. On the ground, that

meant she was typically in the air? The woman spoke for several minutes into the machine about the forthcoming rally at the Schaumburg clinic presently under siege by the whack-job from Kansas. The woman would not stop speaking. He checked his watch and still she kept speaking. She repeated, before finally signing off, *Okay, R. This is Lynn and I am on the ground.*

Other messages for R about the shindig tonight. The final message was from his publisher, to whom Stephen owed a call. He made the call from the kitchen sink and spoke with the assistant who put him through.

Stephen? We need an afterword!

Really?

Really. Especially from you.

That ought to boost the sales.

It's not about the sales. It's about posterity and publicity and *then* it's about the sales. Slut yourself out, Buddy. Give me a couple thousand words.

What about?

About Sarajevo. About the fucking war. What do you think?

I don't know anything about the fucking war.

Tell me why you did it. Just that. Give me a thousand words. Five hundred? Do it for me, okay? He said, By the way, your pal, Messinger?

Yeah?

He sent an introduction. How's that!

I don't know. How is it?

Well, he writes like a German, that's for sure. Lofty lofty. They have trouble locating some of those verbs over there, don't they? He sure seems to intend for you to be taken notice of, which you should be, but I'm partial.

I wish you hadn't asked him for that.

Oh, grow up. He said, What, you wouldn't do the same? Don't be precious. Look, when can you get it to me?

How long can I have?

A month. A month. Oh, six weeks. But no extensions, okay?

Okay.

You got a fax?

No.

Stephen, *everybody's* got a fax. Give me your fax and I'll send this—

No. Let me wait till I finish this—whatever. What *is* an afterword? Whatever you say it is. You're the man, here.

Okay, Stephen said. But it's going to be short—

Say, he said. There's a girl here. Ahem. Woman. Elise Kohlhaus. She wanted me to deliver a message. Straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak.

You've met her?

She delivered Messinger's essay personally. Had a lovely little lunch. Quite dainty. She asked me by the way to deliver a message to you personally.

Which is?

Okay. Now I've got it written down. It's very precise. I got to get it right. Here. Wait. Jerome! Where's that notebook? The one. The one with the papers and the lines. Not *that* one, the *other* one. Okay, say something. You, Stephen. No heavy breathing there. Shame shame. Okay. Okay, now here it is. Are you ready? Let me know when you're ready.

I'm ready. Shoot.

Nope. You're not ready. Not for this.

What?

I don't think you're ready.

I give up, Stephen said. I'm not ready.

It says, Ahhhem. It says, and now I'm quoting directly, Stephen. It says—*Stephen, come live with me and stay with me and spend your life with me.*

Stephen laughed. He poured himself a glass of water.

Hey, you out there? Aren't you girlfriended or something? This seems serious, if you know what I mean. He said, By the way, she's at the Dakota.

I know.

You know? You know! What am I? A secretary? What, she can't call and leave a message? Oh yeah. Oh yeah. What am I thinking? I see. I get it, Stephen. Your *girlfriend* doesn't know!

Eh heh.

Stephen, he said. Stephen Stephen. You can't see me, but I'm shaking my head here. I'm shaking my head! Now I'm sighing. Hear that? Sigh. Now I'm going to let you go because I'll bet you got some things on your mind.

Thanks, Stephen said.

Okay, Stephen. Think fast. Be brilliant.

Okay.

Okay?

Okay.

Right on, Stephen. Type type.

3

Spend, she had said. *Spend your life with me.*

Everything comes down to currency—even Time, being infinite, because of course a person’s time is not. Before he made the second call, first he had to do the math. He took a tall glass of water up to his desk. To stall he checked the bandage on his hand: the purple scar, the loading up of it with ointment meant to heal. He returned to his desk and pulled out the statements from his father’s—now his—broker. By all accounts a recession was taking place and the past two years had cost him. For the miscellaneous expenses, flights and chemicals and the biannual new suit of clothes, not to mention that new suit he’d just bought in Germany, he permitted himself a budget of eleven K which he would need to fund with various windfalls. He’d still have to put himself out for hire. But it was doable: certainly he’d lived cheaply before. He said, looking at the papers across his desk, You’re going to do this, aren’t you?

He said, Stop pretending.

He’d be giving up health insurance—which he never used, anyway, not wanting to be tracked. He’d be giving up the funding of his pension. He’d have to scramble to fill in the annual two-K gap for his IRA.

He could live in his father’s farmhouse; if he lived in Europe, he wouldn’t need a car. He lit a cigarette and placed his second call. A career in academe, it takes years to build: years to get even a first job. Post-grad school, his first job had been as a sub-minimum-wage laborer in a California Mountain Resort—digging ditches, skimming condoms out of hot tubs, arranging boulders to compliment Resort Lifestyle Landscaping. For seven months he worked with (and took pictures of) those who worked just like himself beneath the sun—mostly illegals, a few convicts, those who couldn’t afford to insist on anything. Later Stephen hitched a ride to Massachusetts, and there in Gloucester he got himself a job on a fishing boat, a topic recently in

the news thanks to a catchy pop song by a pop star describing the plight of those who worked the industry, and that job had led to the photographs which eventually became *The North Sea*, and then he hunkered down in an overworked and underfunded art department in South Dakota, and there he paid off his student loans in two years. Once paid he was a free man. By now R was calling, so he went to Chicago. For two months he did a stint as a coroner's photographer for the Chicago police—which, like everything else, he'd done for the experience, and which was dreadful, photographing murder victims, bloodstains, various points of entry. The scenes of the crimes, they always smelled, a terrible fact he'd never considered: the photographs went into files, which went into boxes, which went into warehouses for the unsolvable, and this work had led to various contacts with the press and that led to other things: all the while, he'd thought, he was just taking a break from academe, believing that his place was there, teaching to the future, and finally an overpriced but nonetheless respectable institution had reached out, so to speak, and he took the train to the suburb, through Rogers Park and the concrete canyon to the land of big trees and yards and fern bars packing fifteen-dollar cheeseburgers, and there he did the things one does to make certain one gets the cushy job. And so he was hired and, after his book of essays came out, tenured and promoted: on the third day he went through a terrible crisis and took an unpaid leave, and then another unpaid leave, and now his new dean had been leaving messages with R about Stephen's coming back. Stephen could have spent months on the matter, he knew this. He could have pumped the school for a raise. Certainly an office with a window.

He made the call. The new dean's secretary answered, who had no idea who Stephen was, given that life always goes on, thank God. The new dean, who was actually a guy named Dean from Media, said over a speakerphone, Stephen?

Hey, Dean. Dean Dean.

Haven't heard that!

Stephen said, Are you on a speakerphone?

What's that?

You sound like you're in an ice rink.

Oh, it's okay. I'll talk louder!

They did chitchat, then, while Stephen held the phone a foot away from his ear. The chitchat, this too was a rule.

Then the dean said, unfathomably, So, Stephen. How's the kid?  
And Stephen said, before he quit his job for good, Fine.

4

What do Stephen's fishermen and cowboys and now Sarajevo portraits all have in common? The books all document a disappearing way of life. All ways, he supposed, disappear. In the sixties *The Way* was a Bible cheesily translated—Jesus for the folk in denim and beads—and when Stephen finds that now, next to his King James and *Book of Common Prayer* and *I Ching* and *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, his first edition of Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned* and his Standard English Classics' *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus, and Lycidas—Stephen, hey baby. R.*—and his G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* and his Fowler's *Modern English Usage* . . . when Stephen locates this book, *The Way*, with pictures of soulful kids on the cover contemplating the meaning of their souls, he knows he will never let it go. This book, like the others, a gift; this book, and however badly paraphrased, a gift from his father.

*To Stephen Sellers Brings*, his father had written. *A son to be proud of on the Day of his Confirmation. April 15, 1969. From his Dad.*

This is his Special Box—a carton full of essential odds and ends marking his life. A sheathed K-Bar knife with rosewood handles; a stone from Omaha Beach at Normandy; his grandfather's gold pocket watch, circa 1902; a woman's comb once belonging to his mother, and which still smelled of the oil from her hair; this handful of books; a lock of Gulliver's hair; his father's slide rule; a copy of his own book of essays, *The Poetics of the Line and the Art of Sight*, which he had signed and given to his father . . . *To Dad, whom I hope always to make proud. Love, Stephen* . . . and packets of letters and postcards, mostly from R. There is a blue mussel shell from Elise, in which she had once poured a spoonful of mineral water, and then raised to his lips; there is a champagne cork; there is a paper bird, indigo, also from Elise, with a note which instructs the reader to pull the wings apart and blow; there is an unopened string of condoms, like tickets for the carnival. And here a birthday card for Stephen's thirtieth birthday from R writing in her profoundly circled and fistled script—

R being a lefty—thirty reasons why she loves Stephen . . . *Reason #4, You like it when I wear only socks. Reason #12, You're thinking. Reason #22, You love coffee in the morning with me on the wrinkly blue sheets. Reason #28, You're still thinking* . . . There is a snapshot of R and Stephen as sophomores in the college library preparing for an exam. There is a cassette tape with a recording of Gulliver having a conversation with his friend, Liam, in the back of R's Jeep. There is a small red car Stephen bought for Gulliver at a gas station outside Paris. These are the things in his box.

He had bought the condoms in South Dakota—a small town, adjacent to the very small town in which he lived and in which he was constantly running into his students and colleagues—in preparation for a visit from R. To avoid being spotted, he had driven one town over. At the grocery store, the only game in town, a girl he nonetheless recognized from the campus had rung him up. He had thought about buying other products to conceal his real mission, but instead he thought, Screw it. I'm a grown man. I'm a university professor . . . and the girl said, holding up the condoms, Five thousand dollars, please.

She said, shrugging, Law of supply. She said, giggling, making a big show . . . Paper or Plastic?

She said, Do you need any help out?

Enough, Stephen had said, sufficiently embarrassed—So much for being a grown man, etcetera—and the girl said, catching his eye, Well. Have a nice day!

Then he laughed, like that, and she laughed back, and he drove back to his furnished attic apartment on Main Street, and R arrived, with champagne and cocaine, and later that night the kids of the town cruised up and down Main—Dairy Queen to the Square, and back, and then again, like toddlers running circles through the largest rooms in the house—and he and R had spent the night going at it. This way, that way. They never did use the condoms. Once she put him on his back and descended, squatting on her heels, flexing, and said, You know when you get ready to come?

Yes?

Don't.

And maybe it was the cocaine—he'd done it twice, if only because he wanted to do it more, and nicotine was hard enough to give up, thank you—but he never came, and they kept going at it like birds in the sky over the dark yard, all that rough strife, with the springtime

windows open and all those kids' cars going by with their radios *whump whump whumping* and the headlights, like beacons, and R, coming like a banshee, and those beacons casting shadows through the gauzy drapes amid the light of his room. In the morning, the day was full of birdsong, and R said, rolling over, and not having any birds near her apartment in Chicago, only panhandlers, Why are they so loud?

What?

The birds! It sounds like an ava thing.

A what?

An ava thing! It sounds like a zoo!

She didn't get pregnant that trip but he understood she wanted to. She was thirty now, she explained. Do you know that?

R, sitting at the window, brushing her hair. You could move to Chicago, R said. We could play grown-up?

And thus they began the extended conversation involving trips to Omaha—a wedding of a common friend—and Minneapolis, another wedding. The brides and the grooms, those who R claimed didn't know any better, they were melting like icicles. They did a trip to St. Louis and then to Nashville where they wandered around the lonely-hearted downtown. These were trips, sometimes funded by Stephen's giving of various presentations, of decidedly carnal exploration. He thought, while tugging off R's underwear in a rental car, Okay, let's try it, this playing of house, and see what happens.

What happened was clear from the start. What happened was R and Stephen did not play house particularly well—theirs might have been a romance now premised on carnality and trust, punctuated by the long-distance thrill of reunion, but it was no longer a romance built on sensibility, and certainly it did not have the juice, the coal-oil burn, for longevity. Despite their history together. Still one does not let go easily, despite the volatility and the flames (because, you know, those flames *are* hot)—and now there was a kid on the way, a baby, and what were they going to do?

R said, I've had two abortions. I'm not going to have a third.

She said, doing the math in her head, Who'd be a better father than you?

I don't know.

She said, I don't want to be alone.

He said, R, everybody is alone.

She said, But I don't *want* to be. Stephen, she said. Let's partner up.

Like that?

What? You think there's somebody better out there for you? You think there's somebody who could know you better than I do?

He said, Well, there might be somebody better out there for *you*.

She said, But that's not the point, is it?

The point was, like all points, endlessly disappearing. The point was: she had let herself get pregnant because she was thirty and it was time to have a baby. And as if shopping from a catalog, she had selected Stephen to be her partner in this and all like matters.

Stephen's middling career of romance—the women: he was genuinely glad to have been there: the awkward courting pauses (*Oh, you like Lyle Lovett! I love shrimp. Do you like shrimp?*), the thrilling introductions to each other's bodies—kiss and breath, hair-in-the-face, sigh—and later, in the clear light of day, the awkward retreat. The pulling away. The conversations, the explanation. In South Dakota, surrounded only by students and the waitresses where he ate his meals, and the cute girl at the Wal-Mart, and now the *other* cute girl who teased him at the condom/grocery store, where Stephen always returned now to buy lots of other things he didn't need . . . in South Dakota, Stephen had been lonely. He dated one girl with a storybook name, Polly St. James, but after only two weeks she began picking out houses with picket fences and then she began dropping by Stephen's attic apartment unannounced with a wok. And so he had stepped away, always, as he always did. R might not understand him—or he, her—but she respected what she didn't understand. With R, because of their relatedness (it always felt incestuous, listening to R discuss a book, or a lover's technique, all in the same breath), because of their mutual and fundamental trust—that's what it came down to, a trust, like a bank account with a big, fat line of credit—with R he had always been able to return and stand in line and cash his checks. In general, though—and wasn't this the lesson of the taboo?—one should not marry a sister. They, the sisters, were supposed to be taken by another, like God.

Taken. Do you take this woman? This man?

And if so, where?

They hadn't done the vow thing; they hadn't even done the Justice

of the Peace thing. Instead they spent a weekend in French Lick, Indiana, and there they spent most of the first night in a warm pool of water smelling of sulfur. R drifted on the warm blue water with her three-months-pregnant body—Not yet broken in, she called across the water. Still like new. *Well, kind of*. . . and the water was blue, like the light in the Blue Grotto off Biševo.

He thought, R would like Biševo. He wished he'd taken her there.

He stood alone in his office. He stood alone going through the items of his box. All points endlessly disappear, he thought. It's a law of geometry, the final lesson of optics. On a camera lens, as in mathematics, infinity was transcribed thus:  $\infty$

*Taken.*

Look at an explanation long enough, and even the reason to explain will disappear. Glass houses, who isn't sitting by the window? Gulliver, too, had been taken. Look at an explanation long enough, or a wave in the sea, and all you get is lost—

Hey, called R's voice. Where are you?

Up here.

She pounded up the steps—that aerobic sensibility. She turned the corner and said, balancing on her toes, God. You look great!

It's the suit.

Well, you should get some more of those. She said, kissing him, What are you thinking about?

Infinity. Its expression.

There you go. Of course. She said, Me? I've been shopping. I got apple juice. So, you know, people don't have to know. So you can pass.

Cover up all that shame.

Don't try that shit with me, Stephen. I'm not ashamed. Fuck you. I just thought you wouldn't want people asking you all night long why you weren't drinking and saying *atta boy* and telling you stories about their Uncle Joes.

Okay, he said. Thanks.

Thing is, you gotta get it. It's all in the car. Hundreds of dollars' worth of hootch. No nipping. I'm not going to be one of those pathetic co-people.

The co-people?

I've been hitting the self-help section. You know, to understand better. And not just the Dare to Let Yourself Grieve schlock. I'll tell

you this, the more I read, the worse it seems. Everything. Like *I'm* supposed to be better.

I used to think you were a drunk. In college. Always getting blasted. I was going to talk with you about it. I was very serious.

And?

You stopped getting drunk.

I liked to have fun. It was sexy. For you, it's never fun. It's work.

More or less.

She said, having confided with her coworkers, Self-medicating. You're probably bipolar. It's becoming quite chic, you know. Yin and Yang, Light and Dark.

So that explains it. A Manichean vision.

Up and down? She said, looking at the cut over his eye, You're not going to tell me, are you?

About what?

About what happened. Before you came home? I know something bad happened. Did you get arrested or something?

No.

She said, touching the bruise, It's a lot better now. She said, You know, whatever it was, whatever happened, it's okay. It's okay, Mister.

Okay.

She said, Well, whatever. That's the thing I wanted to say. And I didn't want you to confuse my anger and whatnot with something else. You know?

I know.

She said, You've got the box out. The Special Box.

Yeah, he said. I'm supposed to write something. An afterword, whatever *that* is. I'm supposed to figure out why I went to Yugoslavia.

The book, she said. It will be nice to see it. You might show it to me sometime, you know?

I didn't know you wanted to see it.

Of course I want to see it. I'm just scared of what I'll find there. Then I'll be scared I won't reply the right way. You can be a little intimidating, you know.

Uh-huh.

No, she said, taking off her blouse. I'm going to take a hot bath and put on a party dress, okay? No more sniping.

He flinched at her use of that word, *sniping*. He said, Okay.

I've got a new one. A party dress. Just for you. She said, looking at her watch, The caterer people will be here in twenty minutes.

You got a caterer?

I got a whumper raise. I got a man I need to do some pleasing to before he leaves me. Also, the DC Power Chicks. So be polite. No fisticuffs. Stay away from Welfare Reform and Foreign Policy, please. No smoldering stories about the Balkans. And no saying of the word *dyke*. Okay?

Can I say *black*? Or do I have to say *African American*?

*Black* is okay among friends who know you. Elsewhere, it's best to go polysyllabic. Unless you're talking to somebody who *is* black. Then you *have* to say *black* because if you say *African American* you sound stuffy and insecure.

R turned to fire up the tub. There was a towel covering the dent in the door, which she left open; her marvelous hair shimmered in the light.

True story, Stephen called after her. This guy, this talking head, he used the word *clearly* four times in the same sentence. I counted.

Clearly, she said, coming back. Clearly you were teasing me. That question about *African American*?

A little.

I like it when you tease me. But not in public. She said, stepping out of her long skirt, You're not the only one who's been doing some thinking. You know, you're not the only one who can be a bitch. Patient, know thyself?

She stepped out of her underwear; shrugging, she lifted off her camisole in one breath; she held her clothes in her fist. She said, Look. I know you're thinking about leaving. I know that.

She set her clothes on his desk beside the stack of prints. She fit her body into the general description of his own, tucking the backs of her hands into his belt, her finger descending the length of his fly, and kissed him. She'd been doing this to him just so for years.

She stepped back, brushing her hair from her eyes, and said, I know you're thinking about leaving. I know. I want you to know, it's okay. It's okay. I don't want you to leave, but it's not as if we've been happy together. And if you leave me it's not because of somebody else. God knows that's not why I'd leave you. This, she said, is about us. It's about us and the family we used to have but don't have anymore. It's about us failing and fucking up.

It's complicated.

And simple. She said, hitching her breath, Look. If you leave, I don't want you feeling bad. That's the message. I don't want you feeling guilty. We've had enough bad feeling to last a dozen broken-hearted marriages. So don't do that.

Okay.

She said, shivering, crossing her arms, You're packing. I know that. Either way, it's time you went back to the doc. But you know that, too.

More or less.

Ever since you came home, you've been packing. Doing inventories. You keep looking at the books on the shelves and the pictures on the wall. You're planning your next trip only this time you aren't going to come back.

You know I never know anything until I do it. You know that.

You are the most inexcusably temperamental man I know.

Delicate.

She laughed. She wiped her eyes and said, You could keep me company in the bath, but you gotta bring in the groceries before the thieves get it all. I left the door wide open.

She said, dipping her toe into the bath, Just so you know I'm going to soak and smell real pretty and make you want to stay.

5

Q. What is an incubator?

A. A safe, Gulliver explained. An incubator is a safe warm place you put baby animals who don't get sat on by their mudders.

After one always follows another, like numbers or ducks. They came, the people to the party, to the table decorated with linen and borrowed silver; most of them Stephen did not know. There was Susan with the Nose Thing, and her lover, Jennifer Something; there was the new Assistant DA and his wife, who were important; there were the two doctors, Michael and Mike; there was R's bangle-wristed boss with a mighty power scarf, and who kissed Stephen, European

style, and proceeded to give him advice about all manner of topics; there was Dana of the Recent and Bitterly Divorced, mother of Liam, Gulliver's playmate; there was a friend of Stephen's from college, Jack, who now taught in the sculpture department at the Art Institute.

Thirty-five, Stephen thought, and I have *three* friends.

He had friends now abroad, at least. Another friend was a freelance reporter who had thrown Stephen work back when Stephen first came to the city. The guy was eager to talk to Stephen about Stephen's trip. Instead the guy listened patiently while a woman who knew a lot of things explained to him and Stephen the underlying ethos of the current Balkan crisis.

You knooow, the woman was saying, staring at Stephen's bruised eye. You knooow they've been killing each other for centuries.

Next the woman began to lament the current state of crime in her city. The nation's capitol, she said. She said, most sincerely, My God, it's become a regular war zone! The violence!

Uh-huh.

Apparently she had all kinds of plans to stop the Cycle of Violence. Education, it seemed, figured prominently in her plan.

Stephen said, I think it's so important to teach people not to be violent.

Oh, but that's my day job. Not my *passion*. Well, not my *passion* passion. She said, I'm actually writing a novel? It's a novel about how our lives are shaped by the themes of our lives and desires? The city becomes a symbol of the themes, you see. I'm calling it "Life on the Ground."

Good title, Stephen said. You must be Lynn.

Why yes. I am! And you?

Stephen, Stephen said. Friend of R's. We go way back.

She said, I'm looking for an agent.

Stephen said, looking for an escape, Like for a house?

She laughed, very understandingly. Well, sort of, Stephen. My book is going to be character driven, I think. She said, thinking aloud, Very.

Neat, Stephen said.

Stephen's friend gave Stephen a wink, asked him to call, and ducked out lickety-split.

The woman said, watching the friend vanish, And what do *you* do?

I used to teach.

Me too!

But not anymore. I've been having a lot of what you writer types might call flashbacks.

Oh, I see—

Very vivid, the imagery. So I'm between things. Until the pills kick in?

Things, she said, knowingly. Well. Well well.

Stephen made off for more apple juice. It was easier to enjoy a character-driven party when one was actually taking part in it. He stood in the corner of his living room nursing his apple juice, biting his lip, and watched the party.

Well, Jack said, sidling up with a martini the size of Naples. How's tricks?

Fine.

Lots of people here, Jack said. You're going to need new digs.

R wants to get a three-flat. Our own. Rent out the first two floors and become landowners. The gentry. She's been looking. Humboldt Park.

Danger.

The place you can afford, Stephen said, that's by the crack house. You spend a hundred K on the building and another two rehabbing it and that's with the plastic doors. Then the guy who's been there since 1944 gets screwed.

Jack said, Hey. You guys doing okay?

No.

I'm sorry, Jack said. I love R. God knows she knows what she wants.

And doesn't. Everybody loves R. I mean, look at her—

Too bad. For both of you. Jack said, confidingly, Depakote. R asked me to tell you. They're doing cool things with that now. Really—

Stephen said, Can't we talk shop? Compare departments? You should tell me about the novel you're writing.

She got to you, too, huh?

More or less. Stephen said, Just so you know, if she comes back over here, I'm stepping out.

How'd you like to be a character in that fucking book?

I have a new rule, Stephen said. No talking to anybody I don't want to.

That's a good one, Jack said, shifting his weight.

Yeah, Stephen said. Simple and elegant.

I'll tell you this, Jack said. I think there's a lot of estrogen in this room. I'm still trying to figure out why R invited either of us.

The DC Power Chicks recently on the ground had by now collected in the center, holding court. R stood at the ring, lively and sexy in her party dress, laughing a lot. Being R. She kept brushing her thick hair from her eyes and laughing. Stephen stood quietly, admiring her figure and her poise. Then Susan with the Nose Thing, catching Stephen's eye, wandered over and told a funny story about her new dog, which she'd named Taxi.

Really? Stephen said.

Really—

When did you get him?

I don't know. A week ago?

And you named him Taxi?

Yeah, she said, nodding, stirring her drink. She explained she liked to go out to the street and call his name. Taxi! He has big ears, she said. Big and floppy. She said, This way I always get a cab!

Jack left next. Stephen spent some time with R's bangle-wristed boss, and he was finishing off his fifth glass of apple juice—*So*, R's boss had said, now tipsy and loud. *How's the Not Drinking?*—when he decided to step out.

Take a drink, he thought. Take a knee.

He took the front stairs. On the porch he stood in the cold wind and lit up and studied the light. One thing he loved about Chicago, he loved the light. *Light dwells within light*, Christ had said, at least according to the Gospel of St. Thomas. From across the street, at the Garcias', drifted music and laughter. He could smell the woodsmoke from their chimney which reminded him of the woodsmoke in the air over Sarajevo. It was cold there; it was cold here. He felt a wash of lingering jet lag, the sagging of the eyelids. He'd been back a week and somehow it now seemed years. Perhaps they too were having a party—the Garcias. The center of his hand ached deeply in the cold: the scar, it was one made to last. He listened to the crippled dog, barking, and then came a child's voice: calling out to the dog, inviting it in. In the light you could see the metal staples in the dog's hip, reflecting. The snow on the ground had a glazed sheet of ice which caused the light to bounce. Now he heard a set of heels and turned to

watch a woman walking down the salted walk. His neighbor, the same he'd seen the other morning stepping out from the cab. She was wearing the same black overcoat and a red scarf which matched her hat. Her heels, they clicked and clicked against the walk. As she approached, she slowed her pace, the rhythm of the clicking slowed, and Stephen recognized her perfume in the cold air.

Hey, Stephen said.

Hey, she said, coming to a halt. I didn't know you were back. She said, awkwardly, So you're back?

For a while. How's school?

I finished. All done.

Congratulations, he said. That's great.

I guess.

He said, We're having a party.

She looked up through the windows to the people in party clothes, behind the sparkling windows, the lace drapes, and said, Looks that way.

He realized she could not recall his name; nor he, hers. Distance could be like memory that way. A peal of laughter rang through the air—R's voice, calling out. They both looked up at the open door. Stephen said, R would love to see you—

No, she said, pleased to have been invited. But thanks.

Okay.

Well then, she said, turning. It was good to see you.

You too.

Thanks, she said.

Hey, he called after her. By the way, I like your hat.

Really? she said, touching it. I made it.

It's cool. Anyway, 'night.

'Night, she said. See you around.

6

The Garcias' house burned that night. A hot coal, spitting up through the chimney onto the shingled, sagging roof, and igniting.

Nobody saw it happen. It was late, R asleep, slightly drunk, and Stephen below, having changed into sweats and having cleaned up

and having fallen asleep on the couch. In his sleep he dreamed he saw lights flashing against his eyelids. He dreamed he heard sirens, and he thought he was dreaming about places he'd been before, and he thought it odd the way the sirens sounded like American sirens, not the sirens of Europe, and then he saw a woman on an island, wind in her hair, and that woman became Elise, standing in the sun in front of the blue sea on the island of Biševo, and she was saying, *I've been calling you*, and he said, *I know*, and then he heard R's voice, exclaiming, and he thought this was going to be one of those dreams, the fight dreams, which saddened him, and he woke. He thought, listening to the sirens, Somewhere there must be a fire.

He raced upstairs. R stood at the window, her face and disheveled hair and her bare arms illuminated by the light of the fire.

The house was in flames. There were trucks on the street and men shouting. R turned and dressed in jeans and sneakers, a sweater, and they ran out through the front door. The street had filled with neighbors. The family, the father and mother and grandparents and kids, six or seven in all, screamed when the roof fell in. The crippled dog stood inside at the window and a fireman with an ax was trying to get at it. Once he'd broken the window, reaching for the dog, the dog attacked. The fireman fell back off the ladder, cursing, with the dog's jaws locked on his sleeve. Falling to the ground, onto its stapled hip, the dog cried out, letting go, and two of the kids ran to the dog and calmed it and began to tug it away, but now the dog spooked and turned and attacked one of the kids, a little girl. The dog bit her hand, and face, and then a fireman hit the dog with an iron bar and killed it.

They stood on the street in the cold air and felt the heat from the flames reaching into the dark sky. The sight of a burning house, it's bigger than most things which take place in a person's life. R said, crossing her arms, My God, look at it. And it was pretty, and magnificent, he thought, those orange and purple flames billowing into the sky: fire, like the sun's, was the first source of light. Then fire became two sticks, a little friction, in order to warm the first tribe. And then there was the beating of the drums, with more sticks, for the giving of thanks, to be followed by a couple of misunderstandings, a few wars, during which fire then became the signal to aim, to kill another at a distance. First with the arrow, then with the round: the

distances grew, and the spears became the muskets which became the ballistic missiles, and then the distances grew too far to see. Or too close.

After a fire consumes, there's smoke. The dust and the ash linger in the air. Standing before the fire, Stephen watched the flames reflecting off R's face. The firelight lit her eyes and flickered in her hair. A woman stood alone, crying. There was a man, also crying, and several children holding hands. A fireman with blood on his jacket carried a bewildered girl in his arms. The wispy-bearded boy paced before the fire with his camera. The people on the street were shielding their eyes watching the man and the woman crying, the flames behind them, and now R said, turning to Stephen, shielding her eyes, You have something to tell me.

He said, I quit my job.

Oh.

I didn't want to say anything before the party.

Uh-huh. She said, So you've already made up your mind.

Yes.

When were you going to tell me?

After the rally.

You're not going to stay. I knew you weren't going to stay.

We want different things. I always was a compromise for you.

And me?

We're different.

She said, Go to hell.

You should let me go. It's not right to try and keep me just because you don't want to lose me. That's not a reason to fight. It's not good enough.

Not if we're not happy, she said. We used to be happy.

We were kids. We were eighteen. Siblings.

I know. She said, beginning to cry, I'm really going to miss you.

Just walk away, Renée.

She said, wiping her eyes, laughing, God, you used to love that song.

I still do.

I don't want you to go. I mean, I want you to be able to come back. This is different. It's not fair. You start to get your act together and you leave? We're just starting to recover. We could *still* have a life, Stephen. It's not fair.

What kind of life? We keep trying to change the other. We can't let the other be. It's not right.

I know. I was supposed to be able to fix it. Together. With you.

When you look at me, Stephen said, all I see is the boy we lost. And you, too. Because you didn't just lose Gulliver—you lost me, too. And I lost you. And Gulliver lost us. And Gulliver *is* us and you can't rescue me and we can't rescue him. I can't rescue anybody.

You did. After. You did. A little bit.

He's not coming back.

How do you know?

I just know. He's gone. He's not coming back and it's not our fault.

No? she said, turning her face back to the fire. You're wrong. It is.