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Choices And Chances: A Creative Exploration Of The Human Struggle Toward Meaning And Identity

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CHOICES AND CHANCES:

A Creative Exploration of the Human Struggle Toward Meaning and Identity

Lawrence R. McEvoy, Jr.
March 30, 1987
submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors requirements at Carroll College
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of English.

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Director

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Reader

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Reader
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During my years as a hard-studying academic, I have done much research and written torrents of analytical and evaluative compositions—some of them bad, some of them mediocre, some of them good. For my honors thesis, though, I wanted to write the sorts of things that I never have had adequate opportunity to investigate while I have been in school. Certainly the principles, both academic and personal, that I have assimilated in my brief twenty-one years are embedded in this work, but for the most part these writings are my expression, my exploration, of the dilemmas and perceptions that have for one reason or another wandered around inside of me.

I have always wanted to write, so here it is. This senior project is finished; it is finite and will be stored somewhere in an undergraduate library, but the writing itself is not finished. It will go on and on, and I will keep trying to hone the vague, elusive images of my own experience into concrete pieces of writing. It is hard to write, at least for me, yet there is no other way to write well except to start somewhere and keep plugging. I have enjoyed writing this capsulation of my college crucible, and I hope you enjoy reading it. All of the pieces involve struggle in some way, and while they all fit somehow into the "human struggle to create meaning and identity," they by no means define or encompass that struggle; they are just the tip of the iceberg, as seen through my eyes when I am young and wanting to write about it.
Imagination means Individuation.
--Stephen Spender, The Imagination in the Modern World
To fly

with ravens
In a dizzying giddy blue,
Ripping wind from the edges of stooping wings,
Wheeling on the flat satin of feather
Dancing on the breeze of fickle weather.

To want to fly,
Crawl up on granite edges
Lifting Earth toward perfect blue,
Discovered by ravens nesting there,
To bridge the gap between the sky and you.

To want to fly,
Stand small on trailing talus,
Stunned as the sun
Throws a curtain of squinting glare
Over the rocks, the ravens, and the freedom there.

To want to watch
Is to miss the flight and see
Only a picture instead;
To fly,
Wait for the birth of the bird
While the dream hibernates in your head.
THE GATHERING NIGHT

He eased through the door and stood there leaning on the knob, gazing vacantly into the kitchen. He trudged to the sink for a glass of water, but stopped instead at the counter with his head bowed and his hands on the edge of the counter. His wife, swooshing into the kitchen in a wool skirt, spied his lowered head and came to him.

"Hi, Jack! I just got back from the store," and she turned his face to kiss him briefly.

"Hi, Edie." His face escaped from her hands and dropped slowly back to his chest.

He does look a bit worn out, she noticed. "Jack, a week in the sun would do you good." She giggled with her mouth and her eyes, and he almost smiled himself when he heard her. "How was your checkup with the doctor?" His budding smiled faded, but she didn't see, for she had flitted to the other counter and was unpacking groceries.

She thought she heard him say the doctor was fine, but she was too busy digging in the groceries to hear clearly. She pulled out a plastic bag of oranges and set them beside him on the sink. Glancing sideways at their bursting forms, he reached out with one hand to take one. He rubbed the smooth, knobby surface and looked at it. Abruptly, his hand deposited it on the counter, as if it were repulsive.

He turned slowly to face her, but she was still bustling with the groceries. "Edie--?"

Well, that is a relief, then, she thought. It's such a crazy thing, cancer is. It had been nearly five years now, but it was
always at the back of her mind.

He looked away again, out the window now. "Edie, how was your day?"

"Jack, what is it?" She had looked up, clutching an empty grocery bag. Her raised eyebrows pushed creases into her forehead as the doubt flickered in her eyes.

He mustered a smile and shook his head, once, to ward off his news. "Oh, my bones are just aching again. How was your day?"

"Oh," and the lines of her mouth began creeping back into a grin, "It was all right." The grin spread up into her cheeks, and she ducked back into the grocery bags, her hair shading her face.

The sight of her there, smirking girlishly, chased the weariness from him for a moment. No need to bring it down just yet, he told himself. He snatched her hand and pulled her to him. "Ok, what is it? You've never been a good liar, Edie. What's up your sleeve?"

"Oh, Jack! I got my twenty-year service bonus at the travel agency today-- fifty percent off any intercontinental trip we'd like to take."

"What about the other half?"

She put a slender finger over his half-grinning mouth.

"Oh, I have that, too. Sneaky me, I've been saving up travel money for a while now, and I have enough all saved so the two of us can have a great little vacation--maybe go to Australia next Christmas when it's all cold here and your bones get all locked up."

It was "next Christmas" that brought it all crashing down on him again. He held her close against him, her face buried in his chest,
and let his head drop down to hers. "It's back, Edie."

She stiffened in his arms. "Oh, God," she whispered and raised her face. The operations, the chemotherapy, his wasted body—it all flooded over her like ice water and froze her face in panic. Jack broke her gaze and groped for an orange again like a blind man fumbling for his cane.

"Can they operate? Can they use drugs?" Something, there must be something. "When can they get rid of it?"

He stroked her fine hair with his free hand. Relieved, almost, to share the numbness of it with her, he said, "It's in my pancreas, and he thinks in my kidneys, too. They can't operate this time." He looked at her almost apologetically.

"Aren't there any drugs they can use?"

"No." She could barely hear him. "Nothing."

"Isn't there anything they can do?"

"NO!" His sudden anger made her collapse in his arms, but he kept going. "Six months to a year, he tells me. That's all." He pushed his thumb deep into the orange, and it spurted little gold drops that landed on his hand and blurred into a sticky trickle. He stared at his hand, and when he spoke again his voice was quiet. "That's all I have. This is it, this time." His eyes drifted up to the ceiling, his head tilted as if he were puzzled.

She raised her face and whispered hoarsely, "We still have time." She reached up and cradled his face between trembling hands; he tried to avoid her, but she turned him to her pleading eyes. "Hey. It's a good time to retire."
His eyes dropped shut, and his lips slackened into a limp half smile. He sighed deeply and let the weight of it flow away for the moment. His head tilted forward until their foreheads touched. "Yeah," he said. "A year is a nice long vacation, isn't it?"

Somehow the first week stumbled by in an unpredictable mix of tears of anger and disbelief and the starkly ordinary events of routine. Somewhere in those first shell-shocked days Jack quit his job at the bulk plant, and Edie cut hers back to half-time. They had saved for years, and though they both knew Edie would be financially secure, neither of them mentioned it.

The only drugs Jack would need would be painkillers, and he did not need them yet. The disease was virtually untouchable and seemed to know it, lying dormant in his body as if to taunt him with health before it began festering in his strong frame. After the brutal finality of the diagnosis, they began to enjoy their time off, embarking on frequent outings and spending long quiet hours together, even walking to mass on Sunday mornings. They planned their Australian vacation for late summer, and Jack broke out the atlases and maps at night and read to Edie. Between the break from work and the relaxing exercise, he began to feel vigorous and alive. The color grew strong in his face, and the playfulness returned to Edie's voice. A newness sprang up between them, and the disease and its doom were displaced for a few weeks. Because Edie worked in the afternoons, he started cooking meals. She insisted she could do it easily, but he insisted on trying. He had never had time to cook before, and he kidded with Edie about switching roles. Besides, the
long afternoon hours felt like wasted time unless he was doing something.

One day in early spring, Edie whisked into the kitchen at the end of the day as Jack stood over the stove wrestling with fried chicken and Rice-a-roni. She kissed him with briskness and tugged on her old apron that he had found somewhere. "How's the gourmet?"

"Mmm, fine. How's the executive?" He chuckled at his own humor and reached for the Rice-a-roni instructions.

"Jack, take me fishing."

"What?"

"Take me fishing."

"Edie, you don't even like fishing. Heck, I haven't fished since the boys left."

"I know. Let's go soon. Remember all those stories you used to tell me when we met?"

Jack stopped and looked at her, a wooden spoon poised in one hand, the instructions in the other. "You really do want to go, don't you? We can't go 'til the season opens--that's a couple of weeks, I guess--and if we go opening day we have to go early." He poked at the cooking rice and then looked at her, his head head cocked. "Yeah, let's go fishing. Where you want to go? We could try the river or the lakes."

"Oh, Jack, I don't know. It seems to me catching fish was never the central point of your fishing trips; at least that's how I remember the stories."

"Oh, hush. We'll do the river, then. More story material for
you romantic types. No crowds, either. Everyone and their boats will be on the lakes."

"He spent the next week puttering around in the garage, digging out old fishing gear and patching a pair of the boys' old hip waders for Edie. He bought a new set of fishing regulations and a map of access sites to see where they could fish. He had always wanted to take her fishing, but she had never wanted to go, so he had drifted away from it after the boys had gone. He had contented himself with telling her the stories about how he and his brothers had gone out at dawn and waded the river, catching fish and swimming at midday before napping on warm sandbars.

The day before their outing he rummaged around the house gathering gear and packing a picnic lunch. He explained everything to Edie--where they were going, how they would fish, how to use spinners and wet flies--knowing he would explain it all the next day, probably several times. As they lay in bed that night, he told her how the sun would feel, how the water would swirl around her legs and make her dizzy if she watched it, and she finally wrapped her arms around him and told him to wait until tomorrow.

The following dawn found them fifty miles from home at an out of the way fishing spot on the river. Edie stepped out of the car and headed for the river bank, but Jack struck off across the prairie flat of the broad river bottom with an earnest gait, clinking and jingling in a chatter of lures and creel and pole.

"Jack! The river's right here," she called.

Her voice stopped him, and he paused and beckoned with his head.
"C'mon. There's a hole down here I used to fish when I was a kid. Worked it with my brothers. It's just down here a ways."

"Oh, you. You're still a kid," she said, but she hustled to catch up. By the time they reached the spot, the sun had risen behind them, and it threw wiggly shadows over the water from the bank where they stood quietly. The water gurgled and pinwheeled in the pool.

"Looks the same," he pronounced after a few moments, and he realized it had been the same every single day, wet and waiting with fish, for thirty five years now. The sandbar glittered warmly on the opposite shore and beckoned as it had when he and his brothers napped and wrestled there. Seeing the water was high, he suggested that they try worms.

"But what about wetflies, Jack? What about lures, jigs, spinners, and mepps thingies?" He tried to look sideways at her with a deadpan face, but his mouth burst into a smirk when he caught her eyes. "Aah-haha," he said.

She insisted on baiting her own hooks, though she hated worms, and he showed her how to coil the worms on the hook so they could wriggle without coming off. He taught her how to read the water, how to find the little seams of current where the fish fed; they waded in above the hole and let the worms drift. Edie slipped and nearly fell as the gliding current eased her over the mossy, softball-sized rocks, and they both laughed when she recovered her balance. Jack kidded her about not practicing her wading skills on dry land first. They caught many fish, all but one of them small, but they didn't
That the dark, roiling mass of the river could suddenly relinquish a thrashing, glistening fish to the end of her line was a miracle to Edie, and it showed in her face. Jack, too, enjoyed the mystery of the river as he always had, wondering eagerly what shimmering form lurked at the end of his pole every time he got a bite.

Toward mid-morning, when the sun was high and burning their necks, Jack's hand slipped as he baited his hook, digging the barb into his palm. He ignored the small wound and kept fishing. A few minutes later, a vermillion trickle had run down the length of his hand, and Edie noticed it.

"Jack, are you Ok?"

"Hmm?" He glanced at his hand. "Oh, yeah. I'm just fine. Just a little blood." He held up his hand, grinning like a small boy. "Good, red, strong blood. Healthy blood."

"Ok," she answered, but she bit her lip and turned to the river to quell the sudden tears.

They fished until late morning, releasing all but the two biggest fish. They lunched on the sandbar and afterwards fell asleep, their bellies full, on the warm sand. Jack awoke first and lay there quietly on the bar, savoring the sun's warmth on his face and hands. He listened to the river rolling at his feet and felt Edie's sleeping form beside him. Ah, it feels good, he thought, to lie here in the sun with her. He smiled into the spring air and drew a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. He could see the glow in Edie's face when she caught that first fish, and it made him feel
strong and alive to hear her squeal when she grabbed its twisting, slippery body.

Somehow, though, he knew things were just not right. He could see the sadness in her eyes, or sometimes catch the fear that crept into her voice, often when "it" seemed to be farthest from either of their minds. Like when I cut my hand this morning, he thought. He had seen her turn away suddenly. It seemed that just as they managed to ignore it, the knowledge that he was dying wouldloom over them like a brooding storm.

He sat up abruptly and threw a fistful of sand into the whirling water. He longed to store up sunny spring days fishing with Edie and know they would wait for him, and the exhilaration of this one day seemed to him a cruel reminder of what must end. Still, he knew he would never give up the sight of her wading in the water or the feeling of the warm sun bouncing into his eyes off the river. I have never felt better, he thought; how can I be dying?

She awoke to find him propped on his elbows, staring at the water. She shook the sand from her hair and squinted in the bright light. She noticed Jack and paused, her hands clasped on top of her head. "Jack? You ok?"

"Yes, Edie. For Pete's sake, would you quit asking me that all the time?" He picked up a smooth stone and skipped it hard across the pool. "I feel fine." He looked at her with an almost grateful expression. "I've never felt better."

That was the last day he felt physically well. As if the disease had granted him enough time, his body began deteriorating.
He woke up with a fever and spent the whole day in bed. He slipped in and out of pain and fever all week, and he had to stop cooking. He felt a bit stronger after ten or twelve days, yet as spring blossomed into summer, he became progressively sicker. Still, he and Edie continued their little outings, often walking to the park to feed the ducks and gulls when he felt well enough. On days when his eyes were bright and glassy and his face flushed, he waited in quiet desperation for Edie to come home in the afternoons. She fed him hot soup and took him "to the movies," popping buttered popcorn and cuddling with him under the afghan in front of the TV. They began to wonder about their trip to Australia.

"Jack, what do you think about the trip?" she asked one night.

"I guess it's too late now," and he put his hand on hers. "To go, I mean. What do you think?" His hand, still large, was beginning to look thin and bony.

"No, I don't want to go, either." They both fell silent, staring at the set until she spoke again.

"It's not that I don't want to go. I'd love to go, really. It's just that if we go now, we can't do the things we'd like to, and--"

"I know."

"I mean, I'd always remember it like--"

"I know, Edie. Please. It's gone now. We might as well cancel."

"I'll cancel it tomorrow." Her voice almost shattered into whispering pieces. "We should get all our money back; it's still two
months away."

She awoke in bed that night with no memory of leaving the couch. He must have carried her to bed. The thought stirred a mixture of pride and concern, for he had seemed so weak lately. She rolled over in bed to find him, but the space was empty. She looked around quickly and saw him standing before the bedroom window. His thinning shoulders still filled the frame, and he was staring outside, his head craned so he could see the sky. He stood there quietly in his boxer shorts, one hand on the window frame.

"Jack?" she whispered. He didn't move. "Jack?" This time he turned silently. "You ok? Never mind--I didn't say that. What are you doing?"

"Just looking at the sky."

"Can I join you?"

"Yeah, sure. Please." She got out of bed and stood beside him, beneath his outstretched arm. She looked out and up with him. The sky was blue-black and infinite, swarming with stars. It hovered over them like a vast and billowing tent.

"Remember Korea?"

"Of course," she said, looping her hand around his waist.

"I thought I would die there."

"So did I."

"Every night, on the way back from mess, I would look up at the sky and pray that I would get home. I was terrified that I might die without ever seeing you again." He lifted his arm from the window and draped it over her shoulder. "Oh, I love the night sky," he
whispered.

"I still have your letters, Jack. I was out there every night."

"Yeah, I was, too. Every night I went out there."

"I did, too. After I put the baby to bed, I'd sit out on the porch, watching and waiting, praying you'd come back soon." They settled into silence, both of them looking out and up. After a long time Edie heard his voice, barely audible even in the quiet room.

"Edie? Will you look at the night sky when--I'm gone?" She turned to look at him and saw black lines of tears running down his hollowed cheeks.

"Oh, Jack." She started to cry then, too, and the two of them stood there in the darkness, looking out into the night, tears streaming down their faces. They stayed at the window until the tears stopped, and then they crept back to bed without speaking. When they were under the covers, Jack spoke again, quickly and quietly; he didn't want to chase the feeling that hung so closely around them. The words piled up on top of each other, like a child's building blocks tumbling from a bag.

"Edie? I wish time would stop, or even go backwards. I'm enjoying every day so much." He paused. "That's all."

She smiled in the dark and nestled closer to him.

Summer ripened into fall, and the cancer began devouring Jack's body. At first he merely lost weight and tired easily, but by October he needed a wheelchair to get around. He protested at first, saying he could just take things slower, but when he saw he and Edie wouldn't be able to do things together unless he was more
mobile, he reluctantly consented. He steadfastly refused to use it around the house, and they had the chair a week before he let Edie wheel him to the park. He felt crippled, especially when he saw children chasing squirrels or playing tag on the grass.

As he grew weaker though, his objections to the wheelchair stopped altogether, and he sat in it with a mixture of gratitude and loathing. Edie was glad to wheel him around, and told him so, yet she, too, stirred with sadness every time he settled himself slowly into the seat. Not so long ago, this man had carried her to bed so softly he had not even roused her, and he had been weak even then. Now he sat unprotesting in a wheelchair, his once-strong body crimped and wasted with disease. Only with the tilt of his head did he argue with it anymore; he held his chin up, and his eyes glittered from his sallow face like trapped animals.

When they went to church on Sundays, he could no longer hold the door for Edie or stand beside her in the pew. They had tacitly selected a spot near the back of the church beside the aisle. They could see the whole church from there, and Jack felt less obvious. The first few times Edie sat on the end of the pew beside him, but as he became weaker, she sensed a feeling of loneliness about him and stood behind him the whole time, one hand resting on his shoulder.

They were there the Sunday after Thanksgiving, watching and listening from the back of the church. Their two sons and their families had flown in for the holiday, but they had left on Friday. No one had said anything about how poorly Jack looked except the youngest grandchild, who had asked her father loudly, "Daddy, what's
wrong with Grandpa?" Edie had looked quickly at Jack, but he was looking out the window and would not meet her gaze. He had been quiet since they left, and she stood there behind him on the verge of tears, her eyes wandering as Father Renning said mass.

Jack sat in the wheelchair with his big-knuckled hands folded in his lap as he listened to the beginning of the priest's homily. His chin was tilted to the side and down, against one shoulder, in a gesture of pained interest, and his shoulders were turned down and in. A gentle squeeze on his shoulder told him that Edie was listening, too. It was the first Sunday of Advent, and Father Renning was speaking of the night sky and the message there, of the silence that beckoned and waited. While he spoke, the priest's hands swooped back and forth through the air as his voice climbed and tumbled and climbed again. When his voice grew soft and almost whispery, the hands settled to stillness on the podium.

Jack watched and listened and remembered when his own hands had been so alive. As he sat there in the wheelchair with his chin tucked and his shoulders rolling into his wasted body, he felt grateful for this man who could speak so eloquently of the night sky. His mind drifted back to Korea and then to that quiet summer night. He knew he would die soon, so he listened with all the vigor left in him and savored the presence of the woman behind him, lifting one hand back to his shoulder so she could hold it.

She gripped his hand hard, for a surge of grief had pushed the tears out her eyes and tightened her throat. She fumbled for a tissue. Although he didn't turn to look, she knew he could hear her
crying quietly behind him. She looked down at the weakened man who was her husband, and as the priest spoke on about people being connected to the night sky, she, too, remembered Korea and the summer stillness. Through her tears, she kept lifting her head to watch with jack, and the two of them listened back there, out in the aisle in the back of the church.

The next day he began vomiting, and she had to stand beside the toilet and support him as his skinny body heaved. She was wiping his face with a warm towel when he asked simply, his voice raspy but quiet, "Did you hear what he said yesterday?"

"Yes, Jack." She smiled with tears. "I heard."

He vomited all week, and he became too weak to speak much. She held him as his body rocked and spasmed, and he looked at her with glassy, pleading eyes and held her hand tightly. He died that Friday while he slept in front of a soap opera; she found him when she came out of the kitchen with a bowl of soup. Somewhere inside she realized that it had all ended, that there would be no more days in the sun, no more lectures on fishing, no more days in the wheelchair, yet she simply sat down beside him and traced his forehead with her hand. She smoothed his hair back from his brow for a few moments, and then she broke into sobs with her head buried, for the last time, on his chest.

Suddenly she was numb again, numb as she had not been since that first week so long ago when he had told her he had it again. The boys flew back for the funeral, and she cried on the shoulders of brothers, children, friends. She was aware only that she was alone.
Before they had been numb together at least. Somewhere in the mist of grief the funeral came and went, and all the other mourners drifted back to their previous lives. She was left alone.

For the second time in her life she watched the night sky every night, but this time she already knew the answer to her questions. She kept watching anyway, waiting out the grief, waiting for the memories to surface like flashing silver fish from the silted pain.
Where today are the Pequot? Where are the Naragansett, the Mohican, the Pokanoket, and many other once powerful tribes of our people? They have vanished...as snow before a summer sun.

--Tecumseh of the Shawnees
It was one of those days when the air was clear for a change, when the jets jumped out over the Potomac and fled into a thin blue sky. The blue air seemed to pull them off the runway, sucking them into the early December air above the concrete city. They took off in roaring intervals every thirty seconds or so and twisted away to vanish in their own contrails. They fled from the ground as if the same miracle that held their huge tonnage airborne could somehow free them from the city's finite space and time.

One of them, a sleek 727 with a red tail, took me in, and we disappeared in a wispy signature of jet exhaust. I pressed my forehead to the window and watched the Georgetown campus slide away as the jet heeled over and made the earth tilt. Below me, the city became smaller, a mere location, a somewhere, anywhere, not the place that had occupied a semester's worth of close-cornered worry and plans. It all slid away--the tests, the streets at night with their neon invitations, the days of watching jets roaring out of sight to other places, always leaving.

The plane levelled out and headed west and home, a journey I divided between staring down at the checkerboarded landscape and reacting mechanically to the activity inside. Men in suits read the Wall Street Journal or worked on files retrieved from leather satchels while flight attendants peeked incessantly, like mannequins in identical blue and white outfits, "Something to drink, sir? Peanuts? Peanuts?" The next aisle, "Peanuts? Peanuts?" I grabbed
peanuts at every turn and kept looking down, down through trailing cirrus clouds to the land below.

I have always had to watch the land drift by; North America is so huge, so varied and vast and endless even today that it demands my attention. It seems too easy, too effortless, to sit back and sleep while I cross all that space. In some irrational tribute to the ardor of the journey, I raise my head to watch. There are too many thoughts in my head, too, stirred by the landscape that rolls by like some sort of film, with its stories of smokestacks along ribboned rivers, shadows of floods, glacier-wrought lakes, freeways. So many stories.

So the eastern U.S. trailed by, and the plane landed in Chicago and took off and landed in Minneapolis and took off again; the loading gates all looked the same. Some passengers got off and re-entered central time; for them the difference between the place we had left and the one that awaited them was only an hour. For them it was over. No more peanuts, no more Journal, no more flight attendants. Others got on, though, and grabbed the discarded Journal or pulled new files from the same brown satchels.

The jet wheeled over land that had no smokestacks and very few rivers. My head again dropped to the window, away from the friendly skies and its peanuts. The roar of the engines lulled me to eerie silence, as if the wind-like sound in the pressurized cabin were the only noise in a silent universe. The ground, so many miles and years away, peeled by slowly, a great ream of paper showing its every pore. Snow already dusted the northern plains—down there it would be cold,
and the wind would be knifing anything not tucked into the folds of some coulee. At 30,000 feet the earth was still, its stories easy to see, unlayered by expressways and unspeckled with towns. Wrinkled bluffs, like crimped corners of a brown bag, fanned out from threading water courses. The streams took their time, for the land was old and did not hurry them into straight, tumbling paths. No fence lines, no county roads marked sections and townships--not many people lived in that northwest section of South Dakota. Not many ever had. The snow on the ground and the roaring engines made the land seem frozen, not merely cold, a vast diorama locked in the icefloe of time.

A blotch of timber rolled over the horizon to the northwest, a scar on the brown and white flatness. I had seen it before, as a toddler riding through on a family vacation, but it was not the childhood memory that made me push my face closer to the glass. There was a story there, buried beneath the snow, not a story my eyes could see, but one my mind remembered, dimly. A skeleton of it rested at home in a book whose cotton binding was worn slick with many nights' reading.

The dark scar inched closer. A hundred and more years ago, American Horse had camped there with his band of Oglalas, a fugitive remnant of a proud prairie people. Two months after Custer, the U.S. army found them there. Most of the people escaped and fled south toward the Cheyenne river, but the soldiers chased him and a few others to a cave on that lone stretch of timbered bluff. How he must have felt, this man of open space, chased into a cave and
showered with bullets, waiting, knowing it was all over, not just this one day, not just his life. So he waited, and he must have ached to run just one more time on a quick buffalo pony, to live just one more night under a prairie sky and its blue-white moon. The buffalo were already gone by then, and the people were scattered. Railroads had been built; there was no room left for this tiny group of people on this huge land. His band was not merely running, they were vanishing.

With the placid desperation of doomed prisoners, they returned the fire of the soldiers under a warm September sun. Toward evening, an army scout went to the cave and asked them to surrender. He didn't answer; he didn't have to. Half of them inside were already dead, and all of them were wounded. He stepped outside and saw the soldiers gathered below him. Holding his entrails in a bloody left hand, he shook hands with the scout. As he extended his hand to the people that destroyed him, he knew the life bleeding in his other hand was gone forever.

They gave him a blanket to wrap his wounds, and he sat up by the fire, rocking slowly back and forth. Too empty to weep, he died during the night, his last thoughts drifting out to the lingering strands of his people. At the site, the U.S. government erected a sign saying that two U.S. troopers were killed there, September 9, 1876. The place was, and is, Slim Buttes.

His people returned at night, and by the time the sun again shone on the mouth of his cave, they had carried him away to burial on one of the nameless bluffs above the winding little creeks that
take their names from vanished souls. He is out there still, his bones and his lifetime woven into the land that keeps so many of them, forgotten people with strange-sounding names to this century.

The bluffs were nearly under me now, dark and cut with gullies, just as they were then, and before then. I gazed down at the rutted butte, and the land stared back, unblinking. The trees have hidden the mouth of the caves, and a hundred years of wind and rain and sun have washed away the blood and the footprints that left such sharp edges in the dust that day. Still the ground remembers, holding in its gullies and meandering streams what living things forget. No more do bands of them roam over the land, hunting buffalo and swimming in the cold waterholes of August, but the story is etched there and cannot be removed.

Slim Buttes disappeared under the belly of the plane, and I took one last look at the frozen earth. Nothing moved. It would be here, just the same, in another hundred years, holding more tiny tales of life, like protozoans that die and pile up on the floors of the oceans. They are there forever, buried under the sediment of this later civilization, whispering to airplanes and satellites.
ONE IN A MILLION

He let himself in the house quietly and sat down in the dark. Red and white lights from the city scattered into the night and then rejoined on the black glass to flood through the bay window and bathe the apartment in soft light. The light flowed past him and onto the hardwood floor, leaving his face in a mask of shadows and light spots. He lay back on the couch for a moment, sighing, and then he changed his mind and stood up. He flicked on a light and strode over to the big table outside the kitchen, his long legs trailing scissoring shadows on the floor. Picking up the rubber banded bundle there, he flipped through his mail and tossed the junk pieces into an overflowing wastebasket beside the table. The only remaining piece was a letter from his parents.

He walked back to the couch and looked at the reflection staring back at him from the window. It eyed him with the same sweat-tussled hair, the same lean body in the gray sweatshirt. Through the window, the Chicago skyline outlined his reflection with a field of tiny lights and created a strange double exposure around his image. The buildings themselves were indistinguishable from the night, but the thousands of window lights stacked up into tall rectangles. He stuck his tongue out at the broad-shouldered mirage and turned his back to sit down. Kicking his feet up on the arm of the couch, he stretched out and slit the letter open with a tiny nail file on his keys. It was an Easter card from his parents, scribbled in his mother's wobbling blue pen. They were fine, a bit lonely now that his youngest sister had finally left home, and hoped to hear from him on
Easter Sunday. He grinned. After all these years he still called on every holiday, yet they never forgot to remind him. "OK, Mom," he said. On the back of the card was a postscript: "Catlin--the same one you used to know?--left a message on the machine yesterday, said she just thought she'd call. 612-323-3434, if you want to call her back."

He raised his eyebrows and then read the postscript again. Why would she call now? He hadn't heard from Catlin in years; he hadn't thought of her for months, at least. He dropped the card on the coffee table beside the phone. He switched off the light and drifted back to the days when he found out about it all.

"Hey, have you run into Catlin?" he had asked Skeets, who was going to school at the U. in Minneapolis.

"No, Wayne, I don't think she'll be coming. I guess she's pregnant. Somebody said she's getting married before the baby comes. Sorry, man. I thought for sure you knew already."

"Catlin? That's ridiculous, Skeets. That's impossible." He was sure he was joking.

But he wasn't joking, and Wayne understood why the letters had tailed off toward the end of his freshman year at Duke, why she had hedged about coming down to the Twin Cities to visit before she started school at the U. He found out later that the baby came in November of his sophomore year; she had gotten married in October.

He put his hands behind his head and tried to remember the guy's name. She had mentioned him once, in one of her last letters, right
before summer--"a nice guy, I think you'd like him." He found out
from a friend of a friend that they had a second child a year later,
and then he lost track, let her go, moved on to get his Masters in
counseling at Northwestern.

Somehow he could never quite swallow it, though. The Catlin he
had known and the one he heard about seemed so different. She used
to say, when they were tanning on the dock, how she couldn't
understand how everyone in Avon could be raised there, never go
anywhere else, and never try. She would stare at the bluegills
peeking out from under the dock's shadow and say, "Not me, Wayne."
She wiggled her toes in the lake and looked at him suddenly. "I,
her lips were pursed tight as she bobbed her head, "I am going to get
out and look at the whole world." She considered the sunfish for a
moment and said, "Of course, I might even come back and live here--
it's a nice place, you know. But to never go anywhere else? Forget
it--that's crazy."

No, he could never quite see the two sides of it. She was so
aware of that small place, and yet she fell in anyway. He was
tempted to call her so many times after he found out about the baby,
but what would he have said? "Hi, this is an old boyfriend, could I
speak with Catlin? Thank you. Say, Catlin, I was just wondering,
how did you grab the tar baby when you already knew?" He hadn't
wanted to know, really. He preferred to see her laughing on the
dock, kicking water at him with those pretty toes and watching
sunfish.

He reached over in the dark and grabbed the phone. He set it back
on the table, and then picked it up again. She's probably worked right through the whole mess and picked up where she left off, he told himself. When he dialed, the ring sounded loud to his ear, and then she picked up the phone.

"Hello?" She had no idea; he could still hang up.

"Catlin." He ran his fingers through his hair. "How have you been?"

"Fine, fine. How about you?" She laughed then. "Oh, listen to us--it seems like yesterday."

"Yeah, you still giggle."

"I do?" A child whined in the background. "No, Rachel. Sit still. I'm so glad you called. I had no idea, really, even where you were, so I tried your folks' house."

"What made you call now? It's been a while, you know?" He lay there on the couch, looking out the window. There was no reflection in the dark, just the skyline, glowing like a symmetrical sky, with all its right angles and squares of light.

"Well, we'd always been such good friends, and I never--I felt nervous about calling, but I told you I would never forget you, and I haven't, so I thought I'd call." He bit his lip and laughed to himself. She always used to fall into cliches, he thought, but she really meant what she said.

"Say, how's your husband--Jim, is it?"

"Jeff."

"Jeff, yeah, Jeff," and he knew he wouldn't be able to remember the guy's name the next day.
"He's out of town. He coaches the basketball team. You know how that goes. They're at districts now. He won't be back 'til Sunday." That's right, the mania over the high school basketball teams--he had forgotten that part.

His hand dropped down over his eyes and just listened to her speak. It seemed so odd to him to be sitting in his own home, surrounded with his own furniture, his own job-training career, and listening to her voice. It wasn't real, this melodrama, yet he could hear her voice, small and far away through the static, and it sounded the same.

He took a deep breath. "Catlin, what happened?"

"I don't know." Her voice was almost a whisper, and then it recovered, her words spilling over each other and spreading into him like a stain. "I tried to tell you. I did. I sat down to write, and I wanted to call--I just couldn't. Not then." She stopped and said something to Rachel. "I'm sorry, I really am."

"Nah, don't worry about it. It's a long time ago now. It's over. It was hard on me, though. I couldn't believe it at first. Honestly, my mind wouldn't buy it. It's happened to a lot of people I know, but not you. Not Catlin, I told myself. No, I couldn't believe it. I dreamed about it a lot, seeing you pregnant and everything--does this bother you?"

"No, no. Go ahead."

"Yeah, it hurt for a while, actually a long time, but I got over it. I felt bad for you, too, because I know it's not what you had in mind for yourself." He felt embarrassed, as if he had talked too
much on a first date.

"Yeah, that's what was hard for me, too. Having to change all my plans, all my expectations. You know how we used to talk---school at the U., and then somewhere really great. But the baby came, and I had to take care of her, and now I won't get to go to school. I've made my peace with it, but it was such a shock when I realized how final everything was."

"You could still go back. I knew a lot of women at--"

"No. He'd never go for that." Wayne's eyes dropped shut; she would never have said that eight years ago.

"No, I guess you can't go back, he said. "Are you happy, Catlin? I mean, are things going pretty well?"

"Yeah. It's not what I imagined for myself, but Rachel and Rita are wonderful, and I love them, and they make me happy. I can't imagine my life without them now." She's trying to make due, he thought. It seemed he could almost hear a tiny voice beneath the static, and he imagined that voice was still screaming to walk away from the whole mess.

"Are you going to live in Avon for a while?"

"Mmm-hmm. We'll probably stay here. Both our families are here you know, and Jeff's got a good job."

He heard a siren, and red and blue light whirled across the ceiling. "What's he do?"

"He's an apprentice plumber now. He was a mechanic, but the plumbing has a lot more room for advancement. He seems to like it."

He nodded silently and waited before he asked her, "Do you think
you would have married him anyway? It's none of my business, I--"

"I might have. I think so. I can't imagine doing that with someone I didn't love, you know?"

"Yeah, I have trouble seeing that." Why did you do it then? he wondered.

"It turned out all right. I used to cry myself to sleep when I first found out, but things aren't so bad. My life's just different than I expected, but whose isn't?" She's trying to make herself content with it, he was positive, and he could hear that little voice again. One of the little girls screamed in the background, banging something, and she told her to stop. "Anyway, enough about my life. I called because I wondered about you. I often think about those days, even though I know they're gone now. What are you doing?"

"Well, let's see. In a nutshell, I finished at Duke, and then I got my Masters at Northwestern in administrative counseling, of all things. I've stayed in Chicago, and I work in a placement organization on the South side of the city."

"Oh! You're in Chicago?!" He could almost see her face, the way her mouth puckered into a little "o" of surprise under her eyes, those laughing gray-green eyes.

He laughed into the phone. "Yes, Chicago. Quite a surprise, huh?"

"Well, it's just that, I don't know, I'm so used to seeing you at your folks' place." An image flashed into his head, a picture of her flip-flopping around the house in those footed pajamas her mother made her buy before she came down.
"That's right. I haven't been back for a couple of years now. I miss it, sometimes. Not the mosquitoes, though. How is Minnesota, anyway?"

"The same. Mosquitoes are still here. So what do you do in Chicago?"

"I work in a job placement organization, sort of a job training deal. We work with people who have been unemployed or want better jobs. It works out pretty well, actually. They come to us on their own time, so when they come they're ready to go. It was tough at first, but we have a great placement rate now, and we can offer them a lot of skills. Working with the people is great. There are some gutsy folks here--some pretty burned out ones, too. A lot of them are single guys who are trying to straighten themselves out or single women who," he halted, and then decided to go on, "married young and then got divorced."

"Where do you live?" She was peeking now, and he knew it, so he answered her question at face value.

"Yeah. At first I had a place up north along the lake, but it didn't go down real well to show up down here and drive home at night. So I moved down here into one of the neighborhoods. It's a lot closer, and I feel at home--you know, playing softball on the weekends or hitting the block parties."

"You never did get married, did you?" There it was.

"Nah." He waved the idea off into the dark. "I thought about it a couple of times, but I'm just too comfortable by myself, I guess."
She laughed. "Right. One of these days the bug'll bite you. You'd be surprised at the fringe benefits."

"I bet."

"Say, I better let you go. Let me have your number."

He gave it to her, and she took it down in between Rachel's demands for a drink of water. "Catlin, thanks for calling my Mom and Dad's place. It meant a lot, really."

"Yeah, I know. I mean, I'm glad, too."

"Take care of yourself, and your family. Good-bye."

"Good night, Wayne." She hung up. Good night--as if she'd see him the next day. He stood up and put down the phone. Catlin, he said to himself. Good-bye.

He kicked off his shoes and stood up in the darkness. At the corner between the wall and the ceiling, his shadow bent into a twisted shape like an old man's; he clicked on the light. He wandered into his bedroom and knelt beside his bed, reaching far under it to pull out a taped-up shoebox. Ripping off the tape with his stubby, quick-bitten fingers, he pried open the top and peeked in as if to assure himself it was all still there. One of her letters poked out of the pile, its closing corner jutting into the triangle of light illuminating the dark insides of the box. "You make me laugh. Love, Catlin," he could read.

A ragged edge caught his eye, and he reached in with his fingers, unwilling to take the top off the box, and found an old picture of her. It was creased across the center with a whitish blur, but otherwise she looked the same as she had on the day she took it.
don't believe you're taking my picture, the face said. Her cheeks were red and healthy with sun, and when he squinted he could see that big freckle on the side of her nose. An unruly strand of hair wafted away from her head, waving at him.

He put the picture back in the box and tried to tape it shut again, but the tape was curled and wouldn't stick. Holding the box in both hands, he walked out to the wastebasket and laid it, gently, in with the junk mail. Yanking out the plastic liner, he secured it with a twister and stepped out into the hall. The carpet of the old walkway smelled of dust and groceries, like his grandmother's apartment used to smell. He walked down the hall, dropped the black bag off at the four big garbage cans by the stairwell, and slipped out onto the fire escape.

He loved standing on the fire escape in the evenings, feeling the cold metal soak through his socks. Except for the two young men leaning against a lamp post, the intersection was empty. Heat from the street still mingled with the cooler evening air drifting in from the lake, bringing a mix of oil and trash and geraniums from the window boxes. He started to wonder about it all again, about how their lives had turned and twisted so far apart. They were so alike, he had thought, yet as he tried to recall the picture of how they were, it blurred and he felt only a sense of distance, a sense of having moved far, far away. He tried, for a few moments, to recapture the sensation of their moving in the same direction, toward similar lives, but nostalgia taunted him without reward.

As he sat there on the platform, the warm sense of completeness
that followed the phone call dissolved and left him irritated in a nagging sort of way. He tried hard to soak up the flavor of the spring evening, but his unsettled thoughts kept drifting back to her. He had packaged it up so neatly and moved on, and now here she was calling him up again. What for? The more he thought about it, the more he realized her phone call had ruined everything. The girl he used to know, the one that laughed and dreamed, the one who was so unabashedly naive and determined, was gone. He couldn't even think of her that way anymore, and he certainly didn't like thinking of her the way she was now. She had robbed him; he felt cheated. In a way, calling like she did, she had smeared everything he had ever thought of her. Yes, she had ruined everything.

He gave up and walked indoors again to call one of the guys at work. It would be time to start playing softball on Park street again. His thoughts that evening melted as the spring turned toward summer. Playing ball on Park street took his time after work even when he didn't play, because there were always people there, old guys, kids, families, everybody, just gabbing. He went down to relax in the amber light of the city's evenings and bask in the feeling he found there, the feeling of being around people who were just enjoying themselves. He was getting ready to head down there one Sunday afternoon when the phone rang.

"Wayne, It's me."

"Well," he began. "Catlin." He pulled up the sleeves to his sweatshirt. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. I just called to say hello." He was sure she was
crying.

"Well, great," but she didn't answer. "Catlin, is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything's fine. I just missed you."

"So how's the family? How's Jeff?"

"He's out of town again, camping I think." They talked for a few minutes about nothing, and he asked again.

"Catlin, what is it?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to say hello." One of the girls started screaming in the background.

"Catlin. I know you better."

"I think I called to say 'I'm sorry.'"

"Catlin, you did that last time. Forget it, it's over with."

Then she did start to cry. "I know, I know, I know. But I need to talk sometimes, and--"

"Hey," he tried to sound soothing, but she was sobbing. "That's not what I meant." There was a long pause, and he wished again he had never heard from her.

"It's just so hard. I wish things had turned out different. I just need someone to--"

"Catlin, we can't talk like we used to." She stopped.

"I know," she whispered.

"It's not my place, you know? Even if we wanted to, we can't be that close."

Yet she wouldn't let him go. She told him about the girls and how she was taking ceramics at Hastings Valley Community College, and that
some day she hoped to visit Chicago.

"Catlin, I need to go. The guys are waiting--we're playing ball."

"Oh, sure. Don't let me keep you waiting." He heard her draw a rattling breath.

"Hey, thanks again for calling. Take care of yourself now."

"Good Bye," and she was gone.

He grabbed his glove and ran out to the street. He was sure she would never call again now. He could still hear that little voice inside of her, wanting so badly to escape and try all over again, but he wasn't sure if that little voice belonged to her or to him.
WHAT WINTERING ANIMALS KNOW

When snow comes to the Yellowstone plateau in the fall, chasing the fat lazy days of summer, the throngs of calico tourists have already migrated back to their suburban homes and commuter jobs. Before the snow piles deep and buries the road, hordes of snowmobilers haul their black snowsuits and boots from summer storage. Cross-country skiers retrieve their skin-tight racing colors or woolen nickers and make their reservations at Old Faithful. Every night winter throws new snow on the outposts of human civilization, erases benches and railings and outhouses, and locks the big buildings under its white weight. While the geysers and boardwalk waterfalls of summer take their places in summer snapshots, the elk and bison herds stand outlined starkly against winter's deadly beauty.

At first, chance dictates the fortunes of the herds that huddle in the steaming high valleys. How late in the spring the young ones were born, how much summer-grown grass lies under the snow, and how cold and stiff the wind blows forges the character of each winter. None of them are easy.

In December and January the sharp cold and deep snow tucks the chins of the herds, and their steaming breath floats thickly on the brittle air like so many tiny geysers. They turn their heads, slowly, to watch the skiers, and they stand in the sun or the steam or both. Already they move rarely, and then only to eat.

The skiers stand there sweating, and some of them, feeling the air pull the red heat from their bared ears, remark how amazing it is
that the animals can stand the cold, all day, every day. After all, they point out, there are no lodges, no high-tech clothing, no schnapps to keep them warm. They take a few pictures and move on, kicking their way back to warm homes for the rest of the winter. The snow keeps falling, and the big animals keep waiting.

The elk stand with their backs to the wind, their heads held just above the ground, moving only their lips to eat. The bison weather the bright cold with half-closed eyes, shoveling snow with their shaggy heads to find the grass below. By late February, the big animals have transformed from healthy organisms to gaunt fixtures of the landscape. Their coats are still long and air-filled, but shaggy and patchy. Their summer-curved sides hollow as the winter continues; their muscled haunches wither to sinew as they fight their battle with the cold, summoning a calorie of heat for every one the cold steals.

Now, when winter has grown skin tight on their ribs, when the days are longer and the snow deeper, is when their survival shifts from a stroke of chance to an act of will. They no longer duel with the cold—the weapons on both sides are exhausted. Winter's coldest days and heaviest storms are past; the accessible grass and stored fat are consumed. The herds and winter both begin to die—winter's death is inevitable, the animals' death lingers as winter's dying threat.

The skiers wear lighter clothing and take fewer pictures now. As if in respect, they spend less time peering at the animals, watching them die from a distance instead. For the animals, the
months of cold and snow have distilled their lives to one essential purpose: to outlast the winter. So they wait, stubbornly and patiently, the tendons in their necks taut against their skin, walking to warmed patches of barren ground on rickety legs. To lie down is an inviting alternative to standing one more day.

The coyotes tear the gaunt carcasses of the dead ones; their own hard winter is over. The animals that remain standing are unswerving and unself-conscious in their quest for spring; their singularity of purpose burns behind their listless eyes. With the fortitude born of enduring generations, they know spring is coming. Their willingness to stand, spring after spring, century after century, becomes an elemental commitment to their genetic destiny.

To the tourists who see them every year, they are animate ornaments on a beautiful postcard scenery, yet their relentless endurance stares past our peeping lenses to the spasmic throes of our own human struggle. The same impulse must burn in us as a species, yet so few of us achieve their struggle-born harmony. Elk have done and will do many things during their lifetimes--they rut, they itch, they graze, they frolic, they wallow--yet winter boils them down to one act, living: evolution's amalgam of desire, purpose, obligation, and need.

And us? Millions of us spend our lives wondering who we are, where we are, why we are, unable to find the answers in the crucible of our own lives. We litter our history with the bodies of our carnage, and the smell of our blood is the smell of our guilt, not the consequence of storms and winters. We have conquered storms and
winters by now, we have tamed oceans and atmospheres, yet we pay the price of our collective ignorance with the lives we lose in warfare and the hunger of politics. We have exploded from the bowels of the young earth like some wildly oscillating life form, a genocidal organism confused about its own role, unable to settle itself into the age-old rhythms of continuity and inevitable, grinding change. We have wandered not only to the door of our own disaster, but to the edge of planetary extinction. How biologically schizophrenic it is that we are made of the same tissues, the same strings of the same molecules, them and us, yet they live so unerringly while we stumble through centuries, struggling still to find and embrace our own niche in the universe.

A few of us have tapped the wellsprings of our vitality over a lifetime; all of us wander across it periodically, for brief periods of minutes, hours, weeks, illusive hints of potential. As a species, though, we seem unable to trace the complex helix of our evolution's challenge, the convoluted mystery of our own intricate minds. We are prolific because we are powerful, but we cannot match the dogged march of herds of elk. Bison and elk do not reel when winter comes; they cannot stop to get confused. In the winter, when movement itself is an effort, to doubt is to die, to fall to the coyotes and the cold. Winter will take some and leave others, but they all know the struggle. Some die because they lack physical resource, never because they lose their direction.

We rarely fail for lack of resource, yet we seem to lose our direction so easily. Perhaps our genetic template is different;
perhaps we are too young. We are the newest of new life on this planet, and maybe that is why elk and sharks are so good at what they do: because they are older, much older, their genetic maps so much simpler and definite. Maybe we need to live longer, to let our lifespan catch up with the enormity outlined in the human task before we settle into the circles of seasons and snows to mesh our technology with our spiritual quest.

There was a time when living and existing were one, when there was no schism between how we lived and why we lived. Ironically, our ability to stray, to lose touch, allows us the rare chance to return, not to the same place, but to the same path. Indeed our genetic strands are more complicated than nature has ever built; evolution blessed us and was not kind. Our potentialspirals away from cold winters and simple survival, gives us consciousness, and then makes us dizzy in its ever-widening arc. We struggle forward and try to return, each of us, to the dawn of our species when we still followed our unerring instincts, before our capacity to reflect granted us the promise of transcendence and the peril of anomy.

If the elk find their integrity in the fight against the storms, we find ours in the conscious exercise of choice. We will regain our struggle as we have lost it: in our millions of individual efforts to live as elk and bison do, with simple and unyielding resolution. Then, like them, our generations will move through eons, like the slicing tails of sharks in the oceans. Until then, we will ski past elk in the winter and wonder how it is that they do what they do so well.
"It's a hot one, Raymond," said the smaller man as he turned away from the city. He tilted back his hardhat and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. A drop of sweat ran down his crooked nose and fell down through the scaffolding to the street four floors below. "It is a hot one."

"Yeah." The big man's head turned slowly and his eyes rolled white in his dark face as he glanced sideways at the younger man. "Yeah, the man said it was eighty seven, and that was when I got off the train. It's going to be hot, all right."

They turned back to the sun. It loomed orange and dim in the thick air, hovering like a searing balloon above D.C. The Whitehurst freeway wound along the Potomac to the east; past the river the Capitol and the monuments poked out of the dirty morning haze. Sailboats skated in and out of the hot stripe of glare on the river.

Raymond stretched on the platform and pouted slightly, his bushy moustache bobbing over his mouth. "Hey, Isaac, you seen Kevin and Keith?"

"Nah, I think they missed the train again." He bent over his jackhammer and made sure the air hose, trailing four stories down to the compressor on the street, was not hung up on the scaffolding that climbed the building like a strange, geometric vine.

Raymond shook his head slowly and looked down at his huge hands, thick-fingered and strong, wrapped loosely around the railing. Since he had worked with Raymond, Isaac had never seen those hands really
grip anything. He held everything loosely, as if he would crush it in his hands if he really held on. He even held the jackhammers gently, pushing them with his body, never with his hands. "Kevin got to start getting here on time, or the man going to let him go, you know what I'm saying? Can't let Keith go though; need him to run the elevator." He turned to put on his goggles.

At the end of the block, two lean men jogged out of the subway entrance, throwing on red hardhats as they came. Above Raymond and Alex, from the ninth or tenth floor, the big plumber that looked like a viking bellowed out one of the big window portals. "Kevin! Leg your ass up here in two minutes or you're home for good!"

One of the men broke into a run and a grin and headed toward one of the entrances of the building. Kevin always wore long-sleeved flannel shirts buttoned at the wrists; today he was wearing his blue one. He never wore t-shirts, and when it got hot, he worked without a shirt.

Keith trotted under Raymond and Isaac. One of Raymond's huge hands wandered over the railing in salute for both of them, and Keith waved back, still running. He moved with a loping stride, even when he walked, his shoulders rolling with the rhythm of his gait. He worked with the labor crew, shuttling materials up and down the building for five-fifty an hour. Usually he rode to work with Raymond, but Raymond's car, a dented white Chevette, was in the shop for the week. "Seven thirty, buddy. Electrician's been hollering about you for a half hour."

Keith ignored Isaac's remark. "Draft day, Isaac. Draft day,"
was all he said before he ducked into the underground garage to punch his time card.

"Hey, that's right. The Celtics say they're going to pick Bias. I can work to that." Isaac popped the railing with his open hands before slipping on his goggles.

Raymond's eyes rolled to him. "I work to everything. A labor foreman's got to keep his title." He grinned at Isaac, and his teeth were big and white and made him look almost shy. Isaac grinned back, he wasn't sure why, and said, "Oh, yes."

So they worked. The sun inched up into the sky, turning whiter and throwing wrinkles into the air above the street. The quivering air flowed up along the side of the building, carrying the smells of hot tar and dust and making the edges of the building seem curvy and illusive. The two men heaved on the lightweight jacks, clearing the pre-cast concrete frames so the big plate glass could be fitted. Every half hour or so Raymond's two-way radio would crackle, "Raymond-Raymond," and he would have to leave to oversee the other laborers.

Isaac had earned his own hammer that way, chipping when Raymond left. He had been picked to help Raymond, to keep the hose from kinking. When the big man was gone for a half hour one day, Isaac picked up the hammer and started himself; he had gotten quite a bit done before Raymond returned.

"Not bad for an owner's nephew, eh Raymond?" he said as Raymond clambered up the scaffold. "Give him something harmless,' they said. Christ, I'll show you how important I am." He jabbed with the
hammer at one of the marble slabs on the side of the building. "Now that's impact."

Raymond's eyebrows had arched at the young man covered with dust. "Break one of those, and you'll be working here ten summers to pay for just that one slab." Still, he was grinning. He put a hand out toward Isaac. "What d'you say your name was?"

"Isaac." His hand disappeared in Raymond's grip. Raymond pulled the radio from his hip. "Hey, John."

"Yeah, Raymond-Raymond. Go ahead."

"My boy can work. We're going to need another hammer." For three weeks since then they had been crawling around the side of the building all day, sometimes in the sun, sometimes in the shade, always in the heat. At first Raymond would stop periodically to watch Isaac, to see if he could use the hammer hour after hour. He had to hold it close against his ribs, so close that the hammer made his whole body shudder, but he never put it down unless Raymond did.

Now, on the fourth floor, Raymond stopped to watch Isaac work. He no longer had to check on the boy, but he liked to watch him burrowing at the cement with the hammer. He had no idea why the young man worked so hard, but it didn't matter to him. He reached over and tapped Isaac's bare, sweating shoulder.

"Yeah?!" Raymond flicked his index finger down, and Isaac shut off his hammer. Cars and trucks drove past on the street below, and in the building a screwgun was rattling, but the platform seemed quiet. Isaac tore off his goggles and flailed his hand at the dust around his face.
"Time to eat, go sit in the shade for a while." Raymond's hand was gray with concrete dust as he rested it on the edge of the building. He stared up along the wall to the fourteenth floor where the roof shimmered in the heat. "Pretty soon, only people like your uncle going to be walking around inside this place. No room for us then," he said. He patted the wall. "This baby's ours now, though."

Keith popped his head out of the entrance to the parking ramp. "Lunch time."

They lived for lunch time. Lunch time and quitting time and pay day. Lounging around, in groups of three or four, drinking beer out of cans wrapped in paper bags, making fun of the lazy ones on the job, they talked about what they would do with their pay checks and wondered when they would get the raise that was always "coming."

They all sat on stacks of sheetrock in one of the big commercial spaces that would later admit only clean-smelling tellers and expensive clients, but for now it was their place.

Kevin and Isaac traipsed through the concrete doorway, big coke cups poised on their heads. "Damn, that beats all," said Keith. "How do they do that?" He took a swipe at Isaac's coke, but Isaac stepped aside, the cup still balanced.

"Ah-ah-ah. Generations of wearing the yarmulke have taught my people this." He stopped and lifted the coke from his head, his chin tilted upward and his feet together in an attitude of lecture.

"Yarmulke, nothing. Beanies, maybe."

"Keith, there you go messing with my color again. I won't tolerate it, man. You big bad bigot."
"What's your excuse, Kevin?"

"Don't need one. Just talented." His skin was smooth and young, and the thick voice sounded odd coming from him. His shirt was off, and his body was blue-black and skinny, with tiny muscles that wrapped his ribs. "Give me that sports page."

"Oh, no. I bought it, man. Celtics going to be tough when they get Bias. Oh, yes."

Raymond had been lying on his back on the sheetrock, his meaty arms folded over his chest, but now he sat up and yawned. "Larry Bird says he's going to show him everything he knows."

A throaty cackle lifted their attention from the sports page. "Ah yeah, the pussy is lining up already. Yessir." The concrete finisher who always wore the Orioles cap sat across from them. He always wore an orange jersey to match the black and orange cap, and his eyes glittered and squinted in his black face. His leering teeth and goatee made him look like the Devil.

"What is this? You know as much about women as sports?" said Isaac.

"Hey, I been reading the papers. Red Auerbach says the boy has good work habits. I guess he be up running every morning, lifting weight in the afternoon, playing ball at night--"

"Yeah, yeah! I read that, too." Keith stood up, pointing his finger at the Orioles Man. "The thing about Bias, he's a hard worker."

"Of course," said the Orioles Man as he scooted up on the edge of the drywall, "Cleveland might just take him first, and then it's
all over." He reached up and pushed his head back as if he had thrown
snake eyes at craps.

"You're talking shit, man. Cleveland's so stuck on Dougherty it
ain't funny. No, Lenny's going to be a Celtic. Right out of
Landover, too. Yeah, Celtic's going to take him, and then," he
pointed his finger again, "he be good to go."

The Orioles man dropped his bluff and leered. "Young Man!" he
said, as if he were watching Len Bias do something wonderful in his
head.

Kevin drained the last of his coke. "He don't need to worry
about that pussy lining up--it's all headed my way."

Keith and the Orioles Man said, "Shit," and Isaac tossed his ice
at Kevin. Raymond yawned again and said, "Work time."

The heat crowded them the rest of the afternoon, a blanket that
sucked sweat from the men who worked outside, where Raymond and Isaac
wrestled the hammers in a shower of concrete. Inside, the heat was
dark and close; it choked the men and chased them often to the water
cooler at the ramp entrance. When 3:30 released them from the
building, they abandoned it for cooler places, leaving on the subway
or in their own Novas and Caminos with primer spots, heading home to
a shower and a change of clothes.

They turned on the TV that night to see a grinning Leonard Bias
waving from a podium in New York, a green Celtics cap on his honored
head, a new jersey draped across his chest. Beside him stood his
dad, on the other side the Celtics' General Manager, Red Auerbach.
Newscasters' voices signed on and off all the city channels, "So, the
Dream within a dream is complete: Maryland's All-American was the number two pick in today's NBA draft. Len Bias is going to be a Boston Celtic." Quotes from Bias, his father, Auerbach, and Celtics players were repeated on every station. The late night sports shows showed the same clips, the same quotes, and more highlights.

Len Bias soared through the air in front of screaming throngs in red and white, his body tight and rippled, dunking at the buzzer, hitting jumpers, blocking shots; "he's a young man the university and the city can be proud of," said Red Auerbach. They showed him goofing at practice, sitting in school, even staring from his own self-portrait, a proud-looking young man with a gold choker highlighting his dark skin and smooth features; "he's worked so hard for this," said his father, beaming. Bias himself confessed, "Yeah, I had hoped so all along, but I was afraid to say anything in case they didn't pick me."

"With Lenny," said one of the Celtics, "we're really going to light up the league." Always, they ended with that frozen shot in New York, the one where Len Bias stood robed in promising green, grinning like a kid from his Dad's side.

The day after dawned with the same sticky heat, the same clouded sun pushing through the dirty air. The building stood fourteen stories on the Arlington boulevard, its half-built bulk casting a gray shadow in the early June air. On the higher floors the building's maroon and pink marble sides glittered like dark ice in the sun. Mirrored glass would one day cover the huge windows, but now the openings yawned out at the sun like dark caverns on the
building's cliffs.

At the foot of the building, at the entrance to the underground parking ramp, the men gathered around the "office," the houstrailer parked just within the vehicle entrance. They milled in and out of it or talked in small groups, waiting to start work at seven. The subcontractors stood or sat on the edges of the loading docks, while the laborers wandered back and forth across the entrance, hollering at their buddies as they drove in.

Isaac was sitting on the wooden stairs to the trailer talking with one of the Salvadorans when Raymond and Keith walked in. He shook Raymond's hand, as he always did, and Raymond said, "All right, now." Keith's hand dropped down to Isaac's as he reached the stairs. "What's up, dude?" His voice rose on "dude," as if it were the most important part of his question. "Tomorrow's pay day, Isaac." He disappeared into the trailer, and as Isaac and Raymond left to start the compressor, they could hear him talking to himself while he punched his time card. "Payday-payday. Yes, sir. Pay-day. Hey, you two! Them Celtics did take Bias!" But they were already gone.

Isaac pulled the hammers from the tool shed, and the two men worked their way up to the tenth floor through the red and yellow scaffolding bars. A hammer draped over the shoulder of each one, trailing a rubber air hose to the compressor chugging on the curb. Isaac scampered along the scaffold bars, and Raymond stretched his arms and then his legs in a slow, almost languid rhythm, stopping often to make sure the hoses weren't tangled, that the sun was still where he last left it. They reached the platform outside the huge
window holes, still strewn with concrete fragments from the week before. The hammers rattled to life.

They squinted through their goggles on the tenth floor and lost themselves in the noise of the hammers and the showers of splintered cement that measured their effort. Keith dropped by once and popped his head out the window, "They took him--I told you they would!" He twisted up his mouth and knocked Raymond on the hardhat when Raymond just kept working. "Hey, Dad. Makes you feel good, don't it?"

Raymond grinned behind his goggles. "Makes me feel like working all day," he hollered. "I don't care about Lenny Bias--me and my boy going to chip so many windows they going to put us in the construction Hall of Fame." He said "fame" with his whole head, pushing the hammer into the cement with his trunk-like arms.

Keith stepped back from the dust and looked the frame up and down. "God damn, you two are bad motherfuckers with them hammers. I do believe you two fools were made for each other." The radio crackled on his hip, and he headed back to his elevator, shouting over his shoulder, "I be by at lunch with a sports page."

He left them there, up high in the heat where the sun burned into their shoulder blades. The sticky air condensed into beads on their bodies and only rarely moved the sweat from the back of their necks, but they could see the Potomac and its sailboats playing against the green shoreline. They looked around very little, really, and talked less, preferring instead to drive the hammers into the beam edges, washing themselves with shards of cement and wincing
behind the plexiglass goggles. Time passed quickly in the wake of their shattering progress, and Keith had to holler at Raymond on the radio to tell them it was lunch time.

Isaac shook off his goggles and brushed the concrete from the hair under his hard hat. "Sure beats sweeping floors, don't it? Morning went by pretty fast."

"Yeah, it goes all right when you're working. Pay ain't that good, but this job ain't so bad. A man got to do his job, you know what I'm saying? Maybe that raise'll show up in our checks Thursday."

They threw their goggles down on the platform with the hammers and climbed down the side of the building. They stepped into the entrance of the parking ramp to wash their hands at the spigot beside the office. A green Jaguar X-12 stood right in front of the water outlet. Keith stood there looking at the car, holding his hat and scratching his sweaty head with one free finger.

"Hey, dudes. Check out this car. John says not to splash water on it, though."

Isaac peered into the car. "Christ. It's all of thirty feet to the first parking spots and he's got to park right in front of the water. Asshole."

Keith laughed. "Watch your mouth--he's where your check comes from."

"He's the guy who holds up our raises too, even though it's been six weeks now since John recommended us."

Raymond had slid behind the car and washed his hands. "Come on,
y'all; wash up and let's eat."

"God damn, Raymond." said Keith, shaking his head. They cleaned up and walked down to the 7-Eleven, on their own time for a half hour.

"Yes sir, things be going all right around here lately. Them Celtics did pick my boy, and I heard John talkin to Jack about you two this morning. I'll tell you something--they like the way you work." Keith was talking to them both and jabbing his finger at the heat as he spoke.

"Elevator operator's a tough job, Keith," said Raymond.

"Don't be talking shit, Raymond. Working that thing is harder than you think. Somebody's always calling on that damn radio, and I got to load up and unload and put up with all kinds of shit from people waiting to move stuff."

"It's a rough life, Keith," grinned Isaac. "You having to wear the goggles and buck the hammer and all."

They went into 7-Eleven and bought their cokes, and Raymond bought his daily Budweiser, wrapping it in the bag so he could drink it on the street. Keith bought a paper, and they walked out into the heat.

"Yeah, things going all right." He paused to sip his big gulp and eyed Isaac's cup riding on his head. "We just might open up that check tomorrow and get a big fat raise."

"Seeing is believing," Isaac said, popping his coke off his head and catching it in his hand.

Raymond pushed his lower lip into his upper one; his moustache
twitched down. "Got to be coming, though. One of these weeks."

The three of them trudged into the eating area and spread out on a stack of dry wall near Kevin and the Orioles Man. Kevin lay on the dry wall, his hands behind his head, his eyes closed. The Orioles man scooted up to the edge of the stack and put his hands on his knees when he saw the three of them come in. "Lenny Bias sure looks good in Celtic green, don't he?"

"Oh, yes he does," said Keith as he spread out the sports page. "Says here he already signed a contract with Reebok. He going to be a rich man. Damn." He read in silence for a few moments, and then looked up at Isaac. "Pretty soon, Lenny going to be able to park his big Jaguar right in front of water spigots, just like the one over by the office, and you won't be able to do nothing about it."

"He'd still be an asshole," Isaac said. He bit into his apple and then said with his mouth full, "You know, he's never going to have to work one of these jobs, waiting for a raise from some big snotnose in the office. He's set."

"Damn right." The Orioles man tilted his head back as a grin flickered into his face. His teeth glinted white above his goatee. "His life is going to be one big party. One big party."

Kevin's eyes opened, and he looked up at the Orioles man. "Who's having a party?"

Keith said, "Kevin, you had enough partying--can't even stay awake through lunch."

Isaac looked up from his spot behind Keith's shoulder. "He's coming back to D.C. tonight. That'll be some serious partying."
They spent the rest of the lunch hour talking about basketball and the things they had seen Lenny Bias do, except Raymond, who stretched his big frame out and fell asleep on his back, his big black arms folded across his chest like sheathed weapons. The Orioles Man issued his predictions on the fortunes of the draft's top picks, defending himself with a bag of reasons and claims of inside knowledge. The heat made them drowsy and sticky and dusty, and they left the storage area five minutes late.

The afternoon dragged by, holding them to the building longer than they wanted to stay in stuffy corners and head-rattling noise. As they left Wednesday behind—hump day, they called it, because there were only two days left until the weekend—the sun had turned orange again in the city's smothering haze, and the corners of the buildings in D.C. were rounded in the gray heat.

Yet they returned again on Thursday morning, all of them, the carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and laborers, for Thursday promised cash, money for the bank, the rent, and the weekend.

Raymond and Isaac crawled up to the fourth floor above the entrance to the parking ramp and stopped to look at the city. The air was thick again and made their t-shirts stick to their skin, but low clouds lurked above the building and hinted at rain. "Wouldn't that be nice, Raymond," said Isaac, staring straight up along the building's flank to the gray above, "to have a big burst of rain right after we pick up our checks? Take off the rest of the afternoon."

Raymond flipped his goggles down and grinned, his smile oddly
child-like. "Yeah. I'd double up on them Budweisers and head out into the city. Just hang out." Then he picked the jack up in one hand and started chipping. Isaac grabbed his own hammer with two hands, took a last look at the sky, and leaned the hammer into the wall.

Later in the morning, when broad stripes of sweat ran down the middle of their backs, staining their t-shirts gray, Keith ran out of the garage entrance. Backing into the street to avoid the concrete that dribbled down through the scaffolding from the clattering hammers, he cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled, "Isaac! Raymond!"

Outside the fourth floor, the sound of his voice flattened and died against the building, but Isaac heard him anyway and glanced down through the cracks on the platform to see Keith beckoning. He shut off his hammer and nudged Raymond.

"What!"

"You're not going to believe this, but Len Bias just died." The word "died" floated on past them toward the higher floors, leaving the two of them staring at each other, not moving. Neither said anything. Isaac finally looked down again.

"What?!"

"Yeah, I just heard it--they say he died of a heart attack. Found him this morning up at College Park."

They didn't need a sports page at lunch. The Orioles Man tilted back his cap and said, "Damn fool. Nothing but a damn fool."

Keith pointed his finger at him, "You don't know nothing."
"Come on, Keith. Twenty-two year old men don't die of heart attacks. Not when you're big and fast and healthy. Not when you've got everything." Isaac sat with his hands in his lap, watching his feet swing back and forth.

The Orioles Man shook his head. "He was doing blow, that's what he was doing. Damn fool, throwing it all away like that--went to his fool head."

"You don't know that either, man. Somebody could have put something in his drink." Keith licked his lips before he went on, "A lot of folks going to be jealous with everything he picked up so fast. I bet that's what it was."

"Yeah, maybe," said Isaac.

"Man, I'm telling you, he did it himself. You know the way it goes. Get a little money, feel like having a good time, find some women."

"Then why'd he do it? Why? You tell me that." Keith was standing now, walking around the dry wall and pointing.

The Orioles Man threw his apple core against a beam, and it splattered to the ground, leaving a stain on the beam. "Hey, man, why do you do it? Same for him, out trying to enjoy himself."

"Yeah, but I don't have a million bucks in my pocket and a ticket to the NBA, either." He passed by the apple core and kicked it. "And he don't have this piss-ant job."

The Orioles Man shook his head again. "That's just like this girl I know. She gets all worked up when her kids find her doing blow. She don't want them to see her, but I just tell her, 'hey,
girl, you doing it.'"

Keith sat down again, his voice quiet. "But he was out. He had everything—all of it. He was out."

They all sat there, fiddling with their lunches. The place smelled of concrete and sawdust and the portable latrine that stood in the corner. The Orioles Man looked around and then shook his head. "Damn."

"I still don't think he did it to himself," said Keith.

Raymond crumpled his lunch bag and threw it in the garbage, tossing it side-arm with an air of dismissal. "Well, it don't matter now, does it? He's over." He looked out at the street. "Damn. Got to look at other things, though. Come on, Isaac. We got chipping to do."

They picked up their checks on the way. Raymond opened his and looked toward Isaac, who shook his head. Keith opened his and then stuffed it in his pocket. "Shit, man. We got to be crazy." He spent the rest of the afternoon hollering at people on the elevator, telling them about the tightwads he worked for or just cussing them out when they didn't move fast enough.

Lost in their shuddering noise and showers of dust, Isaac and Raymond worked into the afternoon without speaking. Once, when they stopped, they heard Keith yelling at one of the electricians for scraping up his elevator or something. They restarted the hammers and kept chipping.
VIOLET LIVES

Blossoms inviolate,
The color of the King,
Burst to fleeting brilliance
With the thundered rains of spring.
Tiny petals, fragile still with birth,
Curl like a baby's hand
Cradled on the earth,
Crowning a purpled land.

Summer comes, in hot-forged copper mail,
To call forth withering death or seed
At the sun's unrelenting trial;
To demand so soon
The delivery of promise into deed;
A beckoning doom in the cicadas' singing heat.

In wilting reach to the arid ground
That can lease no more water to their veins,
They thirst somewhere back to spring's early memory
To lay seed for later rains,
To recall and so pass on
The fragile blueprints of their forms.
Then they wither quickly,
Cradle-days forever gone.

Blossoms inviolate,
The color of the King,
Burst to fleeting brilliance
With the thundered rains of spring.
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