

# HOW THE DAYS OF LOVE & DIPHTHERIA

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**I.**



*I don't believe in innocence, he said.*

Few stories as old as the story of the boy whose family you killed. What authors of ruin, you with your black masks, your knives. Few stories so sorrowful as mother and father and how you left them strewn, cut apart and opened, how the birds and barn cats crawled within and slept, how they seemed under the wide light of the house you set ablaze. How your horses thundered the hillsides, clouds of dust and soot, the long green grasses gone black in your wake. How father was washing the car and then your knives slid into his throat. How father slept in his hammock and then before him, your black masks and long teeth. How father waited for you and your clouds of dust at the back porch with his repeating rifle, drunk on whiskey. Few stories so conflicted as who was found and how they were found as the story of mother and father found in each others' arms, as the story of mother and father found disassembled and strewn and entirely apart, as the story of mother and father perhaps not found at all. Few stories as old as what you did and what the boy intended to do. In the long years thereafter the story of how the boy followed you and yours is the oldest story of all.

Now this boy and how he lived under the soil while you—. How he mewed and dreamed under your hooves and vibrations, how he lived and slept under the burning house, the sirens. How he lived in a land blacker than your blackest masks, blacker than the sky you built from the soot and ash of his house. Now this boy, pale and ribs and trembling. How he dreamed his father's heavy voice. How he dreamed his mother, the rip of her hair pulled, the clumps of skin dangling from roots. Now this boy and the cool damp of their world of

soil. How he clawed and dug and buried and tunneled at the sounds of horses rampaging and snorting. No rivers but rivers of worms below the only world he ever knew. Now no women in robes the way he dreamed, their hands cold along his groin, the way he dreamed their dead-blue lips against his neck. How he dreamed them in gowns, amorous and rigid for the fumes. How no women but the flesh of the dead he dreamed beneath the ground. How you hunted for him with your horses snorting and kicking at the soil. How your long teeth dripped for the boy you could not find. How the blood of his mother, the blood of his father, on your knives and teeth. How the vibrations of your rampage shook his skin. Your horses and their wild greased hair, their dripping slather. How this boy and a world of soil and the excavations that followed. All the trucks and men with shovels. All the shirtless men, their burned skin flaking like sheets of Bible paper. How they dug with shovels and spades and their blazing knotted muscles, their sharp dried throats. These men and how they dug trenches. How they called the boy's name into holes. How the house burned white behind them. All the grasses of the valley gone black and the sky filled with soot and smoke. The rumble of trucks digging into the soil. The boy who would not be found.

*Now, in those days a city, he said. Now a burst of light.*

Always this house smoldering, always the horizon blotted. Always this house burst apart and burning. Silence save for the crackling of boards and beams, the slow melting to tar of shingles, the house always collapsing. Along the hillside, overlooking the burning house, leopards with sooted fur, their yellow eyes. Always along the horizon, leopards gone mad for the

fires. How the smoke clotted their lungs. How leopards, deranged along the horizon, gagged and vomited black blood. Always along the hillside, black sparrows, weighted down, hunched and shuffling. These molds of burn and char and how the leopards watched them, lurching and hungry. Sparrows disfigured in the light of the always burning house and the leopards who hissed from a distance.

*In those days of diphtheria, he said, we knew only to burn their houses and cauterize the wounds.*

For a while this sensation of publicity. Television crews from stations local and national arrived, along the highway their white trucks and television cameras, their images blurred for the smoke, the air bending against the blue flame. Reporters and the “rare phenomena” of the burning house, their makeup smudged for ash, their eyes and mouths smeared with charcoal. The redness of the heat. The way their eyes watered and blurred. Scientists arrived in station wagons wearing lab coats soon blackened for the soot, scientists carried thermometers and vials, and now scientists gauged and calculated, whistled and rubbed their brows, scientists wrote lengthy papers articulating the nature of their findings, the permanence of the flame, and they delivered these papers to men in ties and black-rimmed glasses, men of impassive faces who had only read what heat does to a man’s membrane. Men who did not comprehend how the house grinned with vibrations. Then wanderers and zealots arrived with gifts for the house. They left dollar bills and coins pressed into the soot mounded along the lawns, they prayed on their knees and stamped their foreheads to the blackness. They carried children bloated and wheezing with

diphtheria to the flames as if these fumes would somehow clear their clotted throats. For awhile this sensation of publicity although all influence is soon forgotten, all horror and value is subdued, and a house that burns forever soon becomes as any other.

*Now a woman vibrated into shadow. Now her fluids gone into steam.*

Now this family and how they purchased the land. He, jobless after the factory closed, and she, a waitress in the café, and how they could afford no other. This young family who bought this house always burning. How they told each other it was not really so bad. Ankle deep in soot and watching the weird glow, the flickering. This what their lives had grown into. From their station wagon they brought their tent and their boxes of clothes and pots and bug sprays and hammers. Soon they erected their canvas tent and under the weight of the glow, this man and woman, waiting for the end of these flames. Now, secluded and playing pinochle, singing songs and strumming guitar, making love and dreaming of a child. Yes. For what is a man and woman together without new life between them.

How the flames whispered in the voice of white flashes.

How the husband would say, "I think it's waning, some." The glowing membrane of the canvas. Later, they shoveled the soot off the tent, always shoveling with bandanas tied over their mouths, always dressed in navy blue exterminator clothes, always the goggles, fogged with soot. Still how they made love, the slide of soot along their canvas walls as her nose against his neck and the burn fumes, the tongue along the rim

of his ear, her teeth a soft nibble, and now her mouth slumped open with charcoal as they pant, finished.

“I don’t think it will ever end,” she said and through the canvas, the never waning house, how it smoldered, always alive.

*How in those days we insulated the walls with hair, bones of children, farm animals dead, he said. Entire horse carcasses often warmed the children within.*

Now the boy who dreamed from the soil. How he woke and how he crawled from within. Now the boy and how he sat on the hillside and how he knew the breathing and strumming of the man and woman. How he knew their dreams. How they believed, some day, green lawns and above ground pools. How they believed a badminton net. A riding lawnmower and lemonade. How the boy knew the creature that rose within. Now along the hillside the boy watched the canvas tent alighted, yellow and red. Their shadows moving together. Their moans under the moan of the wind, the splintering of the burning house. How he wondered what a lit match does to canvas, the ash and red cinders diminishing everywhere around him, as if a snow storm or memories of Tokyo, the paper kingdom, set ablaze.

Now the woman’s belly, mounded in low sickly glow. When the man felt the rise and what struggled beneath he understood the tent was no longer enough. So he constructed a house alongside the burning house. Now inside the tent the woman grew large. Always from her position the long shadows of construction, the ground of soot and ash. Hammering and the strains and groans

and soon an entire wall blotted for the shadow of this new house. A two-story home in the English colonial style, the miniscule windows and the stone chimney, the wood plank floors and how this man pilfered the landscape for animals to insulate the walls, how he figured the fur and meat of these creatures would shelter them from the roar of the neighboring house, the fumes. How the kittens scratched and mewed and the hounds, their muffled baying until all was silent, until, finally, all were dead or too weak to mew and moan. How the windows streaked black and in those days, very seldom, the tar dripped. Their flower print wallpaper and how she scrubbed furiously with bleach at the first hint of black. Always, no matter the insulation, the soft blue fumes and the wood smoke, the pine tree air fresheners she hung first from the living room doorway and then the kitchen and soon fastened from hooks in the ceiling and all throughout the bedroom, the nursery. The subtle motions of a thousand air fresheners when the man or woman passed beneath. How the man's eyes watered for the smoke and pine fumes. How he punched the walls, the bloody purple of his knuckles and how he said "this goddamned house!" There the drip of tar along the crevices. How the television antenna bent under the soot and now the man on the roof with a push broom. How the woman wept silently on the sofa while the man's racket from the rooftop, the hoarse wind, the plummet of cinders. Soon the duct-taped rabbit ears and the flickering local news. Now the soon-mother mounded on the flower print sofa and the soon-father there sockless and half asleep on his reclining chair. How they tucked the exterminator clothes away in trunks in the cellar, how they said "good riddance." How the woman pried open the trunks while the man went job hunting and the waft of dust and age and

yellow and how she regarded these clothes, starched with mold and soot, some mornings, as she strung the laundry across the basement. The laundry she once thought to dry in the open sun and how she leaned at the window, and the thought of the grass and the wind and their sheets, thrashing against the breeze.

*In those days our women died by childbirth or by the flames. How many women we found as if tarred, sprawled on front lawns, within pantries. Yes, so often an unwed mother became a living wick, and her condition was cured by the long blue flames—*

Now the boy along the hillside. How he lay on his belly in a mound of soft ashes. How he watched the lighted windows and the mother and father who were not his and the son they bore. How the son was not him. How he watched them through the lighted windows, streaked with soot. The son, in those days and how she held him against her lap, his pink open mouth. Now how the boy dreamed of you, returned. How he considered your hooves and your white eyes peering through black masks. How the son grew and how this new family laughed and watched television. How they ate carrots and ham from television trays. How the son grew. Soon, almost a man. How the father snuck the old exterminator outfits from their chests and how this son and the father played catch in them, their familiar bandanas tight. Their slow ungainly trudge through the debris. How the cinders caught in the wind seemed like worms set afire. How the ball spiraled through this horror until it plunged forever into mounds of black. How father and son made black angels pressed into the soot and how their soot castles caught on every gust. When the two returned inside how the wife wrinkled her nose. How

she pulled away, coughing, as the husband kissed her. How he showered with a scouring pad and emerged with beads of blood. How the mother undressed and the shape of her figure, her pink brassiere, through the lighted window. How the boy thought she would taste. How she would look strewn. The way this family who was not his family would look cut and severed. How the boy watched from the hillside and considered the voices and what you would do to this house, erected in the flickering shadow of all he loved.

How the boy woke moaning the thunder of horses.

How he dreamed these seas of worms.

How the boy watched the mother in the lighted windows. How her skin seemed to taste in his mind.

How the son slept in the soft glow of the nightlight. How the boy in his soot and ashes, and the light of your new fires, farther and farther away.

*Before us these people wandered bridges. These people gardened. We made them into shadows.*

How the son watched the boy from his bedroom window. How the son became feverish for this lonesome boy, a silhouette on the hillside of cinders. How the son waited until his family slept, how he dressed in exterminator's clothes before wandering to the hillside, and how he woke the sleeping boy, naked under a scorched gnarled oak. How he handed the boy a mayonnaise sandwich wrapped in waxed paper. How the boy ate as if he had never eaten before, his lips smeared white, his greedy eyes wide at the taste, the son before him. *Who are you,*

*little boy?* the voice of the son, lost in the moaning winds. How the boy pressed the son deep into the soot. How the son thrashed beneath him. How the meat went limp and cold beneath his fingers.

*Are you lonely out here? Do your parents know you're gone?*

How the exterminator clothes stunk of the son's last moment. How they fell from the boy's figure like a sack, as if the dead-son had been twice his height. How the boy's teeth trembled as he thought, *They will know.* How the boy crept into the house dressed in the black clothes of the dead boy, and how the soot trailed in his wake. How the parents slept somewhere in the house, their snores while he waited for them in the living room, and how they found him asleep in the morning, or what seemed morning under black skies. How they prodded him with fingers until he woke and how when they spoke he did not know the words. The father carried him to the bathroom and the mother stripped the clothes from him like an enormous skin. How they held him under the shower, no matter his thrashing, and how the water became pools of oil. How they called him the name of their son and dressed him in the dead child's too large clothes.

How he stood before the fogged mirror, pink and alive.

How the father said, "Did you always have brown eyes?"

How they poured him milk as if his throat were not clogged with soot.

How they watched television and, when he snorted at the stupidity, how they said "but you like this show"

and how in his mind the boy thought of you and your horses and your knives and your canisters of gasoline rampaging into the television house. The blonde family, blood smudged and torn apart while once bald eagles swirled overhead. The pristine house, wrapped in smoke and flame, and your black masks on the television.

The son dead before him. His bulging purple face. His coal-stuffed eyes.

How slow the son's dead meat slid free of his clothes. The pale white against the landscape. How the boy kicked the dirt over and over until the son was a mound in the shadows along the hillside.

"Looks like we need to do some school shopping," the mother said when the son's clothes did not fit him.

How the mother kneeled before the boy's bed. How they prayed although he did not know the prayer. How she must have known.

What did he dream in these last moments? Did he consider his father and the soot angels they made? The arms of his mother, their warmth?

How the boy and the father stood at the window watching the burning house, how it shimmered in the waves of heat. How the father said—

*I believe in what comes before innocence. I believe in the wide yawning mouth.*

Now the boy in the dead-son's bedroom. How he laid on the son's spaceship sheets, the faint green of the

stars decaled along the ceiling. The shapes they spelled in their secret language. How kittens seemed to mew within the walls and how the boy slept, contented by the sound. How the boy read *The Art of Lovemaking* from the dead-son's shelf although the words seemed squiggles of worms, how the pictures were black and white photos of bodies, naked men with shaved heads, their ribs and shoulders, the bones jutting, naked men tossed and wrapped into each other, naked men piled and mixed with the dirt while smoke stacks loomed in the dim background. The coils of black smoke. He blushed when the mother asked him what he was reading and he said later it reminded him of her and Father, together. "How so?" But he would not say.

How the father said, "Do you remember when we played catch outside—"

And the boy said, "Until we lost the ball—"

"In the mounds somewhere," the father said. "And how angry your mother was, how she wouldn't look at us. We were filthy, I'm sure. But a boy has to play, I said—"

How he kissed the first girl he brought to his room, the taste of her wires, her blue rubber bands. Her smile and her neck against his kisses, the strawberry of her red hair. How she trembled beneath his weight, under his wetness, his hands. How she was firm and large and seemed as the mother once seemed through the lighted window. "Please, I want to see," he told this girl. How she caught her hair, her braces, in her sweater. How her teeth chattered and her eyes darted. How the boy, with his lips and his hands, did not care even after her neck gave against his caresses and she seemed to

fade in and out of consciousness. This girl, pale and fraught with freckles. And how her undershirt pulled free and how her gray brassiere and his fingers along the edges, the softness. Now pulling and unraveling and unsnapping until these, pink and erect and what he so long anticipated. How she whispered against his embraces that she should leave. How she heard the mewling within the walls, ghosts of kittens long dead, voices of kittens born anew. "There's nothing there," the boy murmured against her neck, his hands—. How she pulled free anyhow. How she scurried while he lay, exposed and ready for her. How her soot tracks disappeared against the gusts and fresh cinders. How the boy never saw her again.

How the son sometimes stood on the hillside. His blue naked flesh. How in the evenings the son watched them from the yard. How they all seemed through the lighted windows. How the son made no gesture but to stand beneath the glow of the always burning house. How the boy locked the windows and propped chairs against the doors.

How the father told the boy, "Their son died from diphtheria. His mother found him, blue and wheezing. He was still alive when she arranged him in the casket but the boy was dead when the father arrived home, the white lace, his calm blue face. When she said the word he dragged the mother from the house. She'd gone mad, yelling in a language nobody understood. How the long trail of gasoline caught and spread. How it has burned ever since."

*The man gestured to the razed pines, the scorched stumps. I believe in how easily a forest burns, he said.*

These boys, boys whose names the boy could not recall, these dozens of boys and how they crowded into the boy's room, these boys with long tangled hair, boys with yellow teeth verging on green, boys smelling of fuel oil, of perspiration, of some rank earth, boys with switchblades unsnapped and glinting, boys with black eyes, with blood-shot eyes, these boys with fluids and how they dripped, yellow and red and translucent, these boys and how they piled over each other, how they giggled and sneered, how the boys crowded into the boy's room tingling all throughout with the longing to grope, to pull and suck and stab the boy atop or alongside or nearby. How the heat of the boys made the other boys dizzy, how they smoked cigarettes and snuck whisky and how the room filled with blue smoke and how they laughed at the mewling of kittens inside the wall, how these boys thumped at the wall with their knuckles, their knives, how these boys wanted to hunt and murder what lived within, how these boys glowed and grew rigid and purple in the light of the burning house.

How the son watched from the hillside. His bruised throat. How he stood in the center of the cinder yard with calm dead eyes. How one morning the boy woke, and there, the son, dangling from the ledge outside his window. His blue murderous fingers.

How the mother lost her slender figure, how she resembled a pear, save her sags and folds, which seemed more the melting and collapsing of a large candle, how the dirt did not wash free from underneath, the smell of black and decay, and the walls always lost under dripping tar. Now how the father was too drunk on malt liquor and fuel oil to command the woman

to scrub and how the woman was too fat to climb the stepladder, too immense and putrid to stretch her arms over her shoulders, too weak under the layers to scrub. Trapped along the walls, a thousand, thousand flies writhing and buzzing in the tar. How the woman slept now for the fumes of the tar of the always burning house. How her figure bulged on the sofa. How her wheezing trembled the house. How the father slept for his drink or stumbled up the stairs and how he sometimes lost himself along the banister and there he lay howling and moaning through the night. How the boys in their wild masses stampeded over him, how they stole his cigarettes, the last of his cashed disability check, how the boys bought firecrackers and lighters, how they exploded these on the lawn, the glow within the glow. How the father loomed at the boy's room and the stillness of a hundred boys within. How he slumped against the malevolence of children. How his lips, sodden for the boys within the room, the musk of the boys, the stale heat of the boys. How the father missed the trembling of youthful flesh within his arms, none since this wretched family he built, these black walls, this wife who bulged and wheezed, this house he grew from the timber and soot, this house under the light of the house burning, trapped always under this illumination.

*The man gestured to the skies, Under the shadow of our aircraft, he said, a schoolyard of children became a river of tar.*

How the father leaned in the boy's bedroom doorway and in his arms, a folded pair of exterminator clothes, dusty and crisp with mold. How the boy's room was empty save for the boy, the scents and stains, the mounds of translucent fibers. The father's mouth

scarcely moved when he spoke and how his words seemed the words of something less than human, some yawning piece of earth, some dying sludge. "You want to play catch?" the father said. "You old idiot," the boy said. How the father lurched into the room and how the boy shoved him off, how the father pitched over, flailing. How the father struck his face on the boy's desk. How the father watched the boy from the floor, his face a sheet of blackish blood. "Too big to play with your old Dad huh," the father said. "You're not as big as you think you are." How the two swaddled their hands in white socks for lack of gloves and now in the basement how the walls sweltered and dripped, how the sound of hands wrapped in socks thumping against warm meat, how white socks clotted black with blood, how the father swung wild for the boy's face and how the boy mashed in the father's throat, his stomach, his kidneys. How the father wheezed and vomited. How the father buckled. How the boy was too quick and the father too drunk. How when the pain was gone the boy took the socks off and so too did the father. How the coal dust and soot filled the father's throat and how he fell to his knees, wheezing and dripping blood, saliva, mucus. How his face smeared violet. How the old man moaned and wept and how the boy left his father there, blind with blood.

How his face glowed with a long off yellow. How the father said, "I would burn this house and all of you in it, if I had to."

How the boy woke, claspng his throat and gasping. How he believed he could not breathe although he was breathing. How he watched his skin in the bathroom mirror for hints of blue. How the boy slept with the

medical encyclopedia under his pillow and how he reread the sections on sanitation and vaccination by the dead-son's night light. How he wandered the house while his parents slept, gauging the strength of his own breathing and listening to the mother's wheezing on the sofa. The father's low faint breaths in the basement. How this infection seemed an infection no fire could eradicate.

*In those days, the man said, the city was reduced to rubble and the horses lost their skin for the fires. The horses in those days wandered pink and exposed. In those days men with skin like blackened alligators rode bicycles along ancient obliterated streets. In those days we watched them on the television news, and from our tallest buildings fell confetti and streamers. Our women kissed our men openly on the roads, in celebration.*

When the boy left, the father was asleep in the basement, his face crusted with black blood and flies. When the boy left the mother was asleep on the sofa. Her face and arms lost in immense putrid folds. When the boy left he took only a soft apple and the medical encyclopedia, until the mewling of the kitten inside of his walls became too great. How the boy opened the plaster along the cracks as if pulling open a canvas tent or the skin of a large animal, and there the white pink thing, trembling and mewling in his hands. How he stroked her soft white fur and how she mewed in his hands.

**II.**



*The man gestured to the narrow highways, the long stretches of dirt and dead grass. He indicated the bleached white skulls of horses and dogs. He told us of what you had seen and what you had done. The barns you razed to soil and the crops you brought the torches to, the cornfields you popped and, from the midst of the exploding white, how red and gray pheasants ascended, screaming and smoking, their feathers alight. How blood is a sort of copper. The farm mothers you held down and shoved full of red glistening pricks and knives. How they screamed through the rawhide buckles you clenched in their mouths. How a mound of children is inevitable and their smell is the musk of loam. How you marauded the suburbs and left the intestines of fathers and mothers and children coiled on front lawns. How we cannot always breathe. You spelled the names of a thousand ancient writers with the flames and blood of your conquests. You targeted not priests and kings but the blue fumes of mothers and fathers. You sought out the children and how they would grow into something other and you taught them to be no more. How we grew confused and lost by your light. The man gestured to the footprints along the road, those of a boy and those of a cat. The boy who followed your fires along the hillsides and ravines and the kitten who trotted, faithful and obedient, to the rhythms lost within his wake.*

How the rain pelted the roof and the long off flashing of lights and the kitten asleep on his belly. When the boy woke he woke to the wood smoke you built along the horizon, the hay and dung from barn animals long dead, their fumes mere remembrances trapped within the wood, the lice and rats within the hay the boy and the kitten bedded on. She, sleepy and fat on the mice he cornered and stomped for her. So long now since the boy knew the breathing or words of a creature other than the kitten, other than eagles gliding. How the boy

knew by the eagles, the blackness of their skulls, the smoldering of their feathers, if you had passed by. How the kitten mewed when the eagles dove and returned to the gray skies with marmots and mice within their beaks. When the boy woke he stroked the kitten under the chin and the animal purred and stretched. How the boy slept by the rumbling within the kitten's throat, the crackling and splintering of your long off fires.

How the boy woke, lost in the shadow of the old farmer, the white stubble, the manure dried overalls. The oak cane he held, gnarled and hooked. How he had no eyes but gaping caverns and the voice of the woman behind guided the cane against the boy's throat. "Higher, Pa, now to the right, yes, exactly." How the kitten growled and hissed. "Let me see your feet," the old farmer murmured, and how he stooped uncertain, his mouth open and there the bloody gums, the few teeth green and jutting, and how he moaned "ah, ah, ah" while his wretched hands stroked the air, while the woman's voice guided him, and how the old farmer stripped the boy of his tennis shoes. How the old mother wept, "I always knew, I always knew." Her red faded house dress, her ancient skin like crumpled paper. How the old farmer said, "Lord if you can give this boy life again then won't you return to me the sight you stole." How they asked, "Do you remember us, Son?" and "Have you returned of your own volition?" and how the boy knew enough to say "Yes." How the boy soon ate porridge and bacon, crisped and greasy, while the kitten drank a saucer of milk, store bought from a plastic jug, and how the old mother said, "All the animals ... it happened not so long after you—nothing takes around here since," while the father sat smoking a pipe on the front porch. How the boy nodded and ate and later the kitten on his lap,

purring and warm, milk clinging yet to her whiskers and mouth. How the mother said, "you always did have the touch. Dreamed you'd raise animals or doctor them." How the boy went to the porch while the kitten slept on the sofa, the farmer's corn cob pipe, the blue smoke wafting in corkscrews. Before them the dirt and browned crab grass, the long off road and puffs of dust as cars sped along. How the father asked, "You remember much from that time?" and how the boy said, "No, not much at all," and how the father seemed to weigh this before returning, "Tell me at least about them flames down there."

*How in those days certain fathers—*

How the mother held before him an album of black and white photographs, fastened with browned tape, and how she talked to him as if he knew the moment they were taken. How the old mother and father called him Anderson and now he slept in what they said was his childhood bedroom. How models of zeppelins and airplanes swung suspended from the ceiling and how, piled throughout the room, the glossy magazines picturing famous aviators, Lindberg in goggles posing on the wing, Lindberg in a convertible, waving as confetti scattered like fireworks, Lindberg shaking hands with Hitler. How quiet these nights and how sound the kitten slept against the boy's feet. How the mother showed him photographs of the three of them watching parades along Main Street in their Sunday finest. Father and Anderson cutting lumber. How she showed him his own face pale and unmoving like a wax work, resting in a casket. "You remember?" she asked. "You were right there" and she gestured to the pantry. She kissed him, her breath of onions, her enormous

bosom, soft as down pillows. "I never believed it was over," the old mother said and the boy nodded. "Me neither," he finally replied.

*How in those days Fathers spoke languages nobody understood. In those days Fathers built homes in hillsides with boards and rocks and shovels. How they lived within the cool earth, eating sourdough and the women bulged pregnant in the glow of the hearth. The man gestured to what was once and he said, When all their family died choking, those fathers cleansed the hillsides. These fathers, lost and hopeless, raved in their dead tongue, confused and vibrating against the grasslands they set afire.*

How the father listened from the shadows of the porch. How the boy woke in the night to the father feeling his feet as if he were searching them. His half opened mouth. The raised hackles of the kitten.

When a balding man in a shirt and tie arrived in a tan Packard. Distant clouds of dust and how the boy prayed it was you, come finally to obliterate these long ago infections. How the boy watched from the front porch and in the tall grasses the kitten chased butterflies. The man stood on the steps shaking his head, his red and purple neck, his sunken eyes. "Do you remember me?" the man said to the boy and the boy knew enough to say, "Of course I do." How the man and the boy sat drinking something like rusty water from a flask. Later the man said, "I miss the adventures we had. You know? Yes, we had some wild times." How from his pocket the man produced a photograph of two boys, fishing, crew cuts and short pants. How long a man holds the figure of a child within his mind. "I've been married a thousand years now," the man said. "I've had children. Two. I've

seen them born and grown and one dead and one may as well be. In all these years I've seen a great something of the world. But not a day goes by I don't wish we were back there, in that world we left behind."

How within the family photo album, yellowed newspaper clippings were displayed like brittle carcasses. How the boy knew before he read the headlines. How the ink spoke a language he understood deeper than any articulation. *Diphtheria Claims Ten* and below, the smeared faded photograph of a small boy in a casket and the caption reading: *the strangling angel of children lately claimed young Milton Thomas*. How the old mother whispered over his shoulder, "Your neck swelled to the size of a melon. You remember?" How another evening the mother said, "Some nights I can't sleep thinking about how you told me, 'Mama, I'm gonna die.' But I told you right back 'no sweet angel, you never will.' I didn't lie, did I?" How the boy wondered why you did not ravage this town, choking and gone blue and swollen in the necks. Where were your fires and knives when this entire world went fat and dying?

*The man gestured to what we once knew and explained how fathers raved in the red light of the world obliterated. How in those days to live in the city was to live on the verge of an ever burning world, the fire smote prairies and forestlands of the deranged and widowed.*

How she arrived, a silhouette within the white sun, her hips and wide bosom. Her red lipstick when she stood on the porch, smiling nervously. How she sat on the rocking chair, petting the kitten, and how the kitten purred, flickering her tail. This woman's long scarlet hair and the freckles burst on her arms, along her nose.

How the boy considered the woman's slender hands and long red nails and how he imagined she would wail and mutilate him with those nails during their congress. How the woman believed he was looking at her wedding band. "He's a good man," she said as if apologizing. "Sturdy as a bull." How when she finally left she held him close and her figure beneath and her perfume, like an animal musk. How she said, "I always thought it would be you, I always did—" and how the boy knew enough to say, "I did too." How she wiped at her tears and the mascara running. How she kissed his cheek, the red smear. How her eyes said she would always love this boy she never knew.

How the fires you built became larger than our largest cities. How the boy's face grew hot and cracked open. How his skin seemed the skin of an alligator and how the kitten alone knew him.

How the boy found a shoebox of photographs and how this Anderson, submerged in his casket with hands folded over while blurred relations and friends passed by his side, their faces wrapped and obscured, from the mother to the man who brought slabs of ice to cool the body. How the photos depicted the black smudge of a fly settled on Anderson's nose. How from then on the parlor seemed a void to this boy and how he lay in the spot, his hands crossed against his chest, imagining the feet and legs passing, and how beneath the imitation Persian rug, these wood planks yet stained from the long ago melted ice.

Before the yellow roe sacks, the blackish spatters of blood and heart meat on the rocks, before the slide of the knife into the belly of a strangled animal, how the man said,

“We used to come down here all the time, remember?” There the rocky shore, still and strewn corpses of fish and half fish, the too thin arc of their bones, the flies swirling the meat. Now the long off vibrations of grasshoppers, the blue almost limitless water before them. How there were two boats docked and how the man seemed to mull before choosing the larger. How he slit the rope with a pocket knife and soon they drifted with their rods, their container of worms, their cooler of beer. How the sun and the rocking of the boat. How the boy asked, “Why the *Marie*?” and how the man said, “How’s that?” and the boy, “Why did you name your boat the *Marie*?” and how after a pause the man said, “It was my mother’s name.” How this man slurped rusted water from his flask and smoked Marlboros and how he flicked these over the side, hissing in the blue green. How he filled his flask with pond water and how at his motion the murk seemed clouded with the figures of catfish and pike, shadows moving in the below, gliding easy and malevolent. How the man said, “If I hold you by the ankles, if I promise not to drop y—My god, have you ever seized such a creature, by the lips, the teeth—” How the man said he dreamed himself inside the belly of a fish. “What a relief to feel so young, as if I just got made, and to not remember,” how the man gestured to the world around then he finished, “this.” How this man floats in his sleep, covered in scales, in gills and how he later said, “I know where you been.” How he explained Korea and the men he killed there. The phantom eyes in his dreams, the yellow bloated faces. How the flames seemed more like shadows, and all the dead spoke the same impossible language. “I thought it was Korean at first,” the man said, until his mother swayed amongst, then his father, and from their fat mouths, the same nonsense language as if their teeth were broken and their

tongues removed, as if they were filled with the slow humming of a thousand dying bees. Later, they docked the boat and here the man took the boy by the shoulder. How he said, "Would you teach me what they're saying? Only to understand what they want, if they're hurt, if they blame me—" How the *Marie* drifted slow along the edges. How eagles circled, black and wretched.

How the black and white photos of faces smeared and blurred, faces caught in ghost moments, faces at funerals and covered with bandanas, faces paused at the casket, and before them, the face of the stilled infant, the little boy, the man, swollen and choked to death, the blurred faces of mothers and fathers and their little children, faces wrapped in bandanas and faces swallowed entire by gasmasks.

Now the boy on the woman's lawn and how he watched her through a lighted window, firm and large in a cotton nightgown. Now the emptiness of a world gone calm and flat and smokeless. Now the woman in her nightgown. How she yawned and dimmed the bedroom light. Now this lawn and how the only sounds were frogs and crickets, chirping and singing. Now this wide emptiness, this green world, a world of lawns and trees. A world small and helpless. A world you did not build.

*How in those days, row upon row of wheezing infants trussed in white. Nurses who paced and breathed the contaminated air. Nurses who breathed with lungs clotted by the breath of choking infants.*

Now shoeboxes filled with love letters to the blind father, love letters smeared and streaked with new

tears, the words blurred into new languages, the true languages of loss and aloneness. The language of moaning. How the photographs of a blurred exotic woman, in kimonos and dresses, smiling alongside the blind father, and how his eyes saw in those days. How he stood proud and young and pale and dressed in khaki, how he leaned on a Harley Davidson against a malt shop window, how she lay swaddled in a heap of blankets, nude. How inky fingerprints smeared across her breasts, within her legs, and how the boy watched from the shadows as the blind man stuffed his hands deep into these heaps, how he read with his fingers and his mouth, how he said "ah ah ah," with ink smeared lips and tongue. How the man replaced the photos and closed the shoebox lids, how his hands and face, smeared and black-clotted, and how he crept away, the hollow thump of his cane along the walls. How later, when the mother saw his hands and face as he lit his pipe, how her voice became a bruised wilderness, and how she said, "I could have been rich, there were offers. Instead all I got was heartache and dirt."

*Now the man gestured along the valleys below. The fires he saw and the languages they spoke.*

How the old father stood over the boy while he slept. How the boy's feet in the mornings were cramped and moist. How he locked the bedroom door and yet each night, the weight of the old blind man, the press of his withered face against the wood, his stiff agitated breaths. How the kitten, locked within, yowled and moaned, her white fur shed and billowing and now everywhere descending. Hereafter how the boy and the kitten slept on a cot in the basement. Now within the moist and mold of the dirt floor. How the kitten slept

contented and how the boy searched the language of the webs strung along the beams and pipes, the thin moonlight peeling through the cracked basement windows. The blind old father, silent at the top of the stairs, and how he disturbed none below.

How the boy crouched on the woman's lawn. How he threw pebbles at her windows and how pebbles dented her siding, ricocheted off her bedroom window. How the window webbed and bulged into fibers. How the window caved and shattered. How within the open yawning of the broken window the woman sobbed and wept and how this language clotted with the voice of frogs and crickets, the articulation of glass, shattered and falling. How the husband in his bed insisted he heard no sound. How he lay in his white t-shirt with his reading glasses. How he pressed his hands to the window, intact, and the woman witnessed them passed into a world gouged and battered.

How the boy wandered the dust of the farm and how everywhere, the swirling of weeds and clumps of soil, the distant skulls and ribs. How this farm seemed in photos, thriving with goats, sheep, cows, chickens, horses and now, how the wire pens lay gray and rotten. How the barn was caved and pungent with vacant life. How the mother said nothing would grow but the fields had not been seeded in years, and how the live weeds jutted through the dust, tall and green, weeds and wild flowers burst from the corpse of the field. How the blind father sat smoking on the porch and how he murmured, "Since you... since you left" and how the man worked his mouth as if chewing a cud before he said, "a pestilence like you never seen in your days." How the boy did not know how the mother found the father,

his face and hands spattered red and his eyes, wide and milky. The boy did not know, how in his hands, a hatchet and murmuring of the plague and the end, how his eyes stared upward and how the sun bulged and throbbed. How the blackness enfolded from the edges of his cornea. How the father laid murmuring, while in the house, his son wheezed and choked. How in the fields, all the animals lay strewn and bleeding and mewling and dead. How the father lay moaning and blind and how he told his wife to burn the rest.

How the woman wandered Main Street, her face large and red, her arms and her ankles swollen into fat clumps of meat, how she walked into phone booths and stood fogging the glass, and how she sat humming in trash bins while bees circled. How her husband followed, watching from the edges of buildings, his throat thick, and how when he called her name he could only moan. How he could not breathe, for his wife, her hair wild and streaked now with gray and white, her livid eyes, the shadows of deranged eagles circling above.

How the mother shook the boy awake, her bone hands and pale face in the gray light. The cat hissing from the boy's feet. How the mother shook the boy by the shoulders and said, "Who are you?" How she dragged him up the stairs by his ear and how the boy did not struggle. How she pressed his face to the cold glass of the kitchen window and how she said, "You look at that child out there, you look at my son out there and you tell me who you are!" How the boy gazed along the shadows of the ruined yard, the glow of the moon and the barren fields. How the boy wept, "Mama, I don't know."

How the light of a thousand fires along the horizon. How your hooves shook the valley. How jars fell and burst apart on the basement floor. How the kitten lapped at the preserving liquor, the various bladders and hearts.

Now, within the light you built along the horizon, how the boy hammered pine planks across the doors and how the old parents slept within. How the kitten fled at the thunder of your approach and how for so long we only saw her eyes, yellow and slivered from the shelter of forests and bushes. How the true moment of love is the pain of loss. How your dust and masks and your horses, now skinless, pink and bleeding. How their veins seemed blue maps. How the mother and father moaned and hammered within the house and how you tore free the planks of wood. How you led the old mother and the blind father from the house. How you said, "Your home is not here anymore." How the lit house slurred the oldest language, how it smiled and heaved with vibrations. How the parents within the dead brown grass wept under the smoldering eye of the heavens. How you rode and circled. How you tossed gasoline onto the white of the house, and soon, ash and embers. How quickly nothingness is born. How you pawed at the soil, dug with spades and knives. How you swooned at the scent of the boy and how the boy hid along the hillside while the kitten wandered the forest, lost and growing within. How the boy followed you and your horses, and then followed the dust clouds in your wake and then followed the bare suggestion of your long trail, because he knew no other. How the toothless sobs of a mother and father wallowed in his wake.

**III.**



*You marauded, you sought, you destroyed and you devoured. You burned and you ravaged. Hillsides yawned into ravines under your influence and our oldest prairies vibrated with your voices. You pressed schoolmarms to the yard and little boys fled before your hooves into the soil. In time you flattened all we had ever known. We saw now how rapidly our world had changed and deformed in your wake and how, now, towers and machines and streaks of soot everywhere. How we believed you had invented and destroyed all you could invent and destroy and yet our horizons still trembled with the force of your inventions, with the humming, and how there bloomed a wide glow of colors we never saw before.*

How the daughter, the blurred curve of her figure, who lived once in this room with her father and mother. How she said, "So often, when I was a little girl, we would wake in the night to horns honking and people pounding on doors, trucks idling in the street below, trucks collecting bodies. How mom and dad wouldn't let me look out the window, to the bodies piled in the back of the truck, bodies naked and tossed and wrapped into each other. How they told me it was a dream, or storm sirens, but how I knew. I saw in books and newspapers and how we whispered to each other in class, through our bandanas, about where our classmates went, because, every day, two or three were always gone."

"I remember—" the boy said and stopped, because he did not remember, because he preferred to caress her shoulder bones, the lines of her neck.

"And always these boys," the daughter said, "boys from my classes, boys from the school buses, boys from Sunday school and the grocery store, how these boys

were always in the streets kicking rocks and lighting fireworks and firecrackers, how they ran in the dark, hooting and sneering, how our windows widened with their white and red flares, how these boys in their bandanas ran off laughing and shouting—”

“Do you remember their names?” the boy interrupted. The daughter nodded, and she began to say them all.

How the boy woke inside a tavern on the outskirts of town. How the beams hung low and the taller men stooped while they drank and smoked. How the air seemed entirely of blue smoke and how even when all other eyes watered the boy’s eyes did not. How the boy washed dishes for room and board and how he lay on his cot in his room above the tavern. How the vacant roads hummed with the vibrations of the cooling earth, of cement cracking and expanding. How the shadows along his ceiling were no longer the shadows of men but simply the world moving and developing on its own.

*In those days you felt good about yourself when you coughed blood into a handkerchief. The ladies gazed at you in new ways. Even healthy boys gnawed their own tongues hoping to make the right impression—*

Now this woman who owned the tavern, crisp and bronzed. How she stripped free of her robe before him and how she stood buxom and white in the chest. How she sun-bathed topless on her front lawn, chest pressed downward. Before her, an upside down paperback novel, *Love in the Boudoir*, opened to a random page. How the boy watched, lightheaded, as she lay cracking and golden on her beach towel, kicking her feet absently. Her pink painted toenails. How she

drank her Bloody Mary through a straw and when she smiled her teeth seemed thick with blood. Her round Hollywood sunglasses and how she spoke to the boy while he washed dishes or swept up after the yellow lights dimmed and the customers shuffled home. "You remind me of my husband," she told the boy, "God rest his soul. Wherever his soul is." Later, how she fixed the boy a Bloody Mary and how his head swam as he gulped it. How she said, "Do you believe in such a concept as a soul, Henry?" How the boy smiled and how he could not feel his face. "You don't mind if I call you Henry, do you? Of course not. How young we were. How free. Live it up while you can, Henry. Once it is gone you can't get it back. One day you are free and easy and young and the next you're just a dumpy old woman like me." How she smiled and waited for the boy to contradict her. How she laughed gaily and said, "You're too kind, Henry, too kind."

*How in the days the front page headline contained what house burned or what barn or what city was now razed or being razed. If not the marching of armies then the marching of time, if not the will of God then the hand of roving bands of firebugs. These roving bands and how we knew them by their handkerchiefs, the man said. We knew them by their black hands, their gasoline canisters.*

How the boy prodded the shadows of cars and bulges of tar in the long, quiet road, how he believed these were the half-consumed bodies of goats and deer. How his—

*In those days we knew our neighbors by the way they coughed, and the names they forgot. How they watched their children, growing and wandering through our yards, their bandanas and gasmasks, loose and heavy.*

How the daughter was slender in ways the mother was not slender. How her long arms were not covered in the same flesh as the mother was covered, clear of ruin, and how she seemed of polished ivory, save for bursts of freckles. Now the boy stood in his apron, watching how the sun lit her neck, the few wisps of hair and how they glowed. How the daughter played tennis in a white skirt and white visor. Her white stockings pulled to the nubs of her knees, and how she waited, pacing and bouncing a tennis ball against the back porch, and how she giggled and waved when her friends arrived in their tennis whites, jammed and piled into the back of a convertible car. How the boy watched in his apron through the fogged glass of the kitchen. How she knew the names of her friends and how she recited these names and how her thin hands moved as she spoke and how he saw them each as the words became skin and hair. The clothing they took on. The sneers. How the boy stood in his apron watching her and how the mother watched the boy as his eyes glazed to something dull and remote.

*How the man said, In those days, these sisters, my mother, and how their dresses caught fire, how we learned that cotton burns as if soaked with gasoline. Yes, how I often found them as if tarred, sprawled in their panties, on front lawns.*

How in the silence of a small town all sounds carry. How the mother found the boy and the daughter on the back steps of the tavern. How this girl and her legs, bare and white, and how natural the boy's hand seemed on her knee. How she heard him say words like "love" and "diphtheria." How these words worked, awkward upon his lips, and how the mother knew he had never said them before.

*The man gestured to the forest where the edge of your creation moaned and seethed. There you built the factory to raise our fires and disease.*

How the woman invited the boy into her home for lemonade and fig cookies, the glass half-filled with vodka, and how the boy's face numbed. How she sat alongside him on the davenport and in her hands, the wedding album. How she flipped through the pages murmuring, "The spitting image." How young the woman was, in white lace, and the husband, bearded and tall. How they wore black bandanas over their faces while the wedding party wore gasmasks. How the ring bearer and flower girl, in gasmasks, and later in the album, "So many children," the woman said, of these children in caskets, in lace gowns, their wispy white hairs, eyes open, soft pink lips slightly parted—

*How these hallways and the huddling of children, their blood spattered handkerchiefs, their skin cracked and blackened. How the sky blazed and opened into an enormous eye and those almost dead were lit into nothing. How new colors were born in the flash of the final moment. How this light was the most beautiful light we had ever seen.*

Now the pink granite tombstone and how it was chiseled "Henry Filmount: Beloved Father, Sturdy Husband." How he died at twenty eight and how they found him naked and bloated and choking in the street. How the girl snapped her gum and said "Daddy, let me clean these weeds for you," and how she bent over to pull those dandelions clotting the edges of his memorial. How the boy watched her figure, her skirt gathered and un-gathered. How the mother watched the boy as he watched. How she said loudly, "I would

like to say some words” and she spoke for some while about the unique and heavenly love she shared with this man, how his disability had hindered them, how, “I knew he was frail from the first moment, doubled-over, coughing blood into a silk handkerchief,” and yet they had persevered, how they built their house and bar with planks of wood and bricks, how their hands bled in the fire light, how they cooked fish over open fires and how they made love—how the daughter groaned and the woman raised her hand before lowering finally and continuing, “But Henry, a woman grows old and lonely. Henry, a woman is not a piece of fruit to wither and get eaten by birds. Henry my darling—” and how she could no longer speak, how the sobs rose and welled and overcame her. How she pressed her face into the boy’s chest and sobbed. How her fingernails dug into his shoulders. How the boy gazed beyond the shoulder of the woman, to those trees lingering along the horizon. How their limbs seemed fled of birds and leaves. How your fires and smoke seemed flared anew, and how the boy no longer cared. How all the world seemed silent and immune save this aging woman and her tears soaking his apron.

How the boy and the girl found two headless lambs in the field behind the town, as if laid out as gifts. How the girl screamed and the boy held her close. How small and taut she seemed, fit within his arms and the taste of her neck, her earlobes. How the boy and girl lay on their backs some distance in the field beyond, in the silence of the other, and how they waited, although the girl did not know until the boy sat up and said, “Look!” and how the eyes, yellow and slit, along the tall grasses of the field.

How the boy gazed out his window rather than sleep. The expanding street and behind him, the girl on his cot, the blurred curve of her figure, and how she lay covered only in the too thin sheets, translucent with fluids. How she said, "I think I had a brother. I remember a brother. I remember mother saying the name Milt. Mother and how she loved Milt, how we found her sobbing and burning photographs in the bathroom sink." Later, how the daughter said, "I remember this little boy crying. How he was still alive when they put him in the box. How they wanted to know if it fit and how he begged them not to do it. I remember my mother saying he would be all right, how it was only a game."

*How these hallways shimmered with the burst of a thousand, thousand sunrises. How we never saw a more beautiful light. How there was no line between the cities of our birth and the dust and embers thereafter.*

Always the husband now, returned, and how Henry leaned on the boy and pressed against the boy, smelling of leather and dust. How Henry smoked cigarettes in a chair, butts smoldering through the shag carpet. Always the husband now and how his eyes were all but devoured by beetles and worms and the conditions of time. Always the husband and how he moved his mouth to speak and how only a humming sounded. This husband now and how his lips become sodden and glistening at his daughter sunbathing on the lawn. How he lay alongside his daughter and how she had grown these years, how he fondled her hair, kissed at her neck. How the boy watched, his face red and numb. This husband now and how he smashed all the portraits hanging from his wife's walls, how he spat dust into the food and urinated ash into the soup. This husband

and how he sat at the foot of his wife's bed while she masturbated and moaned the name of the boy. Always this husband from doorways and shadows, always this husband, speaking the language of humming and dust, and how his widow answered him by turning on fans, and by closing the windows.

*How the light bent along the horizon and—*

How your factories glowed, how they moaned and blossomed. How this boy held the daughter in the dead and tufted lawn of the hillside. How they refused to believe what you built below.

This husband of the soil, Henry, and how he pressed a pillow against the boy's face. How beneath the pressure the boy thrashed and moaned. How the husband tried on the boy's shirts and pants and how none of them fit, how the seams burst apart and how they dripped with soil and mucus. How the woman touched the stains and asked the boy if he had been gardening. How the man slept in the boy's bed and how the sheets, stained with dirt, mashed moss, and worms. How the husband read *The Encyclopedia of Medicine* from the boy's shelf and how all words seemed smears of ink and clotted with the images of men shaved and pale, their ribs bulged and strained against impossible skin, their open black eyes and how they lay, piled and strewn. How the husband knew well what these men had become.

*How in those days men took it upon themselves to pull on masks and light torches, how they banded together, neighborhood by neighborhood, and they boarded up and burned those infected houses.*

How the boy sat on the back porch with the daughter while the mother wailed inside the house. How this world was no longer her own. How the woman wept and took pills and drank a bottle of vodka. How she masturbated and how she screamed out the window for the boy, "This is for you!" How the dead-husband leaned over his widow, how he blew on her ear, how he caressed her neck. How she giggled and sighed while, outside, the boy held the daughter. How frail she seemed now, how red her eyes, her lips of salt and thin hair, white and blue with moonlight, her brow rested against his apron. How the dead husband dragged his wife past where they sat, the moaning fatness of a canvas sack, and how the daughter pretended not to see. How the daughter said, "She's jus—" and how she sputtered. "I just don't—how she can—She's always—" How the boy said, "Someday you will do the same. But all of this," and the boy gestured to the town around them, "will be gone by then."

Now the humming faces of a thousand, thousand locusts and the horizon yawned a pure whiteness. How the air vibrated and grew new colors. How cities folded into dust. How time shaped and bent and dissolved. How you stood beneath the wave of the blasts, in your exterminator outfits, your bandanas. How you watched the end of all we had ever known. Now the flash of light and how from every forest buffalo stampeded and pummeled the street into rocks, how the vibrations shattered windows. How still living buffalo were skinned and their hides dropped like trousers, steaming and burning. How buffalo stampeded, pink, and how blue smoke coiled and fumed—How the skies rained husks of trees, evergreens stripped of needles, flaring and sparking—How elevators opened and there

stood bears, sizzling and frying in their own grease while marmots and squirrels scratched and yelped within serving carts. Does skittered along hallways, fat with life, and does dropped to tiled floors, moaning, smoking and sizzling, while from their split bellies pink heads emerged.

How the vibrations smiled and heaved and swallowed eagles, black and heavy. How eagles woke, thrashing and flapping and screeching in kitchenettes. How charcoaled eagles fell from windows and broke apart on walkways while cougars and leopards, white tufts splotted with oil and soot, matted brows, hunkered on counters with steady eyes. How wild cats washed the scorch with pink tongues gone ebony. How the buildings moaned and seethed and crumbled while within, deer trampled the elderly. How legs and hooves caught in the spokes of wheelchairs and smoldering deer thrashed against tiled floors. How their eyes—.

How a light flashed and the horizon rumbled with animals. How the boy held this daughter on the back porch and how in that moment he knew what he had lost a thousand years before, and how only now did he ache for what had been. How the sky opened and hummed and the boy knew enough to say with his final sound, "I love you" rather than what he knew, "I should have killed them." How she could not hear within the sky, broken into lights and impossible colors. How their ears popped and clogged with pus and they were forced to imagine the impossible roar. How the street yawned and expanded with vibrations. How a doe, lost and smoking, skittered past on the street before them. How the girl's chest bloomed with the life to come. How the boy held this daughter within the smoke and light

of a thousand, thousand candles, as the smoldering remains of feathers and trees fell about them.

How deer, skittish and blind, ran through shop windows and into cars while goats, half-burned, and herds of black sheep once white, lay smoking and blind. How coyotes seemed the hunched figures of bears, and how bears sweltered into deer, and how deer fell with tongues pink and burning, men tripping over them, lamenting the terror visited upon moose. How scorched kittens licked the charcoal bodies of dogs, beavers, goats. How these animals mewed into the vibrations, moaning and melting. How they wailed. How the vibrations caught all within and how those from this city woke in that city and how all cities burned and fumed into one. How withered men who had not walked in years dove out seventh-story windows, crisped to charcoal. How the few remaining survivors fled the towns and cities, blind and smoking, against the tide of a thousand, thousand burning animals. How women found themselves beneath the figures of brown bears yawning and moaning with steam. Brown bears cooked in their own juices and brown bears split open and these women, somewhere crushed beneath. How the hallways of offices and hospitals filled with gusts and moans and animals toppled into charcoal and debris. How the hallways and valleys, the cemeteries and taverns, lit up now with the burst of white light from along the horizon and how none could see your approach.

How there is no fear in the moment before you disappear.  
How this daughter, fled now into the particles within.

*I don't believe in innocence, the man said. I believe in what happens when the sky yawns wide and blue with light. I*

*believe the sounds your fires make when they swallow the forests.*

Now you arrived along the horizon, a dim line of seven figures, vibrating against an open chasm.

How—

Finally, in your boots and your exterminator clothes, you surveyed what you wrought. How you swished your boots into the—

You drew lines in the mounds and how you searched for the last of the women, if only husks of women, if only the charcoal of women, and what you would do with these women if you found them, yet—

How your horses, their skin and veins—

How your horses trotted through the soot and burning embers of cities and towns and animals and forests and mothers and children and hospitals and the boy, or you prayed the boy amongst them—

How there were no women to find.

How you wandered the ashes of what remained although nothing remained. How the world you constructed hummed with a thousand, thousand silent vibrations.

How their hair, gone to smoke. Their eyes molted—

How the only light you saw was the first light you kindled. How you held no new colors in your conception but what power they contained.

**IV.**



How within the yawning of the light, the final figments of this boy and girl, the particles of soot and debris, the house they constructed in the mound of dirt and rock along a hillside. How the long green grasses, irises and daisies, bent now and how, as the light broke into a thousand, thousand new colors, the boy dug out the hillside with a pickaxe and spade and the girl dried mud for bricks, and the girl gathered eagles' eggs and caught marmots and prairie dogs with traps of twine and sticks. How in the flash that meant the end of all, they lay before the hearth within this wide belly of soil. How they made love and sang while the sky loomed open and silent save the long off hum of what they called crickets. How they played badminton, how their chests throbbed as they fell into each other, how the man held his hand to the woman's bulged belly and how, a dim remembered pain. How the child within kicked and mewed, how it hungered for more than boiled roots and sourdough. How the horizon rose clotted with the smoke and detritus of a thousand skins and, within the light of this evaporated world, how the man held his son, writhing and red. How he begged the child to breathe and, once its lungs filled and expanded, how he prayed the child would never stop.

How—

How the father held his newborn son in their cavern and how the infant dozed, so terribly light and frail. Now this ache, within, this knowledge of what burned along the edges.

How the father took his son fishing along the stream and the son, interested only in the texture of the stones, the moss, in the ants along the strands of grass, the water

bugs darting and flickering. The son's pale freckled face, his wisps of red hair. How the father brushed the son's bangs from his eyes while the son pretended not to smile. How the man and his son ate what they called mayonnaise sandwiches but were mostly goats' milk cheese and sourdough. How the son sat on his father's lap and the heat of the boy through his layers of denim and cotton. How the father felt the burn of light in his cornea and the boundaries wilted and blackened. How the father wiped his eyes with a handkerchief while the little boy dozed, slouched and drooling against his father's side.

Now the boy asked his mother and father how they met and his parents could not answer. Later, as the father and mother lay in their bed of straw and cotton, how they recalled only the conception of their son, the moment of waking into the light of this prairie, the long green grass and daisies, and if they strained enough, how they knew only an ache, and the sudden flash of a thousand suns.

How the walls inside the hillside curled and puckered like a burning Polaroid. How fruit jars warped and twisted into flutes while the fluids clouded and blackened. How the parents noticed but pretended these blots were simply shadows. Now always this smell of smoldering and smoke, of meat cooking and burned, no matter how long the door was open, the windows, no matter if they cooked outside or in. How the husband and wife sat in lawn chairs along the hillside, admiring the prairie grasses, the sway of brown and green, the long off bounce of prairie dogs, their chattering. How the light of the falling sun seemed born of new colors and textures and how the landscape seemed to wilt

before these red and gold eyes. How the air gusted in a crimson breath and the wife said "it must be a tornado." How somewhere, dimly remembered, the truth moaned, and how she prayed her husband had forgotten. How the sky opened and the father called the son into the house again. How the boy's head, his red hair, barely over the tips of the grass.

How the walls corroded and blackened as if charred. How the father and his son scrubbed with scouring pads and bleach, their hands raw and red. How the father and mother made a game of it, those who cleaned the most won a piece of pie, a raise in allowance. How the boy peeked out the door and how the prairie entire seemed flooded with ash and soot. How they scrubbed.

How the father wandered the black and flattened fields, as the sky folded and unfolded into new colors, how it vibrated and scorched the perimeter. How the father, his shirt unbuttoned and flapping, his chest and belly, his hairs bleached white for the horizon.

How they woke to a roaring and crackling. How the boy screamed and how he lay within the arms of his mother and father. How the roaring seemed larger than all sound. How a thousand planes dealt into the hillside would seem a murmur by comparison. In the place beneath all knowledge, the mother and father knew how quickly something disappears and so they held each other all the tighter to know the moment the other was no more. How the boy hiccupped and feared he could not breathe. How his neck swelled and his skin turned blue. How the boy, through the roaring and crackling, on these bed sheets, and somewhere the eyes of a cat, slivered and yellowed. How the boy said,

“mama, I’m going to die,” and how she knew enough to say, “No you aren’t, honey, no, you never will.” How this boy could only stare back at his father and mother and why they lied.

How the boy lay swollen and blue. How the father tore apart chairs and boxes, how he hammered together a tiny casket. How he wandered those hillsides, black and molted. How it seemed he could climb within, and how he felt he once had. How this son lay in his bed, cold and unmoving save to wheeze. How the air around them burst. How the mother laid the boy’s favorite toy truck in the crook of his arm, and how the horizon opened.

How the father hugged his son in his casket and whispered to the child of wax how this suffering would end soon. How the boy’s ears leaked for the moaning. How the walls opened and there was white light. How the mother patched these with the boy’s spare overalls. How the overalls flickered into light and flames while she beat them with a broom. How husband and wife finally lay with each other amongst the crackling, coughing for the soot and smoke of the walls and the hillsides, and the entire world obliterated around them. How the funeral of the world they had always known burned into their minds now and how they forced themselves to kiss each other, to wet each other, to remind each of this life they would yet lead, and, how this mother said, if only her voice, lost in the humming, how this glow, all around them, was only the glow of the falling sun, and soon—



**ROBERT KLOSS** has recent fiction in *The Collagist*, *Caketrain*, *Gargoyle*, & *Everyday Genius* among others. This is his first book.

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