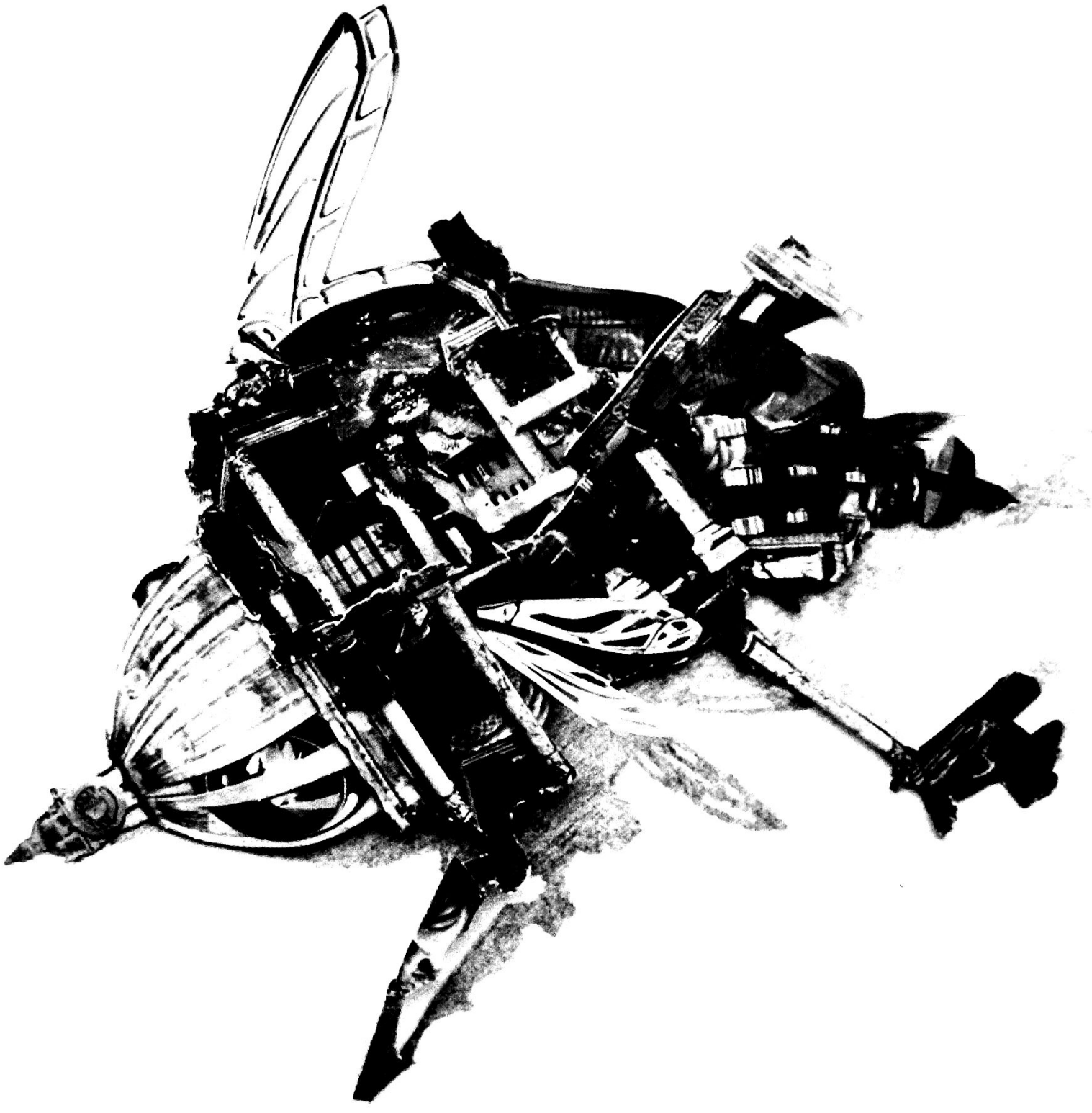

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Saturday Children

Amos Magliocco

The lot was empty for years because the neighbors who owned it enjoyed the trees along the creek and they could afford not to sell. Like everyone on the street they attended the Mormon temple at the end of the block, a bright affair with a glass façade and a tall, rust-colored steeple. When the value of their houses fell, the lot was sold to a former widower, recently-remarried, who though he arrived without the children the neighbors would have preferred nevertheless built a handsome white stone house elevated two tiers over the creek, small enough to preserve the gangly hackberry, a large beau'd'arc in the center of the yard, and two emaciated post oak twisted in helical competition for sunlight. In any wind the braided trunks rubbed and creaked like an old footbridge. All that autumn the new owner supervised construction and when the house was almost finished, he died.

His wife put the house up for sale and a man named Connor Marstellar made an offer, which was refused. Marstellar visited again and spent thirty minutes in the backyard, contemplating the two-tiered landscaping, the gurgling creek, and the wide meadow on the other side. Soon he was planting perennials and evergreens and Asian Jasmine along the foundation where Bermuda would have declined in so much shade. A dozen tufts of monkey grass he arranged around a flat-stone path from the upper level down to the creek. The meadow across the way hosted mature trees so full in mid-spring he could not see the house behind them or even imagine it. The surveyor's report contoured a flood zone deeper onto their property than his by a hundred feet, likely the reason why the house was so far from the water. At night, dogs howled to distant sirens like some nocturnal troupe of professional mourners, their yelps like chamois polishing glass.

One morning in late May a woman came out onto the meadow with a Labrador Retriever. She snapped a fallen branch in half and pitched the longer portion for her dog to chase, and Connor smiled at the image of a tall woman in a white sweater playing fetch with her dog. She looked to be in her early forties, with a youthful haircut and vigorous attention to the animal and their play. The branch she'd thrown whistled in the air and her dog launched himself so suddenly the squirrels and the leaves on all the trees seemed to pause. Trotting back with the branch in his mouth, the dog scowled at the bubbling stream until the woman clapped twice and then he stepped smart. Connor cradled his coffee mug and sank into the wicker chair on his porch. He felt that if he were to wave or call out to her it would break some

meditative reverie. By way of compromise he stood and brushed the crumbs from his jeans and the woman and her dog both turned to face him. She smiled as if he'd said something she didn't quite hear. In that very instant a red-shouldered hawk dove from the upper canopy, stripes scored on its wingspan. When Connor looked again, the woman and her dog were turned back for the kennel.

Connor's brother Mike and his family visited on Saturday afternoons ever since Connor's wife Stephanie had died in Iraq. The brothers drank beer on the porch while Mike's kids, a boy and a girl, climbed the big tree and chased bleating squirrels around the yard. They cheated behind woodpeckers hammering with their dramatic red crowns and froze in wonder when a hawk sailed around a bend in the creek. Their mother, Melissa, was nervous about how high in the tree the girl climbed and the way the boy balanced along the ledge of the retaining wall. She smoked cigarettes and threaded the butts into empty Coke cans, checking her phone for text messages, then paced, closer and closer to the children. Mike ignored her agitation, as if she were invisible, but it was also possible they'd been married so long, twelve years, that she was an incarnation of his own unease. Connor recognized Mike's stress from their childhood, but his brother's communication with Melissa was in a code he did not detect. He and Stephanie had not been married long enough or spent enough time together for such a language.

Six months after Stephanie was gone, Mike tried to change the Saturday routine. He told Connor to get out of the house, drive into town. If you can't bear to meet people at least be around them. He blamed Melissa for various cancellations, though they all knew the visits constituted Connor's only human contact most weeks. After the new house, however, when the children saw the creek and yard, all the songbirds and sparrows dancing through the trash trees, there was no more talk of interrupting the visits.

One Saturday in October, Connor's niece stood near the bank of the creek. She pointed to the other side and said the leaves from an American Elm were falling in the same shape as the branches. From across the swale the dogs sang in reply as if they'd long waited for someone to notice. The girl inched toward the water, no more than a foot deep and five feet side to side. She was right about the leaves. The orange scatter on the grass was like a tree of flame rising through the ground.

"Get back up here," Melissa said."C'mon. You, too, Brandon. Let's go inside. I'll make Kool-Aid." The three together climbed the short steps from the lower tier to the upper level and filed past the brothers wordlessly. Mike looked to his wife as if she might offer an explanation, for Connor's sake, but she said nothing.

"They can use the DVD player," Connor said. "I have their movies saved on my Netflix queue."

Melissa held the patio door open for the kids. "Is there anything else on that queue I should know about?"

"All right, Mel," Mike said. Connor laughed. Kidding or not, the question felt good, an invitation to normalcy.

Despite Melissa's fretting, it was a fine yard for children, though for a toddler he'd have built a fence along the ledge, a garden Kenninji of bamboo. He'd have

emailed photos to Stephanie the same way she'd documented how she and her squad mates had welded iron plates to the sides and undercarriage of their Humvee. But Stephanie was dead and there would be no fence. Except for photos on the wall she was absent from this new place. He kept some clothes, like her green blouse from the unveiling of a tacky eagle statue—one wing longer and thicker than the other—on their college campus; and the frayed concert t-shirt, when a drunk sit ting in front of them passed a joint to Connor and went to buy a beer. Connor and Stephanie took a few drags and forgot about it, burning briskly, and when the man returned a half hour later the joint was gone. Connor expected a fight, but the man never turned around. In bed a week later Connor reminded her of the concert and they laughed until they could hardly breathe. "I planned to punch him in the face before he said a word," Connor said. "I thought it was my only chance."

Those moments were rare, confined to Stephanie's leaves and holidays. She drove a convoy escort, whisking allied contractors across Baghdad, all somewhat routine until one day, returning from an escort, her squad stopped to check their map after the GPS signal had failed in a canyon of concrete buildings. Two young men, maybe Iraqi, maybe not, stepped out in front of them, well-dressed, clean shaven, as if they were already dead, each with a Russian tank grenade held away from his chest like an offering. "What are those?" Stephanie called over the radio, not a question so much as a statement, according to the reports. And again, "What are those?" For reasons neither Connor nor anyone else would ever learn, the Humvee's .50 cal gunner did not open fire, did not cut the men in half with three or four rounds.

"Melissa doesn't think you're bad luck or anything," Mike said. "It's just she has a new relationship to danger. A dysfunctional relationship, I would say." It was good that Mike could talk this way. For months their conversations had adhered to surfaces: the un-mowed grass, Connor's beard catching food, sweatpants and ballcaps and pizza box es. Now it was okay to witness how Stephanie's death tilted others' lives, Mike as a father whose children's aunt was killed by bad men far away, and how to explain such a thing?

"So—what? She floors it at green lights?" Connor said. "Pushes the kids' heads down and pops the clutch?" Mike laughed. "For Christmas, I'll buy her night-vision goggles." The dogs barked at the brothers' laughter and the woman across the creek unlatched her gate. Mike waved and she waved back. Connor raised his beer bottle more nonchalantly than he intended.

"You're a smooth one," Mike said. "Why not just flip her off?"

"I've only seen her a few times in the six months I've been here."

"And your creek is not a moat. You don't have to date her—she's twice your age, anyway. You can't say hello?"

"Next time I will." Connor shrugged. "She isn't twice my age."

THAT NIGHT HE dreamed a flash bomb detonated over the creek, cold brilliance painting the dogs mid-gallop like full moon greyhounds. When he woke up he understood that police sirens had brought the frantic bays of her animals. In the living room, a thin glow was draped over his furniture like a sheet, pale light from a three-globe patio lamp in

the woman's backyard. Like a first coat of snow, it fell on either bank of the creek. Like ash. With the trees losing leaves, the fixture was visible for the first time, fluttered like waking starlight. Crisp as night-walkers the dogs stepped and held their heads to cry and described circles in their pacing and sniffed each others' necks.

In the morning, he brewed coffee and sat on the patio. Along the foundation the thickening jasmine glowed ruby red in the blossoms. He nodded off again until a voice woke him. "Sir? Sir? Excuse me." It was her, in a black windbreaker and her hair fallen over her shoulders. She looked younger, and waved her arms back and forth as if to gain his attention across a crowded room.

"Hello," he called back too loud. He was embarrassed at having fallen asleep.

"I'll come around," she said and pointed to the creek and to the bridge at the end of the street. He resolved to act like a normal person. Sit up straight. Smile. He was forgetting how to act around people. Where the water ran below the road, she climbed the steep bank and descended again on Connor's side. When she was close enough to see him well, she squinted and nearly spoke again, like she recognized him. But they had never met. He reminded her of someone, he expected, old pleasures petitioning for restoration in the heart. He hurried to the steps to offer his hand. "I'm Connor."

"Hi, Connor. I'm Amy." As he suspected, she came to apologize for the dogs. She'd seen the light of the television in his living room and with him asleep on his patio she assumed the noise had kept him up. She was nervous, said other neighbors had threatened to call Animal Control or make some formal complaint. Like some distant flavor from childhood he remembered how it felt to be upset by such a thing, to obsess over inconvenience. He started a kettle for tea, Amy on the edge of her chair with her legs crossed at the ankles and her hands folded in her lap. The strawberry blonde hair at her shoulders was still damp and she wore no makeup. "What I really came to ask," she said, "I must be honest—is about the children. The ones on Saturdays? Are they yours?"

"Those are my brother's kids." She nodded expectantly. "A little gang of anarchists," he added, worried he wasn't saying enough. "They didn't sneak over and break anything, did they?"

She laughed. "Oh, no no. And I wouldn't mind if they had. But do you think their parents—your brother, I guess—"

"Mike."

"Do you think Mike and his wife would let them come and play with the dogs? I mean, I know their mother is afraid of your retaining wall here, and the creek."

"Her fears make for a long list."

Amy smiled and held his gaze. She didn't know whether to laugh or not. Connor started to speak but stopped and looked down.

"There's so much more space on my side," she said. "Plenty of flat ground and green grass. It's a natural playground. That's why we bought the place." In her kennel, the dogs waited at the fence like abandoned chaperones, four of them pacing back and forth and stopping to watch, tails wagging with such force their chests swayed. "They're good with children. All that young energy is well spent on the dogs. And it's good for the animals, of

course." The thought of the kids chasing and being chased by playful pups was wonderful, that was hard to deny. And perhaps Melissa would relax enough to stop coming over, an unkind thought. He was ashamed to begrudge her company, but she wore Stephanie's death like a veil and in her presence he was afraid to act even for a moment as if he wasn't thinking about it.

"What is her name?"

"Sorry, who?"

"Their mother. Your sister in law? I'm so nosey."

"Melissa."

Amy nodded. She seemed like a person who understood both the conversation you were having and the one you wished you were having. If only she could read his mind. So far no one had asked the right questions, which Connor believed existed somewhere, and which in their correctness would suggest such accurate answers as to relieve the dull urgency to explain himself. On the Internet he found the term "Complicated Grief" to describe how the normal mourning process can fold into depression and finally stasis, like the point at the bottom of the globe where one simply turns, round and round, while all humanity flies in circles overhead.

"In no time their mother will see the dogs are safe." Each time Amy spoke was like waking up again.

Connor said, "It's not her fault—Melissa, I mean. She was my wife's best friend and my wife—Stephanie was my wife—died in Baghdad last year. She was a soldier."

"I'm sorry."

He leaned back in the chair, confused, nearly alarmed by the lack of chattering condolence. "Can I come and meet your gang first? Then I can give their nervous mom the all-clear."

"That's a good idea. The dogs might be standoffish at first, since you're a grownup, but they'll come around. Kids they take to instantly. It's something how they know the difference." She stood and extended her hand.

"We never had any. We'd planned on it."

She leaned toward him a little and as if she were trying to guess, asked, "What do you do, Connor? Are you back to work yet?"

"Part time. I'm a paralegal for an estate attorney. Wills and medical directives, that sort of thing. These days I put in a few days a week with estate preparations. I supervise events called label parties."

She smiled expectantly. She was either unaccustomed to or unwilling to accept the clipped manner in which Connor negotiated the world these days.

"Grownup kids walk around and tag what items they want while Mom—it's usually Mom—looks on. It gives everyone the idea that there won't be any surprises later."

"How ghoulish. Mine can fight it out. They'll learn more about one another that way."

"Where are your kids? You said 'we' when you mentioned the house. Are they grown?" Connor could not remember the last time he'd asked a question specifically to extend a conversation.

"One is grown, sort of, my college daughter. She's in grad school. That's a sort of hybrid of old age and adolescence. The other girl my husband took." Stephanie was a blunt woman, "callous" is how he might have described her a long time ago, before the accident. Now it was relaxing to speak with someone who did not anticipate the effect of her words, who let fly and managed the consequences later. Perhaps diplomacy had failed her too often. Connor had found that with the more cautious-minded, tremendous energy was necessary to reflect a safe response, to assure them they hadn't said "the wrong thing" when it did not matter at all what they said, or failed to say, or if they said not a single word. Easier to avoid people entirely and reserve the energy to climb out of bed and make coffee and push through the day.

As she took the steps to the lower tier Connor said, "Why is your dog afraid of the creek? The retriever?"

"He knows how fast the water can rise. Barkley is his name—he's my boy. What he doesn't know is that it has to rain a long time for a flood like that to happen again." Connor nodded and Amy left with a wave. Her dogs leapt at the gate and surrounded her in a pack when she stepped back through the kennel door.

A FEW DAYS later, Connor supervised a label party for a retired attorney twenty-seven years older than his second (and current) wife. She and her two children from a previous marriage had lived with the attorney nine years, but the adult children from his first marriage didn't like her. The old lawyer, Ray, was finishing a breakfast burrito at a small glass table in the kitchen when Connor arrived. His current wife was a plain-looking woman who'd been pretty once, kept a good figure, and made it clear from how hard she worked that she'd earned what inheritance he saw fit to leave her. New braces flashed with her smile, perhaps a sign she was worried for her future.

"Connor, tomorrow, after this whole sordid business is ended, I want to talk in front of your cameras, if that's allowed," Ray said.

"Of course. But I don't have to tell you that it's impractical—"

"To *control from the grave*, as they say? You'd be surprised what's possible if your progeny are sufficiently weak-willed, or you have cause to doubt their fundamental humanity."

Clifford, the oldest son from the first marriage, arrived while they ate. A lanky man who steered his index finger with a clinical disinterest, he looked like a down-on-his-luck art dealer. This vase. Mother's lamp. His entire haul would show up on eBay.

Ray said, "Your boss told me about you. It's a terrible thing for a young man to lose his wife. No getting over it, don't worry about that. Not possible. But you persevere and eventually you find the sand to start over." He talked more and more like this, about disconnection and alienation, while his children and stepchildren cut each other with asides. They moved through the house like judges at the state fair. Ray said Connor was lucky to be childless. "You're money ahead. Most families, the mother is an interpreter, a go-between. When she's gone you wake up in a village of foreigners. You don't speak the language, you see, and they resent your inability to translate what happened the way their mother could. It's always better for the father to go first. I'm not supposed to talk like this,

equal rights and all." What Ray was trying to tell him was that each person's grief is newly met in the world, as individual as every member of the endless, single file formation of the dead. He'd sensed this but never examined it. It did not improve anything by its knowing.

His visit with the dogs began awkwardly. Barkley refused to join him and Amy on the patio or even step through the open gate. He dropped his head and whipped it back and forth like a precocious child, not budging from the far corner of the kennel. In his protestations he was quite beautiful, a milky-white coat with a squared jaw and muscular haunches, his shyness so human it was instantly charming. Connor admired his intolerance of strangers, but Amy was embarrassed. "Barkley," she said. "Oh, what a show." She turned her attention back to Connor across the green metal table. "He's living in the past," she said.

"Jealousy. Like any guy. I should introduce myself properly."

"Let him come to you." The other dogs were anxious to meet a stranger, but Barkley's reluctance tempered their hospitality. "Sit a moment and show him you're no threat." The dogs collected behind their pack leader, a loyal crew. His followers gathered, Barkley sat up, triumphant. Connor and Amy laughed together.

She must have married young, Connor thought, had her first child at eighteen or so. How such news must have rang in her ear, a moment of exhilaration and terror at the start of a relationship.

"Tell me what happened to your wife," she said.

He gave a sanitized version to impart facts—Humvee and grenades—abstracted enough through summary to maintain the conversation. He knew a way to sand the edges.

"So many questions," she said and shook her head. "I guess you have to put them away one at a time."

"The turret gunner could have killed them. I know a lot about that kid, where he was born and went to school. I saw his Facebook photos. He looked eager to kill something, anything, with that .50 cal. He was always posing behind it. I don't know why he didn't shoot them. Stephanie put the Humvee in reverse but they had pulled some old car in behind her. The first one threw his grenade too far and it landed behind them. So she put the truck in drive and floored it, right toward them, but the second one, he didn't panic. He threw sidearm, you know, like a ballplayer, on a low arc so it detonated at the windshield. It was a perfect throw."

Amy looked beside Connor and there was Barkley, ears raised and tail wagging, watching him as intently as she had been. "You let down your guard."

"I didn't know I had one left." He offered his hand and Barkley allowed a scratch of his chin and head. "But you're easy to talk to," he said, not caring for the moment how she took it. What he meant was he felt like Amy knew all these details already, and was only hoping he would tell it truthfully, would tell the hardest parts best.

She drew Barkley to her lap and hugged his neck. "Such a good boy," she said. "Thank you, boy. Such a good boy." She looked to Connor with a face full of expectation. "So do we pass? I know it's a little pathetic, but I'd love to see those children here, almost as much as these dogs would."

At the end of his label party, Ray Spiller gathered his two families on an L-shaped sectional in the living room. When the camcorder started he described old and new love with a wisdom terrible for the cost it implied. When he finished he thanked Connor and wrote a check to the law firm. Connor pulled the tab on the videotape to prevent erasure, slid it into his briefcase netting, and left the house.

Mike thought Connor's proposal to bring the kids to play with Amy's dogs was some kind of breakthrough. Whatever it meant, it felt good to give Amy the news they were coming. to offer someone good news was a momentary joy and she nearly sang at the prospect. As she'd predicted, the dogs and children made boisterous playmates, an inexhaustible mass of limbs and delighted shrieks as the kids chased the animals and turned to be chased. Enthusiastic stick-throwers and ball rollers and even aspirants to the pack when the boy went on all fours to bark Barkley's language back to him. After a few weeks, Amy learned their favorite TV shows and sealed their friendship with homemade pimento cheese sandwiches. She told Connor, "You and your brother can bring your beer, you know."

"No, let's leave that over there."

"Speak for yourself," Mike said and punched him on the arm.

Then Connor thought it would probably be okay after all. It was clear when the kids were with the dogs that neither Amy's past nor his own warranted attention. The phrase "field of pure presence" came to mind when Amy was near, and Connor recalled a piano teacher who once said a well-played piece should leave "a dent in the air." As Amy moved, the space around her seemed to ripple in her wake.

One night after a long evening at her place, after Mike had grilled salmon steaks and they ate so much Connor could barely climb up his side of the creek, he had strange dreams. In one, he was the Humvee driver, clad in the mottled, green-beige ACUs. Two people stepped in front of the truck and Connor gently shifted into drive because he realized the two people were actually he and Stephanie. His hair was long like when they'd met. They each wore black suits with ties. He could feel the powerful engine vibrate in his fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. A voice came from above—the turret gunner: "Keep going." It was Amy's voice. "Keep going right past them," she said. "They won't hurt us." He knew this wasn't true, but as he accelerated the pair did not flinch, made no show of aggression, and Connor woke in sheets damp with sweat.

After several questions, Amy finally told him about her marriage one night on her patio. "After the flood I had trouble sleeping. I used Ambien. I started sleepwalking, sleep-dressing, even sleep-driving." She shrugged. "One night I scrambled eggs and bacon, made two slices of toast, and I plated the whole breakfast but left a plastic spatula in a pan with the flame on high. The funny part is I never touched the food. My husband Jimmy could hardly wake me when the smoke alarm went off. He took so much smoke they hospitalized him overnight, but even after that I couldn't kick Ambien." In a newspaper the next morning her husband read how an "unknown male" had been taken from their residence for smoke inhalation. "A blow to his ego, I suspect. His friends made jokes. Of course he was the one fooling around." She

laughed with relish. She was saying it was all right to laugh. But he couldn't. Connor was saying it wasn't.

"Why were you taking Ambien? Was it Jimmy? After all that time could you sense when something was wrong?"

"No. There was a hollow space at the center of our relationship. It wasn't there for a long time and then it was and it grew and grew. He took his new love there to hide it. I had no idea."

He felt a chill. A smoke detector in her house chirped as if the battery were low. "Do you still take Ambien?"

"Well. On the vow you're not a cat burglar, I lock myself in my bedroom now. The latch is on the outside."

"Barkley lets you out," Connor guessed.

"He waits at the door each morning. He reaches up and pushes the latch pretty as you please. It's a big latch I installed on the other side. He's never late. Never not there. He'd bring eggs if he could. I still wander around in my sleep, it seems, but with a little resistance I go right back to bed."

THE NEW RELATIONSHIP brought a tangle of anticipation with hollow grief and also resentment, at Amy for her dissembled marriage, at Stephanie for dying in some remote fucking place he could never visit, at the Army for slogans like "freedom" and "duty" when the only true thing was Stephanie had done a job and it was dangerous and they had known that from the beginning. Rain woke him, tapping the glass and plinking the aluminum gutters. As he drifted back to sleep he wondered what dreams Amy locked in with herself. In the morning he called her. "Barkley let you out yet?"

"He's more reliable than a morning kiss."

Connor laughed. "Amy, can I ask you one more question about your marriage?"

She sighed. "Connor, at this point it's like eyewitness testimony, you know? After the crash? I don't know that I even know the truth myself."

"Were they twenty-four good years?"

"Connor, you didn't miss anything. It didn't happen. Your wife died young. What you had, you had, what never was you can't claim. The sooner that's clear to you the sooner you'll sleep at night." He was flush with embarrassment. But when his indignation reached the surface, it popped like a child's blown bubble and spread into the open air. Only so much defense can be mounted for the dead.

"Breakfast—the three of us?" He asked.

"Barkley?"

"Why not?"

She said, "I know you saw it rain last night." The creek was several inches higher, swift against the jagged banks.

"You won't make me climb over there, will you?"

They took Connor's Ford Explorer. Amy smelled of soap and cinnamon from something she'd baked earlier, and she fit comfortably in his car, in his life. She and Barkley inhabited the cabin completely, his panting and her scents and smile and expectations

for the ride and their morning together. All this toward some powerful new mystery, even while by the simple act of stroking Barkley's neck, to congratulate his dignified entrance to the vehicle. Amy suggested it was here, the mystery was this same small moment. The rain started when they were on the sidewalk, and in their rush to the café they passed a huge ceramic planter of carnations already overflowing. They spent the day downtown, took lunch in a taqueria where no one spoke English, and bought a bottle of Tempranillo for later. On their way out, she put her arm around his waist. He might have hesitated another time, but that night his body bent like steel and he followed her into the bedroom, turned the lock on the outside while Amy started a Coleman Hawkins CD, a teenage move they both laughed over, and Barkley peered through the door until Connor pushed it closed.

They fell into one another, anxious and hopeful.

In the morning Amy was in a green chair by the window. The outline of her body shimmered like desert heat bends an image or suggests water where none can exist, and Connor remembered the smooth stretch of her legs on his chest, her hair in his face. When she turned her head the whispering snow outside reflected in her eyes, falling in thick handfuls. He threw off the comforter. It was true. It was snowing. "How did you arrange that?" he said.

"Don't tell me you think this is all for you." She turned to face him, a little glossy and disheveled. "You have to call Mike and have him bring the children!"

He'd have preferred to stay in bed with her, keep another day for themselves. "Let's bring them tomorrow—after they're worn out from building snowmen," he said. Her eyes widened. She hadn't thought of snowmen.

"Children don't wear out, Connor."

He beckoned her to bed. "I'm almost a child, compared to you." She lunged toward him and tried to slap him playfully. He grabbed her and pulled her on top of him. When they finished, Connor resisted the urge to ask her about the sex in her marriage, but he couldn't help himself. She rolled her eyes. Fearsome at the start, she said, mellowed later, until he started cheating, and then he was energized and rough where they'd been soft, chatty where they'd used silence. Eye contact and hands so strangely animated as if the new lover was in the bed with them—something of a turn-on, she said. She went to her dresser to find clothes for the day. Connor would have to bring the kids now. She'd paid with the retrospective, paid bodily, the way she studied her ankles with resignation, comparing in her mind's eye the younger woman's legs from the story she just told. These were the bargains they struck.

It was good they didn't wait. The wind shifted and their snow melted in uneven tracks hidden from the sunlight. The kids brought friends from Mike's neighborhood and the dogs were frantic to play with as many as possible. Amy, Mike, and Connor drank hot chocolate under her canopy table when one little boy heaved a snowball toward their refuge and Connor said, "Hey!" but Amy jumped from her seat and packed a return volley in her bare hands. Her aim was true and she tagged the astonished child in the back. He fell dramatically and rolled around while a Jack

Russell pedaled atop him as if he were a log turning in a river. "I've still got it," she said. She wiped her hands and caught Mike studying her and she laughed at herself.

"Their mother can't do anything that spontaneous," Mike said.

"It's alright." Amy brushed the snow from her gloves. "They forgive her what she's going through. It's the mother they're counting on."

Mike said, "That may be true, but they know their mother is counting on their father."

Amy gave him a long, open look before she nodded and looked at her drink, vapor rising in curls of steam.

"You're the expert, Mike. On your own opinion, anyway," Connor said.

"It's hard to understand if you don't have kids, Connor," Amy said. "It's not your fault."

The boy raced Barkley back and forth from the cut bank, water lapping the edge. His boot heel sliced into the mud and Connor too felt as if he had been tilled by the blade of some harsh absolution. Not his fault. Of course it wasn't his fault.

"The waterline is the highest since you moved," Mike said. "Got your schooner sealed?" He reached over to punch Connor's arm. "Where's it go, this picturesque canal of yours?"

"Lake McClellan," Amy said. "The crystal waters. Straight out to sea."

On the downtown square that night Connor and Amy watched college kids play Frisbee while young parents stopped along the sidewalk so their kids could greet a black poodle tied to a parking sign. A world full of kids.

"You don't talk about your girls much," he said.

"They're not in the museum yet. I see them so often, talk almost every other day. I'm not as interested in the past as you are. I find the past to be cold like some distant moon. And cynical, because even a happy moment is as shallow as the creek most days. You asked about my girls. Merritt is my oldest. She had a little camera when she was a teenager. Carried it everyplace. One night she and a friend drove to a movie and happened to pass Jimmy and me on the highway. Merritt told her friend not to honk while she fished out that camera. They pulled alongside just as I was laughing at something Jimmy had said—my head thrown back, my arm draped over the door. I never saw the kids. Didn't know they were there. Merritt waited ten years to give me that picture. One Christmas, there it was—twenty four inches wide and framed. I couldn't believe the discipline to keep it like she did. What you have to know. There's sadness in that. We must have shown her that somehow, Jimmy and me. And I don't remember the moment of course—nobody would. I can't remember Jimmy and me that way at all."

"Maybe the past doesn't matter."

"No, the past throws a long shadow. I remember the months after my divorce as profound loss and exhilarating liberation both. I never knew such strong feeling. It matters." After a few moments she turned to face him. "But a future that never happened—you're just not obligated to those hopes anymore. Dreams from long ago are still just dreams."

Late that night, Connor found a documentary about the ancient buildings and vegetation of Baghdad. Many streets are lined with trees which after five years produce the palm dates Iraqis have loved for centuries. Sweet and supple. Children walk

up and down the boulevards collecting the fruit. It seemed almost impossible that the men who killed Stephanie would not have done this very thing when they were boys.

For their first dinner at his place, Connor made enchiladas. Amy chopped vegetables and habitually glanced toward her backyard. She teared up halfway through the first onion and laughed while she dabbed her face with a tissue. "When do I see my first label party?" she asked. He couldn't bring her to one, of course, but he didn't have to—Ray Spiller's videotape was still in his briefcase. After dinner, Connor played the tape. The image shook a little as he'd tried to frame the whole clan, with Ray in the center. Never mind that, Ray had said. Zoom in on my face. The HD resolution rendered the blotch on the bridge of his nose and the emerald shine in his eyes. He looked around and faced the camera. "I always missed your mother," he said. "Right until the end, even though we brought each other to grief many times, and that's often what you saw, but between those moments was healing. That's hard to see. Our marriage was like an old bone break that set wrong. It ached in the cold, but it was solid. It still aches now, even though I have a new wife who I also love. When you meet someone new, you put her in the front of your mind, which your mother would've wanted. And if this new marriage seems easier, if it looks happier, it's because of all that healing I learned with your mother. I think we taught each other. I honor your mother by this happy marriage and you will do the same when I'm dead." And there he stopped. He looked down and back up to the camera several times, as if there were more to say, but he didn't speak again.

Amy asked about Ray's health and what Connor thought would happen to the young wife. The video had disturbed her in a private way that did not invite scrutiny. He didn't know what would happen. In his experience, he said, the living are hard pressed to keep their promises to the dead.

That weekend she didn't answer her cell. Her lights were off at night and it rained through the afternoons and into Sunday night. The speed with which the creek rose was astonishing—swollen over the bank and several feet onto his lower tier, rushing with debris. A line of storms trained over the town and heavy rain became torrential. Water approached Amy's kennel, where the dogs huddled at the far side of the pen. He called her over and over, sent a dozen texts. From the edge of the waterline he studied her house and made out a dim light in the bedroom as if a TV were playing. It could be the Ambien, or perhaps Barkley was too scared or confused by the weather to let her out.

And if the water came, what would he take from his own place? The computer and photo albums. His little file cabinet. There were carnations in a white vase, a surprise from Amy, and a photography book he planned to give her: a documentary of birds on the Louisiana Gulf Coast. A lightning flash exposed the creek, so swift now a man could never stand in it. Between flashes you could imagine a normal depth before the next strike showed the rotted branches and lawn furniture gliding downstream.

He drove over and banged on her front door. He worked his way along the side of the house to the back where the dogs whimpered, Barkley not among them. In the worst case.

he'd let them out to save themselves. The next bolt caught his breath, revealed water only a few feet from the fence, twenty-five feet wide from her side to his, a conveyor belt of trash. Amy's patio door was unlocked and Barkley stood at the entrance to the bedroom hallway, ears high and alert. "Good boy," Connor said and Barkley wagged his tail. He tapped one paw and then the other. "Is she in there, boy?" He called out: "Amy? Are you here?" He took a few steps and called again. He knocked on the wall. He thought of the turret gunner, whose father had said on the phone: "He didn't have time to shoot. He didn't have time."

Connor turned the latch of Amy's bedroom door until the alarmed reply came: "Who's there??"

The room was dimly-lit, and he dared not enter, though he'd spent a half dozen nights by now. "It's flooding, Amy. What's the matter?"

"Oh, Connor, wait." Before another word, lightning rolled across the sky like a net tight against the underbelly of the clouds. In the illumination, a photograph on Amy's dresser he hadn't seen before: a woman in a car, laughing, and, at the end of her bed, two sets of bare feet.

What is it, the man in her bed asked. Who is that?

He didn't want to hear the answer. "Jesus—I'm sorry. I—the water's nearly to the kennel," Connor said.

"Thank you, Connor. I'll get dressed. You take care of your place, too, and we'll talk tomorrow." He pulled the door shut and walked outside. Barkley followed him into the rain, and at the kennel door Connor gauged the distance from the water to the southern end of the pen. Out there with the dogs he waited for the sky to fill flat white like a hundred laundered sheets on a line.