Extinguish my sight, and I can still see you; 
plug up my ears, and I can still hear; 
even without feet I can walk toward you, 
and without mouth I can still implore. 
Break off my arms, and I will hold you 
with my heart as if it were a hand; 
strangle my heart, and my brain will still throb; 
and should you set fire to my brain, 
I still can carry you with my blood.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, 
The Book of Hours, Prayers to a Lowly God
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Black River Falls

D.L. Olson

They weren’t kidding when they named this river Black. It’s blacker than my uncle’s fresh-plowed dirt. They say it’s white pine that makes the water this dark. It’s blacker than a white pine woods on a cloudy night. It’s almost as black as Dick Larkin’s heart. It’s funny how a wood that light can make water black. But then it’s funny how cold can leave water high and dry. A lot of funny things ain’t funny to nobody.

Sometimes the river’ll go up, just like sometimes it’ll go down. Rivers ain’t much different that way than anything else. I’ve been living alongside this one now for pretty near fifty years. Jobs may come and go but the water just keeps flowing on. I’m hoping it ain’t too black to wash me clean.

If it gets too high, they’ll open up a gate. If it gets bad enough, they’ll open up two or three. But no matter how many get raised, they never stay up for long. That’s when I hurry down below the dam to the great big red rocks. Because water ain’t the only thing that gets left behind. If I’m lucky I’ll find a fish in a poof that ain’t yet dead. It’s funny how the slippery things can breathe underwater. But then it’s funny how they’ll drown out in the air. I catch them with my own two hands and I toss them back. I’ve saved more fish than you could count. I’m counting on the fish someday paying me back. You don’t have to have arms to lend a helping hand. Ever since I screwed my life up but been combing these banks. They cradle the river just like a darling that’ll never turn up. Mostly I turn up old bottles and rusty cans. Once I dig up a winter coat my size, but there’s nothing in it but stinky mud. Finding driftwood always gets my hopes up. If you soak a stick a while in water, it gets so heavy it’ll sink. But if you don’t give up, it gets so light it’ll float. It’s lighter than white pine ever dreamt of. White pines grow so tall and pretty. Way back when that’s about all that grows around these parts. Now about all you’ve got left is jack pine and scrubby oak. Except around the Larkins’ cabin up above the gates.

Today the ice is melting just like it was way back when. That means the sucker’s be fighting their way upstream before too long. Even though there ain’t no way they can get past the dam. When they’re spawning they swim so thick their backs look like stepping stones across. I ain’t never yet seen a fish jump for joy.
“Gracie!” Dick keeps calling inside my head. There ain’t a gal who don’t think he’s the dreamiest dreamboat around. A voice will really carry over water glassy like that. Up here above the gates it’ll get smooth like a mirror. There ain’t no rocks like there is splashing down below the dam.

Today the river’s white as a wedding dress, but underneath the ice it’s still black as pitch. And I still can hear the kids laughing up on the pier though it’s been over forty years. I guess the idea of a big-shot Larkin going after Gracie really is a gas.

As kids Ethel and I know how to have a ball. We have all the fun we want and then some. Till one night our fun goes too far, and I mess my life up but good. Now I know better, but knowing better now’s too late. What’s done is water under the bridge. It’s gone clean through the only open gate and down the falls and out of sight for good.

The Black River ain’t big for a river, but without little rivers like it the Mississippi wouldn’t amount to much. Just like if it wasn’t for the falls, there wouldn’t be my home town. Folks call them both Black River Falls. Just like if it wasn’t for the river, there wouldn’t be a pier up above the dam. That’s what everybody calls what’s left of the old railroad bridge that got washed out during the flood. It’s just a stack of stones sticking out of the water. The pier ain’t all that far from the Larkins’ cabin. Their cabin in the white pine woods ain’t so fancy as you might expect. Even though Dick’s dad’s a doctor and his mom’s a Greeley, so they can blow money hand over fist and never think about it twice.

Too bad I don’t know enough to stay home that night. But then it’s too bad about lots of things. Too bad Daddy’s older brother gets all of Grandpa’s land, but that’s the way Norwegians have always done it. Too bad Daddy’s so worried about what folks are saying behind his back. Just like it’s too bad he can’t make a go of it on the farm where I’m born. Too bad he has to sell out and move us into town. Too bad he ever has to get a job sweeping floors. Too bad he starts having those awful spells. His ranting and raving scares me and Mom half to death.

There are three things Daddy won’t shut up about—stallions, saloons, and coffin nails. Coffin nails is what he’s got against Ethel. He don’t give a hoot that she’s my best friend. Jimmy Waarvik is a nice boy who’s sweet on me, but he’ll drink a beer now and then too. When Daddy gets wind of that, he chews Jim out so bad he never comes back. Ray Gutknecht is an even nicer boy. Raymond wouldn’t dream of lighting up or setting foot in a saloon. But one night Daddy catches us smooching on the porch and really blows his stack. He calls Ray a stallion right to his face and I never see my dreamboat again. After that word gets around school fast and pretty soon no boy will look at me twice. So that’s
why the invite to Dick Larkin’s cabin sounds so swell.

My whole life I’ve lived in this town with the same name as the falls. The falls are here long before any folks show up. Before the Civil War that’s about all this place is, along with all the white pine trees. Then old Jacob Greeley takes off from old New England and heads out west. One look at the water splashing down the great big red rocks and he builds himself a sawmill on the spot and dams the river up. It don’t take long before old Greeley’s mowing the white pines down like hay. The river gets so jam-packed with logs you can walk across and not get wet. The more boards he saws up, the more trains keep hauling them every which way. That’s how the falls turns into a town. And that’s how the Greeleys get filthy rich to stay.

Before long, settlers from the old country start showing up too. Over in Norway there ain’t enough decent land to go around I guess. My grandparents come over in that bunch and they stake out homesteads west of town. Farmers always need a place to trade, so Saturdays they drive their buggies into town. Pretty soon in Black River Falls they’ve got themselves a county seat, and here’s where it’s been sitting ever since.

My dad’s folks do okay for themselves, but a hundred and sixty acres am’t much when it comes to divvying up. So my uncle gets it all and rents Daddy the sandy quarter to work as best he can. It don’t take long before Daddy’s selling out and moving us into town. He finds us a place to live over in Hardscrabble. That’s what folks around here call the East side. That’s where I grow up and where I still call home.

“Don’t you dare go in that river,” Daddy always says. “If the drop-offs and rocks don’t get you, the snakes and snapping turtles will.” Daddy ain’t one to be telling no lies. So I always do my best to listen. Too bad I don’t try nearly so hard to obey.

When I’m growing up, I never once set foot in the river. The closest poor kids like Ethel and me get is to play along the banks below the dam. But we hear stories about rich kids going swimming up above the gates. Dick and the Bailey twins are too stuck-up to go in the free city pool like the rest of us.

Somehow I manage to make it all the way through high school. That means it’s time to get a fulltime job. So I apply at the clinic, but they already got all the nurse’s aides they want. It’s the same story at the phone company and the five and dime. I try lots of places before I come up with anything. Gjerseh’s Cafe out on Highway 12 needs somebody for washing dishes. G’s ain’t all that far from our place. It’s where truckers like to stop for coffee and a bite to eat. I have to work weekends, but then I get Mondays and Tuesdays
off. It ain’t exactly what I’m looking for, but it’ll have to do.

June flows by pretty fast, and so does July. But then comes August and things really slow down. It gets so hot it hardly cools off even after dark. One Sunday Ethel stops by G’s, and Mrs. Gjerseth gives me a break.

“Wanna go to a beer party tomorrow night?” Ethel says. Just like she’s talking about stopping at the A and W for a frosty mug.

“Are you nuts?” I say. I ain’t even eighteen yet for two more months. Besides I ain’t ever tasted the stuff, and I ain’t in no hurry to start. But Ethel ain’t pulling my leg. And she ain’t talking about just any old beer party out in the East side sticks. No, it’s Dick Larkin that’s throwing this party. And it’s at his parents’ cabin in their white pine woods up above the dam.

“But what if Daddy finds out?” I say. Just the thought of that’s so scary it makes my scalp prickle.

“Who says you have to tell him?” Ethel tells me.

I think about that a while but still shake my head.

“Sally Jensen and Tommy Dali can give us a ride,” Ethel says.

I think that over good. My classmate Sally’s always been nice to me and so has her boyfriend, Tommy. “I’d better not,” I say.

Then Ethel says, “Dick told me personally to invite you.”

That settles it. I agree to go.

So the next night at home I put on my uniform like I’m getting ready for work and I hide my jeans and a blouse in a paper bag. And I head out the front door like always, but at the corner I turn left instead of right. Tommy’s Studebaker is already waiting at Ethel’s.

I hurry up and change my clothes, and just like that we’re on our way. Tommy tears across the bridge and on up Water Street onto German Hill. He turns onto Cemetery Road and guns it like we’re going to be late. Pretty soon he’s tooling so fast the white
pine woods are just a blur. All of a sudden he hits the brakes and swerves to a stop. “The Larkins” a great big sign says plain as day.

From the outside the cabin looks kind of teensy and not fancy at all like I expect. But what do I know about fancy? I follow Tommy and Sally and Ethel on inside, just like I’ve been here oodles of times before. The icebox and cupboards look brand-spanking new and the walls are so white they just shine. Dick and the Bailey twins say hi just like we’re all old pals. The guys are galloping along on a pony of beer and raring for us to catch up.

The first cup of Old Style tastes awful bitter, but the next one goes down better. I take a ciggy-butt from Ethel and inhale just like I’ve seen her do plenty. By the third brew I’m feeling no pain and laughing along like one of the gang.

That’s when Dick pipes up, “Let’s all go swimming.”

“The pool’s already closed,” I say.

The guys all roar. “I mean in the Black River,” Dick tells me. Just the thought of going in that dark water gives me a shiver.

“Up here above the dam it’s just like a lake,” Tommy says. “There ain’t no current or rocks or nothing.”

“What about the snapping turtles and snakes?” I say.

They roar even louder.

“But I didn’t bring along a suit,” I say next.

“We won’t look,” Dick says. The guys all just about split a gut.

Dick hands me another beer. By the time it’s down I’m game to go in too. So we all head on outside. The sky’s all clouded up and the night’s turned black as pitch. Dick takes a flashlight and leads us through the only white pine woods now around. The needles really prick my arms and legs, but I keep up okay.

We get to the boat dock and the guys strip down to their shorts. I don’t know if it’s the beer or the pine pitch or what, but my head’s spinning so bad it ain’t even funny. And I ain’t in no mood for taking off much of anything, leastways not in front of some guys.
Sally and Ethel ain’t exactly in no hurry neither I see.


Maybe Ethel’s put away more suds than me, because all of a sudden she whips off her blouse and her pedal pushers, just like she’s in the girls locker room and it’s time for gym. The next thing Sally’s down to her bra and panties too, leaving me standing there all dressed like a fool.

“Come on, Gracie,” Dick says. “Who do you think you are?”

That’s a pretty tough question, way too tough for me. I don’t see no other choice but to play along. So I take my blouse and blue jeans off too, and I wade on in just like everybody else. At first it ain’t all that different from the pool except for the slime oozing between my toes. Though the water sure does feel sticky and it smells just like my uncle’s fresh-plowed dirt. All of a sudden I hit a drop-off and my head slips under and I swallow water and I cough and I choke. And for a while there I’m panting and paddling like a puppy. What I want to know, if there ain’t no current how come I’m drifting downstream?

I catch my breath and make it out to the pier like the others. It’s just a stack of stones sticking out of the water. I try to grab hold but it’s too flat all around for a grip. All of a sudden Dick shouts from on high, “Come on up!” Who knows what he does to get up there, but that’s where he is. Then Dick lets out a grunt and Ethel a squeal, and just like that she’s up there too. Ned and Ted and Sally and Tommy don’t follow far behind. But me, I’m still treading water and getting so tired it ain’t even funny. So I take off swimming for Hardscrabble and home, but, dumb me, I left my clothes on the other bank.

So I turn around. And I side-stroke and I dog-paddle and about everything else except drown. Finally it gets shallow enough to touch bottom. I crawl up on the shore and collapse on the prickly ground.

“Gracie!” Dick keeps calling out. There ain’t a gal who don’t think he’s the dreamiest dreamboat around. The pine needles I’m laying on really hurt, but I’m too tuckered out to budge.

“She made it to shore!” Tommy shouts. A voice will really carry over water glassy like that. Out by the pier there’s a loud kerplunk and somebody comes splashing up a storm.

Soon whoever it is plops down right beside me. “Where you going so fast, Gracie?” Dick
says real soft like. He’s leaning so close he’s dripping on my face. I still can hear the kids laughing up on the pier though it’s been over forty years. Well, now I’m older and wiser, but then I not only don’t know better I don’t even know good. Dick puts his arm around me and whispers sweet things into my ear. At first it’s kind of scary, but it don’t take long before it becomes dreamy. Pretty soon one thing leads to another and before you know it I’ve gone so far it’s all the way. That’s still the only night of my life that’s ever been too short.

Back home I tiptoe on inside. Lucky me, Daddy don’t wake up or nothing. Mom asks me if I’m okay. “Uh-huh,” I tell her. What else can I say? The next day my stomach’s queasy and my head’s all achy, but I’m so happy about me and Dick I hum and sing while I iron and sew.

Every night at G’s I keep looking for Dick, but he never shows his face. And then comes Labor Day and he’s off to college up in Eau Claire. And he stays up there every week and all weekend to boot.

The leaves are already laying on the ground and curling up when mornings I begin waking up sick. I do my best to hide it from Mom, but she’s been around too long not to know the score. From the look on her face I can tell she’s really scared. What Daddy’ll do when he finds out scares me so bad too my hands tremble.

No matter how little I eat my stomach won’t quit swelling up. And there ain’t no gates you can raise to help it back down. When I ask Mom about seeing a doctor, she just lays down on the couch and cries. So I write Dick a letter, but I can’t bring myself to mail it. I think about phoning his folks, but who am Ito go calling big shots up? And I think about running away, but there ain’t no place to go.

Thank God Dick makes it home for Thanksgiving. I spot his big Buick tooling along Main Street and wave like crazy, but he zips right on by like I’m a white pine stump. So I walk on over to the Larkin house way up on Price Hill. His mom stands in their great big picture window and makes faces at me, but Dick won’t come outside. He’s back in Eau Claire before we ever get a chance to talk.

For Christmas Dick makes it home again. This time I spot his Buick outside a downtown saloon. I slip in through the back door and lean over the jukebox like I’ve got a dime to waste and can’t make up my mind on a tune. There Dick sits on a stool with the Bailey twins, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes and playing poker dice for quarters.

“Hold it, guys!” Dick hollers. “Gotta shake the grapes!” And he strolls right on past me
like I’m clothesline post and slips inside the john.

When he comes back out, I step right into his path. I’m shaking all over, but still I get the words out. “Dick, I’m in trouble,” I say.

“So?” he says and laughs right in my face.

“I mean it,” I say and pull my coat tight so he can see how big my belly’s gotten.

“It happens every day,” he says with a shrug and starts to stroll off.

I grab his arm and I say, “But, Dick, you’re the father.”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” he says and yanks my grip free. “No broad’s going to pull that old trick on Dick Larkin.”

“Richard, I swear to God there’s never been anybody else.”

“Your turn, Dickie!” Ned Bailey shouts from the bar. Richard rolls his eyes and moseys away. I’m lucky to make it outside before I break down bawling.

January comes and the river freezes hard as rock. Soon powdery snow is covering the ice like a blanket. The ice starts off thin but it don’t take long to get thick. Before you know it, it’s February. One day I’m sitting knitting when Daddy stomps by with a pail of ashes from our front room stove. He gives me a dirty look and growls, “You look like

What else does he expect what with how little I eat?

In April things warm up and begin to thaw out. Once it starts to flow, there’s no way you can make it stop. Just like once a chunk of ice breaks off, it’ll float clean out of sight. The more the ice breaks up, the blacker the river gets. Then along comes an awful Friday. It’s got to be the worst Friday of my life. I hike on up the West bank into the Larkins’ white pine woods. That’s got to be the best hiding place around. I’ve no sooner set foot in there than a trickle runs down my leg. Before you know it, it’s flooding onto ~ the dirty snow. First out comes a little head and then out comes the rest. Because it’s a boy I name him Eugene. His little mouth is just like Dick’s and he’s making tiny fists. And he’s got hair black like his dad’s, but his skin’s white as Christmas. And Eugene don’t cry. He don’t make a sound. There ain’t never been a boy born so still.

I take off my coat and wrap it around my baby boy and I hug him to me tight. And I hum a lullaby into his tiny ears cold as ice. Me, I can’t stop shivering, but Gene’s too nice a
boy to make a fuss. He’s got to be about the nicest boy a mother ever had. ~ By the time it gets dark I’m shivering so bad my back begins to cramp. That’s when I walk on out onto the ice. And I kneel down and I ladle out a handful of icy water with my hand, and I baptize my baby Eugene Leroy Larkin. And he don’t whimper and he don’t cry or nothing. Eugene’s way too nice a boy for anything like that. They say a handful of water’s enough to forgive a baby’s sins. A whole river full ought to do it for me.

I don’t know what to do next. I can’t take Gene home to Daddy and Mom. I can’t leave him where he is, and there ain’t no place for dropping him off. That’s when I remember baby Moses and what his folks do for him. So I zip my coat around my darling and lay him down on the ice near the edge. And then I step back and stomp with all my might till a great big chunk breaks off. And I take my foot and shove it away from the bank. Before you know it, Eugene’s floating free as a white pine log. First he drifts toward the pier, but then he turns and floats straight for the falls. Soon he’s hurrying for the only open gate. The closer he gets, the faster he goes. Till all of a sudden Gene rushes clean through and down the falls and out of sight for good. I tell myself it’s all for the best, but still the sight makes a mother sad.

And now it’s forty years later and the ice is thawing again, just like it was that awful Friday, just like it always does this time of year. Daddy and Mom have long since passed away. Nothing ever stays the same, just like white pine ain’t used for lumber like it was. They say Ethel’s on her third husband now down by Whitewater, and Dick’s a big-shot doctor up in Eau Claire and a grandpa six times over.

It’s been such a long, long winter I was afraid April was never going to come. But here it is and things are melting fast. The river is getting blacker than my cousin’s freshplowed dirt. Big chunks of ice are breaking off and racing for the only open gate. I can hear them crashing on the great big red rocks down below. That means the suckers’ll be fighting their way back upstream before too long. Even though there ain’t no way they can get past the dam. They say it’s white pine that makes the water black. That’s funny because there ain’t hardly no white pine left. I’m praying the river ain’t too black to wash me clean.
Bowery
Stephanie Dickinson

At first they enjoyed her rising and falling chest. *I'm not afraid,* she kept saying, lips pressing petals of sweat into silver duct tape. It was a hollow below zero like this when the kidnappers tried writing a ransom note. So recently they’d come to this country, it was impossible to put into words what they needed, so they bickered. Hot where they came from with bats, birds, and spiders. The moon a thickness that drifted over jungle. Here only buildings. An island city with eighty million rats and cold that made their genitals shrink. These two used to having empty stomachs, given the love reserved for lesions, watched the girl tap her feet. They kept her for a week. Her thirst must have driven her into euphoria against the wall where waterbugs crawled. The Internet Café stayed open. The Smiling Man Deli kept selling cucumbers with holes, bitter lettuce. What eclipses she saw as her limbs went numb and they thought she was dead, the black eyed girl they decided to burn. They could no better build a fire than write, the boys who broke the legs off her chair and soaked them in lighter fluid before striking a match. She was alive after the fire, freezing where the missing sun tried to shine.
Remedial Algebra
Stephanie Dickinson

Ethel Bailey, ugly but lovely woman plain as the flat heel on your shoe, the long brown stocking of your body bends over the blond desks as you ask us to consider a mathematical system of five digits.

Five miles from anywhere we meet the stare of the blackboard then drift out the window where the sun dribbles like cat piss into the fields of broken cornstalks poking above crusts of old snow. In the barbed wire fence husks flap like rags.

You are gentle and freckled, Ethel Bailey, yet we call you brontosaurus and pinhead. Your eyes flash telling us the mystery and clarity of $x$; how 6th century Pythagoreans embodied themselves in numbers and mediated between the sides of right triangles before voyages.

But we are not going anywhere except deeper into where we are from and these desks are cold like the beds in the upstairs of our farmhouses. Solve on a 5-hour clock one minus four you ask Bev Kness who is asleep and in a week she will be last seen getting a lift in the mail truck.

One minus four you ask Linda Moses who does not look up and hasn’t since her brother suffocated in a soybean bin. One minus four you ask overdeveloped Maggie Bell who grins like she does when the neighbor boys set her in the horse feeder trough and tickle her. It is after lunch and you call on Judy Smoker, hunched in her rabbit fur jacket, not yet belching constantly because she goes to Thaddeus Edwards, the veterinarian, who aborts her with a drug used to bring on milk let down in cows. And you call on Patty Zahrentk, who inks a blue heart on her book, the only equation she knows Patty + Lee = love.

I have not thought much of you, Ethel Bailey, since that February day a long time gone when nothing you taught sank in. You did not deserve to burn in a midnight electrical fire. I see your hair flaring but you standing tall, singing integers. I hope for your sake there is some paradise on the other side.
Farm girls undress, they swim in the pond like nymphs, float on the brown shimmering water where cows drink. Diving into the muck, they imagine themselves Persephone in the underworld, a gossamer of dragonflies. They might have dropped from the thigh of Zeus, these two with chore buckets waiting on the bank. They pull their overalls on, girls hoping to bloom in the sultry corn weather afternoon. Wild, untended, never praised, brazen, my friend Linda had a father who worked her like a son, and even after our swims, she smelled of the hog wallows. We walked barefoot into the sweetness of dusk that had been forever coming. Bangs hanging in our eyes, we were three miles south of anywhere, daubing our farmer-tanned wrists with Ben Hur. No escape from the hayfields ripening on every side, trom the orange trumpets of ditch lilies following us. My cousin, bespectacled and freckled, trotted his pony alongside. *I could never love you*, she shooed him. She wanted red Mustangs, Harley Davidsons, anything fast to take her away. Crickets whirled as we cut into the cemetery. We wandered over the graves, talked to the blue-eyed upper classman, Jack Holub, killed in a tractor accident. We sat on my father’s cracked headstone. *I wish we could trade*, she’d say, already breasty, milkiness pushing out the bib of her coveralls. No town boy would find us though we were goddesses who had never seen mountains. Splitting a can of warm Falstaff, we were frantic for any forbidden fruit. But this was Iowa, black soil country, and dangerousness came slower than the glaciers. Her father, wearing waders and hard looks, was quicker. Already looking for us.
From the side of the grave, Garner saw nothing really. He thought of how so many people began their lives anew at the side of a grave. How for them, their life has just become a new story and what better way to start a story of life than with a death? They talk up and down about how death prompts them to live life to the fullest, to finally live their dreams and stop putting off what they have always wanted to do. They speak with wide eyes and awe stroked voices about the epiphanic power of another’s death. That from this death, they have learned how life is something precious and not to be squandered. Garner wasn’t one of those people. He didn’t see any lessons written on the cold lacquer finish of his grandfather’s coffin - had not heard any in the last words spoken by his grandfather. He’d heard only the echo of promises broken and seen the great crushing wheel lay its spoked dead weight across the frail body of his grandfather.

The polished surface of the coffin threw the sun into his eyes. He blinked and turned his head to the side and the minister’s words fell from his mouth with all the solidity of sleet. He swayed, trying to decide if the sound of the minister’s words ran cold or hot. In this instance, sleet doesn’t necessarily imply cold. He wondered if the person really was a minister or were they all called priests? the father? The man wore cloth of a Catholic color but Garner didn’t couldn’t tell one from another and the great mass of mourning people made him withdrawn and edgy. I’m not one of you, he wanted to say. He didn’t understand the words the black robed figure used to comfort the crowd and saw how it didn’t work anyway. The priest, he essed, (the word strangely unfamiliar across the rasp of his tongue) chanted as though he’d fallen from a great height. He mumbled how it didn’t work anyway. The priest, he essed, (the word strangely unfamiliar across the rasp of his tongue) chanted as though he’d fallen from a great height. He mumbled slowly, praising the air above the coffin with a slight flourish of his hand. He held open the Bible with his other and stared at it without expression. Perhaps, thought Garner, he believes himself to be merely a type of vessel for the words. His god rumbles through the air, into the book and then out of his mouth in a quiet jumble of Latin and English nothingness.

He turned his head and blinked his eyes, again to try to clear them of the sun’s light.. Maybe he is a father, thought Garner. He wanted to kneel and pinch dirt with his fingers, to rub it like fabric between thumb and forefinger. His daughter giggled and Garner looked at her. He set a hand on her hand and ran his fingers through her hair. Miria stopped and became still, looking at him with deep question of death and its solemn ceremonies like a frame around her s. “Dad?” she whispered. But he raised his finger to his lips and shook his head.’ didn’t miss his wife, nor argue with her when an emergency with one of her patients bad come up. Fine, he told her, take care of him. He had meant it. He treaded carefully on their shared emotional ground. He felt eager to be near her,
but at the same time he felt no responsibility to put the weight of his soul upon her shoulders. She called him uncaring, unsharing. But he didn’t feel those feelings in his heart and so felt she had no ground to stand on. In fact, their common ground rocked with the aftershock of quitting his job yesterday and he understood he’d used much of her ability to understand his actions.

After the wake, he drove Mina and himself home. The house, two stories and built like a box, a farmer’s house, Janice called it, felt full of echoes and shadows, even when he turned the lights on. He gave Mina a bath and put her to bed. His wife came home later, after he’d worked his way through a bottle of wine, some grape he’d never heard of, Janice took care of buying wine. She practiced a knowledge of wine. “Nice grape juice,” he said as she came in through the door
“Don’t do this,” she said. “You’re drunk.”
“I should think so.”
“Well?”
“Well yourself’?” But the words bit into his tongue and Janice stood in the doorway, jacket partway off, her brown hair held back under a cap and her purse still attached to her hand, even though it rested on the floor. She shrugged off her jacket and turned from away from him. Gamer struggled to sit up, but spilled his wine on the floor. He decided he’d go for a walk rather than force a messy confabulation with Janice. Later, though the house had taken on a fullness since he’d returned from his father funeral, he missed something essential which once had been present. He let himself in and climbed the stairs to the landing from which all the rooms upstairs opened onto.

The full moon lighted the walls and Gamer stopped, raised his hand into the cantilevered light falling between the blind slats. He remarked silently at the shadows, thinking about blue light in the Grand Canyon. He’d gone there with his father and grandfather one summer. And the light of the place had remained with him when all other remembrances had faded. The blue light reminded him of swimming, of pushing himself through deep water and watching air, trapped in bubbles, rise to the surface.

He brushed his teeth without turning the lights on, grimaced at himself before the mirror, the white of his teeth pale and hazy. They stood so thinly they seemed like a memory from long ago. He raised his fingertips to the mirror and brushed them across the ivory reflection of his teeth. In the bedroom, he bent and undressed. He stopped and pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

His wife and daughter lay on their sides in an oceanic tangle of bedsheets. Garner’s heart beat like a riptide, sucking his thoughts out from under his feet. His mind receded into lines, stretched out from where he’d been to an infinite point beyond recollection.

Gamer reached a hand through the air, towards his wife, I’m trying, he wanted to say, feeling the distance between himself and his family congeal into an eternal longing that spun from out of the unseen wastes of his dreams. The wastes we all have, he thought. Like the wastes of the dead, of his grandfather’s body locked into the dark confines of
his coffin, that too secured beneath a flood of dirt.

I’m dead, he thought again. He felt the power of those words before the words themselves erupted into silent sticks on the thick carpet of his tongue, where they become bogged into lifelessness, leaving Garner to stand alone and breathe, the night air cool against his chest.

The hospital stroked itself in sound which had hidden itself in the walls and in the flickering of the fluorescent lights. But late at night the absence of a healthy humanity let it creep out from behind those barricades. Those ballasts need to be changed, Garner thought, looking at the flickering lights. The place smelled of onions and the cloistering green moistness of a weedy thicket.

He thought: where are all the people? The halls echoed with the starchy sound of his shoes on the tiles. He walked past the nurses’ station. The young intern seated there did not lift her eyes from the novel she gripped in her hands. Melanie. He remembered her from his last visit. She had brought his grandfather tiny paper cups with pills inside and a glass of water.

She sneezed as he walked past. Pretty, he thought. Garner had an excited moment wherein he and she matriculated beyond mere formality, suddenly fornicating in a broom closet. Mop heads brushed his buttocks with damp fibers. The smell of her perfume mingled with the odors of cleaning agents and her breath rippled across his neck. But she read and he sighed, feeling the tightness in his groin melt away. He smelled her perfume hanging on the air in front of him, thinning as he pushed himself through it.

At the door to his grandfather’s room, Gamer looked at the medical charts hanging off the door. They were written in block letters, carefully applied by someone who had wanted to insure their literacy. He read and read the lines and could make no sense of them. He stuffed them back into the folder and pushed the door open.

The old man sucked feverishly from a straw crooked to his lips. He opened his mouth when Gamer walked inside. The straw had attached itself with dried mucous to his lip, hanging there. On a wooden chair next to the bed Gamer saw a large red book and a brown shawl. He also noticed the stripped mattress on the other side of the room, The man there must have died yesterday. He stood, looking at the bed. The bare mattress offered no clue as to what might have happened; the existence of possibility lay like blank space that he didn’t have the imagination to fill. But still he looked. He looked for the indentation of a body, of the body which had lain there. But then, even Gamer could not remember the man who’d occupied the space. He knew a man had been there. He saw the generic shorefront maleness of his face in the hard jaw and the rough eyes; the forearms as big as a truck axle. He heard the man breathing, laboring with the illness which had delivered him into these crisp sheets of a hospital bed. He thought of the sand left on the banks of a mountain stream in spring, deposited there by the waters as they ran down the mountainside.

“Where is the water coming from?” the old man asked, seeing Gamer’s thoughts and
Gamer didn’t know, turning to look at his grandfather, who lay like one more grain of sand on the banks. The old man sat up, leaning on one side, He stared at Gamer, confusion pressed into the cracked upholstery of his face.

“Do you see the water there, and there?” he asked.

Gamer strained to hear the Irish in his voice, but his grandfather’s voice remained as it always had: deep, melodic, full of something low and sharp. Others had asked where in Ireland he had come from, but Garner shrugged and raised his eyes. His friends acted surprised when he told them he’d never heard his grandfather’s foreignness. His grandfather was his grandfather and he had often thought of the difficulty of separating such innate family folk from the childhood fabric of his life without revealing their humanity, the other self they must project to the world of non-grandchildren. How ridiculous, he thought. He preferred to think of his grandfather in the near mythic proportions that the small child esteems such people. And if the old man had started to see water on the horizon while on his deathbed, then that was fine too. He’d be as accommodating as he had to be.

The old man climbed out of bed, pulling the IV needle from the back of his hand before he set his feet on the floor. Garner watched, transfixed to his spot at the foot of the bed as his grandfather, ninety five and dying of pneumonia, relaxed to his knees and traced circles on the floor with his hands. “The water is here, here,” he said. Garner bent down, to see. “Alvin, be careful, you’re father will become angry if you jump in without a life jacket. Go on. Go put it on now.”

“Yes sir,” Gamer said and he stood and then knelt again, unsure of himself. He wondered where this was going to take him, into what far off reality of memory was his grandfather dragging him. There were places that were better off not visited! that were better for everyone if left alone.

“Look at the sky. What a blue there is. Feel how warm the water is. It’s all around, thick as the sky and as gentle as a breeze. The water stretches from here past that point.” He reached a hand to the door, his thin finger quaking, the nails yellowed. “I can’t even see that far Can you, Alvin. Can you see that far?” Garner shook his head. “No, grandpa. I can’t see that far.” Even his grandfather took note of the hollowness to his voice, the thick and unkind way Garner’s tongue churled in his mouth and felt clumsy like cotton balled in his throat. But he was grateful that his grandfather had decided to visit a place that wasn’t a shared memory between the two. As far as he knew, this place might not have previously existed in his grandfather’s thoughts. The old man looked at his grandson for a moment.

“I guess you can’t, either,” he said. “So, I’ll tell you about it. A mighty rock juts straight from the sea, with high cliffs of black basalt stark against the deep blue of the waters. The waters are shallow and the rock beckons and throngs with seabirds of many feathers, circling the high cliffs and darting in and out of the clouds, thin wispy things, more haze than cloud really.” The old man sat and pulled his knees close to his chest,
hugged them with his arms. He leaned against the bed. Garner thought, if he couldn’t see, then he must have made it up.

His grandfather lost years in that gesture. Garner thought of all the children he’d seen in that posture. He smiled to see his grandfather so, staring out over an ocean and sitting in the gentle lap of small waves breaking on a sandy shore.

There’s a light, too,” his grandfather whispered, tilting his head to Garner. “A soft light. Maybe it’s unfocused from the haze. I’m none to sure. It’s beguiling.” It was the way he said it, stretching out the long uï of the word, tilting the accent of it straight in the middle, that Garner heard the Irish in his grandfather’s voice for the first time and then, with his heart beating quickly in his chest, watched as the old man bent again to the seashore with his arms outstretched and cupped water in a hand, placing it to his mouth. He let the water fall from his hand and then turned to Gamer.

“The water’s as thick as it can be. It’s all around us, me and you. Buckets and buckets of it.” And then the old man leaned against the bed and his arms fell to the floor. Gamer watched his lungs rise and deflate. He watched this process slow and then stop. And as he watched, he thought of this place his grandfather had seen and he reached out his hand and caught that of his grandfather’s and tried to see into that far horizon that had so beguiled his grandfather.

He’d felt like an anomaly behind the gray expanse of his desk, as though he were nothing but a blip, one static point on someone else’s lifeline and had simply walked out. In fact, the death of his grandfather had become the final chapter in his life, his story. He existed in a vacuum of energy. In the moments which made up his life, he saw that what he’d thought of as his identity had been nothing more than a suit, one he’d decided not to put on anymore. Still standing and holding his hand out to his wife, Gamer thought about how clean the hospital floors had been. Were they really so clean, or did he remember them that way.

Sleep stayed on the fringes of his reach all night and when the sky turned gray, he shivered and thought how nothing had changed for the dead. If memory is an ocean, then I am lost, he spoke to himself If memory is an ocean…

He awoke and realized Miria had left for school and his wife for work. He dressed and drank coffee. Then he wandered around the house, some-times touching something he and Janice had bought together on a trip. They traveled extensively before Miria had been born. To the coasts, Europe and the South Pacific. He ran his fingers over the dark stained mahogany of a tropic idol, a rough approximation of a real god, carved out of flotsam most likely, waiting patiently for people like Janice and himself to purchase the thing. He leered at it and then stared out of the window, hugging himself He thought again about the funeral, his wife’s absence from the event. He even suspected his wife had felt disappointed when he did not argue the necessity of her missing the funeral to
attend one of her patients. He used to hate their needs, their dark and flagrant desire for a ceaseless and sometimes cruel attention. He knew his wife and the bluntness of her logic, and while he imagined she directed the majority of that bluntness to himself, he felt reasonably certain her patients received some small portion. He felt sure, that indeed, this was what they paid her for.

I’m still dead, he thought, merging into traffic on the highway. With nothing to do, he’d decided on the utter nowness of driving. Traffic flowed like unrippled water and. he knew how the world is water. Garner yearned to lay prone in the damp sand and feel the lapping cool of its liquid press against his lips. He wanted to sip the sea as had his grandfather. He also knew, though, the power of water to run bad.

Unsettled water and black night. Bad blood, he supposed.

There had been a share of that between him and his father. The man held too long to his faults, thought Garner. Release came in the form of an enclosed space (his car) and carbon monoxide When the water gets too deep, the pressure crushes. He knew this, had read accounts of it in journals. As a kid, he’d swim to the deep end of the municipal pool. Twelve feet. And even at that paltry distance, he’d noticed the change in pressure; the weight of the water sitting on top of him and the urge his body had to float upward. His father only felt the crushing weight of the water’s depth and had refused the body’s need to rise, to jolt to the surface in a rush of bubbles and explode skyward, breaking the slick surface of the water and exist in that joyous state of life lived in two elements: air and water. Far below lay the bottom of the ocean and far above lived the sun and in between, Gamer felt the length of the distance to each, not in the equality of miles etched upon a map, because there were no maps, no exact lines drawn upon paper to indicate where it was he traveled, or had come from, but in the shape of something felt with groping hands, as if he created the thing at the same time he felt it.

His grandfather had pointed out the landmarks of his last journey and Garner understood they were his landmarks; understood he would have different points on a nearer horizon to ponder as he left.

He drove away from the house, wondering briefly if had ever had a destination in mind. A small place where he could be still and think. A car jolted into his lane from the front. Garner blinked and his jaw dropped. His hands cranked on the wheel before he had time to tell them to do so and it amazed him the power of his own reaction. How quick, he thought, how sublime. He felt his body aching into the motion of directing the car, watched in a calm blankness as the car in front swerved side to side in a complicated disarray; a patterned drunkenness. His hands felt the pebbled texture of the steering wheel slip and slap like a boat in the ocean and he thought he smiled.

He waited for the deep end of the pool to break down upon his head, to bend with its soft steel and touch upon the bones of his shoulders until they snapped. He girded and strengthened his body. The iron for the car, he thought, had been ripped from deep
within the earth, out of the crust The iron having wound up there—womb red iron giving birth to steel in new fires—after rising from some sweltering heat, magma heated and cooling in the light crust. The iron was straight from some sleepy geologic epoch and it had been given form, pulled and shaped out of its primeval self and whipped into a linear history—an orderly progression of events: recorded stamped, folded, fried, greased and set into motion, beguiled into a vast panorama of battle plans: schemes and empires, forged in the fires of a modernity which saw nothing but its own forward progression, its own sleek transformation into History. This series of events had been what Gamer wanted to break with, before they stove in on his heart with atomic force. He racked on the wheel and pumped the brake, his mind flowing onward.

Yet, the fires that sweep from out of the void of the future to which he now felt were only a tiny raft set adrift in the ocean of his grandfather’s delirium sea, banked cold in his heart and he saw instead the ripe fruit of the past and memories unfolding again and again until they bobbed like so much storm refuse in a swirl of all events to happen and that had occurred and he could reach inside and pluck one with the daintiness and uncertainty of a child selecting a cookie from the dark jar on the counter, feeling with her small hands until, the shape just right, it is pulled from the jar with a victorious flourish and the band’s music subsides and dies in the water. One more moment lived and relived.

The car spun wildly under his body’s mute direction and he felt, heard, the hard grating, rasping sound of its exterior lick with orange fire the same guardrail he’d seen the other car swipe. He pulled the car back to the left and felt it give grudgingly until it swam again in the flow of traffic. In his rearview mirror he saw the other car resting on its side and a man climb from the streaming metal. He considered stopping, but others had and he relinquished command of the moment to his own quick need to be still and unmoving, to take solace in the rush of traffic and be pulled along. His destination now clearly defined itself: home.

He recounted this episode to Janice over dinner and she looked at him, an expectation hidden in the gesturing of her cheeks, the flare of her nostrils and the downward pull of her eyes. Okay, he thought, I have said something and I don’t know.

“Why did you quit?” she asked.

“I didn’t like the fabric of that suit anymore,” he told her. She nodded and looked at her plate. Miria looked between the two of them and she shrugged. He giggled watching his daughter beat off the tension of the table, recognizing it had nothing to do with her.

“I’m pregnant,” she told him.

“Okay,” he said and nodded back to her.

“Is that all? You don’t want to say anything more?” “I’m not sure. I don’t think so. No.” “Mommy, can I hold the baby? I promise to be quiet. I won’t hurt him. Sandra can hold her brother whenever she wants to and I thought I could hold our baby too, because I’m real careful. Remember in that store? all the glass things and I didn’t move a muscle?”
Remember how still I was? remember Mommy?”

He looked at his daughter and wondered what she wanted to be. It was difficult to remember what he’d wanted to be before. A fireman. Perhaps a veterinarian. But those were jobs, he thought. They wouldn’t necessarily define a person. He thought of his wife. A psychiatrist. How did that define her? Was he supposed to think she listened with a trained ear to what people said to her all day? When the man at the checkout counter in the grocery store responds negatively to the question: How is your day? does she automatically assume he is a manic depressive as a result of witnessing his mother’s death at a young age and will soon take his own life?

Gamer blinked and lay down on the cool wooden slats of the deck. He could smell autumn in the chill. Not so close, but soon, the leaves will begin to change. Football season too, he thought. Exposition games have already started.

He heard the sound of Janice and Miria talking about what she would wear to school on the first day, where and when they would shop. High above, a first star appeared. He closed his eyes and counted to fifty and when he opened them, ten stars twinkled and the square pane of light shining on the field behind the house, the light from the kitchen had taken on a solid shape and could be seen as a tangible event in and of itself.

The body, Gamer thought, doesn’t have those types of separations. We are still creatures of the flesh, of a limited mortality. etc., and even the most spiritually advanced being on the planet has to eat and defecate without fail or suffer the consequences. There is no purity, just this life, just using. He thought about resubscribing to cable, so he wouldn’t miss the games and wondered what Janice would think of that. He blinked once more and from somewhere, he heard a deep sound of water moving.
Across the attic’s threshold she stepped, her intentions only dimly evident. The objects themselves stood a few feet away in pale illumination by a hooded wall fixture, four rectangular sheets of canvas stretched across plywood and painted with images from the past, unframed and upright in a row aligned front to back. The floor creaked and groaned as she picked her way among their son’s long unused toys, their unfitting clothing and the more recently consigned furniture and odds and ends not yet entirely dispossessed, all of it vaguely cloaked in darkness. But the dust-coated upper edges of folded, stapled canvas glinted as if in anticipation of more light.

She and Will had been working on the lower two floors for years, consulting the records of crafts societies and architectural firms for old photos and plans in an effort to get as close as they could to the original design. Stripping the place of the ensuing layers of paint, of inappropriate fixtures and ill-conceived reconstruction conducted in the spirit of one fad after another that would soon fade into the next, all that had been hard enough, difficult as it was to purge an unwanted past. Old, musty carpets gone, the raw, varnished-stripped parquet and pine whispered fond hopes underfoot. In the acid-washed bathroom, burned free of decades of greenish grime, black and white tile shone at last beneath the claw-footed tub that lent its occupant the mien of something mythological. In the end all that had remained to eradicate was a floor-to-ceiling mirror, warped in places, patches of its silver backing showing through at the edges, which had been installed long before they bought the place a decade earlier and spanned half a wall of the otherwise empty living room. She’d stood next to her husband directly opposite the mirror but as far away as possible, as he administered the blow, at last raising a hammer to shoulder height, eyes intent on the distorting glass, and then releasing the handle with a sudden uncocking of his right elbow. The heavy head revolved once, twice and a third time before she saw their paired reflections, as if struck by a burst of interior lightning, burst into a thousand pieces of brilliant jigsaw. But the other half of the project had had its own complications, because Will was a stubborn purist about the original arts-and-crafts design they had restored, whereas she was willing to adapt it as she saw fit. Insisting on bare and uncluttered space in keeping with his utilitarian, less-is-more sensibility, he had dismissed every other piece of furnishing or decorative touch Evelyn had suggested as so much bric-a-brac. She imagined at times that she would have gotten a more positive response from him had she worked as a curator instead of fund-raiser for the local art museum, if only because he would have taken her views much more seriously. As it was, he felt his were in no way inferior to hers. And perhaps they were not. Yet she simply could not tolerate a space utterly naked of personal expression.
Stepping forward in the attic, closer now, enough to separate one canvas from another, Evelyn reached forward to the first of the four and held it closer to the light. It was an oil she’d painted soon after they’d moved into the house, but the image existed primarily in her mind: a green, three-story frame house with a wraparound porch standing amid pine and oak and other flora. She set it back down and flipped forward to the second painting, a self-portrait that she could never look at for long and did not now. She quickly moved on to the third, of Will late at night but still in shirt and tie, sitting in an upholstered chair beneath a naked light bulb, immersed in a magazine, her last painting. There was one more in the row, however, another that Will had not seen. And this was her favorite, of a clearing in bright sunlight in the woods near an upstate artist’s colony consisting of six wooden cottages near a mountain lake and a central building turned classroom. She saw herself again in the clearing on the very first afternoon of the retreat she’d made there some eight years earlier, happily, dizzily sketching in a notebook. Within days she had agreed to pose therefor another painter, a serious, dark-eyed, broad-shouldered man several years younger. A simple decision really, with no thought to past or future, to obligation to anyone but Daniel, the good-looking artist who coveted her image, at least for a few days and nights. There was no harm in it, or so she thought at the time. Even now she could feel the grass beneath the towel, the breeze licking at her nipples and buttocks after the last undergarment had been discarded, along with all sense of time or commitment.

But the present and its own needs also soon disappeared, at least as she wanted to define them, and then all but four canvases had been burned, oils, paints, brushes dumped summarily into the trash. The explanation? For public consumption, she offered up clichés about other commitments, obligations, responsibilities. Of course she told herself a different story, subjecting events to a radically original spin, though in neither case did she admit to holding her failure against Will after he’d jettisoned his own aspirations for more money on the business side of modern publishing. No, she privately preferred her nobler explanation, that she would never be as good as she wanted after losing the affections of someone who was. Because Daniel’s style was exactly what she was after, a brilliant amalgam of emotion and technique, and she imagined she might gain access to it through intimacy with its master. So she had let him paint her naked in the high grass turning golden in the fading light, and then make love to her that night and every night thereafter until they returned to the city. He lost interest soon after a party on Central Park West to which she’d taken Will though she knew Daniel would also attend. She recalled little of it besides a dimly lit cavern of an apartment and several self-absorbed isolates hovering around a table of raw vegetables, the image blanketed by a mental haze that failed to distinguish who, what or where. Except that Daniel at one point had offered Will a cigarette from a packet with a small purple square on its front across which the name of the brand was lettered in gold. And while Will had turned down the offer after remarking that he’d never seen
that particular brand before, she retained the distinct impression that it was English. Descending the narrow stairway from the attic, as if to a level untouched by sun or soul, she went from room to room in search of the best spot for the painting of the green house, trying to decide where it would look best and wondering what he would say. She wanted a prominent place but one that would nonetheless draw no objection, a location that wouldn’t intrude on its surroundings. She finally chose a spot above the table where she and Will took most of their meals after David had gone away to college, and had continued to do so even after he returned prematurely. The fact was he rarely ventured downstairs, his presence known primarily through the vague but insistent reverberations of heavy-metal rock music through substantial wood and plaster. Will had given up his own meager talents to support David’s, first at Julliard, then at Oberlin, only to see his son squander larger ones. But if he could indulge David, why not her? “No tchotchkes without prior consultation,” he’d said.

“Fine,” she replied, “so long as you let me experiment.”

The kitchen, after all, gave her more leeway, already filled as it was with butcher block and granite and stainless steel. Yet she studied the painting of the green house from various angles until satisfied the location was right. Then she turned toward the window and saw again how the two telephone wires divided the world beyond into three sharply asymmetrical sections. The bottom rhomboid depicted the rhododendron and forsythia at the foot of the sundeck, and the salt-box shed near the vine-clad fence that had once been her studio. The middle revealed the neighbor’s backyard complete with basketball hoop, gas grill, picnic table, and pink polyurethane pool, prosaic accouterments each of everyday existence. The top allowed into view the edge of a commercial thoroughfare of gas stations and garages and obscure wholesalers, the harder realities of the city just beyond their neat little enclave. No such banalities cluttered her painting.

Will took no notice of it at dinner that evening, but she chose not to draw his attention to it. When he did the same thing the following evening, she continued to hold her tongue. But when to her complete exasperation Will seemed utterly oblivious to its presence for a third consecutive night, she could hold back no longer.

“So?” she asked after joining him at the table.

She motioned to the spot on the wall with her eyes. “I still don’t think it was your best.”

She knew which one was, but the next morning went up to the attic and instead brought down the painting of Will reading beneath the naked bulb. He had used the big job he’d taken as an excuse for giving up on writing, and she had tried her best to get his surrender into the painting, the subject’s scalp reddening under high wattage like meat under a broiler.

She took a greater chance with its location, hanging it on the wall of the pale green living room wall, where it fairly leaped out from its surroundings of stucco and dark beams and parquet. But again he took no notice of the painting. This time she did not wait to draw his attention to it. Yet Will merely asked what its title
was.

“It’s called *The Light Fixture*, “she said, which was true enough. “Really,” he said.
“What do you think?”
“I like your treatment of the poor fellow’s scalp. But where is that other one?”
“Which?”
“Don’t patronize me.”
“What would you like me to say?”
“You know.”

The self-portrait made her too uncomfortable, revealing as it did a sadness she tried her best not to display, deep lines about the eyes and mouth she had failed to deny, a disarray unbecoming in public. And so the thing remained unfinished as well as unhung.

“I’ve always found that one a poor likeness,” she said. “That makes no difference,” he said.

But she discounted the insight, as she had all of his kinder comments about her work.

And then their attention abruptly shifted to sudden footfalls upon the stairs. David had chosen that moment to make an appearance, one side of his head freshly shaved, the other dyed, his left nostril featuring a nose ring he began sporting not long before leaving college. Lingering within earshot, he proceeded to ask Will for a hundred dollars.

“For what?” Will asked.
“I’m going out tonight.”
“Let me guess,” Will said as he opened his wallet and withdrew five twenties. “The Lower East Side.”

David scowled slightly as he stepped forward and accepted the bills while Evelyn held her tongue. She and Will had agreed to let things run their course so long as they didn’t become too desperate. There was little choice really, since they’d tried everything else they could think of. But after their son had slunk “How long are you going to put up with this?” she demanded.

Will bolted upright. “As long as it takes,” he insisted.
“Come to bed,” she said wearily. But as usual, Will ignored her, so that in the morning she might have no idea when—or even if he’d joined her.

When daylight came, she retrieved the painting of the clearing and hung it in a discreet but clearly visible location, above the oak dressing table in the alcove off their bedroom; as if to keep watch over her jewelry, make-up and cologne, everything she still used for beauty’s sake.

Again, however, he said nothing after he returned for work and changed his clothes, so she immediately steered him back into the bedroom and pointed it out.

“Very interesting,” he said.
She didn’t hesitate to tell him what she’d decided at last to say. “There happens to be
a story attached to it.”

“Oh?” he said.

“Yes,” she said, and then she explained how she’d posed in the nude in the clearing one afternoon during her upstate retreat.

Will stepped toward the painting, drawn as if by a magnet of dissembled emotion, a compass for repressed complaint. “Why are you telling me this now?” he demanded.

“I thought you might want to know.”

“I’d already guessed as much.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because I knew there was more to it than that.”

She looked away now, as if to flee, but could think of nowhere to go but the attic, and it no longer contained anything that might comfort her.

“What are you referring to?” she asked, turning back to see her husband staring hard at the canvas, as if searching for some image or meaning that had long eluded him.

He offered his explanation without turning. “I found an empty package of Silk Cuts in the kitchen wastebasket a week after that party.”

A nerve began to twinge in her left arm, as if fear could register as pain. “You never said anything.”

“What was there to say?”

There was little now as well, except to wonder aloud if that was why he had also quit.

“Quit what?” he replied, innocently enough.

She looked once more at the clearing, and for the first time noticed how crudely the trees and clouds had been drawn. The effort suddenly seemed childlike and innocent but a long way from anything that one could seriously call neo-impressionism, as she had up to now. But while there was no escaping the disappointment this fact presented, she also felt a distinct sense of relief in its wake. Without another word, Evelyn went to bed, and when she woke up in the middle of the night alone and in fresh despair she was at least thankful that the pain in her arm was gone.

Eventually, she replaced the painting of the clearing with the self-portrait. And one evening shortly thereafter, she stood outside on the porch, trimming a wayward branch of fulsome dogwood, when Will drove up in the car and began walking toward the house. A moment later, David emerged from the front door in full downtown regalia. He sauntered toward the vehicle, slid into the driver’s seat, and roared off, though not before acknowledging his father’s parting wave. Will turned to Evelyn, his face framed by a triangle of dogwood branches, a warm smile abruptly turning up the corners of his familiar mouth, as a gust might a straw hat’s brim. In its garland frame, his expression seemed to hold out more meaning than she thought prudent to expect. She was about to ask what he meant by it, but stopped short. Forgiveness, she decided, led in many directions at once, but was best left uninterpreted. And the next time she recalled the clearing in the woods upstate where she’d posed without clothing for another man,
meditating on him as he worked as if he were as much her creation as she his, she saw Will in his place, if only for a brief moment.
Though the world was very new, Raven watched the beach from a spruce that looked old and dead, towering as bare as a bone atop a cliff. Raven knew hunger, and he felt lust, but no tide had washed the shore yet, nor had any sorrow washed a soul, and then Otter raised his head from the surf, and a bell-like crooning caught sadly inside Raven’s throat.

Otter blinked tiny inky eyes, squinching up a black nose, shaking flakes of fish from gray whiskers as if the hairs could stay clean and dignified. Otter crossed forelegs like arms across his chest, and with little webbed fingers he eased a sea urchin into his mouth, as if he could handle things fastidiously. Raven closed his wings as silently as Falcon. Clearly Otter thought himself better than any animal, more, and Raven dove down, and he screamed like Hawk, slamming his beak against Otter’s breast, lashing claws into his belly.

The sea whooshed into Raven’s bill, past his head, hands wrenching his bill, binding his legs. Otter dragged Raven down through green murk to red and purple shapes, urchins on rock, and he shoved Raven hard, pushing him against spines sharper than fish bones, and Raven squirmed, fighting water in his throat, cuts through his feathers.

Otter thrust his face close, his inky eyes suddenly as big as Sea Lion’s. He wiggled his whiskers like tentacles, his mouth yawned open, ugly blunt teeth thundered against rock. Urchins and clams burst apart, and shards flew against Raven, stinging, and Raven raised a wing, sprouting webbed fingers. His feathers turned to otter fur, and his legs, to otter flippers. Otter squirmed away, and Raven swam after the ripple of bubbles—rocks were everywhere, swarming with kelp and anemones, and Otter was gone, hiding like a helpless sculpin beneath some ledge. Raven snatched an urchin and bolted up, flapping his old wings in the air, spitting and coughing, croaking his old croak. He tucked his urchin beneath his old feathers and flew up and down the shore, glaring at waves for the presuming little head, his mutters echoing like the empty clatter of surf stones off the cliffs.

* * *

The waves spilled foam way up the sand and left only driftwood and broken cockles, and Ghost Plover ran like a snow-shadow beneath Raven, peeping desperately. “If only the water would go down, and I could find a mole crab!”

Oystercatcher bobbed up and down and screamed in a shrill voice, “If only there were a rock with mussels, and I could pry the clams loose!”

Gull bowed his head deeply and yelped, “If only a flounder were stranded in a
tidepool, and I could tear his belly!"

Raven cawed like Crow, harshly, and Cormorant answered, laughing. He flew to her
cave, and she flashed him a look bluer than any lungwort, more dazzling than any
bunting. She stood by her shelf, admiring her memories, and her fishy smell rose from
her cedar-bark skirt. and Raven lifted a talon, fondling her fiercely, rapidly.

“You’ve been trading shapes with Otter?” she giggled.

“Otter is a dream I do not like!” said Raven. His touch grew heavy and slow, and he
looked out at the water. “You asked the whales to help make tide?”

“The whales will not tie the surf with or pull it from the beach,” said Cormorant.

“They will sing the surf out to sea?”

“The whales do not believe things should be left stranded on the sand. I think we must
make mood.”

Raven gave Cormorant a beady look. Otter had urchins, Bear had salmon, and she
herself had smelt. Now Ghost Plover needed mole crabs, Turnstone needed barnacles,
and Buzzard wanted a washed up seal, dead and bloated. They needed food, not mood,
but Cormorant shrugged her wings, grinned and rolled a soft mat of cattails at Raven’s
feet. She lit little fires that made big shadows on the walls and then arranged pretty piles
of reminders on the floor—bits of the new things she and Raven had already made for
the world, shells of snails, caps from limpets, claws of crabs, bones and teeth of fish and
birds.

She nibbled Raven’s throat, and he wanted fingers for caressing, and he pricked her
with his urchin, and she squealed and shoved him away.

“That is not mood!”

“Sorry, it was not I! It was Otter!”

“Otter?” From her memories Cormorant snatched a razor clam and threw it past
Raven’s head. “What are you saying? Something that is not true?”

“I only meant I did not mean—”

She snatched a sand dollar, threw it spinning at Raven, was yanked strangely toward
him. Suddenly both clung to the mouth of the cave with their talons, leaning toward the
sand dollar, which hung as a giant white face above the water, the old gray rays on it
warped from the spinning, vague and cloudy even in the bright blue sky.

Raven and Cormorant huddled together, trembling, watching Sun. The two had never
dared to put anything in his sky, and now Sun burned his heat angrily, and the birds
sweated, panting, and Sun wrapped a cloud around himself, and the cloud swelled and
swallowed Sand Dollar, and all the ocean turned flat without waves, heavy and dark.

Sun had never sunk before without putting up pinks from Salmon and yellows from
Sea Lemon, but now he threw down a dirty puddle of gray and slipped without a glimmer
into it.

Cormorant sidled in front of Raven and spread her wings as if to block the hardest
rain. She hissed like reeds that would not break in the strongest gust, and the clouds
gave way, and a radiant rose flooded the horizon. Sand Dollar beamed through the dusk, and copper ribbons of kelp hung down black rocks, dripping pearly drops on slick-pink sand.

Ghost Plover bobbed before the wave-claps, squeezing a crab in “No, she is there on the sand wrapped in some flimsy skin that has no fur! Her face is as smooth as Seal’s, and the only hair she has is bound on her head! She has feet instead of flippers, is kneeling, weeping!”

Cormorant did not stir from the steam of her bath.

“I will turn into a baby otter, call her out to the waves and see if she can swim,” said Raven.

“She is a dream I do not like,” said Cormorant.

“Down, down deep I will call her.”

“An otter woman!”

Cormorant flew with Raven--row after row of new otter men sat offshore in some kind of giant hollow eel that raced through waves as swiftly as whales—some wrapped fingers around slender logs that cleaved powerfully through the water—and others drew strings of sinew as if to shoot pointed shafts from boxes of oak—catapult otters!

A dirty taste like whitewash surged on Cormorant’s tongue, and she spat as she landed by the otter woman.

The otter woman went on wailing, whipping down sand as if she hated every grain.

“You have lost your sons to the giant eel?” said Cormorant.

“My husband is dying!” said the otter woman.

“And you cannot be with him?”

The otter woman writhed toward the headland, and a pink-faced pup squalled from her wrap.

“My husband is with his friends and has sent me off!” said the otter woman. “The jailer has already mixed the hemlock! I cannot bear it!”

A new stink of grief gusted across the beach, blowing from Cormorant’s cave, and Cormorant and Raven flew to a ledge outside the mouth, gripping the rock with claw-tips, craning necks, watching silently. Inside, the husband sat against a wall as easily as Otter reposed upon the sea, bowing an ancient head of white hair before four young men who sweated like nervous elk and wept as loudly as the wife on the beach.

“Certainly the charges are false, and you have not corrupted us!” cried the first young man.

“A ship waits for you!” cried the second.

“Here are coins to pay its captain!” cried the third.

“And more to pay the jailer!” cried the fourth.

“Tell me,” said the husband, “shall we honor that which is evil and ugly and turn our backs on that which is beautiful and good?” The young men threw themselves at the husband’s feet, clasping and stroking his ankles, and the husband raised a bowl of
hemlock to his lips and drained it.

“You shall bury nothing but my body,” he said, walking to the back of the cave, lifting a dead ochre star from Cormorant’s shelf of memories. He held the star high in the mouth of the cave, and its shadow leapt across a wall.

“If you were born kneeling as you are now, and chains held you in your places, and you were unable to turn, and you had never seen the sun or the mouth of the cave or the star in my hand, then you would call the shadow of the star the real star, and you would not know any other star to name,” he said.

“The shadow of the star would seem the real and only star,” said the men.

Cormorant damped Wind beneath her nostrils, building steam inside herself, and she pressed her black body against the black headland and nodded at Raven to do the same.

The husband stepped out to the ledge of the cave and held the ochre star high again, and its dried-up rays shone clearly in the air.

“But if you had been born out here, you would call the star itself and not its shadow the true thing?” said the husband.

“In the sunlight we would call the actual star the real star,” said the men.

The husband gasped gayly and then sank down, rubbing his legs. He looked at his friends proudly, as if each had caught an enormous halibut, and no man anywhere would have to fear or suffer or puzzle over any hunger again.

“Let us call our lives inside the cave the lives inside our bodies,” said the husband.

“Our tastes for flesh,” said one man.

“My heartbreak now,” said another.

“The pain of a crushed bone,” said another.

“The stink of my bowels,” said a fourth.

“And let us call our lives out here in the sun the release of our souls at death and at last an entry into the only place where knowledge can be free of the troubles of our bodies,” said the husband.

“The death of our bodies is a loss for that which is evil and ugly and a gain for that which is beautiful and good,” said a man.

“The wisdom of the soul,” said the husband, and he reclined his head upon the rock ledge, clasped the star to his chest and gave up his breath.

His friends dropped around him, keening and kissing him, and Cormorant flew into her cave, spreading her wings, and fog poured from her nostrils and feathers, soaking the men, and she lit on the husband’s chest, and fog poured from her skirt, pink from her bleeding, rank like rotting cod, sour and salty like sea water. She sang a twitter like a warbler, and the dry-dead star heaved up, flexing its rays. The star leapt beneath Cormorant’s skirt, and she sang a gush like a wren, and she shook moaning and whinnying, and Raven screamed, swooping down, driving his bill into the husband’s stomach, shuffling green-bloody worm strings between mandibles.
The men gagged, a foot found Raven, he sailed backward above the beach, and fingers clutched Cormorant, yanked her skyward, tore at her feathers, pinned her wings against a wall.

The pink stink curled beneath arm hairs, clogged the men’s nostrils, swirled around tongues, stung swollen eyes. Fingers tore shreds from the cedar-bark skirt, and then a hard-grainy-grabbing thing fell upon a knuckle. A man slapped it, another dropped onto his wrist, cold as a sea stone, and another clung to his navel, pinching and sucking his stomach.

By the time Raven flew into the cave again, Cormorant sat slumped, her cloaca sopping, her cheek patches sallow and shallow, her breath slow but calm, her smile wan but replete with joy. The pink fog had sunk, and sprawled everywhere on the black-wet rock were new sea stars.

One oozed red, inching across the last bit of a vein, and a second rippled as roughly as the hide of Deer, folding itself across the last of a foot. A third swelled with web-like rays, sucking up the last of an elbow, and a fourth glowed as brightly as Sun, wrapping petal-like rays around an entire head, but otherwise there was no sign of the husband or his friends.

Once again Cormorant’s cave belonged only to her shelf of memories and the fishy scent of Tide.

* * *

And so today Cormorant raises nestlings on a rock so high men cannot climb it, and Blood Star, Leather Star, Sunflower Star and Bat Star join Ochre Star hunting Tide, and birth is feared by ugly bodies, and afterward Mother and Father sense new threats as well as pleasures.

The next morning Cormorant gazed from her cave, flashing a blue look of worry at Raven.

“Bound and her pup are nowhere,” she said.

“Nor do I see Otter,” said Raven.

“If Otter took them, we would see the giant eel searching the water for the pup.”

“The eel is gone already.”

“Maybe none of it was, and it will never really be!”

Into the cedar and spruce the birds flew, soaring along the streams that cascaded from the mountains, flying around icy peaks, calling without answer into the fir that sloped back to the sea. Near the beach, dunes blew the color of snow, hiding driftwood and pine where Bound might hunch with her pup.

The birds lit upon the headland again, and Cormorant glared miserably into her cave. “A dream of separation!” she said, and Raven reached around her wing, brushing her. He sang the flash and bolt he saw inside her, the fog, the hollow-sounding sweep, her
sorrow, and his feathers turned to fingers, and as he caressed her, his tongue turned soft and broad, lapping her tears, and the two rolled down the headland, joining as otters, crying Out.

On the beach Cormorant threw back arms, dug into sand with toes, lifted Raven with hips. He sprouted rays like sea stars, explored her with each, and she slid onto him, lapped him with narrow licks, made his belly tingle.

She was yanked skyward again. Fingers pinched the back of her neck, shook her, threw her into a crashing wave.

A man in a black robe slapped his hands, cleaning filth from them. His nose wiggled, a centipede thrashing, and his eyes bugged like blowfish eyes at a woman dressed in a blue wrap behind him.

“Look, look at them!” he said. “Two different beasts! Right out here! And neither has seen he who will save them!”

The woman absorbed the words, her eyes blue too, calm like a quiet cove, her face pale but glowing as warmly as Sun behind a haze.

Raven stood slowly, knowing how well Cormorant negotiated seas—his otter member had not yet shrunk inside him, and it wagged big and stiff, painted with the little bleeding left.

The man in the robe vomited into the surf, and Cormorant dove into a crest, lifting her rump, oozing juices. The man’s hands flew to his eyes, and he fell on his back, squirming, hacking as if his deepest insides would come flying out his mouth. His eyes turned black and murky, rolled backward inside his head. “The beasts will meet the Lord!” he yelled. “He is coming, finally coming! Coming!”

The woman’s glow sank beneath her wrap, she plopped onto a rock, her belly swelled like a bear’s before a cub. She pushed out a pup, but not like a bear or otter. The pup was as clean as an egg—no blood or feces from the woman, no splash or splotch on the boy, no rash or cord gunk, no smell.

The woman’s glow shone inside the boy, and the man leapt up, his eyes glistening clear again, fixed on Cormorant as she rode a curl of surf onto the sand and stood beside Raven.

“The boy’s father is the Lord, and he is the Lord!” said the man. The no-huff woman swaddled the baby in a hide, and the man reached in and grabbed the baby’s member. The man fingered the member and made it stiff, and he pushed and tugged at it and spoke to the sky. “Praise to our Lord, our God! Oh, King of Earth!”

The glow flashed inside the man’s thumb, a beaver nail sharper and brighter than in any dream so far, and he snapped the edge down across the member, and the baby screamed, turning the red of one sea urchin and then the purple of another.

Cut Nail kissed the member, drank blood from it and spat again, tossing flaps of foreskin onto sand.

The blue of Cormorant’s eyes went black, and her feathers drooped against her
breast.
“It binds him to his soul!” said No Huff.
“Soul?” said Cormorant. “You know the word, and you believe in it?”
“My son is the Word!” said No Huff.
“Do you know the woman Bound?” said Cormorant. “The old man Hemlock?”
“We know his father is the Lord in Heaven!” said Cut Nail.
“Listen to my boy!” said No Huff. “Listen, and he will heal you!”
Raven flew up and circled the boy to see if he was so clean he had no anus or not even any dirt in his hide, but Cut Nail seized the boy and plunged him in and out of water, and the baby grew as big as Fisher, as Seal, as Cut Nail, and then his hide hid only his loins, fitting so tightly Raven saw only the butt crack in back and the Cut part pressing against the front, hanging like a leaf-slug dangling from a branch.
No Dirt stepped from the waves, and Cormorant waited as he shook himself, her eyes shining blue again, glimmering.
“Do you know your grandmother?” she said. “Her husband is gone, eaten, but she may be lost in the blowing sand.”
“My boy will make the sand stand still!” said No Huff.
The glow flashed in the beaver finger again, and Cut Nail yanked a pole of driftwood from the beach and carved she-things on it—crookedswaying hips, flappingflaming tongues, snortingheaving nostrils, tanglelicking tresses, gianthollow eyes, splitting frothing spider bellies.
Cut Nail slammed the pole in front of Cormorant. “This I see inside you!”
“There in the part where she wiggles any shape she craves!” said No Huff.
No Dirt gazed down tenderly at Cormorant and laid fingertips upon her crest. “Praise to our Lord, oh, God!” he said. “King of Earth, forgive this beast!” He shoved
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No Dirt gazed down tenderly at Cormorant and laid fingertips upon her crest “Praise to our Lord, oh, God!” he said. “King of Earth, forgive this beast!” He shoved gently at Cormorant, and she bowed reluctantly, holding her hiss.

“Go on your way and sin no more,” said No Dirt.

Cormorant pumped her head, fuming, and a little fog rose from her, sour, and she made no more. It was true the pole resembled some moods she had with Raven, and she wondered, was sin real? Did it curse the creatures that came out of her? Keep her from finding Bound?

No Dirt and No Huff and Cut Nail walked into the dunes, and Cormorant raced after them.

“Oh, watch him now, and do not be blind!” Cut Nail thrust the she-pole up and down.

“Our souls shall live forever!”

Raven hovered in the flying sand, beating his wings furiously. “The dunes must blow! They must move, or they will not stay!”

“It is written!” said Cut Nail. “We shall prepare the path for the Lord!”

No Dirt came to the foot of a dune, and the sand howled like sea lions the size of mountains, beating his cheeks purple again. He dug hard into his hide, and then the glow went into his hand, lighting up seeds in his palm.

“Quiet! Be muzzled!” No Dirt tossed the seeds across the dunes, and then grass grew and rippled in supple green waves. Sand blew only in quiet shush-sounds, and Ghost Plover popped her head above the ground, bobbing her bill so excitedly she seemed about to fall on her chin.

“Come, tell us, have seen the woman Bound?” said No Dirt.

“I can see hardly anything!” said Ghost Plover. “Look, look at my chicks! They have always been the color of sand, and the sand has always hidden them! They have never been like grass, and I have always seen fine around them!”

“Come, bow before me,” said No Dirt.

Cormorant bit his wrist. “This little grandmother is trying to tell you, No Dirt, you do not know this ground well enough to throw your seeds here.”

“Look at the plover’s legs,” said No Huff. “She can kneel, I think.”

“E-e-e-e-eee!” cried Ghost Plover. “I do not! I make myself flat, ease my wings across my chicks, fade like snow against the sand!”

Suddenly she flew up, wheeling around, stabbing her bill at waving grass. Red Fox sprang from the stalks, Gray Fox snapped his teeth, chicks raced like gusting puffballs across the sand, shrieking.

Red Fox snatched one, pounced sideways, bit into a second, and Gray Fox shook a third in his mouth, gnawing its downy neck.
The foxes dashed into the grass, disappearing, and Ghost Plover flew to the beach, followed by Cormorant. Cormorant got small like Ghost Plover. She keened, screaming like Sandpiper, and she threaded a new needle-bill up and down in front of waves. She gulped the losses she sought, and she flew back to the dunes, holding them in her old black throat, beating her old black wings.

“Ghost Plover is pulling out feathers, wailing, stabbing herself, falling headfirst into breakers, flying backward on her neck. All her chicks are dead, and she is delirious!”

“She is sorry she doubted him?” said No Fluff. Raven made new howling claps, whoomping his wings, hovering, glaring all about.

“Over there Raccoon sneaks through grass, and there Weasel slinks through, and there Opossum noses through, and everywhere else Skunk and Coyote and Gull and Crow crack and slurp plover eggs, and none are bothered by sand anymore!”

“Do you see Bound?” said Cormorant.

“I see baskets larger than whales coming on the sea, blown by wraps from leafless trees! I see dunes that do not move, but no woman, no pup, no young plovers, only bad grass from hasty seed!”

The glow flashed in the beaver finger again, and Cut Nail twirled the she-pole around and carved bonyhollow skulls, emptyblack eyes, wonnblack nostrils, blackbeaksblackdevils-eatingdeadblackflesh. “This I hear in Raven’s voice, I see in Raven’s wrath!”

“In the part that puffs out and sticks itself into any shape it wants!” said No Huff. “Please, all of you go!” said Cormorant. “Get on a sailing basket and keep your story home! It does not consider us, and the boy will not be wise here!”

“Nail me!” cried No Dirt, pointing at the bare-bone spruce atop the headland. “Bury me in that cave, and you will see! Nail me, and I will be the truth!”

Cormorant spat wet, wrinkled skin-pieces down onto his sandals.

“Forget your truth, your soul, your lord, your bind, your vanity! Sew these back on yourself and go!”

She fell backward onto grass, spreading her legs, and needle-billed birds spewed out, so many so fast they swarmed across the dunes, digging up grass. They swirled high into a funnel, roaring, calling Wind, and Wind blasted from the sea, waves smashed against dunes, and the sailing baskets tossed and heaved behind the boy.

Woodpeckers whooped war cries, hammering the bare-bone spruce, and Raven got big as five eagles, six, seven, and he dove onto No Dirt, slashing through muscle to clavicles, yanking him toward the sails, and No Dirt hung slack.

The glow flared in the beaver finger, and Cormorant leapt up, jabbing her bill at Cut Nail, and the edge flashed down, and then Wind grew still, and all the air felt gray and soupy and as heavy as Earth itself.

* * *
And so today a slow and quiet croak creeps up inside Raven’s throat, stops, starts again, and he sounds unsure, as if the Lord and Virgin and Boy had never had a true way to change their believers, and instead the believers had changed the world, and Raven had suffered sorrow ever since.

Today Raven glides above Tide, and the glow burns from memories, glinting from the ax that had hacked the last chips from the bare-bone trunk, gleaming from gold crosses that had come on all the ships.

Raven had hung No Dirt upon a mast, a musket had popped, he had flown back through fog.

Blue coats, red coats, beaver coats ran across the beach, shooting fire from new black poles, and on the sand lay an uncle who had sung and carved Raven into stones and wood, blood running from his head, soaking his otter cape.

And beside the uncle lay an aunt who had sung and woven Cormorant into stones and baskets, and fingers tore loon skins from her mantle and periwinkles from her dress, and she thrashed on sand.


A blue-coated captain stood atop the dunes, pointing a brass compass at the mountains and plains beyond. “In the name of the Lord I claim the land for the Crown!”

* * *

Wind bellowed like monstrous sea lions clubbed inside a cave, and Raven beat giant wings above red coats, blue coats and beaver coats who lit lodges with torches. Feathers gusted up, flaming, and an orange blaze crackled around the she-pole, and Cormorant’s head hung down from a wire bind, bits of her popping out like burning sap.

Sun poured through grainy-gray mist, and the glow flashed in the beaver finger again, and the edge was speckled with the last bloody chunks of the part of Cormorant that had pleased Raven with so many shapes.

Cut Nail thrust his edge into the sand, falling to his knees, clasping and shaking his hands. “Lord, have mercy! Have mercy, Lord, please!”

The glow gleamed in Raven’s claws, smote zigzags in his eyes, shone like obsidian shields around his wings. He dove, but Cut Nail grew hard like stone, gray as if from salty spray, and green gobs oozed like sea anemones from his eye sockets.

A pink smear bubbled from the sand, and a chick stretched out two downy stubs and then flapper bigger and bigger wings. Cormorant flew to her old cave, and Raven lit upon the old mouth, and she glared at him with eyes as blue and hard as any ice field.

“You are angry I dropped No Dirt into the sea, leaving you?” said Raven. “And sorry for Bound?”

Cormorant waddled to a higher ledge, and Raven shrank from seven-eagles big to
less than one.
“Cut Nail cut the cords inside your throat?” said Raven.
Cormorant leaned out of the wind and preened a shoulder.
“I will sing the sulk inside you, the hiss,” said Raven.
Cormorant sat whitewash at his feet, and Raven stormed inside her cave.
Her shelf of memories--gone! She did not know his voice, and she eyed him from behind, chilling his back. Her wings clapped, and she darted along the cliff and lit beside another cormorant, who unfurled his neck, nipping the pouch beneath her bill--she would not have Raven again, not sea stars, not anyone but her own.
“She is just a shadow of herself,” thought Raven, “and I am just a shadow.”
Forests fell, and cabins rose in clearings. Beaver coats built towers of bare-bone poles, and the glow rippled through furry cheeks as Otter bit his whiskers with worry above the surf.
A beaver coat stood in a scow upon the sea, swinging a rifle from his shoulder. A shot rang out, Otter dove, and beaver coats paddled high-prow canoes, pushing him to shore.
Otter leapt from the face of a wave and slip-slopped his paws across wet sand. His back arched high, and a beaver coat shot a rifle from a bare-bone tower.
Otter fell snapping at a red glow in his dark fur, a breaker swept him, he rolled landward like tangled lump of seaweed.
Another shot from a scow! Otter’s daughter sank in a bed of kelp. Bangs from towers up and down the beach! Otter’s son fell, his wife too, his father, mother, uncle, aunt, grandfather, grandmother, nieces, nephews, cousins.
No more otter heads above the surf! Long white fingers clutched lustrous fur softer than silk, richer than Ermine, warmer than Bear, and the glow glinted from knives cutting splayed otter bodies.
Otter coats left on ship after ship, and the glow lit up the yellow film of otter innards, the sandy white sinew and purple organs on the beach. Buzzard bent his gnarled skull beside Maggot and Fly and Gull, and they ate and ate and ate the dead. How hungry Raven felt, how empty. To feel the right fear, but in the wrong hands, the wrong beast!

* * *

And so today Raven does not talk with men and women walking the beach. He watches us warily, and he glides with crimped wings above the hiss, howl, sweep and thunder, and he listens for the old voices to sing inside the surf again.
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