

The Story of Josh

A Novel

Gillian Brown

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ABSTRACT

The Story of Josh

Gillian Brown

The Story of Josh is a novel in free verse drawing on the Jesus myth, but set in a modern North American context. The project was first inspired by Anne Carson's Autobiography of Red. The novel is written in verse lines because the symbolic resonance of poetry better lends itself to the re-telling of myth than prose.

The novel tells the story of a Jewish boy growing up in North America; the text leaves most settings unnamed to preserve some of the universality that the Christ myth has come to represent. The story explores the idea of being 'chosen.' The Western ideal of the individual as reigning supreme (as signified by Christ) – the shift of focus from communal identity to individual identity – creates both an inflated sense of self and a deep sense of isolation in the Western psyche.

The novel examines the cultural consequences of the historically dominant concept of mind/body dualism in the Western psyche. The perspective of the individual as dual, with the mind posited as higher, divine, and predominantly masculine, and the body posited as lower, profane, and predominantly feminine, has informed imbalances of power throughout history. Through the character of Isobel, a childhood friend of Joshua's, the novel incorporates the historically dismissed and mistreated symbolic and embodied feminine into the concept of personhood as represented by the Christ-figure. The novel draws on C. G. Jung's concepts of the personal and collective unconscious, the archetypes, and the project of individuation.

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Table of Contents

Chapter I.	A Concise Summary	1
Chapter II.	Beginnings	1
Chapter III.	The Father	9
Chapter IV.	Baths, Snowflakes, and Magic Stars	11
Chapter V.	Schooldays	31
Chapter VI.	Clothespins	33
Chapter VII.	Hannah	36
Chapter VIII.	E.T.'s Flowers	43
Chapter IX.	Klasher	49
Chapter X.	The Old and The New	61
Chapter XI.	Rainy Days	71
Chapter XII.	Candy Bars	78
Chapter XIII.	Shiners	81
Chapter XIV.	A-Theist	86
Chapter XV.	A Warm Wind	86
Chapter XVI.	Hardwood Floors	92
Chapter XVII.	Remote	97
Chapter XVIII.	Sunday Tradition	100
Chapter XIX.	Lock Box	103
Chapter XX.	Passover	112
Chapter XXI.	Act	124

Chapter XXII.	Words and Reason	127
Chapter XXIII.	The Slow Burn	129
Chapter XXIV.	Variables	131
Chapter XXV.	Magdalene	135
Chapter XXVI.	Kisses	144
Chapter XXVII.	The Skin of Sadness	152
Chapter XXVIII.	Tuesday Afternoon	157
Chapter XXIX.	Ordinary Day	160
Chapter XXX.	The Rest	166
Chapter XXXI.	Ways of Getting By	171
Chapter XXXII.	Light	173
Chapter XXXIII.	Bone Cake	174
Chapter XXXIV.	Soleil	178
Chapter XXXV.	Little Fish	181
Chapter XXXVI.	Constellations Change	183
Chapter XXXVII.	A Little Bit Less	185
Chapter XXXVIII.	Seventeen	187
Chapter XXXIX.	Sad	188
Chapter XL.	Dreams	189
Chapter XLI.	After	192
Chapter XLII.	God Again	193
Chapter XLIII.	The Weight	193
Chapter XLIV.	Not Knowing	195

Chapter XLV.	First Year	195
Chapter XLVI.	Letters from Home	197
Chapter XLVII.	Missing	198
Chapter XLVIII.	Other People's Words	199
Chapter XLIX.	His Mother's Letter	200
Chapter L.	A New Name	201
Chapter LI.	Tea Swamp Park	209
Chapter LII.	Another Atheist	210
Chapter LIII.	Stars and Star-Gazers	210
Chapter LIV.	Animals	214
Chapter LV.	Alex	215
Chapter LVI.	Jude and Mary	217
Chapter LVII.	L.O.V.E. in a Tent City	220
Chapter LVIII.	Lamb	225
Chapter LIX.	Interview Effects	226
Chapter LX.	Green Grass	227
Chapter LXI.	The Way	229
Chapter LXII.	Songs of Late Summer	230
Chapter LXIII.	No Apologies	234
Chapter LXIV.	Tree	237
Chapter LXV.	Chosen	242
Chapter LXVI.	Jude's Destiny	244
Chapter LXVII.	The Proposal	246

Chapter LXXVIII.	Safe Injection	247
Chapter LXIX.	The Divide	251
Chapter LXX.	On His Own Again	252
Chapter LXXI.	Star on the Rise	254
Chapter LXXII.	Outside His Story	255
Chapter LXXIII.	Exorcism	256
Chapter LXXIV.	No Door	258
Chapter LXXV.	Ask	263
Chapter LXXVI.	Source of Songs	266
Chapter LXXVII.	Elwin Kane	267
Chapter LXXVIII.	Chills and Fever	271
Chapter LXXIX.	Seeds	274
Chapter LXXX.	Eyes Like Paul Newman's	276
Chapter LXXXI.	In a Crowd of Ten Thousand	281
Chapter LXXXII.	No Tears	284
Chapter LXXXIII.	The Art of Isobel	285
Chapter LXXXIV.	Letters from the Road	288
Chapter LXXXV.	Figs	290
Chapter LXXXVI.	Isobel and the Men	292
Chapter LXXXVII.	Love Stories	293
Chapter LXXXVIII.	Poison in the Blood	295
Chapter LXXXIX.	Klasher's Black Hole	299
Chapter XC.	Revisiting the Old Neighbourhood	301

Chapter XCI.	A Good and Sweet New Year	303
Chapter XCII.	John's Limp	305
Chapter XCIII.	Home Away from Home	308
Chapter XCIV.	The Boys	312
Chapter XCV.	To Become a God	314
Chapter XCVI.	To Meet Again	321
Chapter XCVII.	A New Life	324
Chapter XCVIII.	Save Yourself	328
Chapter XCIX.	Guarded Nest	331
Chapter C.	The Doll Show	333
Chapter CI.	Isobel's Choice	337
Chapter CII.	The Kiss	338
Chapter CIII.	Turn	340

I. A Concise Summary

This is the story. Joshua was born. He did some stuff. He died. He came back again.

But just for a few minutes.

A few people say he might come back later.

II. Beginnings

Some people liked to say (he could not think of which people right now)

The End is in the Beginning

This is mostly always people under the influence

Of first-year philosophy.

Sometimes when Josh was little and sad

His mother climbed into bed with him shiny white mornings

The house still heaving its dark sleepiness

In all rooms but his.

Usually she read him comic books – Batman, Spiderman, Green Goblin –

Twisty battles of Good and Evil curling and uncurling the pages like fire.

Toasty shivers seeded in Joshua's toes burst forth in rings from the crown of his head

He snuggled into her happy-scared in their rhyming moment. *Me and You,*

Us two, in our scratchy Mexican blanket.

A few times she looked at him for a minute and then told him the story. The other story.

The story of Josh. (so far)

Josh liked this story but not as much as Spiderman

Which had rooftop jumping and swinging webs.

In Josh's story there was no rooftop jumping

He decided then that his story needed more action and superhero accessories

Maybe a mask and a magic laser ring

That could freeze BadGuys in a single shot. *pssh-psshew!*

He slid around the kitchen linoleum in slithering gym socks, a colander on his head

And a pipe cleaner with a wooden bead round his finger,

Throwing magic rays through the air with his fist.

When he grew up, he'd get to work on a *real* crime-fighting costume.

But for now he'd just listen.

And Think.

The story of Josh. (so far)

When Josh's mother was just a girl (*barely eighteen, just a baby myself*)

She woke up one morning with a very bad stomachache.

It was the flu of course or the prawn souvlaki she ate the night before

At her grandfather's favourite restaurant.

So her mum poured her a glass of ginger ale and she went back to bed.

Mary lay in bed for days, too sick to even watch TV.

Her mother drifted in and out

Pushing tea and toast like a bookie about to get his legs broken

If he didn't make the next payment.

(Josh appreciated his mother's knack for spicing up domestic squabbles with gangster-like similes).

Rejecting crackers and conversation, the young girl grew so pale

That her mother thought when she squinted she could see right through her daughter

Right through her skin and bone and muscle to the duck pattern on the pillowcase.

There's something seriously wrong with that girl, Saul, you mark my words.

She seemed to be fading away.

Mary was Helen's baby, her youngest

She had already lost her firstborn,

Elisa, to university,

And then to love.

The next morning Saul and Helen forced their daughter out of bed, bundled her up

And drove her to the doctor's office.

Mary followed the nurse into the little white room

And sat alone on the crunchy white paper of the examining table, and Waited

While she waited she watched a jar of clean, pine tongue depressors.

The doctor was old with crackling lines marking off the continents of his face.

Maybe it's cancer, Mary offered hardly caring anymore.

The doctor just looked at her

In that funny way old people sometimes look at young people
Measuring.

Do you think you could be pregnant?

Oh no! ... I don't think so.

Why not?

Because... I...well... It just wouldn't make sense.

So it was not the flu or the prawn souvlaki,

It was Josh.

Josh all along.

(At this, she tickled his chin, and Joshua smiled mischievously).

With this news, the girl was worried because she was young and some other things too.

Every morning she folded up each wakeful night

And stuck it with the towels in the linen closet.

One day, Mary went to the place where they could take out babies

That weren't ready to be born

And save them for another day.

Mary read the pamphlet, nodding off slowly in the Waiting room.

She dreamed that she was back in the Doctor's office

Still Waiting

Watching the jar of tongue depressors

And while she was watching,

The jar melted into water and turned into something beautiful,

An angel

(maybe an angel)

Floating above the sterile white countertop.

Don't worry, Mary, the angel said. We've been waiting for this child.

You'll call him Joshua.

He'll shine like a jewel on a shore of grey stone.

He'll have great power.

(Josh, who liked this part especially, threw one of his magical punches through the air –
pssh-psshew!)

Joshua was hungry. They got up to make porridge.

He worked at the table with crayons, designing his crime-fighting costume

While his mother opened and closed kitchen drawers singing

On the day that you were born, the angels got together...

And decided to create a dream come trueuuue.

So they sprinkled moondust in your hair... of gold and starlight in your eyes so bluuue...

Joshua thought about this. Josh's eyes were brown.

Jimmy's eyes were green Mummy's eyes were blue Daddy's eyes were green too.

She liked to sing this song and the *I'm so pretty* song the best.

Songs make her happy, Josh thought.

They made him happy too.

He woke up to them soft mornings

And imagined he smelled pancakes on the grill all the way downstairs,

Only to find a boring old pot of porridge.

Sometimes Smelling and Wishing are the same, Josh thought.

What happened then? Josh said,

Trying to distract himself from the aching memory of pancakes.

His red crayon traced a cape over the shoulders of the current costume he was designing.

What happened when, Peanut?

When I was born.

Oh... Anyway... So, I left that place and I went home to tell Bubbie and Zaide about you.

But I didn't tell them about the angel dream...

Why?

Well, sometimes, those things... Those things are hard for people to understand...

especially parents.

Why?

She grinned and pretended to growl at him. *Don't you start, Kid!*

Why? Grinning back up at her from blue crayon.

She shook her fist at him and went on. *So they were worried still. I got a job as an elevator girl at the Hotel Georgia, and you and me – we got a little place of our own.*

Was I born then?

No, you were still in my tummy.

This is how the rest of the story went: Josh knew it by heart.

Sometimes he said it along with her.

They said it in Unison. He followed the cadence of her each to each syllables

Hearing and Remembering at the same time.

It was a cold winter day,

One of the last winter days before spring,

And Mary was climbing up the stairs to her apartment

With groceries in her hands, when all of a sudden

Her water broke.

She dropped one of the bags.

Oranges bounced down the stairs and rolled all over the place

A whole carton of eggs got smashed to smithereens.

She called the doctor, and he told her not to worry, to sit tight until

The contractions were the right length apart.

After a few hours, Mary left for the hospital.

Checking her wallet, she decided to take the subway.

It was only five stops – but between the third and the fourth station

The train stopped.

All the passengers groaned.

An hour and forty minutes later Joshua was Coming.

She turned to the kind-eyed man next to her,

And asked him if he could see if there was a doctor on-board.

There was no doctor, but one lady was a retired nurse – she even wore sensible white sneakers.

People took all the keys and quarters out of their pockets

And made a bed of layered coats on the floor.

The whole car buzzed.

When the baby came – everyone agreed later –

Time Stopped and Began again.

They washed him off with Evian water and wrapped him in a green cable-knit sweater.

Mary held the baby and cried.

She looked up, in love with the world,

And the whole car of mismatched passengers looked back.

The business-section readers forgot about falling stocks, the chain-smokers forgot about cigarettes itching in their pockets, the overhead sign readers forgot about avoiding eye-contact.

Everyone forgot about missed meetings, antsy babysitters, hungry spouses, bank tellers' hours.

They forgot everything

But Josh.

(Sometimes, Josh noted, adding it to his thought collection, Seeing and Forgetting are the same thing.)

All the people wanted to touch the baby, but they were shy,

So they all just stood around and watched.

A young man with an orange mohawk crouched beside them and produced a toy lamb from a shopping bag.

An older lady shuffled around and brought out a bag of apples and some spiced cheese.

I don't really have much with me, but I'd like to give you something, she said.

Mary smiled. Everyone smiled back.

What are you going to name him? The young man asked.

Joshua

III. The Father

The story was over and his mother called up that breakfast was ready.

Joshua's father creaked down the wooden stairs slowly

Holding Joshua's little brother by the hand. *Careful,* he said, *Pay attention.*

Morning, his dad touched his mother's ponytail,

And flew the milk like an airplane to the table, crashing it right in front of Josh.

Jimmy looked up from the toy-box and laughed.

What are you drawing? Joe asked, sitting down next to Joshua,

Wincing at the sound of Jimmy bashing his wooden hobbyhorse on the kitchen floor.

Hey! Josh glared at him, *That's mine!*

Dis is not yurs. Dis is mines, Jimmy informed him.

His dad gave him a look and changed the subject, *What are you drawing?*

... *My costume.*

Oh... I like it. Josh smiled at his father. His father who was not his father.

Joshua met him first when he was two years old.

Sometimes this made Josh feel sad.

He wished his father was his *real* father

To have green eyes too like Jimmy's green eyes like Joe's green eyes.

He thought about eyes,

My eyes are brown and I don't know what colour my father's eyes are

But maybe they are brown

Or maybe they are no colour or maybe they are all the colours

Or maybe they are a colour no one has ever seen before.

Even if they were, Joshua decided he would still rather have plain green eyes like Joe's.

Joshua loved Joe and would rather have him

Than any stupid old Everywhere and Nowhere Father.

Joe is my dad and he is Jimmy's dad, but he is only Jimmy's father, Joshua recited.

He is not my father.

Joe was a fixer of cars.

He had special coveralls with his name sewed on the pocket: *J-o-e.*

Three letters and an 'o' in the middle just like the Other one.

Maybe it was a joke and they were the same Guy.

Joshua wished he had coveralls with *his* name sewed on the pocket.

One day, Josh told his dad, *Maybe I could fix a car.*

Maybe you could, Joe said.

But maybe, one day, you could show me how first.

Okay.

Okay.

IV. Baths, Snowflakes, and Magic Stars

Sometimes it was snowing, Joshua told Eleanor, the bath doll.

Eleanor's hair was the colour of medium-old pennies, Joshua observed.

Eleanor stared up at him with her blue painted eyes, her big two-tooth grin,

Her long hair matted and mossy from too many scrubbings

Of the slippery bar of soap that, without warning, might transform into a submarine
full of spies

Contending with the perils of Joshua's bath-time ocean –

The purple plastic shark,

The tornado whirlpool drain.

Sometimes it was snowing for days and days and days.

In the North Coal, he said solemnly. It never stopped snowing.

He looked up at the night-time window.

Outside it was snowing.

Inside Joshua was having a bath

Telling a story about snow.

Joshua's dad came in and sat on the edge of the bath.

He took Joshua's submarine,
Dipped it underwater and lathered it up in his hands.
He started to wash Joshua's body
So that Josh had to manoeuvre around his dad's hands to play.
Joe slid the lather down Joshua's arm, reached his wrist and waited
While the purple shark sailed through the air in an arc
Into Joshua's other hand – *shhhhhhhhhh...*
His dad scrubbed his free hand
And then pressed his thumb into the centre of Joshua's palm,
Cuz he said it sometimes helped stop hiccups.
Joshua smiled, hiccupping.
So much for my trick. It's not really working today, is it Bud? Joe said.

Then he washed the other arm, the tummy, the back,
The whole rest of Joshua
Till he was slippery like an eel.
I'm slippery like an eel, Joshua told the doll. *That's cuz of the superpowers.*
Superheroes turns into stuff. I'm Ackerman.

Joshua looked at Joe.
'Aquaman,' he usually said when Joshua said Ackerman's name. *Ak-wah-man.*
That's how his dad thought you said it.
Josh knew better.

But Joe didn't say anything this time –

He just kept scrubbing Josh,

Down the bruised knees to the souls of his feet.

He took extra care with Joshua's feet.

You have to clean your feet really good, Joshua said. Cuz you walk on them all the day long, right?

Mmm, said Joe.

I'm telling Eleanor becuz she doesn't know. She's only two. She's just a little two year old, and I'm three. Three and a half.

Three and three-quarters. Almost four, Joe said

Re-appearing in the conversation like Magic.

You never knew when, but magic happened all the time, lots of the time –

Josh could see it.

He smiled, happy to see Joe again,

Come from a long way away.

Josh continued on his way, as though nothing had happened.

At three and three-quarters he understood

That this was the way the world worked most of the time.

Things happened and people pretended they didn't see.

Yes, I'm three and three quarters. So I have to tell her becuz I'm much bigger than her.

Alright, you tell her, Josh.

Joshua smiled at his dad, *I already did!*

Okay, Joe said getting up from the edge of the bathtub.

Having rinsed the suds off Joshua with the spilling cups of his palms,

He took a facecloth, wet it under the tap, and washed Joshua's face last of all.

Josh succumbed to it, emerging momentarily red-faced and flustered

By the surprise attack.

Now you can play, Joe said. *And I'll be back in a little while.*

Now I can play, Joshua said to no one in particular,

To Eleanor, the bath doll, with her one missing rubber leg.

He felt lonely.

Then he decided that it *was* her that he was addressing and carried on,

Today is your birthday.

He looked up to see if his dad was still there, watching,

But he was gone.

Joshua was alone

In the shining yellow of the bathroom mirror's vanity lights.

These were the kind of lights – Josh knew, from comic books and other things

he couldn't identify –

The kind of lights that graced the mirrors of movie stars' dressing rooms.

Only the stars' lights went all the way around, not just across the top

Like the ones in the bathroom.

Joshua thought they were beautiful

Like big, bright beads holding a picture in place.

Holding inside their bright shine

Josh's own face.

It was always a bit surprising, his face, a little strange.

Somehow different than how he thought it was

All the day he was wearing it.

Joshua thought about his reflection as he looked at it rippling softly in the water

The outlines of a boy.

An ordinary boy. A boring old boy.

With a scratch on his nose

From a mean twig in a good hiding place.

Joshua looked up again at the snowflakes falling outside,

Bright white in the night sky,

Illuminated by the glimmer of streetlamps

And surrounded by the no-nonsense window frame --

The eye of the upstairs bathroom.

Our house has many eyes, Joshua thought,

And every one saw something else.

He thought about stars again

The shape of stars.

There are many kinds of stars, he told his doll softly.

People stars and dog stars,

Two triangle stars with six points.

(these were the kind Joshua could draw all by himself).

And there's also five point stars and four point stars.

There are no three-point stars, he said hesitating. No, I don't think there are any three-point stars.

But there are real stars and pretend stars,

And stars people wear around their necklace like a jewel –

Those are the stars, Joshua said authoritatively, what belongs to God.

And those stars are called the stars of David....

Because that's the kind David wore when he beat up the giant.

No one had ever told Josh this last bit,

But he assumed it must be so.

He thought about more stars that he could tell Eleanor about

Even if the painted expression on her small rubber face never changed,

No matter what he said.

The sun too, his mummy told him, was a star

But he was not so sure about this,

Because the sun was not in the shape of a star –

Maybe it was a star the way movie stars were stars, and not really a star,

but just called a star...

The sun is also called a star, he said carefully.

And these snowflakes even – the same ones that drifted down inside the frame of the bathroom window – these, too, were stars.

Not the flakes that fell in great white shavings,

Like bits of eraser dust blown haphazardly from the sky

(did God make mistakes too?)

But the tiny pieces that made them up.

If they landed on your sleeve or your fingertip, you could sometimes see

The crystals, the tiny six-point flowers, little white stars,

Their loneliness

As they melted away.

Every snowflake is different, his mother told him one day a long time ago

When the grass was still green and crispy in the morning.

At preschool last year, Joshua's teacher, Lisette, had been showing them how to cut paper snowflakes

So they could tape them on the windows for Winter Solstice.

Joshua tried to make snowflakes like Lisette's

By cutting out pieces of the folded up paper with his green left-handed scissors.

But sometimes he cut a part he wasn't supposed to cut

And it made a big hole in the snowflake that he couldn't fix.

It could be quite frustrating,

But when he was done, Josh had one snowflake that didn't fall apart when he opened it.

He decided not to put it in the classroom window;

Instead, he gave it his mum.

She loved it. She taped it up on the kitchen sliding door

So everyone could see.

How beautiful, she said admiringly. And you made it just for me. Thank you!

She kissed his cheeks and said, *Just a minute.*

And ran down to the basement for the Encyclopaedias.

When she came back, she had one of those big burgundy books with the golden letters

That Josh had come to know, even though he wasn't big enough to read them himself.

She was flipping through it. *Ess En to Ess Tea, she said*

Because Snow is spelled Ess En Oh Double-You, right Joshie?

Mary sat down on the green striped kitchen loveseat and patted the cushion next to her,

as she flipped to the snow page.

She showed him a diagram of a snowflake,

And scanned the page

To tell him bits of what it said.

Each one has six points but each one is unique.

What's 'U-Neek'? Josh asked.

Unique means different. Even though each one is made in the same shape by the same

process, no snowflake is just the same as another. Every one is special. So you know that when you see a snowflake there will never be another one quite like it ever again....

She paused and looked at him, to make sure she was eliciting the proper amount of awe.

Just like people, she said quietly.

But why are they different? Joshua was confused.

How could snowflakes

All be the same and all be different?

Well, because of the wind, and the temperature of the air, and the altitude of the clouds, and all the factors that help shape a particular snowflake at the moment it crystallizes and as it falls.

Joshua looked at her thoughtfully.

She smiled, *But even with all that – how there could be so many variations of just one simple form? It's a great mystery.*

What's a mist-tree?

A mystery is something you can never know the answer to. The whole universe is a mystery.

And me too? Joshua asked. *Am I a mist-tree?*

You, my love, Mary said, brushing her hand over Joshie's soft cheek,

Are one of the greatest mysteries of all...

Am I the kind of mist-tree that's nice or the kind of mist-tree that's scary?

Joshua had heard the word before for the scary shows his dad watched on TV

When Joshua woke up from nightmares and came to find him.

Mary smiled, *You? You're a sweetheart of a mystery.... You're my sweetheart.*
Thank you, Joshua said.

Every snowflake is the same shape, Joshua told his dolly Eleanor, remembering what his mother told him.

But every snowflake is U-Neek. And that word, you know Eleanor, is what means a kind of different.

Joshua looked at his hands and imagined the snowflakes melting on them,
As they had done earlier in Joshua's front yard.

He could still see the ones that landed on his red mittens,

The ones that landed on the bulky nylon sleeves of his snow jacket

Almost as if they were right here

Drifting down from the white ceiling into the warm water of the tub,

Even sometimes on Josh's own skin –

He shivered.

Something sad brushed up against him.

He rolled over quickly onto his stomach

To push it under.

Now his front felt warm,

And his back was cold.

His daddy only filled the bath about a quarter full,

Three and a half inches and you're cut off, Mary joked,

Teasing her husband when he drew the kids' baths.

That's your hot water ration for the day.

The water never really covered all of you at once

So you had to turn yourself,

Like a chicken on a spit,

One side heating up while the other cooled down.

Some people in the world, Joe told Josh. *Lots of people, don't even have water in their houses.*

They have to carry water in containers home everyday.

Joshua didn't know anyone who carried water home everyday.

Everyone *he* knew had sinks and taps and bathtubs in their houses.

But he believed Joe

Because Joe never lied.

So we're lucky, his dad told him. *That we have warm water, and soap, and enough to eat and drink right here at home.*

Josh thought maybe they were lucky...

Or maybe other people were unlucky.

He told Lisette at school about what his dad had said and what he thought about it

As she was doing up his coat one day.

I think it's both, she said.

There were lots of things that were both, Joshua thought.

Snowflakes were the same and different.

People were lucky and unlucky.

He thought about the people who didn't have enough food or juice, or water for baths,

And thought it wasn't fair.

They should write to the Government and ask for some, he told to Eleanor,

As though she had been listening to his thoughts all along.

But maybe they didn't know how to write.

Josh didn't know how to write;

He only knew how to pretend-write.

He had to get his mum to write in all his birthday cards.

Another sad thought came to Josh then,

Maybe the poor kids didn't have mums and dads

Who could write to the Government or in their birthday cards.

Or maybe the Government never read the letters

Cuz they got so many.

But the Government's not the real big boss, Josh said to Eleanor.

God is the real big boss.

You didn't have to write letters to God –

He was supposed to know.

So why didn't God give everyone food and milk and juice and bathtubs

If he could do anything?

Josh thought that he would ask Joe sometime

Because Joe always told him the truth.

But right now Josh didn't want to think about it.

He turned over quickly onto his back.

The water sloshed over the edge and splashed onto the floor.

It was still snowing outside.

Josh thought about the snowflakes again. Seeing them made him happy.

It made him think that tomorrow he would go fast down the hill on the bogan.

Because his mother said if it lasted,

And if there was enough snow, they would go to bogganing tomorrow in the park.

Joshua imagined the whole world full of deep ice-cream snow.

He imagined filling the whole house with snow,

Even the bathtub so they could play all the time, and it would never melt.

But I guess that might be too cold after awhile, he said practically.

It was nice to have a warm bath sometimes.

At his grandmother's house

Joshua had baths filled to the brim, so that his whole body was underneath,

So that the top drain that kept the tub from spilling over

Glugged greedily the whole time.

At his Bubbie and Zaide's house, Josh could run the hand shower

For as long as he wanted,

Making rainstorms for shampoo-bottle ships,
Driving them this way and that
Across the deep sea of Bubbie's shiny porcelain tub.
It felt good to play inside the cozy blanket of a full bath,
Even if there were people who had to walk a long long way every day
Just to bring home a bucket of water.

Joshua looked up at the snowflakes again, anxiously,
Making sure they were still falling.

His daddy had told them not to get their hopes up.

Don't get your hopes up, he said, as Josh and Jimmy had stood on the chair
in the living room, marvelling at the world turning white.

It'll probably turn to rain by morning.

Mummy and Joe had let them go outside after dinner even though it was dark
and close to bedtime,

So they could play a little while it was still snowing.

It might not last, Joe had said in his warning voice,

When they came in kicking off their boots,

Rosy-cheeked and happy,

Talking excitedly about what they would do tomorrow.

*But it **might** last.* Joshua said. *You never know, Dad.*

You never know. But it might not.

But it might.

Alright, Kiddo. You want the last word? You got it.

Snowflakes don't last long, Joshua told Eleanor in his stern, knowing voice.

Only for a little while.

Just like other stars,

They were always fading away.

Melting

Burning out,

Disappearing with the night.

Are you ready to get out, his dad called from the hallway.

Joshua thought about it.

If he got out it would be Storytime

Which came just before Bedtime, but just after Teethbrushingtime.

Well... he said. I'll stay for a few more minutes.

Joe came into the bathroom holding the dark green towel.

It looked cozy.

Joe, Mary called from the bedroom. She was watching TV.

Before you get him out, wash his hair.

Joshua stood up. The water rushed down his back and sloshed noisily around his feet.

I'm ready to get out, he said, holding up his arms for his father to lift him out,
and wrap him in the green towel.

He thought maybe Joe hadn't heard,

That maybe he wouldn't hear until Joshua was all dry in his flannel pyjamas and it was
too late.

We'll just wash your hair quickly, Joe said. *And then you can get out.*

He turned on the hand shower, and tested it on the back of his hand.

Nooo! Josh screamed. He leaped into action, scrambling to the far end of the tub

Away from the treacherous spray.

Come on, Josh, his dad said, sounding tired. *Let's not make a big deal of this.*

Two minutes and you're done.

Joshua started to cry. He hated getting his hair washed.

The shampoo got in his eyes. The water ran over his face and he couldn't breathe.

He couldn't do any of it himself.

He tried to climb out, but his dad held him tight, kneeling on the floor.

It'll just take a minute, Joe said, trying to sound really calm.

He ran the water over Joshua's head, drenching himself too

As he held the little boy,

Anchored him against his body.

Josh sputtered dramatically.

Mummy! he screamed, *Mummy! Help! I can't breathe! Help!*

Joe laughed, *She's the one who **told** me to wash your hair, Josh!*

I want my Muuuummy! Josh sobbed.

She's had a long day, his dad said. *She needs to relax.*

Joe let the shower drop, and started to lather shampoo into Josh's hair.

Even though Josh always hated to wash his hair, he liked it better when his mum did it.

She used the little washcloth with the dog on it

So that soap wouldn't get in his eyes.

She told him to look up at the cherry tree

So that his head would tilt back and water wouldn't run over his face

And he could breathe.

Josh liked the washcloth with the little dog.

He liked the cherry tree that he thought he was supposed see inside the curly blue vines
of the wallpaper.

His mother's rituals protected him

Against drowning and blindness.

Joe never did these things;

With him, there was no doggy washcloth.

There was no cherry tree.

When he was done, Joe lifted Joshua's small slippery body out of the water

And plunked him onto the bathmat.

If you didn't struggle so much, Joe said, as Joshua's heartbroken sobs dissipated.

It would be easy as pie.

He rubbed the towel over Josh's head and then fluffed the little boy's face.

Josh frowned.

You never even make pie, Josh said.

His dad laughed, and said that it was just something his mother used to say.

Why? Did she make pie? Josh asked, having already forgotten he was mad,

Wanting a story.

Joe hardly ever talked about his parents. Joshua's Other Grandparents.

They were dead.

No, not really, Joe said. *I don't know why she said it. Just an expression, I guess.*

Joshua thought about this.

A 'spression' was something you said

Without knowing why.

Joshua had never met this grandma – she had died before Josh had met Joe.

She had died before Josh was even born.

He didn't know much about her,

Except that sometimes she used to say

'Easy as pie.'

Josh looked at his dad, who was busy drying him off;

He was not going to tell a story.

With the quick, sure strokes of a mechanic's hands, Joe rubbed the green towel

Over Joshua's little arms, over his back,

Over his whole three and three quarters year old body.

When he was finished, he lay the towel on the floor.

Step on, he said.

Joshua stepped on.

Joe proceeded to dry his feet, first the foot as a whole,

Then one toe at a time.

You should always dry between your toes, Joe told him.

He told him this every time.

Will it still be snowing tomorrow? Joshua asked, hoping for a better prediction,

An updated forecast.

We'll see... Joe said.

He held out Joshua's pyjamas bottoms.

They were the baseball ones.

Step in, he said.

Josh put his hands on his dad's shoulders and stepped in

One foot at a time.

In the North Coal, Joshua said. *It snows everyday.*

Mm-Hm, his dad said, pulling up Joshua's pyjama bottoms,

Snapping them gently against his tummy.

Joe reached for the pyjama jacket and held it out,

Letting Joshua thread one arm through at a time.

Josh turned around so that they could both work on the buttons.

Josh worked on the top ones and Joe worked on the bottom ones.

I wish I could go to the North Coal. Have you ever been to the North Coal, Dad?

Nope.

One day I went to the North Coal, and I would fly there in a beautiful air balloon with all the colours on it. And bring back snowballs that I could throw at someone as a joke. And they wouldn't even know where it came from becuz there wasn't any snow! That would be a clever trick, wouldn't it? Josh exclaimed.

Joe looked at Josh.

The little boy's eyes were lit up like birthday candles.

He smiled.

Joshua smiled back.

Have you ever ridden in an air balloon, Dad?

Can't say that I have...

I would go so high, Josh told him, gesturing with his hand,

A crescent moon over his head, that I could touch the stars.

Hmm. That might get a bit hot....

No, Josh shook his head. I'm going to bring one back for you, so you can see.

A magic star! And it would be the most beautiful thing you ever seen!

That's okay. I don't need any magic stars, Joe said.

A hug from my boy will do just fine.

Josh pressed his face against Joe's hard shoulder

And turned his cheek so his dad could kiss him.

V. Schooldays

Now that Joshua was four, he went to school three days a week

MondayWhensdayFriday

From nine o'clock to twelve o'clock.

School days, school days, Dear old golden rule days

His mother sang as she pulled hard at the laces of his Little Rascals blue sneakers.

Where are the red ones? he asked.

I don't know. Where are the red ones?

Maybe they're in the laundry room, Joshua offered.

May-be. Mary looked up at him from the laces, *Now, you see? You see how I've got the two loops: the bunny ears – then 'round the tree, through the rabbit hole, pull tight, and there you go! A perfect bow.*

Joshua watched.

Sometimes, in the playground, when his mother's Perfect Bows

Snaked their way free,

He tried to repeat the magical process. But all he could do was make knots

Locked up tight and hard to undo.

He'd come home and have to push his shoes off without untying them

The way his dad hated.

That wrecks them! Joe would say too loud,

Until you get a job and can buy your own shoes, you sit down and untie the laces.

But not his mum.

She never got mad.

She just smiled and sliced cool apple.

A snack to tide you over, she'd say, sorting through the fridge for lunch inspiration.

A snack to tied you over, Josh thought.

Everyday she tied them just the same

And said, *See the loops? Now, 'round the tree, through the hole,*

pull tight. There you go!

You'll get it, she said, as he watched her fingers shyly.

Grabbing his Spiderman backpack

And his hot little hand in her cool long one,

She pulled him out onto the crisp stickiness of the blossom petal sidewalk.

Step on a crack, she said, *Break your mother's back.*

He hopped over the cracks almost all the way to school.

When he missed she flailed her arms and buckled her knees

As if her spine had just been broken.

Joshua thought this was very funny.

My mum is very funny, he told his friend Shanny at school.

Not as funny as that Rain-Bow! Shanny replied pointing her sparkle-pink fingernail

at the dripping paint on his easel. *Why's it all red!?*

Joshua looked at his rainbow and felt strange.

When he was asleep, rainbows were kinda like that

There was no gold at the bottom

The red was the gold.

Sometimes the dreams scared him.

Your face is red too! Shanny shrieked and then began to sing in the mean way,

Josh-u-wa's 'm-barrassed, Josh-u-wa's 'm-barrassed...

There's two kinds of funny, Josh thought.

The kind that's yellow and the kind that's red.

Mummy is the yellow kind – that's the happy one.

I am the red kind.

VI. Clothespins

Joshua pressed his hands against his mum's new tummy.

Feel anything? Mary asked, reaching up to unhook the ice cream bucket of clothespins

Hanging beside the door on the back porch.

Nope. Josh said, suddenly more interested in the clothespin bucket

Than the imaginary baby.

His mummy hid a key

Inside.

Joshua liked to plunge his hand into the bucket

And see if he could find it.

Careful you don't lose that, Mary would say in her warning voice.

She looked at him now and winked.

It was a sunny morning,

And they had just brought up the laundry from the washing machine.

Well, somebody's in there, she said. Else mum's eating way too much cheese...

Joshua laughed, thinking of a big round of brie

Wrapped up in a baby blanket

He would give it bottles of milk

And take it to school for Show and Tell.

But he would tell her things,

This baby,

Show her things.

She would be nicer than Jimmy.

She would be beautiful.

Mary unfolded the step stool

And patted it for Josh to climb up.

Folding the corner of Jimmy's yellow t-shirt over the line,

Mary pointed at the bucket balanced on the porch railing, *Ready?*

Joshua nodded, choosing the first in the long line of wooden clothespins that would soon punctuate the backyard sky.

Standing on tiptoes, he clipped it on.

Mary rolled the line away a bit, holding the other corner.

He got a second one, and clipped it on.

Mary looked at Josh;

They smiled at each other.

Nice, she said. What's next?

Joshua climbed down to rifle through the basket till he found one of his own shirts.

The Batman one.

This one, Josh said giving it to his mother, and climbing back up the step stool.

They did another and another

Until the basket was almost empty

And there was a long line of clothes and sheets waving like flags over the backyard

Casting shadows on the bright morning grass.

So what do you think? she asked. Do you think it's a boy or girl?

A girl. Josh said.

You think so?

Yes. I think so.

A breeze blew between them.

Jimmy came crashing through the door

Hi, he said. And began to search the box of his dad's empty beer bottles for bottle caps.

What about you, Mr. McGoo? Do you think the baby will be a boy or a girl?

A boy, Jimmy said emphatically.

Jimmy always said the Other Thing

From Joshua.

Mr. Contrary, Joe called him.

Well Hello Mr Contrary. How are you today? Joe would say.

And laugh as Jimmy punched him in the arm.

Let's wrestle, Jimmy would say,

Throwing himself at his dad.

But the baby, Joshua thought,

Turning his mind away from the sad cloud that had blown over him,

The baby would be beautiful.

VII. Hannah

Hannah was born on the Fourth of July

Much to Mary's chagrin.

She was very little then.

At first, she reminded Joshua of a tiny wrinkled leaf.

Later, she had fat cheeks

That Joshua liked to kiss.

And after awhile,

Green eyes.

The night she was born, Auntie Elly came to babysit.

She brought mini pizzas, doughnut holes, and a bag of baby carrots.

Everything baby tonight, she said.

She brought three new pop-up books,

And a little plastic parachute man for each of the boys.

She did not bring Joshua's cousins, Nava and Oren.

Nava was four, a year younger than Josh, and Oren was only two and a half.

Where are they? asked Jimmy, disappointed.

I left them at home with their dad tonight, but don't worry... they'll be around.

Josh and Jimmy spent the evening throwing the parachute men off the back porch.

Auntie Elly was the judge, giving points for each skydive.

The Skydiving Olympics, she called it,

Making sure that everything came out even

In the end.

She gave them each a prize of jellybeans.

Joshua liked Auntie Elly,

She had freckles on her face and a crinkly smile,

And sometimes she told them funny stories

About their mum and her when they were little.

Late that night, Auntie Elly came in and woke them up.

She told Josh and Jimmy

That they had a baby sister.

In the top bunk, Joshua smiled, and felt his eyes close again.
Underneath the starry blue
Of the skylight
(sometimes he thought he could see right through his eyelids).
He felt her emerge inside him
In a space he hadn't known was there until she came.
Hannah, he whispered.
She opened in his mind like a leaf in water.
And he fell asleep wondering...
She was here now.
But maybe she would remember
Before

The next day after work,
Joe took Josh and Jimmy to the hospital
To see Hannah.

There was a big glass window,
Like the window of a shop,
That looked into the nursery at all the babies.
Joe lifted the boys up one at a time
So they could see.

Which one? Joshua asked.

He thought he would know, but he didn't.

All the babies were wearing pink and blue hats.

That one. Joe pointed, bringing his face close to Joshua's,

Trying to see what he saw.

That one? Josh asked, touching his finger to the glass.

No, behind her. You see the second one in this row. That's your sister.

Oh. Joshua said.

She looked like a stranger.

Mary was in the hospital for five days.

She said it was like a vacation,

Everything done for you.

The boys came and visited on Saturday;

They ate chicken sandwiches on the terrace.

She asked them what they thought of their new sister.

Jimmy said Hannah had a lot of hair for a baby.

Yeah, she does, doesn't she? Maybe she'll be a Pantene girl, Mary said,

Snatching another fry from their Dad's plate.

He laughed, *Thought you didn't want fries?*

I don't. Just a few. And what about you, Joshie?

What do you think of your new baby sister?

Good, Joshua nodded, taking a bite of his sandwich.

But he did not feel different.

He did not feel anything.

Bubbie and Zaide came in the evenings.

Joe would go get them coffee

And then leave the room.

The first night, Joshua looked up from where he sat in the hallway

Running a toy truck over the shiny white floor,

To see his dad

Hanging around by the fire extinguisher.

How come you don't go in? Joshua asked.

Oh, you know, I thought maybe they'd want some time alone with their girl.

Josh looked at him.

Besides, his dad said. I felt like taking a walk.

Joshua picked up his truck and took his dad's hand

Where's your mum and dad? he asked.

Remember I told you –

Are they still dead?

Joe laughed, fumbling for words, *Well, it's not really... I mean, when people die...*

Nobody comes back from the dead, Josh.

Where do they go?

I don't know. Nobody knows. It's kind of a surprise.

In the dirt?

Joe hesitated and then said, *Yeah.*

Nobody comes back from the dead, Josh thought.

Not ever.

When he looked up, he saw that Joe was sad.

Can I come with you? Josh asked.

Where?

On your walk.

I wasn't gonna go without you, Kid.

You were waiting for me?

Yep. I was waiting for you.

When Josh and his dad came back, Bubbie and Zaide were putting on their coats.

Bubbie kissed Joshua

And Zaide shook Joe's hand.

The baby is beautiful, Bubbie said. Just beautiful.

She looks just like Mary, Zaide said.

Joe smiled. Yes, he nodded.

She does.

After they left, nobody said anything.

Jimmy was watching cartoons on TV.

The baby was sleeping in her crib.

Joe sat down on the edge of Mary's bed, and then got up again.

We should probably be heading off too. Let Mummy get some rest. Right, boys?

Mary smiled, brushing Jimmy's hair back from his forehead.

Boys? Joe said, Did you hear me?

He scooped up Jimmy

And then Josh –

One in each arm.

Blow me a kiss, Mary said.

Joshua blew her a kiss.

She caught it and then flicked off the TV.

Hey! I was watching that! Jimmy said, snapping out of his cartoon daze.

Well, there you are! Joe said. *We were wondering where you'd gone off to.*

Jimmy frowned and shot out the flat of his hand

And then stopped.

His mother always said Jimmy woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

What does that mean? Josh had wanted to know.

Means he's a grumpy guy when he first wakes up.

Joe raised his eyebrows at his wife now, and she stifled a grin.

See ya, Joe said softly. They looked at each other for a minute

Before Jimmy hit his dad's chest,

Let's go!

Alright. We're going, Joe said.

My dad will never die, Josh thought

Resting his heavy head on Joe's shoulder.

He's too strong.

VIII. E.T.'s Flowers

In the first grade, Joshua got his first real Report Card.

His mum and dad were very proud.

Even math was 'Very Good.'

They promised him a Special Treat on Saturday –

A sleepover and a movie.

Joe rented some movies and a VCR from the video store down the street.

And Mummy and Joe pushed both couches to face the TV.

The neighbourhood kids came to watch.

They watched *E.T.*, *Labyrinth*, and *Goonies*.

They were pulled into the screen, every gesture of story.

Buttery fingers sifted through popcorn kernels, searching

For the last of the last.

Joshua watched *E.T.* the best. His chest pounded

At E.T.'s glowing heart.

He ached, with Elliott, to E.T.'s rasping breath and pallor,
To the suchness of his glowing finger
That mended all wounds (except his own).
To the warmth of his eyes that brought flowers
Back to life.

Chrysanthemums, Mary said, because she wanted them to know the Names of Things.

Joe laughed, *That's important.*

Yes. It is. There was an edge in her voice.

'*Ornithology*' is the *Study of Birds*, Joshua recited

To show her he hadn't forgotten

That morning's Word.

Mary smiled,

Triumphant.

Later on, beneath the yellow glow of the nightlight, Joshua studied his own hands

Bigger than Jimmy's but smaller than Joe's,

Six whole years and his finger never glowed –

Not once.

Joshua began to wonder about Touch.

Sometimes Touching and Fixing were the same thing.

In fact, almost every time someone fixed something

They also touched it.

But E.T. just *looked* at the flowers. Sometimes not even that.

There are ways of touching without hands, Josh thought,

But hands still count.

Saturday night, curled up in his Superman sleeping bag on the living room floor,

Joshua couldn't sleep.

SundayMondayTuesday

On the top bunk, with Jimmy beneath him

Murmuring little bits of dreams,

Josh couldn't sleep.

WednesdayThursdayFriday

Josh lay inside the awake of the dark, struggling

Against the vanity of the quilt, the cruelty of the pillow.

The extreme discomfort

Of things soft and forgetful

When they failed.

Being awake is Mean and Sharp, Josh thought,

Adding this to his collection.

Behind his eyes

The red heart

Radiated

(there was something unspeakable)

Josh and Jimmy watched *E.T.* three more times
Before their dad had to take it back to the movie store.
The flowers died and came alive again and again.
And Elliott *knew* E.T. had come back,
Come back from the dead
Again and again.
Because his eyes opened wide and his heart glowed fluorescent;
The two were innately tied,
Tighter than a double-knotted shoelace.
Joshua felt E.T.'s awful homesickness,
The tight moon-tether pulling hard
Against his will.

For days afterward
Joshua walked around alone to everything,
Trying to understand.
It was as though there was an invisible elastic band
Stretched taut
Rooted deep inside his gut
Reaching out into space, tied to something
Hard and True.

He stepped between the sidewalk's cracks on the way home from school,
And felt its sickly strain
(waiting for the snap and lash – the broken slack or the quick tear from sidewalk to sky).
Joshua sat inside his chip board fort,
Stirring leaf and petal soup in a turquoise bucket,
And tried to think the Thing Unspeakable.
(but thinking was not the way – he was a little scared about this).
Because he couldn't collect
This one, this –
Gravity started to hurt.

Josh decided to bring it up at dinner,
His parents would know. If only he could explain.
They always knew things.
But he felt shy, not sure how to begin, so he said,
You remember the flowers in E.T.?
Jimmy looked up from mucking butter into the last of his baked potato, the brown skin,
then crunched down.
Joe hardly shifted his gaze from the newspaper.
But Josh's mother nodded, *Chrysanthemums*.
Joshua looked at his milk in a green plastic cup
And understood.
They had Names for the Names of Things.

They had words for the other words.

That was all.

Joshua looked at Joe and saw that the red thread that wrote the name on his pocket was beginning to unravel.

He saw the dust in the creases around Joe's eyes

And the cracking fissures of his strong, rough hands;

Hands that fixed cars

But not flowers.

Hands that fixed toilets and fences and dripping faucets

But not cuts and hearts and lostness.

Not even Chrysanthemums.

That night he kissed his dad goodnight, hoping Joe wouldn't see the change

In Josh's eyes, his hug, his anything –

But it didn't matter,

In bed, Josh felt hot and terrible. He'd betrayed his dad

For something invisible, unspeakable –

For nothing.

He cried until his pillow turned to rain cloud

And soaked him

Into sleep.

The next morning, Joe noticed Joshua's puffy eyes in the bathroom mirror
As he finished up his morning shave.
With his left hand,
Joe reached down and ruffled the little boy's hair,
You worry too much, Joe said, teasing softly. *But I worry just enough.*

IX. Klasher

When Joshua was seven years old
Klasher Klashinsky came to live in the neighbourhood.
Klasher was not, of course, his Real Name –
But it was the name that all the kids at school called him.
It was the name that Josh called him too.
In later years, there would be some debate as to who had first come up with the name.
It was Klasher's belief that he himself had chosen it.
Because, at the time, he had decided to become a pro-wrestler,
And knew he would need a tougher name
Than (Pansy-Ass) Peter.
It was Joshua's contention that *he* had made it up
Before he and Klasher were even friends.
That, he claimed, was what was
So remarkable about the whole thing.

It was during a schoolyard game of Knights and Dragons,
Josh remembered,
The Game itself re-dubbed
From its original title of Cops and Robbers,
Which earlier that year had been banned for getting way out of hand,
Sending several kids to the nurse's office with considerable scrapes and bruises.
There was no one to blame, no one's parent's to call in and scold
For raising a particularly unmanageable child.
It was a joint effort, this fall from grace,
A collective crime.

So the Game – in which Klasher would be knighted or rather de-knighted –
was itself an A.K.A.

Cops and Robbers A.K.A. Knights and Dragons A.K.A. Cowboys and Indians
A.K.A. Ghosts and Ghostbusters.

The primary function of these aliases

– as there were *many* reasons, Josh knew, to adopt secret identities –
was that, if you were unfortunate enough to get hauled in by the Lunch Lady
for breaking the Rules, you could plead innocence.

No, no – we weren't playing Cops and Robbers, Mr. Zuckerman,

(Almighty God of the playground – Principal of the Whole Wide School)

That's Banned(!) (shocked and humbled pause of reverence)

We were playing (enter alias never-to-be-used-again nemeses here)

_____ *and* _____.

Which would itself be promptly outlawed.

But in Word only,

Not in Spirit.

This was the secret of the initiated and the inconsequential;

Cops and Robbers/Knights and Dragons/Vaders and Skywalkers/

Cowboys and Indians/Wolves and Lambs,

They were all One.

The children began to understand the way words

Could be used to alter truth,

To change the world.

They started to see

How words gave meaning

And took it away

In equal measure.

The Game (whatever it was called) was always the same;

Two teams on a big gravel field.

At the far end of either side was a prison.

If you were on your Own Side,

You were Home-Free.

If you were on the Other Side,

You were Fair Game.

It was the Other Team's job to do whatever they could to lure you, capture you,
and drag you back to their Dungeon.

Once captured, you were at the mercy of your teammates;

They could run across and try to save you,

Or leave you for dead.

All they had to do was touch your outstretched hand

And iron bars would dissolve into air.

But no one could free another player, without risking his own freedom first,

Often sacrificing himself

To save you.

Often sacrificing himself

For nothing.

It was during a particularly vicious one of these games

That Joshua gave Klasher his name.

Josh was a Knight (a Good-Guy) – he had been counted off as such from the beginning
when the bell rang –

The result of a random division of Ones and Twos

– Ones were Knights; Twos were Dragons –

Indistinguishable in all

But name.

Peter Klashinsky was a One

That wanted to be a Two;

He generally devised a place in the line

Where he was sure to be appointed Bad Guy,

But this time, he had been late finishing his multiplication practice sheets,

And had to take whatever was left over.

At heart, Joshua was more strategist than soldier;

He had a good eye for the other team's blind spots, their strengths and weaknesses,

But he was not brave.

What was more, he liked to make the game real

By giving everyone names and characters.

Klasher (it was true) was the most obvious choice for Peter Klashinsky,

The Turncoat, the Traitor,

The Knight turned Fire-breathing, Rocket-Shooting, Saber-Toothed Dragon,

The most Evil Dragon

In the third grade.

By the end of the Game when chaos ensued,

And everyone was screaming at each other

To get Eagle-Eye and Klasher – the only two Dragons left standing –

Tyler Storen and Peter Klashinsky respectively,

Josh felt a twinge of pride, marvelling

That he, a mere first-grader, had imagined the whole thing
Into being.

The name stuck.

And Joshua knew that *he* had said it first.

That, in some sense,

Klasher wouldn't have been Klasher

Without Josh.

Before Klasher came to live on the street,

He was no friend of Joshua's.

Two grades ahead and a bit of a bully, Klasher went around with jerks

Like Tyler Storen and Andrew Dunn,

Who thought kicking stuff over, pushing people down, and making fun of them
was their God-given right.

When Klasher moved into the little green house across the street,

Josh was scared.

It seemed that the friendly known world – the world of front steps and grassy yards,

Of lane shortcuts and hide-and-seek bushes, of climbing trees

Divided by the concrete stream of the road

That ran between crumbling curbs

Held together by black tar veins

That went soft under your toes in summertime –

That all that had transformed

Into something sinister:

No longer a safe place, but a cold and shadowy place

Where things lurked behind hedges, mailboxes, and trees,

Waiting

To catch you out.

Coming home from school for those first months afterward,

Josh would walk down the sidewalk

Certain he could hear footsteps speeding up behind him.

He'd quicken his pace, avoiding the cracks.

And when he turned to look

There was always a hint

– a rustling of bushes, a swaying of forget-me-nots, a creepy not-so-still stillness –

That made Josh's breath catch in his throat.

Someone was following him!

Then, against any will of his own, his body would shoot off,

A lit firecracker,

Collapsing only at the slam of the front door behind him.

Joshua never knew he could run so fast,
As if he were flying, his feet never quite making contact with the ground.
Unearthly powers enhanced
By Fear;
That Thunderous Spark,
That Great Igniter.

On the day the new neighbours arrived,
Mary watched out the living room window as Klasher's mother and father,
aunts and uncles, and older sisters and brothers carried boxes and furniture
from a big U-Haul truck
Into the little green house, the peeling green house,
Its yellow past peeking out from an undercoat.
Mary turned to the boys, her boys, and said, *Maybe they need a hand.*
She was always wanting to give people hands.

Jimmy sighed, and Josh looked at the floor.
He knew that when she realized that he and Klasher went to the same school,
She would insist that he go and talk to him.
She was always wanting to talk to people,
Which meant *they* always had to talk to people.
Sometimes Josh wished that she was more like his dad,

Who kept to himself,
And believed in leaving well enough alone.
If everything was going fine with the neighbours, Joe figured,
Why risk it by bringing friendship into the mix?
But Mary couldn't help it; she was naturally friendly.
Which meant that the kids had to be friendly, naturally.
Only Joe had amnesty.

Mary pulled Joshua and Jimmy, one in each hand, across the street
Like a pair of reluctant balloons.
Hello, she chimed happily, addressing herself to no one in particular,
To everyone in general,
As she bound towards the people on the opposite boulevard.
We've come to see if you need a hand.
They did not need a hand.
They had lots of hands.

The men struggling out the heavy furniture smiled at Mary,
The way they probably smiled at all pretty young women,
Whether they were offering help or not.
I think we're okay, one said. *But you could ask Alice over there if she needs any help.*
He gestured to a tired looking woman in her mid-forties,
Drooping on the lawn –

A fading tulip,

Long since trampled by a pack of children.

Mary prepared her face with a bright smile and approached.

Are you Alice? she asked.

The woman looked at her suspiciously.

I'm Mary. I live just over there, in the blue house. This is Joshua. And this is James.

We were just wondering if you needed any help.

Alice allowed a small smile to emerge on her lips.

She averted her eyes and shook her head, *I don't think so. But it's nice of you to offer...*

Are you sure? I know what a headache moving can be, even without the pesky

neighbours bugging you. But we really would love to help, Mary said,

a laugh in her voice.

She said 'No,' Joshua thought.

Why wouldn't she ever listen?

But Alice smiled, meeting the younger woman's eyes this time.

She looked maybe twenty-five, this girl, but she seemed so self-possessed.

A crushing wistfulness came into Alice's chest.

I could use a hand unpacking a few things from the kitchen boxes,

Just some pots and plates to get through dinner. If that's not too much to ask...

I could make you some tea, as soon as I find the kettle.

Mary laughed, *That would be beautiful. I'd love some tea. And I just happen to be*

an expert cupboard organizer.

Joshua felt his mother push him towards Alice's younger children

As she followed her into the house.

They were taking turns climbing a tree, swinging from a branch, and jumping down.

It was Klasher and two other kids,

One older and one younger.

One boy and one girl.

The boy was competing with Klasher's jumps, while the girl just watched.

Go play, his mother said, giving him a push. *They don't know anyone around here.*

They know each other, Josh thought.

He made his way towards them,

Pausing every so often to look for some sign,

An opening into their world beneath the pear tree.

Nothing was offered.

Jimmy had left him,

Gone off to harass one of the teenage boys with rapid fire questions.

Klasher had a stick that he was smashing into a knot on the trunk of the tree,

Chipping away at it.

Hi, Joshua said shyly.

Klasher frowned, *What are you doing here?*

I live across the street, Joshua told him, not sure he should be providing Klasher

with such pertinent information.

My mum is talking to your mum.

Cool, Klasher said sarcastically.

Josh didn't say anything.

Klasher's older brother, who must have been around eleven, jumped from the tree and disappeared behind the house.

The younger girl, who was around Josh's age stood nearby.

She did not go to their school.

Josh smiled at her.

She did not smile back.

Klasher knocked her shoulder lightly,

As if she were an appliance that wasn't working quite right,

A toaster refusing to pop.

Izzie say hi, he said.

Hi, Izzie said.

Hi, Joshua said.

Klasher looked at him for a second out of the corner of his eye,

Then went back smashing the stick against the tree.

Pieces of bark were sparking in the air.

Izzie stood watching.

So what do you want? Klasher said after a minute.

Nothing, Josh said. *I just thought I'd come and say 'hi.'*

Hi, Klasher said flatly.

Josh shifted his weight.

Klasher raised his eyebrows and sighed. *You can go now*, he said.

You can go now, Izzie said.

Josh looked from one to the other,

And felt the blood rush to his cheeks.

He took a step back.

Bye, he said.

And went.

X. The Old and The New

At the time, there were lots of houses in Josh's neighbourhood getting torn down.

Big new ones were built over the graves of the old,

Spilling over to the edges of the small lots, fat concrete giants.

Joshua's next-door neighbour, Mrs. Rafferty had died recently.

You know what that means, Joe said. *Another pink monstrosity.*

The poor woman died, and you're worried about development? Mary said.

She could not understand why Joe cared

About things over people.

Or why he was certain that the Old out-valued the New.

She had no problem with new houses and new neighbours.

And while it was sad to lose the old ones,

It made life a bit more interesting.

Mrs. Rafferty had lived next-door for as long as they had lived there,
Since she and Joe had moved into the little blue house on Chesnut street –
(the first and only house they would ever own).

She remembered the brimming feeling of excitement at the prospect:

A house of their own.

A life of their own.

Mary remembered the feeling of pride as she showed Mrs. Rafferty around.

She could almost see herself as the older woman saw her,

A respectable, married woman.

Part of a happy young couple with a beautiful little boy, and a new baby on the way.

James. *Their* baby. Hers and Joe's.

And, as far as anyone on Chesnut street knew,

Josh was too.

Mrs. Rafferty brought over a batch of banana muffins,

And followed Mary around the house, as the girl provided a quick, giddy commentary
on each new room.

She showed the older lady the nursery.

*Another room which I had no hand in creating, she laughed. Thank God paint fumes
and moving heavy furniture are bad for growing babies. I give orders and Joe does
all the work.*

Mrs. Rafferty had smiled then, a far away look in her eyes.

Her husband had died long ago,

And her only son lived half a mile away and rarely visited.

She loved the children.

And they loved to pound on her door whenever they felt in need of a snack.

She was always happy to invite Joshua, Jimmy, and Hannah in for Graham crackers
or chocolate-dipped Digestive cookies,

Dainty rose-trimmed tea-cups of milk with a splash of orange pekoe tea.

Is it tea time already? she'd say to the little vagabonds on her doorstep,

Their torn jeans, their grubby hands dark from hours of play.

She would usher them into her dining room, with its hundred year old chandelier,

Its dark mahogany table, its dainty doilies, its shining silver tea tray –

Objects left behind from another era.

On Sundays, she made them tiny cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off,

Raspberry scones, and fresh lemonade.

You shouldn't do all that for these little goons, Mary would scold kindly.

Can you think of anyone more deserving? Mrs. Rafferty would ask, vague traces of an
English accent still discernible in her silvery voice.

Yes! I can!

She was so sweet, Mary reflected. *Poor lady*

Living alone in that old stone house.

It had a small spire on one side
That made it look enchanted, something out of a fairytale.
She had a wonderful climbing tree in her front yard
With orange berries that the kids liked to pelt at each other
In games that mimicked guerrilla warfare.

But unbeknownst to Mary,
It was not the tree or the spire that Josh loved best about Mrs. Rafferty's house.
What Josh loved best was the plain, little garage around back.
It had been many years since anyone used it,
And it had a low, nearly flat roof
That Joshua could climb on top of.
Jimmy was still too small to get up without help.
Josh liked to go up there, and watch the day unravel
Like a soft ball of wool.
He liked to go up there
And be alone.

One Saturday, Josh was sitting on the roof
Watching over the lane,
When Klasher came by on his bike.
Klasher's own lane was all gravel

– no good for bike riding –

But Joshua's lane was paved with smooth blacktop.

Josh watched Klasher zip down the hill towards him.

He felt a thrill shoot up his spine,

Escaping from the crown of his head like a smoke ring.

He felt powerful,

Like he imagined spies must feel – unseen, watching.

People rarely noticed Josh

Sitting on the roof.

They had their own lives to live

At ground level.

But just as Klasher coasted past the garage

He looked up.

His brakes squeaked.

Josh's heart knocked on the inside of his chest to get out.

Klasher hovered over his bike flat footed,

Squinting up at Josh.

What are you doing up there? he wanted to know. *Spying?*

No, said Josh quickly,

Thinking of the fastest way over the fence and into his house.

But he didn't move. Klasher was still watching him.

So how come you're up there?

I just like it.

Klasher paused for a moment, considering this, and then said in a conversational voice,

Is it easy to climb up there?

Yes, Josh replied.

Blood pounded in his ears. *He's going to throw me off!* he thought.

How? Klasher inquired.

Without thinking, Josh pointed at the old dogwood near the back of the garage.

Klasher looked over at the tree. He looked back at Josh.

Can I come up?

Josh had never heard Klasher ask permission for anything;

It was a strange moment.

Josh hesitated, and then without knowing what else to do, nodded.

Klasher climbed onto the roof, and walked along the highest edge,

Looking out at everything.

Then he came over to the place where Josh was standing.

Now it's going to happen, Josh thought. *Now he's going to kill me.*

In his mind, he saw himself spread eagle on the pavement beneath,

His head split open,

Blood trickling down the hill in a delicate stream of red.

This is a good lookout, Klasher said.

Josh nodded.

You can see across into those guys's backyards, and all the way down the lane.

Josh nodded.

The foundations of the Things He Knew About the World

Began to crack along their fault lines;

Maybe Klasher wasn't going to kill him after all.

Maybe he was just a normal person.

Don't you talk? Klasher said.

Joshua smiled with sudden, unexpected confidence. *When I have something to say.*

Klasher looked at Josh, new esteem forming in his eyes. *D'you ever pick those dogwood conkers and huck 'em at people from up here?*

Josh grinned. *Just my brother,* he said.

You could majorly ambush someone from up here.

Yeah, but they could come up after you easy.

Yeah, I guess.

A silence fell over them once more. Klasher kicked at the edge of the roofing roll where it had come loose.

My sister's not crazy or anything, Klasher said to the roofing roll. *She's autistic.*

Oh. Josh nodded sagely, as though he knew what Klasher was talking about.

Klasher looked at him, *Maybe this can be our secret hideout. That only you and me know about.*

Josh looked at him. It seemed he meant it.

He wanted to be friends.

At least here, at the secret hideout in Joshua's back lane on Mrs. Rafferty's garage roof,
He wanted to be friends.

Joshua smiled a slow smile.

Okay.

And that was the beginning

Of Klasher and Josh –

Of their secret and not-so-secret alliance.

At school, they didn't know each other.

Usually, Klasher would avoid being in Joshua's vicinity out of respect,

But once in awhile he would have to pass by at close range and ignore him,

His eyes averted casually, his voice loud and theatrical,

In the midst of the ongoing performance

For his fourth grade friends.

It wasn't just the two years that separated them

(though that was certainly part of it)

But at heart, Josh knew, that even if he were older,

Klasher would not have talked to him

In front of just anyone.

Joshua was a quiet, gentle boy with an overwhelming imagination.

Someone who liked to draw and write stories

And think by himself.

Someone who could destroy Klasher's tough guy reputation in a split second,

Shatter it all – his Ultimate Cool.

But after school, on weekends, they were best friends.

Walking home on separate sides of the street –

Klasher, with his noisy friends splitting off, one at a time, in different directions

Until only he remained –

Klasher and his little shadow.

Even after the last of his school friends had gone, Klasher wouldn't risk it

Until he arrived home

(at that point, if anyone came by, he could say Josh was there for his sister).

Klasher would walk down Mrs. Rafferty's garden path

To the garage and climb up to the top

Where he knew he'd find Josh.

Then they would decide what they were going to do that day –

Either continue a game they'd been playing the day before,

Or decide on a new plan-of-action.

Most days, when Izzie's school bus dropped her off,

She would come and find them too.

And then the three of them would head off together.

One of their favourite things to do was explore construction sites.
They would scramble into basement foundations, and up through holes
In plywood floors to the roof.
Bare beams, open walls, and empty windows gave the structures a basic beauty.
The bones of a house.
Nothing was finished. It was all in the midst of becoming.
Imagined with two-by-fours and iron nails and secret blueprints
(secret, at least, to its young trespassers).
The whole structure an accidental jungle gym.

Everyday it changed, developed, came closer to what it would be,
To what it was meant to be:
A house
That no one living in the neighbourhood now
Could ever afford to live in.

And as walls emerged where there were none –
Concrete, roofing tiles, doors, and double-paned glass –
Shutting them out,
Klasher, Josh, and Isobel would know
That it had been their house first.

XI. Rainy Days

On rainy days they had to find other things to do.

They constructed Lego cities and elaborate jumps for matchbox cars,

Played smurfs, He-Man, WWF Wrestlers, and Rock Band

To Beach Boys, Beatles, and Stones records,

With pillow guitars and pencil drumsticks,

Someone always jumping off the couch

Into a crowd of adoring stuffed animal fans.

They had games that they played inside and outside.

One in which they had escaped from an orphanage

And went on dangerous adventures through arctics and tropics,

All over the world – pursued and in pursuit –

In their quest to escape evil Miss Hannigan-esque orphanage administrators

And find a long lost benevolent uncle – their own version of Daddy Warbucks –

Who, if he could be found,

Would undoubtedly take them in.

They had other games that could only be played when it rained.

Sometimes they put on their raincoats and rubber boots,

And got as many neighbourhood kids as possible to play a game Josh had invented

called Splash Tag,

In which you were safe if you were standing in a puddle,

But in danger if you were in transition.

If It jumped in a puddle that you were standing near, and splashed you

You were automatically It.

But if you were tagged instead of splashed,

Then you had to race It back to the home puddle in front of Mrs Rafferty's old house.

Whoever got there first was safe.

No one wanted to be It

The chosen, contagious, inhuman One

The outcast

Whose mere touch contaminated.

One day, they were playing another only-when-it-rains game

That Klasher had invented, called Yacht Club.

During a good downpour, the gutters in Joshua's lane would overflow

And stream down towards the busy street at the bottom of the hill.

When this happened they could race little sticks and wood-chips

Down a perilous, miniature river.

Izzie and Klasher waited in front of Mrs. Rafferty's garage

For Josh and Jimmy to emerge from their backdoor.

Jimmy bound down the back steps towards them, and climbed over the fence.

Josh followed behind with Hannah in tow.

Klasher looked at the little girl disdainfully, *Does she **have** to come?*

My mum's gone shopping, Josh said. She won't bother us.

Klasher hated having Hannah around, because she was too little to keep up,

And because Josh went into babysitting mode when she was around,

Making sure not to outrun her, let her get hurt, or let her cry when she lost a game.

*It's not her, Klasher said. It's **you**. You're lame when she's around.*

Josh didn't respond.

Be quiet! Hannah said, stomping her ladybug gumboots on the pavement.

Just stay out of the way.

*I **never** get in the way.*

Leave her alone, Klash, Josh said. Klasher rolled his eyes and complied.

Jimmy's wood-chip crossed the finish line first.

Oh! Look at that – The Winner!!! Jimmy yelled gleefully.

Just call me Master. Lord of the Races.

Sometimes Josh wondered if Jimmy's sheer love of winning was enough

To actually make him win.

Maybe that's how things work, Josh thought.

Maybe if you want something enough

*It **has** to come true.*

They had four more races before Hannah had had enough.

She sat on an upside-down milk crate,

Her yellow raincoat and ladybug galoshes covered in shining beads of water,
Tears dripping down her cheeks.

D'you wanna play something else? Josh coaxed.

Nooo... I wanna go hooome.

*We could go around front and play Splash Tag. And then you could see Mummy
when she gets back.*

Nooo... I don't wanna play Splash Tag. I'm always It, she sobbed.

How about I'll be It with you when you get tagged? We'll be a team.

The idea caught Hannah's attention, *There's teams in Splash Tag?*

No, Klasher said.

Josh glared at him.

Not usually, but we could be a team...

Hannah looked at him, and took a deep breath, shuddering.

Okay, she said in a small voice.

Josh held out his hand to her and she took it.

They walked around to the front street.

We don't have enough people for Splash Tag, Klasher said.

Maybe your brother will play. Josh said.

Klasher's thirteen year old brother, Derek, generally considered himself too cool to
play with them, but would bend the rules if he was bored enough.

He won't, Klasher said.

Maybe he will.

Trust me, he said. Derek's not going to play Splash Tag.

Josh shrugged. *We've got five.*

Four. Since you're a 'team.'

Josh glanced at Klasher.

It's the only way she'll play, Josh said quietly.

So who needs her? Klasher said loudly.

Hannah glowered at him.

If I take her home, all you'd have is three, Josh said. Do you want me to take her home?

Whatever. Do what you want.

Jimmy ran ahead to the Home-Free puddle. *Not It!*

We're counting off, Klasher said.

We're always counting off when you're not first, Jimmy said.

What do I care? Klasher said. Josh is dragging Slowpoke here. Izzie's behind.

I wouldn't be last.

So you're helping her, Jimmy said, referring to Izzie.

No, Klasher said. We're counting off because that's what people do.

When they were all standing on the sidewalk in front of Klasher and Izzie's house,

Klasher started to count off, *Eenie Meanie Miney Mo.*

Everyone knows that if you start with yourself, then you're not it, Jimmy said.

Only with two people, stupid, Klasher replied.

Do One Potato Two Potato, Jimmy said.

Klasher smirked at Josh. *Your brother's crazy, man.*

Just then, the front door swung open.

Izzie flinched. She looked off into the distance,

Just over Josh's shoulder.

Klasher and Izzie's dad Frank stood in the doorway, with a mean, bleary-eyed look on his face.

Probably drunk again.

All the kids looked away.

Okay, Klasher nodded. One Potato Two Potato.

What are you doing out there? Frank snarled.

Tag, Klasher said.

Get in the house! Do your homework!

It's Saturday, Klasher said. *We don't have any homework.*

Frank stormed down the path and grabbed Klasher's arm.

So!?! Teachers don't give homework on the weekends?

Yes but, we can do it tomorrow.

Get. In. The. God. Damn. House.

Why? Klasher demanded, yanking his arm free.

Because I said so. You can spend time with your family. I won't come second to the little Jews across the street.

Klasher's face went white. He stared at his father.

Then he walked up the path into the house.

The four other kids stood watching.

Frank followed his son up the walk.

Isobel! he said, not looking back. *Inside. NOW.*

Izzie looked at the apex of the roof.

She looked at the ground under her sopping sneakers.

Bye, she said.

See ya, Josh said.

She turned and walked up to the door where her father stood waiting.

Crossing the threshold, Izzie disappeared into the house.

Frank didn't move.

He stood in the doorway glowering.

Come on, Josh said, pulling his little sister by the hand.

Hannah started to cry.

What is it?

Her boot fell off, Jimmy said, pulling it free from the crack between sidewalk and grass.

Josh glanced at Frank.

He pushed Hannah's foot into the boot and pulled her across the street.

It's all wet, she whined.

Come on! Josh said, pulling her up the front steps.

He looked back to see if Klasher's dad was still there.

He was. Josh could feel Frank's eyes on him as he scrambled for the key,

And ushered his brother and sister into the house.

Josh shut the door. He locked it.

Jimmy and Hannah sat on the floor, struggling out of their rain gear.

Hannah pulled off a soggy sock, whimpering.

Jimmy looked at Josh.

You don't have to stand there, he said. The door's locked.

XII. Candy Bars

Klasher kept a drawer of candy that he saved.

It never ceased to amaze Joshua

How Klasher had managed to keep such an incredible assortment,

Not just the dregs of Halloweens past

– the raisins and nuts and bags of licorice capsules in soapy pastel coating –

But the good stuff – jujubes and gobstoppers, caramels and sour candy, ring-pops and wagon wheels, m & ms and Screaming Saucers, Smarties and Pop-Eye cigarettes,

And most amazing of all, a plethora of chocolate bars,

All kinds of them, full size – Oh Henry, Snickers, Mars, Kit Kat, Twix, Score, Crunchy, Caramilk, Coffee Crisp, Reese Peanut Butter Cups.

All of them.

Every single one.

They winked out at you from the bottom drawer of Klasher's dresser,

A pocket of suchness

In that dank little room with its old bunk-beds and moldy green carpet,
A slide-away heaven packed chock-full of Candy Gods and Goddesses,
Secrets in their eyes

Keys in their hands – Death and Eternity –

Bound up in their imperishable bodies;

The double-edged promise of refined sugars and hydrogenated oils.

When he was first shown Klasher's secret cornucopia,

Josh was astounded.

What will you do with them all? he asked, his voice hushed.

He felt an incredible respect for Klasher in that moment.

But Klasher shrugged as though the question were absurd,

I'm saving them.

But what for? Josh wondered but didn't say.

Klasher had reasons of his own,

Secrets of his own

That would get lost in the meanness of expression.

Josh knew all about the way things could get lost –

Could disappear inside

The unforgiving logic of words.

That Klasher could keep the candy

So near without succumbing,
Seemed to Josh, an impossible feat,
A superpower in itself.

But even in his awe, Josh was of two minds.
He could see saving the best for last,
Or saving something for the next time you were in need of a treat.
But he couldn't quite understand Klasher's reasoning (esoteric as it was)
That he had to have not just one or two sweets on reserve,
But a drawer full.
Saving them forever, so that no occasion
Would ever be worthy
Seemed a terrible waste to Josh.

Sometimes when he sat on the top bunk and watched
Klasher appraise his chocolate wealth,
His eyes glittering in the light of golden wrappers,
Josh would suddenly feel the ocean of sadness that sloshed around
on the periphery of things
Well up inside him.
He could feel it at the brink, threatening to spill over.
It could gush out – out of body, out of mind,
Out of the thickness of the invisible, the smog of the unspeakable,

Out of the tiny atomic threads of the universe
Bound up in every cell –
Gush out and swallow up the room,
Lego, transformers, dressers, bunk-beds, boys,
Swallow up the house and the street, the sidewalks and the mailboxes,
the Fed-Ex delivery trucks,
The BMX bikes sprawled across front walks that kids forgot to put away –
Swallow up everything,
Drowning it all
Drowning the world in its wake.

Joshua imagined Klasher sometimes,
An old man at the end of his life with closets and cupboards and rooms
Full of candy
That he would never eat.

Still Joshua had to admire Klasher's self-discipline,
Knowing that *he* couldn't even manage to save a Kit Kat 'til after lunch.

XIII. Shiners

Every summer, the family took the car and the ferry and the speedboat
To get to Bubbie and Zaide's summer cabin.
Joe took his vacation days and the rest of the time he went back to the city in the week

and came back again on weekends.

On Friday evenings, Joshua's grandfather drove the boat across
With Josh and Hannah to pick up their dad from the Government Wharf.
Jimmy was usually too busy to bother.

Mary loved the island. She knew every tree like the limbs of her body,
Every rock like the last of her baby teeth
Exchanged for fairy's nickels long ago and rediscovered in a velvet pouch
Hidden in her mother's jewel box.

Mary rummaged around on the beach with the kids,
Showing them the best crab rocks and guppy ponds at low tide,
The fat and sticky purple stars clinging to the sides of rocks.
They made little aquariums in their buckets with seaweed, sand, and water.
Making a secret world for all

The tiny creatures they could find, before letting them out
Into the waves of the rising afternoon tide.

Mary showed them how to catch guppies in their bare hands,
Ushering her right hand along the dark edges of the immersed rocks,
Sweeping the tiny fish towards her left hand like a prayer,
Into the soft draining cup of her palms.

They named each new citizen according to his design,
Like Indian names in comic books,
And cheered for them at the crab races.

On the dock at mid-tide, Joshua and his cousins and siblings fished for shiners with makeshift fishing poles

A piece of driftwood tied to a string tied to a hook

Attached to a fresh mussel smashed from its navy shell

From the massive colonies on almost every low-tide surface.

The little fish pulled and batted on the hooks, trapped by their hunger,

As the children's small hands tried to hold them still enough to extract the hook

And let them swim in panicked circles around a big orange pail

Along with all the other captives.

They were dumped back into the ocean when the collection was complete or the water got too warm.

Shiners could slice your hands with their fins.

They made fine red lines, concise as paper cuts.

Josh liked fishing but he found it stressful.

Sometimes the hook would reach into the eye-socket

Or sometimes the fish would struggle too much during extraction.

Josh took over all difficult operations.

In that moment, the hook sliced into the entirety of existence:

Joshua and Fish.

He spoke softly and dipped the shiner in the bucket, trying to reason with it.

Just stay still for a few seconds, and I'll get it out.

But shiners never listened. They didn't understand.

His sister, Hannah, crouched over them, studying her brother's concentrated movements,

The gentle, matter-of-fact competence of his fingers.

Four now, she asked after the shiner's health and the fine-points of the particular hook.

Is he going to be okay? He's bleeding a little bit. That hook, see that hook has two catches, so when one comes loose the other one gets stuck. I always tell Jimmy not to use that one.

Hey Jimmy, Hannah called. I told you not to use that one! You shoulda listened to me.

Now Fatty might die 'cuz of you.

He's not going to die, Joshua told her calmly, though he was not so sure himself.

Hannah made him act sure.

*Well, he's not gonna die, but maybe he's gonna be **seriously injured**, Jimmy! And all becuz of you.*

Why don't you just shut up? Jimmy said. *Nobody asked you.*

Hannah pursed her lips and frowned.

I don't see what the big deal is, their cousin said.

Oren never thought anything was a big deal.

Josh knew he had a point.

*Just **rip** it out, Josh. Give it to me – I'll do it,* Oren told him.

Anybody can rip it out, Nava said. She was always reprimanding her little brother.

*Josh doesn't want to, **obviously**, Oren!*

Oren pushed his sister's shoulder and she spat back, *You just can't understand anyone who's not a thug like you.*

Can too!

Oh, so you admit you're a thug.

No, I said –

*You just said it! You said you **could** understand someone who wasn't a thug like you.*

Shut up, Nav-Ah.

Oh, Good Comeback! Nava was eight, a year younger than Josh. Every time he saw her she had a new catchphrase. This time it was 'Good Comeback.'

Josh dipped Fatty back into the water for a few seconds. His hands were bleeding now.

Fatty had been slicing them up in his panic.

Josh tried to manoeuvre the fine points of the hook with precision.

Just cut the line and throw him back in, Jimmy told him.

Just then, Aunt Elisa called down to them from the cottage door, *Lunchtime!*

Joshua and Fatty stayed behind

Until the hook gave way and they both sighed.

Josh stopped holding his breath and breathed normally again.

Fatty dropped between wharf and water and slid back into the ocean,

Josh whispered as the fish slipped away into black.

His mother called it praying.

XIV. A-Theist

Joshua's dad didn't believe in God.

You don't believe in God? Josh asked one day, almost hurt.

Zaide had called him an A-Theist.

When Josh had asked what that meant

He said it meant someone who didn't believe in God.

I believe in life, Joe said. *I believe in right now.*

XV. A Warm Wind

Summer came and went like a wilting flower

Clutched too tight in eager little hands,

Like the morning glory Josh used to pick when he was small,

Attracted by shape and shade – the perfect cone, the stark whiteness – of each bloom.

But now he knew that as soon as you touched the blossoms

– hardy and plentiful as they were on the vine –

They perished in an instant.

Summer was nearly over now,

And school loomed in Joshua's mind, dark and gloomy,

A large black rain cloud on the horizon.

Klasher was at soccer camp for these last two weeks.

His house remained across the street, small and green.

It had a cement path
That led from sidewalk to door.
Klashinskys tramped up and down the cracking path
Day in day out
Each bound up in the delicate death-grip of their own silvery thoughts
Like the dreamy prey of a thousand spiders –
Like everyone else.
Only Isobel sat still
On the lowest step and let them pass.

Isobel Klashinsky was the youngest of seven children,
Her mother's last keeper.
She came like an angel –
An egg,
Untouched by the dyes they dipped her in.

At nine, she had long since been deemed
The prettiest of them,
With long blond hair that came in waves and large dark blue eyes –
Portholes into another world –
Its lovely midnight skies.

There was something wrong right from the beginning,
Or so the story went.

Isobel was born, like everyone else.

With unfocussed eyes,

She emerged from her mother's dark insides.

And later when her eyes cleared,

She never cared to look.

That was not precisely true,

But it was what they always said

So, in a way, it became true.

Isobel looked at things, of course,

And she was interested in the world just as other children were.

It was just that people didn't interest her in particular –

Above all else, above the rest.

Why should they?

A quiet baby, she rarely laughed and rarely cried.

She had no interest

In Pat-a-Cake.

Peek-a-Boo held no charm for her. Old MacDonald was a putz.

She was the last of seven, the last one.

Their father Frank often joked that children were like pancakes –

The first and last were never any good.

The first was always soggy and undercooked and the last scorched and tasteless.

You were lucky to get a couple decent ones in the middle, he'd remark.
Chuckling at his own wit, he'd crack another beer.

It was an analogy that cut Frankie most,
The eldest child who'd spent much of his life being chided by his father
For being too stupid or too weak
To carry the name.

It never bothered Isobel;
She was not a pancake.

Izzie, the doctor said, was very high-functioning;
She could talk, and respond to her environment
In ways that were rare in autism.
He diagnosed it as Asperger's, the good kind of autism, the mild kind;
The closest one to normal.

Joshua liked Isobel.
He liked to sit beside her on the front step of her porch
At the top of the garden path,
And watch the ants.
Strong and ambitious,
They struggled against gravity

To carry gigantic pieces of granola home.

He liked to be with Izzie

And just be.

During one of these vigils,

Josh suggested that next time they bring things to give to the ants,

Not just leave it to the crumbs of chance.

Why? Izzie asked. Her voice, as always,

Free of judgment.

Josh considered this.

It was a good question.

He shrugged awkwardly,

Falling back on the vast store of Typical Answers.

It'd be nice, I guess. Maybe then they wouldn't have to look so long.

Izzie watched the ants, scrambling busily over rough terrain.

It's what they do, she said.

Joshua looked out over the bedraggled garden,

Away from the ants, away from the glassy logic of Izzie's blue eyes.

He felt ashamed.

This is what they did – it wasn't enough to find; they had to search.

They had to struggle.

They had to keep busy.

Only the Queen sat still.

Only She stayed home.

Izzie, Josh said, turning all of this around in his mind. *Do you believe in God?*

Isobel looked at him.

He felt her bright gaze on his skin.

His cheeks flushed, a sheepish smile came to his lips

Without being invited.

Izzie didn't answer. She watched calmly

As he changed.

After a moment, she went back to the middle empty space

Of her habitual gaze.

Her voice, when it came, was soft as ether,

I don't know what you mean.

A warm wind brushed past them like a field of tulips.

For a second Josh thought

His heart would break open

And slop messily all over

Her red buckle shoes.

XVI. Hardwood Floor

It was a long time before Mrs. Rafferty's son cleared out her house

And sold it to developers.

It felt like a long time to Josh anyway.

One evening, Joshua's dad got home from work and came to find him.

Joshua was making a Lego city in the basement.

Hey Kiddo, what're you doing?

Josh glanced up at his dad, and then went back to work. *I'm just making some stuff.*

In the basement?

I don't want Jimmy around. He's always wrecking stuff.

Listen, d'you think you could give me a hand with something?

Josh looked reluctantly at the city he was so close to finishing.

You can come right back afterwards, Joe said.

Josh got up and followed Joe up the stairs and outside.

Then they were inside Mrs. Rafferty's house.

The whole place, once stately and elegant,

Had turned into a ramshackle mess.

Mrs. Rafferty won't like this, Josh thought

Before he remembered

People don't come back.

Josh wandered in a daze around the house,

And, last of all, into the dining room.

Everything was gone – the shining cherry-wood table, the silver, the vases,

The glistening china cabinet with all the pretty cups and saucers

(they'd gotten to pick their own each tea time).

The whole house was gutted and empty.

It felt like Josh hadn't sat at Mrs. Rafferty's table in a thousand years,

To be asked how many spoons of sugar he would like,

One or two?

When Josh came back, his father was ripping up the floorboards in the hallway
with a crowbar.

What are you doing!? Josh said, waking from the daze. *That's her floor, Dad!*

You can't just do that!

Joe looked at him surprised;

Seeing Josh's face, he was sorry.

Joshua heard the whisper: *One day, they'll all be dead. Every One.*

Joe put down the crowbar and came to Josh;

He put his rough hand on the little boy's cheek and kissed him.

A strange double-vision came over Joshua,

As though he were remembering the moment

At the same time as it was happening.

Joe gathered him up in his arms like he was little again.

One day, Josh would need him,

And he would be gone.

She isn't coming back, Josh, Joe said. They're going to tear the house down.

Josh began to cry. He cried and cried.

His dad rocked him back and forth

Like a baby.

Josh was glad that Klasher and Jimmy were nowhere in sight.

After awhile, the tears subsided like a passing storm,

And Josh came back.

Joe held him still.

When he was calm again, Joe drew back and looked at him,

Okay now?

Josh nodded.

Sure?

Josh nodded.

I didn't mean to catch you off-guard, Kid. It's just that these are good floorboards.

You know your mum's always wanted hardwood floors.

Yeah.

So, you think we should take them so we can redo the downstairs hall for Mum?

Joshua hesitated.

They're just gonna rip it down anyway. Build a whole new house.

Yeah... okay, Josh said.

So you gonna help me?

Okay.

Okay. How about I pull them up and you carry them out.

They went to work.

Joe ripped up boards and Josh carried them out

Putting them in a big pile in their front yard.

Be careful where you step, his dad kept saying.

And Joshua was.

As they got to the end, Joshua began to feel sure of himself.

He picked up a big bunch of boards all together.

Can you handle all those? his dad asked.

Yep, Josh said.

Alright. Go to, man.

This was man's work,

And Joe wanted Joshua.

He hadn't asked Jimmy.

He hadn't asked Hannah.

Just Josh.

Josh had everything under control.

He jumped with the agility of a leopard, from beam to beam,

Over the holes they'd made in the floor

All the way to the open door.

He kept the boards pointed in the right direction

So that he wouldn't get caught along the way.

Just as he jumped the last gap,

A searing pain shot through him.

The boards fell from his arms in a clatter.

You okay? Joe asked.

Josh didn't answer.

He crouched down gingerly.

A nail had pierced through the rubber sole of his sneaker

And was stuck deep in his foot.

He looked at it for a long moment.

What is it? Joe asked, looking up.

Nothing, Josh said.

Josh, Joe said, making his way over. *What is it?*

Nothing, Josh stood up and tried to pull his foot free.

A searing pain went through his body.

Josh, Joe said. *Let me see.*

Josh looked up at his dad;

A little boy again.

I was carrying too much I guess, he said.

Joe crouched down to look.

He pulled the floorboard from Joshua's foot.

The pain was bad, but Josh was quiet.

Joe took off Josh's sneaker and wrapped his own shirt tight around Joshua's bare foot.

We'll need to get you a Tetanus shot, he said.

Josh looked at Joe;

Everything would be okay.

His foot would get better.

And later, his mother would have the hardwood floors she'd always wanted.

XVII. Remote

In their family, Klasher was Izzie's protector.

He loved her best.

Joshua understood this and was careful not to infringe on Klasher's territory.

When other kids made fun of her,

Klasher defended her.

Names were thrown around and tried on for size

– Freak-of-Nature, Girl-Bot, Alien Child –

But the one that stuck was Wednesday.

With her flat affect and the way her older sisters

Wove her hair into long French braids,

Wednesday Adams from The Adams Family just barely fit.

But it caught on anyway,

Since it was not discernibly offensive

When overheard by the Adults.

The Disney remake had spurred new interest in the evil television clan.

And so the neighbourhood kids, some mean, some mild

– many of them not sure of her real name –

Called her Wednesday.

Even her brothers and sister used it,

Forgetting the occasional fear and malice that went along with it.

Wens, one of her older siblings would say. *Do me a favour and change the channel.*

To which Isobel would get up and turn the dial of the TV to a perfectly even beat

– her mother said she should take up music, get a job as a metronome –

Go Go Go Go Go Go

Stop.

The television had been picked up for ten bucks at the SPCA thrift shop,

It was made before the extreme lethargy of modern society

Had set into the collective consciousness,

A deep, bleeding wine stain.

Klasher never asked his sister to change the channel,

Even though she didn't seem to mind.

He did it himself.

He never called her Wens, or Wensy, or Wednesday –

He only called her Izzie.

He was the last hold-out in the house.

Yet he had come to accept the name

Insofar as it was the only alternative

That no longer warranted a sucker punch

Or a kick in the shins.

But for all Klasher's rage in the name of love,

Izzie was unmoved.

Mockery, betrayal, devotion – none of these things moved Izzie.

She did not care about the things people said;

They were just things people said.

She did not understand Klasher's anger,

Nor did she welcome it

Just because it was performed for her sake.

Still, it was Klasher's anger. Something of his very own.

She could not take it away from him.

XVIII. Sunday Tradition

They climbed through construction sites on Sundays.

It was a Sunday tradition.

Klasher, Josh, and Isobel

Scavenged the neighbourhood for half-made houses,

And went exploring.

It was fun to climb through

The bones of a house

Before everything else grew inside.

They started from the ground up,

Climbing into the pit of the foundation

And finding their way to the top.

That day, it was dark and damp inside the gravelly cement-walled pit

That would one day be a cellar.

The kids jumped down inside.

The gravel crunch of their footsteps bounced

Off the walls of what would soon be someone's rec room.

After a few minutes, they realized that there was no clear way out.

No staircase had been put in yet,

And the walls, though not too high to jump down from,

Were trickier to scale up.

There were no footholds or handholds
In smooth cement.

They could see the house above them
A web of pine beams and plywood
So close it felt like they should be able to touch.

I can jump it, Klasher said confidently,
Appraising the height of the wall.

If he could grab hold of one of the beams overhead,
He could hoist himself up to the next level.

Klasher jumped and missed.

Give me a boost, he said.

Josh interlocked his hands for Klasher to use as a stepladder.

But Klasher couldn't quite reach.

Josh's arms gave out

And they fell back down.

Again! Klasher said.

They tried again.

The third time, Klasher reached

First with a finger,

Then with a hand,

Then with two hands, and then he had it.

Josh stood back

So Klasher could get a good enough swing going to catch his foot on the cement ledge.

Hanging there like a monkey,

Klasher walked his hands over towards his foot

Until he was near enough

To scramble on top of the wall.

From the next floor, he looked down at Josh and Izzie.

C'mon, he said. This place is awesome!

He offered a hand; Josh grabbed it and scrambled up the wall.

Klasher was off and running.

He wanted to see the roof.

Josh looked down at Izzie.

She stood alone in the basement,

Looking for another way.

She did not like to be touched.

Here, Josh said, holding out his hand anyway.

I'm okay, she said. You can go.

Josh looked around for some other way.

Finding none, he looked back at her.

C'mon, Iz. Take my hand.

Izzie looked at him.

She stood there a long time looking at him.

And then she reached up and took his hand.

It was warm and dry (not like the other one).

Izzie scrambled up,

Brushed off her knees and smiled –

Just like a real girl.

C'mon, Josh said. Let's go!

XIX. Lock Box

Izzie was in the same grade as Josh, but she didn't go to the same school.

She had a Government Grant to go to an Alternative School.

When it was first offered from the first grade on, her father had protested.

She's not retarded, Frank said.

It's not a school for mentally handicapped children, the social worker informed him.

It's a school for children with other kinds of challenges – dyslexia, learning disabilities, personality disorders, or just kids who need some extra care in planning their education.

It's a wonderful opportunity for Isobel. The school will lay the academic groundwork she needs, as well as providing therapies that will help her develop her social skills.

It sounded like a good idea to Alice.

It was something they could never afford otherwise

Just being handed to them;

She was never one to turn down a bargain.

But Frank was suspicious. It was his natural state of being –

Suspicion was etched into his face like hieroglyphics into a stone tablet,

Only fading slightly to make room for other emotions.

What's the catch? he asked. *These people take her away and brainwash her or what?*

Not at all, the social worker replied. *It's a very well respected institution. And, fortunately, it's just thirty-five minutes away. If you can't drive her, we can arrange for a school bus to pick her up and drop her off everyday.*

Frank frowned.

He didn't like government handouts, mostly because he'd been turned down for E.I.

He didn't believe anyone gave anything away for free, especially the government.

There were always strings attached.

Maybe we can try it out for a little while, Alice said, glancing nervously at her husband.

Kindergarten at the regular school had not gone well for Isobel.

The teachers found her difficult; the children found her strange.

Isobel was damned by both her curses and her blessings.

She was not quite different enough to evoke pity or compassion.

To most people, her behaviour seemed purposely obtuse, withholding, and defiant.

She was intelligent and, in many ways, an ordinary girl.

Alice was hoping for a better first grade.

Frank, one of Izzie's foremost sceptics, was all that stood in the way.

Frank, Alice said quietly, when the social worker had left the room to 'give them a minute.' We could just try her there for a little while. What's the harm?

If we don't like it, we'll take her out.

Frank scoffed. You gotta be kidding! All these alternative types with their hippy-dippy therapies – how d'you think those Manson kids got started?

Alice looked at him.

I don't think, she said carefully, that will happen to Izzie. We'll keep a close eye on what's going on.

You'll keep a close eye, Frank said. I got enough to worry about. You want to do this, I wash my hands of the whole thing.

We'll try it, she said gently. Just try it. If we don't like it – we'll pull her out.

That had been over five years ago, and Izzie had improved vastly since then.

She had learned the meanings of all kinds of bodily gestures and verbal idioms that had once tripped her up.

She understood now that when a person hunched their shoulders and looked down they were sad,

When they shrugged they didn't know, when they nodded they were assenting,

When they shook their heads they were denying, when they frowned they were bothered.

She learned to read gesture like she learned to read words.

To decipher the movement of a body,

The expression of a face,

To attach it to an emotion or an attitude.

All of the things that came naturally to other people did not come naturally to her.

When she got older, she would say (showing off her synthetic skills of simile)

It was as if everyone else came out of the womb ready to read Proust,

And Izzie had to painstakingly work her way up to Dick and Jane.

She memorized all kinds of idioms and social niceties and what they really meant,

And practised contexts with fill-in-the-blank conversations.

She inserted words or internal motivations into the empty bubbles of thought and speech

Dangling off the lips of black and white cartoon characters,

Searching for the truth behind the words.

These were workbooks about how to be in the world

Without being hated,

Or, worse, dismissed.

She learned that telling the truth was often considered rude,

That even when people asked for honesty, they might not actually want it.

You have to gauge the situation, Candace, Izzie's school counsellor, would remind her.

You have to think about who the person is, what they usually say and do, how they like

to think about things, and then you have to decide what to say. You have to guess.

You have to guess, Izzie said.

What was the point in studying, in trying to learn all these rules

If, in the end, everything was just a guess.

It is a lot of guesswork, Candace nodded. But we can make educated guesses.

Sometimes you'll guess wrong. Everyone guesses wrong sometimes about what someone means. Everyone says the wrong thing sometimes. That's okay.

Everyone guesses wrong. Everyone says the wrong thing sometimes, Izzie told herself.

It worked like a mantra, soothing her confusion.

But it's... more challenging for you, Isobel. You can't just rely on instinct. You have to learn it, memorize it like multiplication tables, like scientific formulae, and then try to apply the right action to the right context. But lots of situations won't fit perfectly into what you've learned. You just have to do your best.

Izzie liked Candace better than most people.

She didn't take everything for granted the way most of them did.

Sometimes she forgot and said something difficult for Izzie to understand,

But she never blamed her for misinterpreting.

Candace taught Izzie that it was important to look at a person's eyes when you spoke to them,

And to look at their eyes when you were listening to them.

I know it's hard, she said. But when someone is speaking, it's important to try to ignore all the other things around you for awhile, and just look at the person.

Eye contact was a sign of respect and esteem, she told Izzie.

Crucial for healthy communication.

If you didn't look at someone they might think you weren't listening to them

or you didn't like them.

At the same time, it was also important not to stare.

That made people uncomfortable.

You had to look as though you could look away at any moment.

But you can always look away at any moment, Izzie said logically.

Candace said that, be that as it may, you should look away every so often,

But only for a few seconds at a time.

It was very complex.

Izzie listened and practised.

Sometimes she got tired of practising and refused to try at all.

It seemed to her that people played a lot of silly games with nonsensical rules.

Candace called them the Rules of Social Engagement.

She said it was important to know them and understand how to apply them.

Izzie had a Reflection Journal in which she was supposed to practise non-literal thinking.

Everyday she had to write something and draw a picture.

She could write about anything, but she had to include at least five phrases of figurative speech.

Life is a game, she wrote between the fine blue lines of her sixth grade journal.

And you have to know the rules to play. You have to understand what it means to win.

So that you'll be disappointed when you lose.

On the blank half of the page, she drew a picture in pencil crayon of people

on a chessboard,

One girl in pawn position, with a long blond ponytail and jeans, was about to step onto an empty black square on the diagonal.

A piece facing her on the other side – a tall man wearing a green top-hat –

Held up a stern index finger. He had dark frowning eyebrows.

There was a big red X on the diagonal square that the girl was about to step on,

And a big green check-mark on the square in front of her.

Isobel looked at the picture and decided that it was good.

Her teacher, Leanne, agreed.

Excellent! Leanne wrote in red pen in the margins. *Your artwork is wonderful, and your analogy is insightful, complex, and consistent! But why not think about winning???*

Izzie was too smart for that.

Izzie let Josh read her journal sometimes when Klasher wasn't around.

One cold winter day, when Klasher was at a friend's house playing video games,

She took Josh into her room, and handed him the notebook.

It was February.

Outside the window, it was snowing.

She was eleven years old.

Josh sat down on the floor beside the heating vent

And started to read the six half pages that she'd written since he'd last seen it.

I am like a rock, she'd written on the first page. *Because I don't feel things the way other people do. Other people are like ice. They melt and freeze depending on the*

weather. But I am the rock because I stay the same. I am strong like a rock. Sometimes my brothers break rocks, so that they can make rock puzzles out of the pieces. To break a rock you have to throw the rock really hard at something as hard as it, other rocks or concrete or something like that. Then you have to duck because the pieces go flying and you never know where they will end up. Sometimes when you break a rock, you can't find all the pieces and then you can't put the rock back together. Rocks look different on the inside. They are rougher and sparklier. They are also usually darker than they look on the outside.

Isobel watched Joshua's eyes trace over the letters, loop back and begin again.

Josh glanced at the teacher's comment at the bottom of the page, *Sounds like a dangerous game!!! This is a good paragraph, Isobel. But I'd still like to see more range and development in your figurative language. How are you not like a rock? What else are you like?*

Joshua frowned slightly.

Izzie watched him. *You don't like it*, she said.

Josh looked up at her. *No, I do.*

Oh, Izzie said.

And then considering it okay in the circumstances, she asked, *Why did you frown? I don't know. I guess I was reading what your teacher wrote.*

Izzie decided not to ask why what the teacher wrote made him frown.

She had learned that people didn't like too many questions about why they acted

the way they did.

Josh didn't usually mind as much as other people, but still.

Candace had taught her what it meant to *'err on the side of caution.'*

Izzie erred on the side of caution. It usually worked out best.

She watched Josh turn the page, and decided she didn't want him to read any further.

She took the notebook from his hands,

And looked around quickly for something new to talk about.

Changing the subject. This was another social tactic she had learned.

I got this lockbox. It has a key. Do you want to see it?

Sure, Josh said.

Izzie took out the box she had gotten from Value Village.

It was a bit rusty and it had pictures of Jem and the Holigrams on it.

It had a tiny key, and a latch and a little padlock that held the lid down.

There was a slot in the top for coins.

It's for money, I guess, Izzie said. *But you could put other things in it too.*

Her sister Katie had laughed when Izzie brought it home,

Aren't you a bit old for piggy banks, Wens?

It had not occurred to Izzie until then that it was a piggy bank. Or a bank at all.

She just liked that it could be locked.

Jem, Joshua said, turning the box around in his hand. *What are you going to keep in it?*

Izzie felt strange.

She got up and took the box and put it back under the bed where it had been.

I don't know, she said.

XX. Passover

Every year the whole family went to Mary's parents' house for Seder.

Joshua listened to the story of Passover

His mind wide open, asking for detail after detail until the plagues and exodus

Seemed to unfold right behind his eyes.

Such an inquiring mind, this one has, his grandmother said, pinching his cheek, Always more questions.

Sorry, Bubbie, am I bugging you?

Of course not, my darling! I only wish I had a brain like yours. This one's about ready for a trade-up.

No, Bubbie, don't say that, Joshua said laughing.

A good heart too. What did I do to deserve you, my darling?

Not a heck of a lot, said Zaide, who took every opportunity to tease his wife.

Dad, Auntie Elly said, Don't start in on her.

You work your whole life to raise your children, for what? Just so they can grow up and start telling you what to do. You guys better grow up quickly and put these ones in line, he told his grandchildren, nodding at his two daughters. The parent's only reward is when the kids have kids to give them a taste of their own medicine.

We're on it, Zaide, Jimmy said, and Joe faked a hit to the back of the kid's head.

Thank you, James. Nava, did you open the door for Elijahu? Zaide asked.

Nava got up and ran to the front door.

Hannah's eyes got very wide, *Elijahu's coming here?*

Yeah, Stupid, Jimmy said. He's gonna come down for dinner in his fiery chariot.

Hannah scowled and swatted the air in his direction.

It's tradition, Sweetheart. We open the door to invite in the spirit of Elijahu and the fifth cup, with the wine, Bubbie showed her, is for him.

But he's not gonna drink it.

No, not exactly. It's a gesture.

Tonight Hannah was going to answer the four Pesach questions.

It was the role of the youngest child,

But last year Oren had done it, because Hannah was still too little.

Mary had been coaching Hannah for the last few weeks,

Asking her the questions without warning,

Until Joshua and James hit their foreheads in exasperation. *Give it a rest, Mum!*

She never listened.

Why do we eat only matzoh on Pesach? Mary asked,

As they were setting the table the night before.

Becuz...

'We only eat matzoh on Pesach because...'

We only eat matzoh on Pesach because when the Jews were freed from the Pharaoh they hadda leave quickly, and they didn't have time to leaven their bread, so they dried it out in the sun to make hard crackers as they traveled. And we eat matzoh to remember that.

Right, Mary said. To remember our people that were freed from slavery.

Yeah.

Right, baby.

Zaide's gonna ask me, right?

Zaide's going to ask you the questions and you're going to do a great job answering.

He'll be so impressed, Jimmy said. Mary glared at her second son.

I have the most important job in Seder. I know all the answers, Hannah said.

Yes, you do.

Jimmy rolled his eyes and looked at Josh.

I'm gonna be so happy when she gets this over with tomorrow night. If I have to hear that stupid pop quiz one more time, I think I might die.

Hey, I had to listen when you used to do it, Josh said.

*Yeah, well, you should've just killed me then and there if I was **that** annoying.*

Josh loved Passover. He loved to hear the stories all over again.

James and Oren liked them too;

They were just gory enough with the plagues and the lamb's blood,

And all the dead firstborns.

That'd be you, Jimmy liked to remind his brother.

Not me. He didn't kill the Jewish firstborns.

What if your parents forgot the lambs' blood. What if they missed the memo or something.

It's a pretty big memo to miss, Josh said.

*But somebody **must've** forgotten. Oh man, can you imagine? That would suck! You doze off on the couch, thinking you'll get up in ten minutes and do it, wake up two hours later and your kid is **dead**.*

You might be surprised at your ability to stay awake when your kid's life is at stake, Joshua said practically.

Whatever, I bet it happened. There are always a few people who mess up.

Nava and the two older boys were getting too cool to show excitement about finding the hidden Afikomen.

But Hannah and Oren were still interested.

Jimmy liked to follow them around and then just as one of them spotted it, Snatch it out from under them.

Oh! Too bad... The prize is mine.

No fair! You cheated. Jimmy cheated – I saw it first!

Come on, James, don't be a jerk. Give it back, Josh insisted.

But, I found it. Whoever finds it gets the prize. Jimmy would wait until his sister or his cousin was sufficiently flustered before he'd give it back.

Fine. Take it, you baby.

For successful teasing, you just had to be able to gauge the exact moment

Before the tears started,

Because that was the moment they'd go running in to The Adults.

And then the trouble started.

Josh didn't like teasing. But Jimmy had a blood-lust for it. He lived to play-torture.

But it was always Joshua's fault when Jimmy went too far.

You're the oldest, his dad would say. You're responsible. Things get out of hand,

You take them in hand.

He doesn't listen to me.

Make him listen.

Josh didn't know how to make anyone listen,

But he couldn't bring himself to tell that to his father.

The next day, they went to Temple. A bunch of their relatives were there,

As was everyone his mother had ever known her whole life, or so it seemed to Josh.

His mother's cousins and their kids, his great aunts and uncles,

All their old friends and neighbours.

Afterward, his grandparents were hosting a big party.

It was a beautiful day, and a lot of people decided to walk,

Since the house was just under a mile from the Synagogue.

The kids ran around in rapturous chases and battle games,

Slicing the air with cherry blossom swords.

It was not until they had been back at the house for several hours, that Mary noticed

Joshua was missing.

She weaved through the crowd asking everyone when they'd last seen him.

A few people thought they'd seen him around, in a tree in the backyard, in the basement

playing video games,

But he was nowhere to be found.

Her panic rose. By the time she found her husband, she was almost in tears.

I can't find Joshua. He isn't here.

Did you check the basement? Some of the kids are down there...

Of course I checked, Joe! What, do you think I'm stupid?

Well, he must be somewhere.

Yeah, somewhere. Like in the trunk of some sicko's car!? What the hell is wrong with us? How could we just walk away without knowing where our kids are?

Hannah was with me. Jimmy was running around with Oren and the Greenberg kid.

I just assumed Josh was with them.

Yeah, well he wasn't, Joe.

He's twelve years old. I'm sure he's alright.

But as they drove around, snaking in and out of surrounding streets, retracing their steps,

Joe didn't feel so sure.

He saw all the hedges predators could hide behind,

The innocuous cars gliding down streets unnoticed.

But surely Josh would've fought, made some noise.

Surely someone would've heard him.

He wasn't naïve enough to get into a stranger's car, was he?

It was true that Josh trusted easily,

But he knew enough not to go off with someone he didn't know.

Unless it was some kind of crisis.

A driver looking for a dog that ran away after getting hit by a car,

Anyone crying.

The kid was a sucker for suffering.

Please. Joe almost never prayed. But every time he did, it was because one of the kids had done something stupid.

Fear made people believe things they wouldn't otherwise.

Fear of God was not just an archaic turn of phrase, Joe thought.

Beside him, Mary was silent.

Slow down, she demanded every time they saw someone walking by.

Have you seen a little boy? About twelve. Curly brown hair, he's wearing a green windbreaker.

Nobody had seen him.

They arrived back at the Temple.

The Synagogue was empty.

Mary started to cry.

We'll find him, Joe said. *I'm sure he's just wandered off somewhere.*

They scoured the twelve block radius around the Temple several more times.

Splitting apart

And then coming together again.

At last, Joe got the idea to go to the school.

And there was Josh leaning against a chestnut tree on the far side of the playground.

Just sitting there.

He did not seem to see them at first.

Joshua! Where the hell have you been!? Mary yelled.

Josh looked bewildered.

I was here, he said.

Doing what? his mother demanded.

Nothing.

Nothing!? *Do you even know what you've put us through? Get up!*

Josh looked at her. He seemed unmoved.

You scared us, Josh, Joe said. *You need to tell us when you're going somewhere.*

Josh nodded, *Okay.*

But he didn't get up.

Alright, Joe said more gently. *Come on, we better go tell your grandmother to call off the National Guard.*

I'm not going home, Joshua said.

Joe looked at the kid. *What's the matter, Josh?*

I just want to be alone.

Come on, Joshua, Joe said. *Let's go. I've had just about enough of this.*

You're not my father, the boy said.

He said this matter-of-factly, without any discernible feeling,

As though he were just observing something about the day:

- The crocuses are out.

- The sky is clouding over.

- You're not my father.

Joe was not sure how to respond.

If there had been an ounce of rebellion in it, an ounce of anger,

An ounce of hurt, he could have.

Only father you got, Kid.

He looked over at Mary for help. But he saw that she too had left him.

Her eyes were fixed on Joshua. They were shining,

Not with fear or sadness,

But with pride.

Joe felt something in him tighten.

Something that resided in his chest

Always on the brink, usually ignored.

It tightened to the point where he thought it would most certainly break.

But it was just a slow tear

One thread at a time.

Joe looked at Mary.

And in that moment,

He was terrified.

They got home late that night.

Joe carried Hannah up to bed, and Jimmy and Josh went willingly for a change.

Maybe an hour after he'd fallen asleep,

Joshua woke up to voices arguing downstairs.

He stood sleepily in the dark hallway

Listening.

The kitchen door was closed,

But the words were easy enough to make out.

You're being purposely obtuse, his mother was saying.

I'm being purposely obtuse? You think the kid is some kind of prophet.

It's not just me. What about what that young Rabbi from the youth group said?

He said he was bright. No one's arguing.

He said he had a calling.

May have, he said 'may have.' And anyway that's what they say about any kid who'll sit and talk about religion. It's a dying profession. They have to recruit.

So you're just going to dismiss it? Dismiss your own son, just like that.

I thought this whole thing was predicated on the fact that he's not my son. Isn't that where this whole myth comes from?

You won't even give him a chance.

You won't give him a chance. A chance to be his own goddamn person, Mary! Not some brainwashed freak who thinks he has to save the world just because his mother had a dream twelve years ago.

That 'dream' is the reason he's still here, Joe. Do you understand?

*I understand it served its purpose. Do **you** understand it was probably your conscience?*

My conscience?

Yes, your conscience.

So what do you think, I just made the whole thing up? That I've been lying to him all this time?

I think that you were a scared little girl that needed to believe in something to get you through a hard time. And I think you took it out on Josh, yes. But you're an adult now:

Enough is enough.

If you can't see that Joshua is special, then you're blind.

Of course he's special. He's a smart, sweet kid. But if you don't stop this shit, you're going to destroy him.

You think I'd hurt my own child?

All this Chosen bullshit – it's killing him. Can't you see that?

Well if you don't believe in him, then you don't love him like I do.

And if you can't love him without making him into a god, then you don't love him at all.

How dare you tell me I don't love my own son?

***Your** son.*

*Yeah, **my** son. If it's all in my head, explain what he said today. He doesn't even think*

of you as his father.

You've made sure of that, haven't you?

So that's what this is about: Joe's hurt pride.

That is not what this is about. This is about you using Joshua to feed your own ego.

This is about you trying to make him into some little idol, to justify your behaviour with this delusional story.

You're cracked, Joe. Really, I can't even talk to you.

*I'm cracked. That's great: I'm cracked. Says the woman who goes around telling little kids that **angels** announced their coming, just because she's too vain to admit that she got too drunk to remember getting knocked up at a party.*

Get out.

Gladly.

Get out now. Leave.

I'm going. I'm not gonna stand by and watch you turn this poor kid into some nut with a rifle at the top of clock tower in ten years time.

Leave!

I'll leave. But think about what you're doing to him, to all of them. You criticize people who push their kids to be doctors and lawyers. Think about what it must be like to grow up with a parent who expects you to become the fucking Messiah!

Oh yeah, and you're so much better. You love your kid so much you'll walk out on him.

I'm really moved.

But he's not my kid, remember? I just fed and clothed and brought him up, but he's

Elijah's son. Or David's. Or is it Yahweh himself? How many prophets were you fucking, Mary?

I want a divorce.

If that's what you want, then that's what you'll get. The Queen always gets what she wants.

The door slammed, and the whole house rang like an open wound.

Mary stared at the space where he had been,

Then turned back to the kitchen and shut the door.

Joshua crept back into his room and lay down on the cold midnight floorboards

Listening to the muffled sobs beneath.

XXI. Act

People were sceptical of the Asperger's explanation,

As people were sceptical of anything they'd never heard of or experienced.

In my day, Izzie's grandfather would muse with the other old men at the coffee shop.

You were rude to an adult, you got a smack across the chops. These days, kid acts up, bleeding hearts give 'em a label and a bottle of pills. You ask me, all they need is some good old fashioned discipline.

Isobel's father agreed.

He thought Isobel's diagnosis was a Get Out of Jail Free card,

And he resented it.

They throw around these 'conditions' like confetti nowadays, he said.

It's all just a racket for the shrinks and the pharmaceutical companies. That's how they hook 'em – Get 'em while their young: keep 'em for life.

Izzie knew exactly what she was doing, he said.

Don't think I buy into this autism bullshit, little lady. You can't pull one over on me, not for a second! he would say, when she ignored or misinterpreted one of his commands.

Maybe you can fool your mother and those hippy-dippy teachers, but you don't fool me. I know it's all an act.

Izzie looked out the window and turned the words around in her mind: All An Act.

She liked the repetition of sounds.

Little Lady.

Hippy-Dippy.

All An Act.

The words intrigued her.

Her father did not.

She liked words.

She did not like her father.

All he did was drink and yell and make people cry.

He did not make her cry.

He can't make me cry, she thought, trying to get a hold of the idiom by trying it out,

Because I Am All An Act.

I

Am

All

An

Act.

Broken down, it sounded like a word spelled out,

Something divided into its elemental parts;

She liked that.

It sounded clean and even

Like the A's could all be laid out

At four corners of a page.

Or you could have one A in the centre and its four

Endings branching out from each side,

The centre, the first letter of all the words.

She wrote it out on the Strawberry Stationary her aunt had given her –

An algebraic formula – North, South, East, West –

I = M

T C A N

L

L

Isobel looked at the form on the page

She smiled.

She tried on her smile again.

XXII. Words and Reason

Now that he was fourteen he understood things that he hadn't understood before,

And these things led to new puzzles.

In his first year of high school, Josh began to see through things people said

To what they didn't say.

He began to see speech

As more of a negation of truth

Than an assertion of it.

People said things all the time that they didn't mean,

Lied – intentionally or not – all the time.

But it was not only these words that negated their own meaning, but words themselves,

Because how could an arbitrary sound express what was in the mind

When even the act, the object itself, was symbolic.

His mother had wanted him to read Plato – and so he did.

He'd always done what she wanted.

He read *The Apology*

At first dutifully,

And then voraciously.

After that, he read *The Symposium* and *The Republic*.

He thought about Plato and wondered if the world really was just a dull reflection
Of some magnificent Ideal, the One, the Truth, that could never be reached
But only hinted at,
Fumbled for indirectly, as one might fumble for a light switch in a dark room.
A light that burned your retinas and blistered your skin –
Was that God?
The Truth of the matter, the thing in itself, Josh knew,
Was impossible to touch.
And if this was Meaning – the thing meant by this or that, the actual referent –
Then it too became purposeless in its inaccessibility.
Josh looked and saw contradictions everywhere – hypocrisy and ambivalence
In everything.
(They were all imposters. Every one.)
And – he thought one night
Staring into his own eyes in the bathroom mirror,
Staring until they blurred and faded into the grey of the rest,
And then came back again sharp and clear as day –
He was the Biggest Imposter of all.
Joshua – who had always loved words, abided them, found order and stability
In their perfect simplicity
In their integrity,
Their one to one relation –

Joshua began to slip

Into a dark tunnel of anger and confusion.

His mother had lied to him.

She had lied to him from the day he was born.

She fed it to him, day after day, year after year,

Regular as breakfast cereal.

He felt alternately sick – stuffed as he was with her self-centred mythologies –

And starved, knowing that what had nourished him all these years

Was completely empty.

The Story. His Story.

He wondered now what had driven him all those years

If not that...

What was the point of his being here?

No point,

He supposed.

No reason.

XXIII. The Slow Burn

In the tenth grade, he found a reason.

It was a new kind of reason.

A real reason.

Maggie Zimmerman smoked B & H Blacks with the other Trainspotters out by the old bomb shelter at the far end of campus.

Her kilt hiked up her creamy thighs above decency,

Her tie dangling around her neck, a school-issue noose.

She wore a long black trench coat and scuffed black, steel-toed combat boots.

On the weekends, she wore thrift store lingerie slips over brown cords

Patched together with duct tape.

She cut fishnet stocking-toes into fingerless gloves and wore them as black gothic-sleeves under a Sex Pistols T-shirt.

She sat in the back of the class, drawing pictures of dragons and deadly fairies on Hilbroy loose-leaf paper,

Sprinkling the lecture, under her breath, with funny, cryptic remarks.

Josh liked her right away, but he was not the type

That she could See.

Everyday, Josh slipped past the smoke pit, invisible, towards the chain-link fence

And, seeing the cool Cleopatra eyes of the girls, the lackadaisical limbs of the boys –

Cigarettes dangling from their lips and S U I C - I D E written in Bic on their fingers, a letter a knuckle – he decided against it for the thousandth time.

Josh played Rugby because his father played a million years ago

And said that Rugby was a Man's Sport

When Jimmy jabbed Josh in the ribs and called it Boys in Knee-Socks.

After practice, Josh went out the far gate,
So he could walk past the place where she had stood
Looking mysterious and world-weary, sucking back her B & H Blacks.
He scanned the ground lazily as he walked inside the forbidden space,
For the faded red welts of lipstick on filters dropped into the pool of cigarette butts –
He always knew which ones were hers.
Joshua wrote her name on bits of paper with the smooth black ink of his mother's
rolling-ball pen: *Magdalene*
Every letter strong and rounded, every syllable sombre in perfect completion.
Her name was branded on the inside of his chest
With the slow burn, the cruel impossibility
Of fifteen-year-old devotion, of intense infatuation,
Of love
If that means anything
At all.

XXIV. Variables

Maggie lived in a big house on the West Side of the city.
Her parents had two cars and a ski cottage;
Her father was a real estate developer and her mother was a lawyer,
So she had *that* to live down.
In the new wave of upper-middle class kids shopping for crumpled clothing

in bargain bins

And scratchy old records in garage-sale milk crates,

Wealth was the new name-brand to have the privilege of loathing.

Josh had the modern teenaged upper hand of a Real Life blue-collar father
and a socially-fallen mother.

An East Side kid at a West Side school,

He grew out of the untouchable position of elementary school poverty into
the high school chic of a 'ghetto' background.

Naturally, it was only cool to be 'underprivileged' in places where no one really was.

On the East Side, it wasn't even a word.

Joshua's Grandfather sold the house when his Grandmother died,
and moved into a condo,

He said it was to ensure his daughter's children a 'decent education.'

Joe resented the implication,

But Saul just shrugged off his son-in-law's moody silence, and said,

*We can't all be as handy as you, Joe. But I'm sure you'll agree that we all want to give
our children the opportunities we didn't have, or failing that, our grandchildren.*

It was the 'failing that' that cut Joe.

When Zaide pontificated on the matter, Josh averted his eyes, ashamed for his father.

Dad, don't start... Mary's gentle warning.

He heard every biting implication beneath relatives' passing comments.

What could she have expected – an eighteen-year old girl with an illegitimate child?

She was lucky to have found a man at all.

Mary's unlived life – the life appropriate to the daughter of a successful jeweller
with three lucrative shops,

And the bearer of a respectable Jewish name – weighed heavily upon Joshua.

She was not destined for what He had made her.

Josh was the inexplicable element,

The absurd variable that had veered everything off course.

Mary and Joe were not meant to be.

Joe was a pragmatic response to bad luck, a 'making the best of a difficult situation.'

This was the story according to her family.

Mary denied it and Joe tried to ignore it.

It niggled inside, the worm in the peach, coiled around the bloody pit of their arguments:

Their fear that it was true.

Joshua felt the softly-voiced criticisms cut into his father's faith

Like a knife through bread.

He wanted to tell him.

Mary loved Joe. She did not love him in default mode. She loved him.

Joshua could see it in the way she reached for his arm when walking,

In the way she glanced over for his reaction when she laughed,

In the way she slammed the door as though possessed by demons

When he told her that if she wanted a divorce

She could bloody well have one.

Josh wanted to tell his dad

But it was not something people said.

So he said, *When I finish school, I'm coming to work in the shop.*

His dad smiled slightly, *I don't think so.*

Why not?

It's okay for the summers, but you're not in it for the long haul.

*How would **you** know?*

You're made for different things, Josh.

Like what?

I don't know. Something else. Something better.

What?

Look, don't start with me, Kid. I'm in no mood.

*I'm sick of people telling me what I should do. **I'll** decide – I **know** what I want.*

Is that right?

Yeah, that's right.

Josh had no idea what he wanted of course, but that was irrelevant;

Only the principle of his position mattered and, as always, it was the Right one.

At least I know one thing I want, Josh thought.

XXV. Magdalene

Josh called Maggie on the phone with a hand-written script.

(Options A, B, C, D, and sometimes E).

He wrote down what he would say, and then the general possibilities of her responses,

Then his responses to the responses,

Trying to isolate the mortifying potentialities of freezing or saying something stupid.

He would have to move down the page quickly, pick the right option,

But at least the words were already written.

Me: Hi, is Maggie there?

Maggie/ Maggie's Parents: A: Yes, hold on just a minute.

B: May I ask who's calling?

C: She's not in right now. Can I take a message?

D: Yeah, this is Maggie.

E: Answering Machine.

(Modify 'D' below into message or hang up.)

Me: A: (They go away to get her. Don't hang up! – Then see D)

B: This is Josh. (Or, B-1: Escape Route: 'This is Andrew – Sorry, someone's at the door, I'll have to call her back.')

C: That's okay, I'll call back later.

D: (DON'T HANG UP!!!!) Hi Maggie, this is Josh, from English. I ~~missed class the other day and I was wondering if I could borrow your~~

~~Steinbeck notes-~~ You know that band, The Dears? Anyway they're in town next weekend. Some of us are going to the show. We have a few extra tickets. I was just thinking maybe you'd be interested.

Maggie to A or D: A: *Who* is this?

B: I don't think so. I'm busy that night. / The Dears suck.

C: Maybe. Who's 'we'? (Persevere.)

D: Sure, that sounds great. What time?

And so on.

Joshua knew that what he was doing was sick, twisted, and completely ludicrous, But, at that point, anything that helped manage the terror was welcome.

He dialed the number

(heart pounding hands sweating body shaking)

Three rings (pending jubilation): *I'm going to get the machine!*

Hello?

Josh slammed down the receiver

(suddenly and inexplicably transformed into burning hot iron).

You fucking coward.

Maggie lived close to school. Josh walked by her house after practice,

On a minor eight block detour from the nearest bus stop.

Her neighbourhood was pretty with oak trees, plush green lawns, and BMWs.

He saw her maybe three times in the twenty or so times he'd walked by.

Twice, getting into the Trainspotters' old blue van,

And once glimpsed through a window

So it hardly counted.

One day, Josh walked by and saw Maggie sitting on her front porch

Blowing bubbles through a plastic wand.

It was a sunny day, the beginning of May. *May is always sunny*, Josh thought.

A paperback lay open beside her, dog-eared and worn, *The Bell Jar*.

Maggie always played herself perfectly, Josh noted;

She was very well cast.

He averted his eyes, but she caught him.

Hi, she said, to his surprise. She didn't smile; she looked curious.

Hi.

You read this? she said, lifting the book to show him.

No, is it good?

It's funny. It's funnier than you'd expect. People always make it out to be so depressing, but it's only depressing because she died in real life.

Doesn't she kind of go crazy, though?

Yeah.

I guess that could be depressing.

That's not depressing. It's interesting. I'd like to go crazy for a little while.

Just to experience it. You'd get this whole new perspective on things.

Yeah, Josh said, although he was not so sure how 'interesting' going crazy would be.

I'm crazy enough, he smiled. I don't think I could handle going officially crazy.

Maggie shrugged, It's not for everyone.

Josh shuffled his feet and shoved his hands in his pockets, So, bubbles, huh?

Yep.

You know, you don't have to buy that stuff. You can just make it with dish detergent and water.

But what about the wand?

Well, yeah, right. I guess you have to buy it once for the wand and the bottle, and then you can just refill it.

All those years – just think... I could've saved like... nine dollars.

Hey, nine bucks is still nine bucks. It's a movie, right?

Damn bubble detergent industry! Now, I'll never get to see Spice World.

Josh smiled.

They seemed to have reached a conversational standstill.

I'm trying to quit smoking, she began again. So I'm fulfilling the oral fixation quotient with bubble-blowing. Bubbles, pens, and weed. It's a three-point plan.

If you're smoking weed, that's harsher than tobacco.

Yeah, but it's more fun.

Well yeah – right..

You don't smoke.

No.

I didn't think so.

They were silent for a minute,

And then Maggie said to her yellow plastic wand, not to him,

How come you never talk to me?

What?

You've been following me around for ages. How come you never talk to me?

What? No, I wasn't. I was just...

It's cool. I was just wondering if I'm really as scary as all that.

Josh laughed nervously, *No. Well, yeah actually. You kind of are.*

Really? Maggie was delighted, her eyes lit up and she looked right at him.

In a good way, he said.

Of course.

And that was it. They were friends now. Maggie and Josh. Josh and Maggie.

They spent the next two months drinking Vodka and smoking weed in playgrounds.

They spent afternoons holed up in her bedroom, listening to records,

talking music and philosophy.

It's harder to get in there than into Hitler's bunker, Maggie's dad said one afternoon,

to their delight.

Magdalene was kinder and funnier in person than Josh would've guessed.

He spent all his time with her, and rarely came home except to shower and sleep;

When he came home he went directly to his room,

And blasted his music.

Put your headphones on, Joe said.

So Josh mainlined Nine Inch Nails right into the core of his ears.

The core of your ears is your brain, he thought, stoned.

The headphones shut out the world.

His mother stood in the doorway until he took them off, saying, *Clean up this room.*

I can't stand it anymore.

So close the door, Josh said.

I shouldn't have to. How can anyone live like this?

I don't see why it's any of your concern. It's my room.

It's my house.

So this is a dictatorship now?

His dad passed them by in the hallway. *When wasn't it?* he inquired.

Right, I forgot.

When did you get so lippy? Mary said, Who are these kids you're hanging out with that can stay out all hours of the night and talk to their parents that way?

Josh rolled his eyes.

When am I going to meet this Maggie that my son his spending all his time with?

She lives in a huge Victorian house on the West Side. You really want me to bring her here?

There's nothing wrong with our home. Nothing except this pigsty.

Whatever, he said, putting his headphones back on.

She stood at the door, bewildered, *I don't even know who you are anymore.*

He pretended not to hear her, and she left him alone.

Josh got up to close the door and heard his parents' voices down the hall.

He's a fifteen year old boy, Joe was saying, Fifteen year old boys are supposed to be obnoxious.

I know. But I just feel like – I don't even know him anymore.

Give it a few years. He'll come around.

Josh didn't know why he was acting this way,

But he knew it had nothing to do with his age.

He didn't mean to be a jerk, but suddenly his parents' mere presence,

Everything they said and did just seemed intolerable.

Their words and gestures scraped over his mind like nails on a chalkboard.

He only wanted to be with Maggie.

To spend a few hours cleaning his room or writing a paper

– hours that could be spent with her –

Seemed absurd,

Excruciating.

You hardly spoke. I thought 'he's either very weird or very boring,' Maggie told him.

I couldn't be both? Josh asked.

She smiled at the curling smoke rising from the roach-clip in his fingers.

Be my guest, she said.

Josh never thought that he could fall in love with someone

Who said things like '*Be my guest.*'

Someone who used words like subway tokens

Every one the same as every other, just as long as they got you where you wanted to go.

But here we are, Josh thought, and said,

I'm not fascinated with myself. Maybe that's what makes me boring.

Oh, Fuck off, Maggie grinned, choking a little. *Everyone is fascinated with themselves.*

It's the rule of existence. What makes you so special?

Nothing, Josh said. And felt the sudden ache of younger days – magic rings and

destinies – still buzzing around inside his head,

Flies that refused to be waved through an open door.

He repeated his jaded mantras to counter the ache's temptation:

It is better to live in the Real. In every case.

You are not special. You're the product of stories and some one-night stand

that she was too drunk to remember. Or doesn't want to, he thought.

This is the way people justify their lives. He was not what you imagined.

He was probably some pimply-faced football player who slipped a roofie into her drink.

The colour of his eyes are muddy brown.

He has a chipped front tooth and second notices on his hydro bill.

He has a name that you will never know. But it's in the phone book.

It is not Unspeakable.

Maggie smiled, cutting through his thoughts.

You're mother looks at you like you're going to explode or something, she said,

Apropos of nothing.

My mother's crazy, he said.

My mother's a bitch.

It's always a competition with you.

Always, Maggie agreed.

Let's talk about something else.

Let's not talk at all, she said, her glance glinting gems that sank to the bottom of the space between them.

She came close and looked at him. Right at him.

That the moment had actually come seemed almost miraculous.

And, at the same time, anti-climatic.

He knew he was supposed to do something, but he didn't.

She laughed, tracing silvery fingers down his arms.

You're a virgin, right?

Catching his breath inside her green eyes, he felt himself dissolve

As she pushed her right hand through his hair.

Just the product of one, Josh said sardonically.

Her left hand slid inside his T-shirt, lighting on his spine.

He shivered.

Right.

Maggie kissed Josh – chin, cheek, eyelashes,

Peeling back his shyness like the rind of an orange.

You're so beautiful, she said.

No I'm not.

She kissed him on the mouth, slow and sweet, then deeper.

Don't argue with me.

Okay.

Okay what?

I'll be beautiful if you'll be... real.

She didn't answer

Her body was her answer.

There was something he wanted to tell her,

But it was just out of reach.

XXVI. Kisses

Maggie read the recipe. She was making pumpkin tarts.

1 ¼ cup pumpkin

1 14 oz can condensed milk

2 tbsp brown sugar

1 egg

¼ tsp cinnamon

¼ tsp nutmeg

24 3" unbaked tart shells

Whisk together pumpkin, milk, sugar, egg, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Pour into shells. Bake 375 for 15-20 minutes or until centre set and pastry golden. Cool before serving.

It seemed easy enough.

She had not made the pastry, but had bought the tart shells in a long, frozen tube of little silver cups.

Look at you, Josh said. All June Cleaver.

I didn't make the pastry, Maggie said.

Tart shell Catch 22.

Josh came close, pulling her to him

Like a rag doll.

He grazed her neck with his teeth.

Maggie brought cheek and shoulder together in an evasive gesture,

Josh's caught between: Nutcracker and nut.

She did not know why he liked to bite.

It never hurt, he didn't forget her, but still.

Off with you, my leetle vampiah...

One time, the first time or maybe the second time he bit her shoulder,

Lingering, with sweet, scraping teeth,

She said, *Can the Child of God be a cannibal?*

He looked at her.

She didn't know if he would take it well, this reference to his Mother's delusions,
Sometimes he did, sometimes he didn't...

Josh chose the sunny path,

Can he be anything but?

Josh once told her (granted, he was stoned)

That the whole world was eating itself.

Everything feeding on everything else.

And I'm not just talking about some vague notion of consumerism.

That sounds disgusting, Maggie replied.

However you want to see it...

Joshua loved her and what was love except the urge to reunite Self and Other

To consume and be consumed.

Until we're inseparable. Until two become one.

It must've been to try to eliminate the inevitability of loss Josh thought, but didn't say.

Speak for yourself, Maggie said. *I don't want to be you. You stay in your corner,*

And I'll stay in mine.

And everything will be just fine, Josh said.

So she called him a vampire

And he called her a stone idol,

And everything was just fine.

She made pumpkin tarts

And he made Kraft Dinner, adding Indian lime pickle for spice –

Because everything good should hurt a little.

And your food should always bite back.

They ate only Orange Foods on Sundays

And were happy.

Josh was surprised, after all this time,

How easy it was to be happy.

He love Maggie and told her so

'All the day,' as he would have said when he was little.

He told her he loved her.

She told him she liked his curls and the white shirt that said 'Not Rich. Not Cool'

in sharpie pen

Inspired, of course, by the Prince song 'Kiss.'

You made me that shirt, he said.

But I like that you wear it.

She wouldn't say she loved him

Because, she said, she didn't know if she did, and she refused to lie.

It was Maggie's way

Of biting back.

Why won't you say it, Josh would plead sometimes. They're only words.

If they're only words, why do you care so much?

Because, Josh said. Because because because...

There was no good reason.

Only because he was hungry,

Only because he collected things she said and did

And hid them away in a little box inside.

Maybe it was just instinct; storing up nuts for winter.

I know you love me, Josh teased her. So just say it and get it over with...

Sorry, Kid, but I do like your hair.

She let it curl around her fingers.

It seemed to touch back.

Her own hair hung straight and unmoved,

Nothing but dead protein.

I also like the way you read philosophy while watching the World Cup while stirring packets of MSG powder into pots of Ichiban, all in perfect rotation.

Perfectly timed,

Like an ancient prayer,

A prostration.

Joshua's eyes were holy, bright,

Soft as moonlight.

They never missed a gorgeous assist, a stunning goal,

(instant replay held no charm).

They never lost a train of thought in the middle of a sentence,

Or their place on a page,
They never let the pot boil over, or the noodles get overcooked.
Maggie always said
He had a beautiful sense of timing.
There was an ease with which he moved through the world,
His instincts sharp.
Time had fallen in love with him.
Maybe this was why she couldn't.
Why should you get more, Maggie asked.
It wouldn't be fair.
Josh pouted. He called her withholding.
He was used to being loved.
So if I got a buzz-cut, you'd leave me?
Maggie thought of his brown curls falling to the floor,
Soft as snow.
Maybe... she said.

Maggie didn't believe in Tests
Unless they drew blood.
Tests of faith, tests of love...
These were recipes for disaster.
Try to measure things like that and they disappear
Like smoke in bong.

And all you're left with is a tube of hot glass that burns your hand.

Josh said Maggie was terrible with analogies.

She just laughed.

Everything is precarious, she said. Nothing is certain.

Sometimes Josh admired Maggie's wisdom.

Other times he thought she was full of shit.

He could never quite decide.

And there were always the distractions:

Those grey-green eyes, those soft smirking lips,

That languid body.

But he didn't say it. He didn't say any of it.

Just to mock him, she enjoyed giving him absurd tests,

Quizzing him from the pages of Cosmopolitan.

Which Sex in the City Girl Are You, Joshua? she'd say.

Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte, or Miranda?

Reading aloud, she'd force him to choose

Between clusters of insipid multiple choice answers,

And tease him no matter what the outcome.

He called her a Sadist

She called him a Baby.

Can't you take a joke? she'd laugh. Poking him, tickling him,

Until it was physically impossible not to smile,

Until his ribs hurt – *Can't you? Can't you?*

The torment of her attention.

When he was little he would go around the room kissing everyone.

Kissing his father's cracked knuckles, his grandmother's papery elbow,

his brother's fat cheeks, his mother's nylon-stockinged knee.

Mary said, he would do this inexplicably,

Set forth on rounds of kisses.

While the adults talked politics and family gossip,

While the kids struggled with puzzles and stacking rings,

Josh would go on a kissing spree.

A round of sweet affection,

Of love unasked for.

But Josh couldn't just go around kissing people anymore.

He had to stand tall against the world.

Now, it was only for Maggie

That he could bend.

XXVII. The Skin of Sadness

Jimmy leaned against the door frame as though his left shoulder had spontaneously melted into the wood,

Watching his brother make a grilled cheese sandwich.

Damn. That looks good.

Thought you were hungover, Joshua remarked, scraping softly at the crispy fried bread with a spatula.

Yeah, well. It's wearing off.

Josh shrugged, *So make one after.*

Jimmy eyed his brother for a minute, and then lifted his chin in negotiation,

Just give me half.

I'm hungry.

Just half. You can make another one after.

What's the point of that? Why don't you just make another one after?

Jimmy shrugged, *Can't be bothered.*

So you're not that hungry.

Come on, man. Don't be a prick. Just half.

Josh rolled his eyes, *You're so fuckin' lazy.*

He stabbed the spatula into the sandwich, and dropped half onto a plastic Raggedy Ann plate. Jimmy stood there watching.

Josh raised his eyebrows, *You want it or not?*

Jimmy took the plate and slumped appreciatively into a kitchen chair.

Leaning against the counter absently, Josh took a bite.

Jimmy finished quickly and turned to Joshua, *So are you fucking this girl or what?*

Pardon?

Maggie.

James...

What?

Shut up.

Jimmy was silent for a minute. Perhaps he had put it a little too directly,

But it was still a reasonable question.

*Cuz I'm just sayin', man, I heard that girl gets **around**.*

Joshua felt his skin ice over. *You don't know what you're talking about.*

She's cute and all, but you don't want to end up with the clap.

D'you even know what the clap is, James?

If I don't, you'll find out for me.

Josh frowned, willing himself not to succumb to the temptation of pounding his brother.

We're not having this conversation.

So you are.

We're not talking, man.

Either you are or you aren't. This is not a hard question.

It's a question that's none of your business.

Fine, but don't come cryin' to me –

Have I ever come crying to you?

Fine. Whatever. Just don't say I didn't warn you.

Stop talking.

*And make sure you check all your pockets before putting things in the wash,
cuz you know Mum would die if she found anything.*

Yeah, because she's a patron saint.

Jimmy shrugged, a mean glint in his eye, *Well, you would know.*

This was Jimmy's philosophy: when all else fails, play the prophet card.

Tried and true taunting method. Old reliable.

Josh felt the anger, a hot rock in his stomach.

Not worth it, he thought to himself, his jaw tight.

He put the plate in the sink

And walked away.

Maggie sat up and looked at him,

Her lipstick smudged across her face.

Why do you want to know? she asked suspiciously.

Josh looked away, at the peeling paint of her bedroom wall. White under green.

Magdalene. Magdalene of the Peeling Walls.

Her parents hated it.

She trained wisteria vines through her window, they curled and reached.

The shame of the question slithered inside, tightened around his ribs,

Rooted itself. Mean weeds he couldn't pull.

I don't know... I guess it's something I should know maybe.

He loved her best of all. He loved her too much.

You never cared before, she said.

I don't care.

The pettiness of it began to gnaw at the vine like aphids.

He felt feverish. Infected.

Then why ask?

It's just something you're supposed to ask.

Since when do you believe in 'supposed to'?

He shook his head, wanting to stop.

The words came anyway, **You asked.**

I did not.

The first time. You asked.

Maggie smirked. Her dark hair falling out of her ponytail, falling into her face.

I asked if you were a virgin.

Yeah.

She looked at him for the first time like he was something incomprehensible,

Something pointless.

It's a different question.

Hardly. The knot tightened with each word.

He could not back down.

He had to push forward.

And you pretty much lied. And I knew anyway. I know when you're lying.

Good for you.

But I didn't go 'oh, how many?'

She hadn't. Josh looked down.

I was nice about it. I knew you didn't want to say. And now I feel like...

He looked at her. She met his gaze, sliced into him like an apple.

Maggie's eyes hurt sometimes when he looked directly at them,

But this was different;

It wasn't the light, it was the gaze, the changed way of seeing.

You feel like what? he asked quietly.

I feel like you're accusing me of something.

Josh reached out, brushing Maggie's soft-powdered cheek with his fingers. *I'm not.*

What if I don't want to answer?

Don't answer.

Fine. She bit her lip and nodded.

The tears spilled over like beads. He had never seen her cry.

I love you, he wanted to say,

But the words evaporated against the skin of her sadness.

He wanted to touch her

But his hands were burning.

I love you more than anything, he wanted to say

But didn't.

XXVIII. Tuesday Afternoon

It was a Tuesday afternoon in September.

You're so pretty, Josh told Maggie, teasing.

She hated being called pretty.

You are, Josh said.

Shut up. Makes me sound like a fuckin' Rainbow Bright doll.

He'd found another nickname for her:

When she gave him a dirty look, he would anoint fire with oil,

What's the matter, Brighty?

At that point, her scowls would transform into punches.

He loved her more with every blow.

Maggie was magnificent.

She hated everything.

She tore holes in her lace stockings with an Exacto knife.

Assessing them carefully before making her first incision

And then slashing savagely as though possessed.

Angry. Unforgiving. Gorgeous.

Magdalene.

Her mother thought she was insane,

Which, of course, delighted Maggie.

Are those your new tights, Mrs. Zimmerman asked as Maggie and Josh lounged on the

couch watching music videos. *Torn already?*

The left corner of Maggie's mouth flickered.

A kerosene lamp.

Honestly, Mags, what have you been doing? You look like you've been through a bullfight or something!

At this, Maggie grinned, shooting Josh a conspiratorial look.

A bullfight, Mum?

If you keep wrecking them, I'm not paying for new ones.

Like I give a fuck.

Really, Maggie. You should hear yourself. I bet Josh would never speak to his mother like that. Would you, Joshua.

Josh blushed, not wanting to get pulled into the conversation.

And I'm sure he wouldn't go around wrecking things either. Honestly, Mags, you destroy everything in your wake.

She showed no reaction, but he knew she liked that too.

Hurricane Maggie.

Well, Josh can't, can he, Mother? Maggie said, a mean glint in her eye.

Don't say it, Josh thought. But Maggie did.

Didn't you know? she said, *Joshua's come to save the world. If he destroyed it first, that would kind of defeat the purpose...*

Josh wished he could disappear into the crevices of couch cushions then,

A penny or a nickel,

Unnoticed.

Inconsequential.

Well it's true! Maggie insisted, her eyes wide with feigned ingenuity, *That's the Pottery Barn rule, Kid. 'You break it, you buy it.'*

She had a habit of calling him 'Kid' because he was seven months younger than she was.

It irritated Josh sometimes, but he didn't protest;

It was the closest Maggie ever came to a term of endearment.

Well, Mrs. Zimmerman said, cutting in practically. That certainly seems like a better plan than whatever it is you're aiming for, Maggie.

Because I'm aiming to be a crack whore.

Well, I don't know what your goals are. I'm not sure you have any aspirations other than to drive me to an early grave.

One can only hope, Maggie smiled.

Maggie's mother looked at her daughter, at the dyed black hair,

at the rust coloured streaks where she'd tried to layer blond over black,

And shook her head.

You know, Maggie, different isn't always better.

No, said Maggie, ignoring her mother's look,

Chipping away at her aquamarine nail polish instead.

But it's more interesting.

XXIX. Ordinary Day

It was an ordinary day.

It was a Same Old day, indifferent to mental notes, to the paperclips of affect.

There was no pathos in the wind.

The willows did not weep.

The sky did not darken.

It was an ordinary October day.

For October, it was actually quite a nice day.

There were patches of sunshine and blue sky, a vague threat of showers here and there.

Mixed sun and cloud, the weatherman said on the radio that morning, as Joshua stirred cereal into milk.

The bus that would get him to school on-time was long gone.

He looked at the crossword puzzle; Monday was easy.

Filling the spaces with invisible letters that he could not commit to ink.

His father woke up with a headache.

But so what?

There was nothing unusual about that.

Years of dust, noise, fumes – the quotidian of manual labour – had taken their toll,
as things will...

Joe got headaches.

It was something normal. Something that happened.

He had a constant headache he hardly noticed anymore.

But on this particular morning, he noticed.

He lay on the bed in work shirt and jeans, his forearm pressed against his eyes.

The blinds were shut.

In the dark room, Mary's eggshell ceiling still glowed bright enough to hurt.

Joshua stood in the doorway, sullen, irritable,

His body drooping like a daffodil after the rain.

That was his way these days.

Joe shifted his arm from his eyes, sensing him there.

He looked at his son.

You givin' me a ride or what, Josh said.

What about the bus?

You want me to be late?

Joe sat up and sighed; he did not want him to be late.

Slowly, too slowly, he pulled on his boots.

Tightening the laces carefully, methodically,

Josh was certain, just to spite him.

Josh was mad at Joe.

Josh was generally mad at everyone these days (except Maggie).

But he was especially mad at Joe.

A week and a half ago, Joe had refused to let him buy a run-down old Mustang

that a guy a few streets over was selling.

Even though it was *Joshua's* money, even though he would fix it up himself,

Even though he would take care of his own insurance –

Even then, Joe vetoed the whole thing by refusing to co-sign.

The injustice of this decision seemed to Josh an absurd abuse of power;

He was determined to make Joe regret it.

Josh was late for school.

His mother had dropped off the others on her way to the store, while Josh was upstairs feigning sleep.

Since his dad had stayed in bed late this morning,

Josh was not about to let him off the hook.

Joe was an asshole,

Lecturing Josh on maturity, readiness –

Always trying prove that he had authority over Josh.

All the Typical Bullshit:

If Joshua wanted the privileges of adulthood, he'd better start living up the responsibilities of adulthood... blah blah blah...

Start focusing on school again, showing up for work on time, coming home for dinner;

Stop cutting classes, staying out all hours, smoking dope, etc.

Stupid reasons.

If I had a car, I'd be on time. I could get home for dinner, and come home earlier at

night. And it was your guys's brilliant idea to make me go to f – to private school all the way on the other side of town. So forgive me if I, occasionally, get marked absent when I'm a few minutes late.

You're not getting a car, Josh.

Smart. Refuse to go along with the one plan that would solve all your problems.

Do you know how many sixteen year olds get killed every year in car accidents?

So I can't go anywhere because of statistics?

You've got a bus pass.

Now, in the vague morning light, Josh felt better.

Joe was in a compromised state; he could get him back.

Usually, his dad was gone by the time Josh woke up.

Bugging his mother just didn't hold the same appeal.

Hurry up! I'm gonna be late!

Why didn't you get up earlier?

Why didn't you?

Joe didn't respond.

Let me guess... Joshua said. You have a headache.

His dad's headaches had been a thorn in his side for years.

Trips to the park, zoo excursions, picnics at the beach

(not that he gave a shit about any of that anymore)

But still – it was a pain in the ass.

The worst part was, Joe never let the headaches stop him. He went anyway.

Put on his shades and barely said anything the rest of the day.

Josh often wished he wouldn't come at all.

He didn't like Joe that way, quiet and in pain,

Stoical to a fault.

He didn't like his mother then either,

Distracted, unsmiling,

Lines growing deeper into her brow.

He wanted them happy or not at all.

Joe didn't give in.

He got up. He went to work. He spent time with his family.

He did not call in sick. He did not opt out.

This would have gone against what it meant to be a man.

A betrayal of the worst kind.

In later years, he had bleeding ulcers, so bad he could barely eat,

His hands cracked and stiff, his brow tattooed with lines of stress;

His body falling apart at the age of forty-four.

What happened to my rough and tumble husband? Mary would tease, as he lost more and more weight.

The one that used to jump fences with a kid or two on his back. What happened to him?

The bloody _____ administration, Joe would say, smiling mildly at his wife.

But Josh knew it was them.

(this was the unspoken reality, the fact refused)

They had happened:

Three kids and a girl-child of a wife.

That and the fact that Joe was incapable of half-measures.

He could not give a little; he had to give it all.

At sixteen, Josh had no sympathy for him;

Joe got what he deserved.

It was cold outside.

As Josh sauntered towards the car, the grass crunched beneath his feet.

He slumped into the passenger seat and waited.

His dad started the engine; it stalled and died.

Joe turned the key, tried again.

On the third time, it started.

'Three times a charm,' he could hear his father say even though he did not say it today.

They drove in silence.

A few blocks from school, Joe reached over, opened the glove compartment and put on his sunglasses.

Josh glanced at them scornfully and sighed.

When Joe pulled up in front of school,

He hesitated, and touched Josh's shoulder as he opened the door.

What time are you coming home tonight?

I don't know. When I get there.

Dinnertime.

Maybe...

Josh.

I have to go. I'm late.

Be home for dinner please.

I'll get there when I get there.... And don't go calling my friends' and bugging them.

See you at dinner, Josh.

Josh slammed the door.

All the way across the field, brittle blades of grass whispered beneath his feet.

He didn't look back, but he knew anyway.

The car would linger there until he was out of sight.

XXX. The Rest

There was a morning and there was an afternoon.

Appropriately the morning was Before, The afternoon was After.

That had been the morning;

This was the afternoon.

Josh was with Maggie (of course)

On her patchwork quilt, in her vine filled room.

They were talking about something.

He could not remember what – only that he was with her.

That was all that mattered.

Her mother called up the stairs, *Magdalene!*

Interrupting.

Maggie sighed.

There was nothing they hated more than interruptions.

Maggie unlocked the door and went into the hallway.

She stood at the top of the stairs while Josh waited.

Joshua has to go home. His mother called.

Maggie came back, *Your mum says you have to go home.*

It's four o'clock. What the fuck does she want?

Maggie shrugged. Josh smirked.

I'll be back later, he said. She better not give me any shit.

He scanned his mind for things she might have asked him to do that he hadn't done.

He had taken out the recycling,

Saturday, he'd cleaned the bathroom and vacuumed the upstairs.

He had not yet started on the garage,

But surely she wouldn't be such a bitch as to call him home for that.

Whatever it was, he had to get back to Maggie as soon as possible.

When he came in the house, no one was around.

Hannah and Jimmy weren't in the TV room.

His mother wasn't making dinner.

Is that you, Josh?

She was upstairs.

Where are you? Josh called back irritably, though he knew.

Come here.

When he opened the bedroom door, his mother was sitting on the bed.

Her eyes were red.

What? he said. But he knew.

He's dead, Josh.

Who? It was a strange question. He didn't know why he asked it. He already knew.

Your dad.

He didn't stay long. Just long enough.

Then he left.

Afterward, Josh walked down the street, floated down the street,

Dead leaves swirling past.

There must have been a bus, but he didn't remember.

He just remembered standing on her front porch.

She came out, zipped up her coat, and smiled.

They walked to the magazine store.

She wanted to see if any of the November issues had come out yet.

She showed him things as she flipped through, said she wasn't going to buy them yet, that she was going to wait.

Josh picked up the two she liked best, and bought them for her.

Whoa there, Moneybags, she said.

He might've smiled.

It wasn't until they were back on the porch, and her mother was calling her,
that he said it:

My dad is dead.

There they were, the words changing the space between them,
Transforming worlds.

He only vaguely remembered what her eyes looked like then.

She said she would stay with him.

Her mother called her again, told her to come in for tea, her grandmother was visiting.

I'll talk to them, she said. Wait here.

Don't worry, Josh said. I'm fine. Go have tea.

No. She would be back.

Just wait, she said.

She went inside.

Josh hesitated for a moment,

And then he left.

Here is what happened:

Josh sat down on the bed beside his mother.

He felt strange, heavy and light at the same time.

What happened?

She shook her head. *Al said he wasn't feeling great. He went to lie down in the back room. He said he just had to wait for the pills to kick in. Next time they went in, he was already gone.*

People don't die of headaches, Josh said.

It was an aneurism.

An aneurism.

A weak blood vessel. It's must've been leaking – that's why the bad headache. And then it ruptured.

Josh stared at her. People didn't die of fucking headaches.

Why didn't he stay home?

It wouldn't have mattered, Josh. The only way would've been to get him to the hospital and get it operated on before it burst. No one could've known.

A headache.

Josh shook his head, feeling like a character in a bad movie.

When he'd last seen his father, blood was leaking into his brain.

He didn't even notice.

It seeped into the cracks of his brain

Until there was nothing left of the man

Who pretended to be his father.

XXXI. Ways of Getting By

After Joe died, Josh retreated into Maggie.

It wasn't a choice.

With her long black hair, red roots peaking out, and her wicked grin,

Her commitment to never go too deep or ask hard questions,

Maggie became even more of an escape.

She became his refuge.

There were known exchanges,

A litany of million times repeated jokes,

Of oft-recited dialogues,

The catechism of friendship.

All of these were of solace to Joshua

In a world he didn't understand.

In a strange alternative version of the world he'd known,

With the same sidewalk, the same stores, the same bicycle racks,

The same puddles of cigarettes imprinted with lipstick,

But with one key element missing that seemed to change the whole DNA of existence.

He didn't know if this element was Joe or something else.

He just knew that something about everything was no longer solid,

Hallowed out, flimsy and permeable.

Like someone had gone while he was sleeping and torn down the world,

And then rebuilt it just the same, only out of cardboard.

Chairs smashed over heads would fall away in pieces.

Is this what we are? Josh wondered. *Just actors on a set.*

Not real at all.

But Maggie still felt real;

She was the only one.

His mother became the heroine of her own tragedy,

A Lady Macbeth or an Ophelia.

She came home from work everyday,

And went to bed.

James stayed in with his video games –

Alternate worlds of clear-cut dangers and instant rewards.

Hannah sat at her desk counting beads,

Making thousands of necklaces.

She listened to Top 40 radio, plastered her walls with pictures of glassy-eyed boys
from the pages of Tiger Beat and Bop.

She made necklaces out of beads

That looked like they'd been laying at the bottom of the ocean for a thousand years.

They each had their own ways of getting by.

Joshua's was Maggie.

He was not sure if Maggie minded; if she did, she never showed it.
Maybe she thought it was strange that he never said anything once the logistics
of the funeral were over.
Because now he not only loved her,
He needed her.

XXXII. Light

When Joshua was a little boy, his dad told him stories...
How sailors used to wrap their dead in sailcloth, sew them up sailcloth,
With stones to weight them down,
And throw them overboard into the deep deep ocean.

Joe loved the sea.
He said that when he died that is how he would like to go down.
Joshua didn't like the idea of fish eating Joe's eyes, but he kept quiet.
He understood
There were things he did not understand.
Joe was buried in the dirt in a cemetery off a highway in the suburbs.
He was buried in a pine box
That Joshua helped to carry.
Joe was surprisingly light.

XXXIII. Bone Cake

Then one day, someone else came.

Another One, a new One.

She came into his mind

An angel,

A reason.

He met Maggie downtown in the law-court gardens across the street from the art gallery.

The same art gallery steps where drugs were sold: uppers, downers, a-little-of-boths.

Kids would buy dime bags or tabs of acid and then come across the street

and sit in the maze,

The pebbled concrete and blind corner hedges of the law-court gardens,

Getting high, getting drunk, changing their minds.

Tonight, they were meeting some of Maggie's friends.

Maggie's friends who had become Josh's by default.

In the old days, they had surrounded her, a wall of superiority and indifference,

Making her seem impossible to reach.

He knew it was his own fault, but a part of him still resented them,

Resented the fact that they'd gotten to him,

Scared him off from all the hours and all the days he might have spent with her Before.

It because of them that he'd waited in the cold – outside the school,

outside the earthquake shelter, outside the Seven Eleven on the boulevard –

Waited for the moment

When they might drop their guard or look away,

And she would See him.

Back then, she came by often enough –

That wasn't the problem.

The problem was that she was always surrounded by a pox of dagger-eyed devas,
a gaggle of girls, diligent as bodyguards.

There was never less than three surrounding her at any given moment.

And the boys – mohawked, black eye-lined in Industrial clothes and combat boots –
were so cool, so composed that Josh couldn't stand nearby without feeling
that his whole existence was unjustified.

They were that self-possessed.

Even when she decided she wanted him, they'd appraised him with cool, hard eyes,
Tolerating him for Maggie's sake.

She used to tell him he was being paranoid;

They liked him, surprisingly.

Surprisingly? You're surprised they like me.

I'm surprised I like you, Maggie said.

But today, when he first arrived in the law-court gardens, they were nowhere in sight.

It was just her. Eyes painted like Cleopatra, pearls in her hair,

Fishnets cut open

So the fish could escape.

He sat down on the ground next to Maggie and offered her
The remainder of a twixxer of vodka that he'd carried around all day in his backpack.
It wasn't much; not enough for him, but maybe enough for Maggie.
She shook her head. Josh looked at her.
Had she changed too – his Maggie?
Had she been replaced with the styrofoam of the secret world?
A beautiful imposter that looked like Maggie,
But turned down liquor at four in the afternoon on a Friday?
Feeling okay? he asked her.
She nodded, but she looked strange; pale and strange
Like a ghost.
For a moment, she seemed to be fading into fiction.
So there's this thing I want to tell you, she said. *I guess it's a baby.*
That's exactly how she said it.
Not *'I'm pregnant,'* which was the normal way of saying it,
But *'this thing I want to tell you.'*

Josh had all the usual thoughts of the *'What the hell am I gonna tell my parents?'* variety.
But he felt something else too...
A sense of purpose.
As the thought grew inside him, expanding like a sea sponge,
Joshua began to feel real again.
Someone was coming to life in the dead of winter.

Someone who would be theirs

And not theirs.

Someone who would say and do things he could not yet imagine.

When Joshua was small his mother told him where babies came from.

This is what she said:

Babies come from a faraway desert.

They come from little bones that a wind blows over and makes whole again.

The wind makes flesh and soul.

This kind of soul, Mary told Joshua, was a magical spark,

Not the fish that Bubbie cooked for Shabbat dinner.

Joshua also knew that babies were put inside the Mummy's tummy to bake.

Like cake in the oven.

He made this observation once and Mary pretended to eat his chubby cheeks;

It made him laugh.

Little Gingerbread Man.

Josh thought of Mickey

Who was made in the night kitchen by three fat chefs.

The book his Mummy thought was weird but read him anyway

Because Joshua liked it.

At four, he used to march down the back lane chanting Mickey's chant,

I'M IN THE MILK AND THE MILK'S IN ME!

I'M MICKEY!

Yes, he used to like to yell that, bold and happy,

To all his invisible friends.

Little Bone Cake.

Little Bread Boy

With cherry filling inside.

XXXIV. Soleil

In the cafe there was a bright yellow flower on the table, and a woman, and a breeze through the open doorway.

Josh smiled at Maggie. She smiled back.

That sly, spicy cinnamon smile.

They had a secret.

Her name would be Soleil.

Sunshiny Girl.

For reasons they could not explain, Josh and Maggie were certain it was a girl.

She had already made her presence known to them,

Though she was only nine weeks into being.

Bright eyes and a mischievous smile,

Skinned knees and secrets.

Freckles. Maybe freckles.

They rooted through second hand stores, Value Villages and Three Vets,
with a watchful eye on baby carriers.

They found a stroller with four big plastic beads on a bar across the front
And big wheels for rough terrain.

Josh imagined the little girl with her small dimpled hands,
Her brow furrowed in concentration as she moved the beads across, left to right,
Struggling them over

One by one.

Pink. Yellow. Blue. Green.

They bought baby clothes.

A small pair of corduroy overalls the colour of moss.

Small purple knitted slippers.

A turquoise sleeper with a yellow duck sewn on the left side of the chest.

They bought other things, too – baby pins (because they would only use cloth diapers),

An elephant bib with a soother attached to the trunk,

A crinkly-winged dragon.

They tucked these items away in school backpacks

And then spread them out on the bed when they locked Maggie's door behind them.

It was a reality all their own then.

But soon they would have to share it.

Maggie was two months pregnant;

They would keep the secret for a few more weeks before they broke it to their parents.

If Maggie was scared, she didn't show it.

Josh knew their parents would be upset,

But when the baby was born, everyone would feel differently.

They'd watch over her like sunflowers.

Joshua sank into a dream:

Joe walked behind Soleil

As she rode a red tricycle down the street,

Stopping every now and again to pick up a pine-cone or a leaf

To show him.

Josh started to rise to the surface,

Into the shadow country between dreaming and waking.

He woke up missing him.

Missing him as bad as he'd ever missed him.

I've missed you all my life.

And then he remembered –

She was coming.

XXXV. Little Fish

Maggie woke up as though from a dream.

Just how do you propose to do that? they wanted to know.

Yes how? Maggie wondered.

She looked at her mother, then at her father, each to each.

She was surprised to find the room unchanged.

There should've been toppled lamps, broken windows, couch cushions sliced open.

Everything destroyed by the force of what she said.

Hurricane Maggie.

But no, it was still neat and tidy, dusted and polished.

Elsa, the cleaning lady, had come and gone.

Maggie's parents were very grave,

Spooky portraits from the Renaissance, only in modern dress.

How do you propose to do that? her mother asked again.

It was a rhetorical question, but she wanted an answer anyway.

Maggie looked at them,

Not through her own eyes, but through eyes –

Flipped images sifted through rods and cones –

And noticed, to her surprise, that they were people.

Real people.

Like her. Like Josh.

Hello... Maggie thought. How strange to see you here.

How strange that I never noticed before,

Just how sad and ordinary you are.

But her parents weren't in on the revelation;

They were still wearing their parent glasses.

You're seventeen, her mother said.

And Maggie remembered that this was also true.

She was seventeen.

What the fuck was she doing?

The little bundle of cells began to move inside her.

Warm water swirled down a drain; the plug had been pulled.

A baby!? A fucking baby!?

The words came into her mind like other people's.

No.

No No No No No.

Take it out.

Little fish,

Sad to say,

But it's time for you to go.

XXXVI. Constellations Change

Constellations had changed.

It was like he looked up one day and noticed that the Big Dipper was gone,
Disappeared since the last time he looked.

And how could it be?

So he started to look for reasons – maybe it was too early, maybe he needed glasses,

Or maybe his mind had just lost its bearings for a minute.

This is what it must feel like to go insane, Joshua thought.

At the very beginning, when you knew something was wrong,

That it must be you and not the world

But you still couldn't change it.

Because it must've been him that was mistaken.

The alternative was too hard to hold.

They sat there. The three of them –

Maggie, flanked by parents on both sides,

Rachel and King,

A lawyer and a real estate developer.

Three against one.

Maggie stared at the carpet and let them speak.

She didn't look at him.

She might as well have been the upholstery.

Rachel was the spokesperson:

We have decided – Magdalene, her father and I have decided that she will not go through with this pregnancy.

We.

Josh was not included in the equation.

It had always been that Maggie was the One

And Josh the Two.

Everyone else was on the outside.

But Maggie wouldn't look at him now; she was now part of the Three.

It wasn't just that he didn't get a vote,

It was the way they looked right through him.

All he wanted was Maggie back.

Josh left in a daze.

He turned to Rachel at the door, her hand impatient on the knob,

and said, *I want to be there.*

Her eyes were hard, ready for anything.

I don't think it's a good idea.

Please, Josh said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Her father and I will discuss it, Rachel said brusquely.

I won't try to stop her, he said, unsure if he was lying.

They won't allow anyone in the room.

I still want to be there.

He knew that Maggie was inside listening.

At school, she wouldn't look at him.

She was constantly surrounded.

Tuesday morning, she passed him in the hall and handed him a card.

It was a clinic card; on the back she'd written, *Wednesday 2 o'clock.*

XXXVII. A Little Bit Less

Wednesday, two o'clock.

Josh cut History and Biology, cut out at lunch –

Two buses and a ten minute walk.

Inside, Maggie had a Sports Illustrated magazine open on her lap.

Her eyes were immobile on the page, and then she looked up.

They looked at each other.

What was there to say?

I am your witness.

And this was not a thing that people said.

King wasn't with them.

Rachel looked at Joshua, decided not to make a scene.

She sat down and murmured something in Maggie's ear.

Something about the form she had just handed Maggie.

Her mother put a pen in her hand and she wrote her name on the line.

Josh waited in the corner of the waiting room, several seats away.

No one spoke to him. No one looked at him.

He was alone in the place where he should have disappeared seventeen years ago.

His skin grew pale, his veins translucent;

He felt himself start to fade away.

He tried not to think of the small pair of overalls tucked between his bed and the wall.

After awhile, a nurse came out and called her name, *Magdalene Zimmerman*.

She stood up and her mother stood up.

Maggie didn't look at Josh. She followed the nurse down the hall.

There was no pain in her face,

No fear –

Only submission.

Josh waited in the waiting room

While the baby was vacuumed out of her body.

Tears spilled down his cheeks.

He couldn't stop it.

When she came back, she looked fine,

Only a little bit less.

XXXVIII. Seventeen

The winter months were cold and wet.

On what felt like the rainiest day of the year, Josh turned seventeen;

Gutters overflowed. Cars splashed pedestrians.

It is your birthday.

Happy Birthday.

Even though he said he didn't want to do anything,

His mother made him a spice cake with whole wheat flour, sweetened with agave nectar.

Since Joe died, Mary was on a health food kick,

Even though Josh was fairly certain that eating whole wheat and flax seed

Had little effect on the outcome of aneurisms.

Hannah knitted Josh a scarf that was long and green.

Jimmy didn't bug him about Maggie dumping him.

His mother gave him a World Book and a history of Great Leaders.

She wrote an inscription:

To my beloved firstborn Joshua, on the great adventure of his life,

I know you will make something out of it –

Something beautiful.

Joshua read it and tried not to let it show on his face;

That Story was over.

XXXIX. Sad

The rest of the year was a blur.

He did homework, wrote exams, graduated.

He went through life on autopilot.

Josh removed himself from all school friendships, fell back on old ones.

Played video games with Klasher,

Watched movies with Isobel.

She was studying human behaviour, she said,

By way of bad and not quite so bad Hollywood movies.

Sometimes she rewound particular scenes to take notes;

She was a dedicated student.

One day, she came back with the popcorn and looked at him.

Are you sad, Josh?

She had learned that expression, a blankness in the eyes,

A posture of the body,

Like a partially deflated pool toy.

This is a way that Sad looks.

Joshua shook his head and smiled, *No, Izzie. I'm not sad.*

He knew it wasn't fair to lie.

But, this too, was a way of the world.

People lied.

XL. Dreams

Joshua lay on his bed blasting Marilyn Manson into his ears.

She's made of hair and bone and little teeth

And things I cannot speak.

She comes down like a wicked angel

Her spine is just a string.

Someone had told him that the line actually went

She comes on like a crippled plaything,

But even though he'd realized when they said it that it was true,

Josh still heard it the other way.

Tears rolled down his temples, into his ears.

How could she do this to him?

The distance was excruciating, almost unbearable.

She didn't care. Maybe she'd never cared.

She could let him go just like that,

Easy as that.

She was fine.

She was going away for two weeks to theatre camp in England.

She stood by the earthquake bin with her friends, laughing and talking.

She looked just the same as before.

Her soul had not been severed from her body.

Josh didn't know who he was without her.

He hated her.

He wanted to kill her.

He wanted her back.

He lay on his bed

Listening to Marilyn Manson,

Trying not to pray.

(God, if you exist,

At least give me a sign she's sad.

Please let her be sad.)

Josh sank into a dream.

He kept finding little animals on his front lawn.

Small bunnies, cute frogs, mewing kittens.

He would pick them up to hold them,

And find that his hands wouldn't let go.

His hands tightened in a death squeeze.

They were not his own anymore.

He couldn't let go.

Then there was a tiger ready to devour him,

Hungry for flesh.

Josh tried to reason with it, making compromises.

What about an arm, just an arm,

Or a of couple ribs?

He didn't need all his ribs.

But the tiger would not be reasoned with.

Josh woke up feeling strange.

The house was on fire.

There were fire trucks, and reverse 911 calls

Telling everyone to evacuate.

Outside on the street, there was a twelve year old boy.

His mother was trying to zip up his coat as he played a Gameboy.

He sat down beside her on the curb,

Resting his head on his mother's shoulder,

The world burning.

Then he woke up for real.

Josh! Dinnertime!

His sister was calling from downstairs.

Josh opened his eyes,

Awake.

XLI. After

Josh's English teacher was frustrated with him.

He was missing too many classes; he was not getting his work in on time.

Mr. Port-Smith told Josh that he was not working up to his potential.

Josh looked at him, tired.

He didn't see the point of all this.

If your dad were alive, he would want you to go forward;

He would want you to persevere.

Joshua looked at his teacher.

You didn't know my dad.

No, but I'm sure –

Don't be sure, Josh said.

Every parent –

My dad didn't persevere. He just worked. He did what was expected of him.

So, you see –

That's not perseverance; that's compliance. He didn't do it to persevere. He did it because he had to. He breathed in toxic fumes 'til he was dead.

Then he sacrificed for you –

No, Joshua said. Don't make it out to be noble. He never questioned anything.

Josh said this,

And knew it was a lie,

But he didn't care.

Because the only thing Joe questioned
Was Josh.

XLII. God Again

Ninety people were murdered in Bombay.

Six gunmen entered the lobbies of three tourist hotels and opened fire.

It was not personal.

Boys not much older than Joshua were promised virgins in Paradise for their martyrdom.

They were marked Saints, marked Sinners.

Anger was justified, but not helpful.

It was one instance among many...

How could this be?

This in the name of God.

XLIII. The Weight

There were things Josh didn't like to think about.

Like why his mother cried when he called her at work,

And told her that he'd got his first acceptance letter from a university.

Instinctively, he knew that he was getting something she didn't,

Something she'd wanted.

Josh felt guilty.

He didn't want her to cry;

He wanted to live his own life.

There were other things Josh didn't understand.

What was wrong with the world?

What made a person so angry that they'd want to hurt someone they didn't even know
just for the pleasure of hurting?

He didn't think university taught this.

Neither did religion.

It was, he thought, the greatest mystery.

Not God, not existence, but this.

What drove people to hate?

Joe was exposed to poisons everyday of his life;

It wore him down slowly.

I am not strong like my father

And even he died broken.

But maybe, Josh thought, I am just like my father.

Not Joe, but the other One.

The one that poisons the blood

Inexplicable.

The one that slipped a roofie into some girl's drink

And raped her.

Because here was Josh.

(he would never be able to make it up to her.)

XLIV. Not Knowing

WHO THE FUCK *ARE* YOU!?

WHO THE FUCK *ARE* YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

WHO THE FUCK *ARE* YOU????????????????????

i have to know.

WHY?

What difference does it make?

None.

You stupid fucking idiot –

Let it go.

You will never know.

XLV. First Year

Joshua went to school everyday of the week,

Monday through Friday.

He liked University more than he thought he would.

Even though it was more expensive, his mother encouraged him to go away to school.

She would give him five thousand a year; the rest he could get from student loans.

She thought it would be good for him to experience something new.

It was always good, she said, for young people to find out who they were

Away from home.

Josh was relieved;

He would not have had it in him to leave her

Unless she told him to.

Hannah cried when he left. His mother put on a brave face.

Jimmy seemed annoyed by all the drama;

Josh hugged his brother anyway.

Josh's roommate in the dormitory was named Theo.

Theo was from a small town where everybody knew everybody.

His family was one of two black families in town.

Are you a fag? Theo asked point blank on the second day.

Josh was taken aback. *No.*

Cool. I just thought I'd check. You never know who's a fag these days.

Josh felt a twinge of anger, but said nothing.

He didn't want to start off on the wrong foot.

Theo had a girlfriend called Jessica back home,

But he broke up with her two weeks into the semester

Because he found a new one, Amy.

Amy complained that her stuck up roommate wouldn't let Theo sleep over.

After that, she rarely went back to her room.

For the rest of the year, Theo, Amy, and Josh shared a room.

They made Kraft dinner in an electric kettle, and watched *Happy Gilmour* and *The Mask* maybe seventy seven times.

Theo's video library was limited.
Josh never got to sleep before three in the morning,
And usually had to wake up at eight.
Everyday, he got up in the dark, got dressed in the closet and left for class,
When he got back at three in the afternoon, Theo and Amy would still be in bed.
At first, he was polite, and left again or worked with a book light,
But halfway through first semester, he started pulling the curtains open,
And kicking the end of their bed, *Get up you lazy asses.*
Theo and Amy never went to class,
Didn't do their readings,
But were still outraged when they failed exams.

XLVI. Letters from Home

Izzie wrote letters to Josh.
She was still at home, working part-time at the local animal shelter and part-time
at Book Warehouse.
She wrote him beautiful letters.
Josh thought they were beautiful anyway.
They were simple and honest.

One day, Amy picked one up, cooing over another letter from Josh's giiiiirlfriend.
What are we, in grade three? he thought.
She stood on Theo's bed reading in a loud theatrical voice:

Animals make sense to me, in a way that people don't. They are less confusing.

I feel comfortable when I'm around animals. They are not as complicated as people.

They are more like me.

Josh took the letter away from her.

What is she, retarded or something? Amy asked.

XLVII. Missing

What kind of person did it take to be a saviour?

A crazy person, Maggie would say.

A person who was not afraid to lead, to say things and be certain they were right,

And if they weren't right, to know that it didn't matter anyway.

Joshua was not a crazy person, he was not a leader, he was not certain he was right,

And thought that it mattered if he was wrong.

He was just some dumb kid.

And yet.

People were suffering.

The injustice of the world rushed up to Josh

And nearly knocked him down.

A dam had been broken.

He waded through the sadness, the rage

Trying not to think.

He missed her.

He missed his father.

Professor MacConagie, his first year philosophy professor, convinced him,
with wit and humour,

That God was a logical improbability and an intellectual absurdity.

But there was still suffering.

And now it was without meaning.

This is why people believe, Josh thought.

Because it was too hard not to believe and still get out of bed in the morning.

Professor MacConagie had no time for platitudes.

He had no time for the weak-minded.

He saw no reason to give up

Simply because there was no Daddy in the sky

Watching.

XLVIII. Other People's Words

For much of his two years there, Joshua read.

He read everything he could find.

Philosophy, Religion, History, Psychology, Mythology.

Anything his professors mentioned in passing he wrote down and searched for in
libraries and second-hand bookstores.

For those two years, books became more important than bread,

More important than water.

In second year, he moved into a house off campus,

Shared a kitchen and a bathroom with six other students.

He didn't really get to know any of them.

At this point in his life, people were not his first priority.

He spent most of his time in his room, in the park, and in coffee shops with his books.

He had a list in his mind of everything he needed to know,

And the list was always growing.

When he wasn't reading, he was missing her.

He distracted himself with other people's words,

Otherwise, it was too hard to be in the world;

He missed her so much.

So he read more,

And for a little while, he was taken out of himself,

And put inside someone else.

XLIX. His Mother's Letter

Then one day, his mother sent him a letter.

Come home, it said.

Even though, he had talked to her on the phone only a few days before,

she had to write it in a letter.

She'd lost her job.

Something had happened between her and her boss that she didn't want to discuss.

She couldn't afford to send him money anymore.

And besides, things were not good.

His brother wasn't coming home most nights;

His sister was quiet and withdrawn.

I am afraid to be alone in the house. I don't know if I could protect Hannah if someone broke in. I am afraid for James – I think he might be making mistakes that could affect him for the rest of his life. And I am afraid for you too, my darling, all alone in a strange city by yourself. It might be different if you were happy there, but you sound so sad. Come home.

So Joshua went.

L. A New Name

The following September, Joshua started his third year of university

In the city of his youth.

Being home was strange; he didn't feel like he belonged anymore.

But he didn't belong anywhere else either...

So he might as well be here.

It was around this time that Josh met Jude.

He heard about Jude's underground newspaper through Klasher,

Who worked at a coffeehouse on the East Side frequented by activists and hipsters.

When Joshua first met Jude, Jude was too beautiful,

Fierce and full of energy and determination.

He had dark eyes and a stubbornly set jaw,

And a sudden smile that cracked open the stoniness of his face

Into brilliant sunlight.

This, Joshua thought when he saw it, was what it must mean to be touched by God.

Jude had co-founded the Student Alliance for Revolution (S.T.A.R.) with Esteban Pardo

(it was not his real name, but it was what he was called)

who had died in a car wreck two years later.

He was also involved in the Take it to the Streets movement

And helped plan and coordinate lots of protests around the city.

Jude could talk for hours, with eloquent outrage, on the corruption of the State,

The criminality of dominant corporations, the apathy of the intelligentsia.

He had facts and figures, tiny details, sewn into his brain,

An intricate and arresting embroidered mandala.

Like everyone else, for a long time all Josh could do was watch in awe

The beauty, the brilliance, the force

That was Jude.

Josh met Jude through the paper.

Jude founded, edited, and wrote much of the material,

For a newspaper called *The Hard Edge*.

Joshua had seen Jude before he ever met him at readings, and demonstrations,
where people flocked to Jude

Like hungry ducks to a loaf of bread.

When Josh first met Jude, he wanted to write for the paper.

He had secret aspirations of becoming a reporter,

But he didn't want to be one that just sat on the sidelines,

A parasite to action.

Jude sat at his chipped veneer desk, which was piled high with papers and proofs,
In a small cubicle made of corrugated iron and a piece of chain-link fence.

The fence had been decorated with three identical life-size cardboard cut-outs of
a nineteen forties Coca Cola Girl

Blithe and smiling in a red and white polka dot bathing suit, Coke bottle in hand,

Her gleaming blond hair painted with bright strips to mark its sheen.

The image was unaltered except for a pretty red swastika, with white polka dots to
match her suit, added to the top of her creamy arm like a military badge.

Jude tapped on the rough edged scrap of iron with his knuckles,

As he watched Joshua take it in.

Then he gestured for Josh to sit.

Good enough for ninety percent of the homes in the world, good enough for me.

Josh nodded and sat down. Jude stayed standing.

He moved quickly, picking things up and setting them down again,

As though he were searching for something,

But wasn't exactly sure what.

He glanced at Josh, periodically,

But didn't say anything.

Finally, he set a stack of papers back on their shelf with finality,

And sat down across from Josh.

Josh noticed that his body, although minutely, remained in constant motion

Unconsciously keeping time to some imaginary techno beat.

He gripped the edge of the desk

As though to anchor himself.

Joshua smiled expectantly. Jude did not smile back.

So you think you're a writer, Jude said.

Josh was not offended; he took his point. *No, not really. But I think I could write.*

What will you write about?

Whatever comes up that people should hear about.

Whatever comes up, Jude repeated, as though he were assessing the words for some hidden meaning.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, and then Jude grabbed a paperclip from the desk;

He had found what he wanted to say: *You're in school.*

Yeah.

What're you doing there?

Philosophy and Classics.

Why?

I'm sorry?

Why? What's the point?

Josh looked at him, not knowing how to respond.

Jude's expression softened.

It's not that I'm trying to grill you. I really want to know.

What's the point of... philosophy...?

Okay yeah sure. To you.

Josh tried to think of how to answer.

Jude sighed, *I was in school. I did the whole university thing, but then I realized it was just a place where they teach you how to think.*

Yeah! Josh said, before he could catch himself. *That's the point of philosophy.*

To teach you how to think.

But think in the way they want you to. It's not critical of its own methods and ideological foundations.

Well... Sometimes it is...

Fundamentally – it's not, Jude said. *The institutional role of the University – its social purpose – is to contain – not expand the mind. To subdue the new generation until they're discouraged enough to conform.*

Yeah, Josh said. *But you have to admit that most revolutionary movements are led by university-educated people.*

But not because of it, Jude said. *It gives you the insider's view, so you're better*

equipped to fight against it. But that's just a lucky side-effect.

Josh nodded uncertainly.

He didn't know if he agreed, but he wasn't about to pursue the argument.

Jude smiled now, and Josh felt better.

The smile seemed to erase everything that came before.

Sorry, Jude said. I don't know why I'm being such a hard-ass. I used to think like you when I was young.

Josh doubted that Jude was any more than two or three years older than him.

But Josh wasn't about to point it out;

He wanted the job.

Jude glanced down quickly at Josh's resume, too quickly to absorb any of it, and nodded decisively.

Okay, let's try it.

Yeah? Josh tried not to sound surprised.

Why not? Jude said, brushing his hands together as though he'd just finished something.

Then he flashed a smile again,

But this time it wasn't directed at Josh.

There was a girl hovering at the edge of the Coca Cola fence.

Her skin was the colour of dark honey,

And her hair a kinky, wild mass of tumbleweed.

She had sleepy hazel eyes and one crooked tooth

In an otherwise perfect set.

Max, Jude said. This is Joshua, our new protégé.

The girl smiled.

Hello, she said. I'm Martha. Jude calls me Max. He's watched Annie Hall one too many times I think.

The Night Watchman herself, Jude said.

It's nice to meet you, Josh said.

Thanks.

Which reminds me, Jude looked back at Josh. You got a name?

I'm sorry?

A name.

A name...?

A pen name. Most of us here have at least two.

To maintain the illusion, Jude said.

We're all about illusions here, Martha confirmed. Jude wants people to think that there are more of us. So we've all got two or three names that we write under.

One will be fine, Jude said.

One to start. Two if he likes you.

Two if you're good, Jude corrected. It has nothing to do with 'like.'

*As I was saying, Martha said. If he **likes** you, you can write as much as you want. He has no interests in journalistic integrity, though he'll try to tell you different.*

Don't listen to her, Jude smiled. She's possessed by demons.

Demons? Josh raised his eyebrows and smiled.

Or is it just one demon? Demons plural, Max?

Just the one, she replied. Josh waited for an explanation.

After a moment, she said, My parents are a bit –

Crazy. Jude offered.

Orthodox.

That's generous...

Max smiled at Josh, seeming to actually notice him for the first time.

He thinks we're bonded, she said. Because our parents named us after Beatles' songs.

Only mine didn't.

A likely story, Jude said.

My parents? Can you imagine?

All the same.

All the same, she said. It's what he says when he can't think of anything to say.

All the same, Jude smiled.

Josh felt too present in the room. I should get going. But I'll be back tomorrow...?

Yeah, okay, Jude said. Maybe around one or something. Think of a name.

Okay, I'll try to think of a name...

All's well, man, Jude offered Josh his hand, and pulled him forcefully into a half-hug.

We're family here, Jude said. We don't stand on ceremony.

Max scoffed, Don't worry about it. He's just trying to make you feel weird.

No, I'm not, Jude told her. I'm welcoming him. Which is more than I can say for you.

Welcome, she said. Welcome, Veritas. There you go – There's your name.

LI. Tea Swamp Park

It was at this point, that Josh felt he was beginning to live, really live.
He was out in the world, talking to people, seeing things, doing things,
And writing about them afterward.

For this, he supposed, he had Jude to thank.

Jude had been a philosophy major too,

As well as history, Jude told him later, as he pushed a stroller through the muddy part of
Tea Swamp Park (it was actually called that),

His three year old daughter balanced on the back rung,

His son gurgling in the carriage.

Jude didn't seem to notice them –

He talked on about the corporate-run government,

The mainstream parties as akin to a choice between Pepsi and Coke.

He was full of eloquent rage.

The little ones, Daisy and Ocean, were just part of the baggage,

The heaviness Jude carried around with him.

He only noticed them to make a point.

Daisy and Ocean are the ones who are going to pay for it.

Fucking Leeches!

Daisy craned her neck, *What's a leech?*

Jude didn't hear her; he was on to the next thought.

This time it was about the Secretary of Defense, his outright lies to the U.N.

Jude was shocked by Joshua's political naivete.

*When I was your age, younger than you, he said. I was picketing City Hall
And shutting down Subway Stations, organizing demonstrations.*

But Josh realized that Jude liked his naivete;

It gave Jude a chance to shine,

To shock and disillusion.

LII. Another Atheist

Jude was an atheist.

Believing in God is like believing in the Tooth Fairy, he told Josh.

After you turn eight, there's no excuse for it.

Josh took Jude's point.

But Jude couldn't take Josh's.

But there is something, Josh said, that binds the world together in a meaningful way.

No, Jude told him. There really isn't.

LIII. Stars and Star-Gazers

Jude was married, yes married (both ironically and for the tax breaks)

to a vague blond named Iris.

She was sweet and soft-spoken,

And drifted in and out of rooms like a shadow

With large painted eyes.

When Daisy was born, Iris's parents had given them a house

Because no grandchild of theirs was going to sleep in a bureau drawer
in Jude's rooming house on the Downtown East Side.

Iris's parents, it was said, owned at least four houses and three of the city's
mainstream arty movie theatres.

Iris herself, Jude told Josh, had a trust fund from her grandparents,

Which in reality, the couple had been living off of for years.

It was just one of her many charms, Jude said impishly.

Their door was always open

Their house was a cornerstone of the activist community

Despite being bought on corporate dollars.

They furnished the house with décor they found in thrift stores and back alleys.

They had more money than most, but they were too hip to show it.

In the summer, the lawn was adorned with shabby seventies couches, coolers of
cheap wine and beer, guys with guitars, and girls with lazy smiles and angry voices.

They threw tarps over the couches when it rained,

But they all still had that sweet mildewy smell,

And crackled when you sat down on them, brittle from the sun.

Joshua was never sure what Jude felt for Iris.

He was not an affectionate person by nature,

Although that wasn't quite true...

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he didn't like to do what was expected.

Iris didn't seem to need much.

That was probably why he was with her –

Her willingness to fade away,

And let Jude shine.

If you didn't know it, it was hard to tell they were in a relationship

Until late at night.

Maybe at four a.m. or so, when Iris would come back to the living room, tired eyed,

To find Jude still talking, puffing on black clove cigarettes and drinking TetraPak wine.

Iris would slip into a room full of poets, painters, and political rebels,

Perch on the arm of Jude's chair like a bird,

And wait.

Her long blond hair wafting down her back,

Her hands folded neatly in her lap.

It might be an hour before he acknowledged her, maybe more.

But eventually, he would touch her knee or her elbow

Or just look up at her with languid eyes and smile.

A quiet smile that was just for her:

I see you.

That was enough for her.

Once a day to be noticed by the man she loved.

Not long after that, he would go up to bed,
His shadow following behind.

This was the way of their life.

Jude told him they usually stayed awake until the kids woke up in the morning.

They'd drop them off at daycare and preschool respectively,

Then go back to bed until around one in the afternoon.

Jude would go to work until eleven, then come home and spend the evening
talking and hanging out with friends.

No one really knew what Iris did when Jude wasn't around;

No one ever thought to ask.

One day, Josh asked Martha if she thought Iris was happy.

He felt sorry for her.

Even when she was surrounded by people,

Iris seemed alone.

Lost in the background.

Max just shrugged, *Iris is a Star-Gazer. She wouldn't be happy doing anything else.*

She doesn't seem happy now, Josh said.

She doesn't seem unhappy, Max said.

No. He supposed not.

Josh saw the connection between Jude and Martha.

Max was strong and bright and fiercely competitive;

She knew what she wanted and how she wanted it.

Like Jude, she was a Definite person.

A Star.

Sometimes they seemed like siblings, at other times like soul mates,

But they both seemed to understand that they could not be lovers.

It was an unspoken pact between them, a respect for the law of foil.

Still it was obvious that in a different kind of world,

Jude and Martha would've been together.

Jude talked about her like she was his sister.

But Josh always suspected that in Jude's heart,

Iris was expendable;

Max was not.

In the world, Martha said, There were Stars and Star-Gazers.

And that, she said, was the Way It Was.

Is that all I am? Joshua wondered sometimes.

Just another Star-Gazer?

LIV. Animals

Isobel Wednesday Adams Klashinsky liked animals.

She felt an affinity to dogs and cats, pigs and cows.

They didn't say things they didn't mean and expect everyone to understand what they *really* meant.

They were simple, plain, without the gaudy frills of humanity.

Stripped down to bare instinct,

Isobel could relax among animals.

One of a kind.

LV. Alex

The World Trade Organization was meeting.

Jude was friends with a guy named Alex.

Alex was a self-appointed guerrilla of the Left. He hated all things corporate.

They should ship those motherfuckers off to some deserted island in the middle of the ocean.

Let them destroy each other and leave the rest of us alone. Fuckin' pigs.

I like pigs, Jude said. Pigs are good. Pigs have integrity.

You're right, Alex said. Only man pulls this shit. And only corporate garbage exploits the world for abstract amounts of money.

Alex refused to be some milquetoast idealist railing against the powers that be without ever executing any real change.

We should fuckin' torch the place, he said.

Josh was quiet. Jude was vague.

For once, someone in the room was angrier than he was.

Protests are one thing, Alex said. Protests are okay, but to really light the world on fire, you've got to make a statement. You've got to show them that when all's said and done, you aren't going to just lie there and take it.

Josh looked down at his hands.

Alex shrugged, *If you want peace, prepare for war.*

Jude smiled thoughtfully, *Yeah, maybe...*

Josh turned on his friend, *'Yeah maybe!?'*

Listen, Joshie, Alex said, as though he were explaining something to a very small child.

These people have killed thousands. Maybe millions. Without a second thought.

Workers burned alive locked inside factories, babies dying of starvation from

watered-down formula, not to mention cancer.... They think they can own the wind,

the water, everything. You want to defend these guys?

I'm not defending them –

Get rid of just one of these guys, and you'd be a saint in my book.

By becoming just like them? Josh asked.

This is about justice. Not money.

You are what you do.

Exactly, Alex said.

Through all of this, Jude watched them,

Back and forth like a pendulum.

This is fun, Jude said.

He took a large joint from his jacket pocket, and turned it around in his fingers.

Josh looked at Jude, and saw something for the first time:

Nothing was real to Jude.

It was all just a game.

LVI. Jude and Mary

Jude wanted to meet Mary.

He was interested in parents, in the idea of parents.

He didn't seem to have any.

No one asked and Jude didn't tell.

Josh suspected a wilderness of foster homes,

But he couldn't say why.

Jude was especially interested in Mary.

He wanted to see with his own eyes

This woman who not only believed the impossible could happen,

But that it *had* happened,

In her own body.

The night Josh brought Jude home,

He found his mother shucking corn in the kitchen.

Mum, Josh said.

Mary jumped.

You scared me! she said and smiled at Jude. *Hi, I'm Mary.*

This is Jude.

Hi, Jude smiled, almost shyly. Maybe Josh was imagining things.

Oh Jude! she said, as though she knew all about him
(she didn't).

Stay for dinner?

Great! Jude said, before Josh could make excuses.

He took an ear of corn and started to strip it back to the core.

Mary smiled and gave her son a curious look.

It's good to see real corn, Jude said. *And not just a bunch of stuff made out of synthetic corn additives. That stuff's in everything!*

Is that right? Mary looked at him, interested.

Oh yeah. My partner's in food sciences.

Iris is in food sciences? Josh looked perturbed.

Jude frowned like Josh should have known.

Yeah...? She's a trained nutritionist.

Josh shook his head, *I didn't know.*

But why would he know?

Iris barely spoke. Jude barely spoke of her.

Josh didn't ask.

There was something forbidding in her gaze, her airy smile.

She didn't want to be known.

Josh told me your husband was a mechanic.

Jude rolled his corn in the pool of butter, salt, and pepper on his plate, taking ravenous bites.

Mary nodded. She never said much when people asked about Joe.

I admire people who can make sense of the physical world, Jude said. People who do things, fix things. My mind doesn't work like that, so I'm amazed when anyone's does.

Mary looked at Jude. Josh couldn't tell what she was feeling.

He took care of us, she said. In spite of everything.

Jude nodded.

He didn't really have a choice, Josh muttered.

Of course he did, Mary said, piling knives and forks on plates with extreme efficiency.

Everyone has a choice.

He loved her, Josh thought. It wasn't a choice.

Jude watched as Mary put bowls on the table, two flavours of ice cream.

Spoons and an ice cream scoop followed.

She did not look at up; she was busy.

Josh knew Jude wanted to see into his family,

Shake it like a snow globe.

After dinner, Jude helped Mary with the dishes.

She told Josh that they needed to clean out the basement, and Jude offered to help.

Josh felt strange.

I like your mum, Jude said.

Yeah.

What? You don't want me to like her?

No. It's fine.

Good.

LVII. L.O.V.E. in a Tent City

Josh did a story on the Downtown East Side,

On how the city had promised a bankrupt department store for housing
and a community gathering place,

But had left it sitting empty for years.

Now the city had decided to revamp the place,

Rent it out to gourmet coffee shops and trendy clothing stores

All vying for space.

The Downtown East Side was up in arms,

Staging a Red Tent City protest that enshrined the site,

Spilling over into the park across the street.

The neighbourhood didn't need more coffee shops and clothing stores,
more yuppies and tourists to drive them further and further out of sight.

They needed places to live, places to gather,

Places to eat and sleep and be.

They were tired of being invisible.

They were tired of being pushed out of the city
Into oblivion.

Josh spent a week in the Red Tent City, listening to people.

The park across the street looked like a sea of red flags

Donated by a group of non-profits that called themselves the Red Tent Society.

The people here were the same as people everywhere else;

They were kind, friendly, angry, sad.

They wanted to be seen and heard.

On Joshua's last day there, he met Alia.

Alia was skinny with raven black hair and needle-point arms.

It looked like small birds had been pecking holes in her for years

Looking for bugs.

She might have been thirty.

She might have been younger or older than that.

Josh liked Alia.

She had tired eyes and a chipped tooth smile.

She said she had been working the street since she was fourteen.

She was blunt, and spoke with no sign of feeling,

Except for a hapless shrug now and then.

Her step-dad had been a drunk.

He had beaten and raped her from the time she was eleven.

He kicked her out of the house for stealing his stereo.

It's hard to go back and work at Seven-Eleven or somewhere like that, y' know? I know a girl who tried. Tried to leave the life and everything, but it's hard to go back to making seven-fifty an hour. She was back in a couple months. You come to a point in life where your just like, 'This is who I am.' That's just the way it is.

She smiled brightly, *That's what I say anyway. But y'know, it would still be nice to have a room. A place to keep my stuff.*

Yeah. Josh felt bad. He had always had a room.

He had had a step-father who loved him.

He felt like an Indian prince walking through the slums of Calcutta,

Dripping with silk and precious stones;

Loved from the Beginning.

And who was he to deserve it?

Who were they not to?

It should have been that every one got an equal share,

A reasonable load to carry and a soft place to rest.

It should have been that every one was loved enough

Never to say, *'This is who I am. That's just the way it is.'*

In the evening, workers for the Red Tent Society made big pots of baked beans;

They gave out warm rolls and blankets.

An old guy who called himself the Bird Dog

Played Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., and Nat King Cole songs on the guitar.

Josh tore a beer off his six pack, sat down next to Alia, and handed it to her.

A peace offering, he said.

Were we in a fight?

Nah... but it doesn't mean I can't offer a little peace, right?

You're an odd one, she said, cracking the beer appreciatively.

Josh cracked one for himself and passed around the rest,

Until all that remained were the plastic rings that could strangle fish and birds,

Other small animals.

Bird Dog started a new song.

L is for the way you look... at me.

O is for the only one... I see.

V is very very... extra-ordinary.

E is even more than anyone that you adore.

He was doing a pretty good impression of Nat King Cole.

This was one of my dad's favourites, Josh said, taking another sip.

Yeah, my mom and my step-dad used to like this one too, Alia said.

Josh looked at the trampled grass beneath them, and smiled, *Do you want to dance?*

Alia raised an eyebrow and laughed, *Why would we dance?*

I don't know... Because we can?

He stood up and brushed himself off.

Then he took her hand and pulled her to her feet. *C'mon.*

No one's dancing, dude.

All the more reason.

He twirled Alia the way he used to twirl his sister when she was little.

They would dance around the living room,

Jumping off furniture, sliding across hardwood floor, spinning and diving,

Until his parents' records were scratched unrecognizable,

Just some bits of flotsam leftover from childhood.

Bird Dog sang louder.

And Love... is all that I can give... to you.

Love... is more than just a game for two.

Two in love can make it.

Take my heart and please don't break it.

Love... was made for me and you.

When the song was over, Alia collapsed on the grass laughing.

A new sheen on her skin.

You're weird, you know that right?

Josh lay down on the grass too. *I know.*

I haven't danced since junior high, Alia said.

But you're good. See – there's lots of things you can do.

*Oh, I'm **full** of potential, Alia retorted.*

Yeah, Josh said. I can see it.

And he could.

LVIII. Lamb

Jude did not want to lead with the Red Tent City story.

He had bigger fish to fry, he said.

Someone had strung up the slaughtered body of a lamb

On the flagpole outside City Hall.

The day before, the mayor had made a statement:

The new mall would help raise funds for more public housing, and create new jobs.

The City couldn't give the building back. But the mayor assured the people that the development would be good for the community.

The next day, they discovered the sacrificed lamb;

A note was pinned to it that said,

Spare us.

Jude thought it was clever.

Josh thought it was pure showmanship.

Effective showmanship, Joshie. Papers all over the country are covering it.

And I've got a source that says they know who's behind it. It's a good interview.

You understand, right?

Josh nodded, *'If it bleeds it leads,' right?*

Jude smiled and patted Josh's cheek, *Exactly.*

Jude had this way of pretending

Not to detect cynicism when it benefited him.

LIX. Interview Effects

Josh read the article.

A few quotes jumped out at him:

The lamb was just a lamb. It wasn't guilty of anything. The government seems to think the poor deserve to be poor. The lamb is a gesture of atonement.

How can it be a publicity stunt? We're anonymous. We don't have a name.

Everyone can see the blood. There are pictures. We want to remind people of the invisible wounds.

The next week the city was full of red ribbons pinned to the chests of strangers.

The ribbons, they said on the news,

Signified the blood of the lamb.

No more, they said. Things had to change.

Jude loved the social theatre of it all.

The Edge's interview, while short, was published and republished,

Quoted everywhere.

But a couple of months later,

The ribbons were gone

And so too was the public outcry.

The people of the Downtown East Side, used to hopelessness,
Went back to the way it was.

But Josh had seen a spark of something.

He had seen ordinary people wanting to rise to the occasion,
Wanting to be better, wanting to be more.

And that in itself was something.

LX. Green Grass

With his shades on the grass was very green.

Josh looked at the richly-coloured world and felt relaxed.

Jude was lying there, his head cradled in Martha's lap, picking at a five string guitar;
The high E string had broken a long time ago, and he had never bothered to replace it.

Jude had a good voice and decent guitar skills;

He occasionally played folk-rock in coffeehouses on the Drive and Main street

To what Josh considered somewhat unwarranted admiration.

Jude had the quality, whatever he did, of being instantly admired – he was that kind.

Jude was beautiful but unfocussed;

He lacked the commitment to put all of himself into something.

He was a good writer but not much of a poet.

Most of his songs were abstract and angry.

He wrote decent music,

But the words seemed hallow.

But he did well with other people's songs.

His voice was good.

It was because of Jude that Josh first learned guitar.

Late at night, alone in his room, Josh struggled his fingers into position.

He wouldn't stop. He'd sit in his attic room and play until he couldn't feel his hands.

His body broke down into its most basic form, a gathering of molecules,

Vibrating to the tune of steel strings.

After hours of no food, and pain,

With a piece of cleverly shaped wood and wire bent into submission,

The world came through clear.

Something took him over.

Something infused him with white hot energy.

It moved through him, but it was something else,

Something other than Joshua.

In the mornings, after a few hours of sleep, he would drift down the street

Anchoring himself in the world again.

There were no words at first, only chord after chord,

Millions of songs written by others, anything he could get his hands on.

It was all technique; finger positions and sounds,

The reverberation of guitar in hands.

With it in his arms, he forgot to feel.

It was a good feeling. A not-there feeling.

A feeling of God.

This, he thought, is what drives passion.

The momentary sense of forgetting yourself.

Of falling away from a story

That never quite felt like your own.

LXI. The Way

There were ways the world broke open when you found your path.

Josh's world cracked open like a fortune cookie and the whole world came tumbling out.

It was shining and beautiful, full of sadness and rage,

But in its way,

One.

It was as though he had uncovered some hidden treasure,

Only it wasn't hidden.

It was all around.

Yes, Josh thought. This is the way it's supposed to be.

And it was.

LXII. Song of Late Summer

One night, when Josh was on a camping trip, on a mushroom trip, he met a girl (again).

She had a mass of curls like tumbleweed

(though Joshua had never seen tumbleweed in real life – only in movies).

At times, it seemed that most of his experiences,

Most of his sense of the way things worked,

Came from movies, songs, and bad late-night TV.

What is real? Josh wondered.

And couldn't find it.

He supposed that her honey skin at midnight,

Her freckles glinting in lantern light – like sparks of embers, snowflakes –

This was real.

She, apart from his interpretations, his heavy eyes and tongue,

Was here.

And she still would be

Without him.

The girl he met again told him a story:

She said her real name was Sadie, actually it was Cindy...

She told him that her mother had always wanted to have a little girl named Cindy.

They sat around the ailing campfire – the two of them – swigging beer from the bottle,

Distractedly cracking unpopcorn kernels with their teeth

from the bottom of the pot.

My grandmother insisted they call me 'Sadie' after she heard – she laughed,

Choking on popcorn.

It sent her off into a coughing fit that made her face turn red and her eyes well up.

Josh patted her on the back, *You okay?*

She was still laughing.

Coughing and laughing at the same time. It made him laugh too.

And then he felt bad that he was laughing while the poor girl was choking.

When she finally caught her breath, he said, *So your grandmother wouldn't call you 'Cindy' because...*

She refused because. Get this - the word 'sin' is in 'Cindy'.

Sin.

Yeah, you know like, bad things or whatever, so she thought the name was evil.

My poor mum, she said. It had never occurred to her.

Josh looked at her.

The flickering light made designs on her face, patterns of light and dark.

He wanted to kiss her, but he couldn't get himself to do it.

She smiled at him, knowing.

They looked away, looked back,

Assessing and re-assessing with each flicker of firelight.

The words came into Josh's mind, *'Love is a duel.'*

What was that from? Kerouac?

They were not sure whether to make the shift from one realm into another.

I wrote this song, he said, because even this was easier than kissing her.

I don't really know what it's about. I just kinda wrote it.

She looked at him, perhaps feigning interest;

Women were good at that.

I might have been baked. I don't know, he said.

She leaned in close.

Josh, she said. *Do you want to fuck?*

The harsh words coming from her sweet mouth seemed odd,

Jarring in the soft firelight.

As if she'd suddenly flashed a knife or something.

Okay, he said, because what was he going to say?

Things never really happened the way you imagined.

A sweetness was lost in translation.

They crawled into her sleeping bag and kissed.

It was awkward, constraining.

They were bound together, dying in spider's silk.

Afterward they slept,

Josh mostly on grass and leaves.

He awoke with the red impressions of twigs and leaves and zipper trails on his skin.

She said he looked like a map from the inside cover of some adventure story,

Some hardcover book children got lost in.

She got up to pee.

When she came back she remembered the song, and asked to hear it.

But there was no point now, so he shook his head and said he was too tired.

She began to coax;

She coaxed so much he worried she'd wake everyone else up.

So he took Jude's guitar from outside his tent and played her the song.

He sang it so quiet that, at times, the wind took his voice.

It ebbed and flowed, another part of the woods.

She started to cry. He'd never seen her cry.

What's wrong? he said.

Nothing.

She didn't know what it was.

Maybe because it was beautiful, she said.

But who was she?

A woman renamed so many times it was hard to know what to call her.

But she was just as much a part of the world as anyone.

Infused with all the heat of embers the night before,

Now cold an hour before dawn.

The rocks and the cedar branches pressed up against their skin,

Making imprints

A deeper shade of flesh.

Are you cold? he said. Because he was.

The wind had picked up,

And the soft peach down on her arm stood tall.

Max shook her head.

Josh took off his old Cowichan sweater and gave it to her.

It's almost morning.

LXIII. No Apologies

The next day was strange.

Josh and Martha got up first.

They made coffee and pancakes on the Coleman stove.

Then the others – Jude's friends (and therefore their friends) got up.

One by one

They shuffled to the picnic table.

Jude was last. He came over slowly, appraising the space.

Pancake? Martha asked, balancing the golden circle on her spatula

As though she were the wife in *Father Knows Best*.

Jude glanced at her, passing her by for the coffeepot.

His wife was not here.

Wake up on the wrong side of the bed? she asked.

Wake up on the right one, Max? Jude asked, sipping coffee from a steel cup.

I think so...

Jude looked at Josh, then at Max,
And nodded.

After that, no one mentioned it, even though everyone knew.

They all pretended it was just the same as before,

Max and Jude against the world.

Josh, a sweet afterthought.

Max came to Joshua's house nights

And helped his mother boil the spaghetti, spin the salad.

She helped Josh sleep under his father's roof again.

They held each other close in his single bed, not talking.

Mary loved Martha;

She had brought Joshua back to her.

While he used to spend his time out until all hours of the night, now he was home.

Max brought life back into the house

Now that Joe was gone, and Jimmy spent most nights at his girlfriend's.

Hannah came out of her room voluntarily;

She liked Max because she was funny, loudmouthed, and honest.

Martha is a lovely girl, Mary said to Josh one night when Max had to work late.

She pulled heavy white sheets from the washer, and tossed them into the dryer.

Josh smiled slightly and folded another scorching towel from the basket on the floor.

And you guys are so good for each other.

Josh didn't say anything.

You can just see it, Mary continued, slamming the dryer door, setting the switch to

Whites/High Heat

I think she's the one, Josh.

He followed his mother into the kitchen, basket in hands, and went on folding.

Mary looked at him. *Don't you think she's the one? Can't you see yourself with her?*

Josh shrugged, *I am with her.*

He did not want to have this conversation.

You know, Joshua, his mother said. *I was married by the time I was your age.*

Yeah well, you also had a kid by the time you were eighteen, and I don't think you would've wanted that for me.

His mother didn't look at him. She looked at the half-folded pillowcase in her hands.

Sorry, he said.

She shook her head, *You don't ever have to apologize to me, Love.*

After that, Mary went upstairs.

She didn't come back down for the rest of the night.

Josh liked Martha. She was smart and funny. It felt good to be with her.

She was his friend.

But there had never been anyone for Josh

But Maggie.

Josh couldn't love like that anymore.

Something had been broken,

And even though it had healed over time, it would never be the same.

Like a bone that hadn't been set properly

And grew back crooked.

LXIV. Tree

Isobel liked to draw trees.

Her favourite was a tree down by the water;

It had grown on such a steep slant that, at a certain point, it had taken a sharp turn

And started to grow the other way in compensation.

It looked like an elbow

Or a figure about to dive into the ocean, with its long arms reaching high above its head.

It stood in the park near the seawall.

Cars drove by it everyday and coated it in dust.

Isobel loved the tree.

She had drawn it hundreds of times on different days, in different lights.

The shape was always the same.

She sat on a bench with a plaque on it that said:

I think that I shall never see a car as lovely as a tree.

Isobel's sketchbook was full of trees.

One day, Josh sat beside her on her bench while she drew the tree.

He had come down to meet her for lunch after her morning shift at the animal shelter.

She had a split shift and was expected back by seven o'clock that evening.

The sun was out but the air was still cool.

It was March

And Isobel was feeling different.

I feel different now, she said. Like I'm alone

Even though I know you're right here

And there are people all around.

Josh looked through the branches, looked at the sunlight glinting off the water inside the curves of dark limbs.

I feel like that sometimes too, Josh said.

Maybe it's loneliness, Izzie said. I'm not sure. But I feel like I need something.

Something else.

People? Josh asked.

People. Maybe people. Also –

Also...?

Izzie turned to Josh and looked him in the eyes.

It was unusual for her to look so intentionally at another person.

I'm going to ask you something. And I just want you to know that I'm only asking – well

I'm not asking for any reason like the reasons people usually have in books, but just

because, you're you and I'm me. We know each other. We trust each other.

Josh was surprised.

He didn't usually think of Izzie as having an inner life beyond the impressions of the moment.

But it seemed she had been thinking about this for awhile.

We do, right? she said.

We do what?

Trust each other.

Yeah. Sure.

Good. So I can ask you something without you thinking that there's any more to it than what I'm asking.

Okay.

You'll believe me.

Yes, Izzie, he smiled impatiently.

I was wondering if you would show me... I mean, I want to learn how...

To what?

Will you kiss me? And maybe... well...

Josh coughed.

He coughed until the tree, her face, the ocean began to meld together behind a layer of tears.

Izzie hit his back hard.

Izzie, he said sweetly, when he'd pulled himself together. I don't think it's a good idea.

Why?

Because I just... I don't feel that way about you.

But you don't have to feel any way. I just want to try it. To see if I can do it or not.

Of course you can do it, Izzie! Josh said. Everyone can do it.

I know. But I mean, if I can like it, she said. With someone I trust.

You should wait for someone else, Josh said. Someone you really want.

But how would I know if I wanted that with someone, unless I know if I like it first?

You'll know, Izzie. Trust me.

Josh decided Izzie was just lonely.

She spent most of her time with her animals

And didn't talk to many people.

She had moved out of her parents' house,

And lived in a basement suite by herself.

Josh decided to take her out with his friends Friday night.

At some point that night, he lost track of her.

He couldn't find her anywhere inside.

Outside, Josh found Iris sitting on the curb by herself.

Have you seen my friend Isobel? Josh asked.

Iris looked up at him. Her eyes were full of pain.

No, she said.

Josh looked at her. *Are you okay?*

As he said it, a curtain fell behind her eyes; she looked like herself again.

I'm fine, she said. *I'm just tired.*

Where's Jude?

Iris shrugged, *I don't know.*

Do you want me to find him for you?

No. I just want to go home. I need a taxi.

Josh stayed there for awhile waving at cabs.

Finally, an empty one pulled over to take her home.

I hope you feel better, Josh said. He opened the door for her.

Thank you, Iris said, shutting it.

Izzie had come out with them for the first time that night.

Josh had brought her to the coffeehouse, and she'd sat quietly at the crowded table while everyone around her drank beer and vehemently discussed politics.

She held her lips in a slight smile and didn't say a word all night.

She was sweet and quiet and didn't let on.

All they would've noticed, if they noticed anything, was that she was not as loudmouthed a person as they were used to.

No doubt they took her for an Iris.

But Isobel was Isobel.

She was unique.

LXV. Chosen

When the songs came, they all came at once, a hailstorm stinging his skin.

They were loud. They were imposing.

They banged against his skull

Demanding to be heard.

Josh wrote them down fast

So fast sometimes he had trouble deciphering his own hand.

He wrote them down on buses, subways, paper napkins.

He wrote furiously throughout lectures, not notes but songs.

After awhile he kind of forgot about school.

It wasn't a rebellion,

Just a total immersion in what was happening to him,

All around him.

There was too much to capture,

Too much to grab onto and try to hold.

A street sweeper rumbling by,

The glint of light through a broken window,

A kid chasing a runaway marble down the street –

Every moment precious, every moment fleeting.

Any little thing could trigger a downpour.

There was a pressure inside his brain. He got headaches.

But right before the headaches, there was a new way of seeing.

An aura, the doctor said. It's a fairly common in the prodromal stage of migraine.

When Josh's vision changed, he was supposed to take an Imitrex tablet.

It didn't stop the pain, but it made it irrelevant.

In the aura, there was a stillness.

And in the stillness, there was a glow.

And this was how Josh came to know it again;

The Golden World.

It was the same world everyone lived in all the time,

But sharper, softer, brighter.

Infused with electric sparks,

They filled the air,

Bouncing everywhere.

Josh understood that it was not the world that had changed but his eyes.

They were seeing without thought,

Seeing what was there all along.

What he didn't notice

Walking around in the grip of the perpetual dream

Of the thinking mind.

The Golden World was there

Always.

It was spread out upon the earth

But no one noticed.

After the aura, the headaches, the sleep, came the songs,

Residue of a time before.

They flooded his mind like a river overflowing in summer.

Josh began to play the songs to Jude.

Man, you're writing up a storm, Jude said, smirking curiously. You caught the bug.

At first, Jude seemed flattered; he thought of himself as Joshua's mentor.

But as days turned to weeks, Jude got quieter. Serious. Critical.

'What does that even mean?'

'That doesn't really make sense.'

'Man, you love your cliches don't you, Joshua?'

Josh tried to fix things. And eventually, he might get an iffy nod from Jude.

Yeah... Jude would say, hesitantly. It's alright...

LXVI. Jude's Destiny

One night, Jude came offstage

Holding his guitar like a woman he was bored of.

He took a swig of the beer that was waiting for him.

Iris wasn't there. She was at home with the kids.

People they knew and sort of knew were scattered about the room

Sitting at dimly lit tables, smoking and drinking,

Talking philosophy and life

The way young minds do when soaked in red wine and weed.

Jude put down his guitar and leaned back, scanning the room.

He was always looking for a guy with a ponytail,

A guy in a slim-fit suit and a skinny tie.

He never asked if anyone had asked about him, but Josh knew Jude was waiting.

He knew it would happen somehow.

He never really talked about it, that's how sure he was;

Some day, Jude would be famous.

One day when they were on acid,

Jude told Josh that since he was a little kid he had always had a sixth sense about things.

Sometimes he knew what was going to happen before it happened.

Josh listened almost believing.

If someone could know what comes next, why not Jude?

He was just that kind, Josh thought.

The kind of person that walked around with a glow about him.

In every gesture, there was something that made people watch and keep watching.

It's not ego, Jude said. It's gonna sound like ego, but it's not.

I've never really told anyone, he went on. But I've always known that something's going to happen to me.

Something big. It's not that I want it or don't want it.

It's just the way it is.

Josh, who had never been certain of anything in his whole life,

Was awed by Jude's certainty.

Perhaps that was all it took to make things happen –

To believe fiercely that they would.

The world responded not to desire, but to confidence.

In that sense, all things were possible.

Jude would be famous.

People like Jude were born to be looked at,

And the world had a way of answering that call.

Jude didn't just believe, he *knew*

That one of these days a guy in a slick suit was going to come looking for him;

All he had to do was wait.

LXVII. The Proposal

Performing's a whole 'nother story, Jude said. Trust me, J, you're not a performer.

Yes, Josh thought turning a bruised pear over in his hand. I'm not a performer.

But if you want, Jude said. I mean if you're looking for audience reaction,

I could do one your songs.

Jude took a sip of black coffee and scratched the stubble on his cheek.

I like to do my own stuff, he said. But you're a friend, man. And I know it would kill you to get up there.

The only thing is, he added thoughtfully. It might be hard to gauge how much is your material and how much is my performance. But it's worth a shot, right?

Josh nodded hesitantly.

Yeah. I guess...

LXVIII. Safe Injection

Josh still worked at his dad's garage a few shifts a week.

It made him some money to help his mum out and pay for school

(when he still went to school).

He also volunteered at the Downtown East Side Community Centre where he monitored the family room, thinking up activities for the kids.

On Sundays, he volunteered at the Safe Injection Site

Making up kits and handing out information.

The more he lived life the less he reported on it.

At night, the songs shot through him

Fast as a needle.

Jude found it all irritating.

Josh didn't meet deadlines anymore, he didn't finish articles;

He seemed to have lost interest in the paper.

Jude confronted him regularly, asking Joshua if he wanted to leave

Josh said he didn't.

Then he would go on and on about how much he valued the paper.

The paper is so important. I just get wrapped up in other stuff and lose track of time.

I'm really sorry, Jude.

While you're out saving the world, somebody's gotta be writing. If you can't handle it –

I can. I'm gonna finish the article. By tomorrow, it'll be finished.

But tomorrow would come and it was something else.

Some new excuse why Josh hadn't finished:

Something else caught him up, someone else needed help.

Jude was tired of it.

These people are junkies, man. They'll still be fucked up tomorrow.

But we have a deadline to meet.

Josh looked at Jude.

He didn't like the way Jude talked about people sometimes.

These people were Joshua's friends.

They were good people with problems, just like everyone else.

Just like all *The Edge's* hipster readers and their yuppy parents.

The labels didn't mean anything;

People were people

No matter where you went.

In the beginning, Josh had been the same as Jude.

He wanted to help,

But he saw the people that needed help as fundamentally different from himself.

He was kind, respectful,

But in his mind, he held himself apart.

Then one day, Klasher came to the Safe Injection Site.

He was with this girl called Adriana who came often.

Pete, she said. This is a good place, man. They don't bother you here. They just give you clean needles. And if you O.D. they help you. They saved Johnny just last week.

Josh was alphabetizing files, putting them away in the cabinet behind the reception desk.

Emma, the receptionist, asked Klasher if he'd ever been in before.

Klasher shook his head. He didn't see Josh.

Emma handed him the clipboard, *Great, if you could just fill that out and give it back to me when you're done.*

They went back to the waiting room chairs.

Josh glanced over his shoulder cautiously.

Klasher whispered something to Adriana,

And she replied in a loud voice, *It's just for like research and medical information and stuff. It's not like they're giving it to the cops, Pete!*

After a few minutes, Klasher gave the clipboard back to Emma.

Ten minutes later, one of the nurses came out, *Peter?*

Klasher got up.

Josh, Emma said. Joshua flinched.

Sorry, she said. *Would you grab me an injection kit?*

The box was beside him; he reached for a kit and handed it to her.

Klasher looked at Josh.

What little colour was left in his face drained away.

He averted his eyes.

Josh thought of the day when he'd looked down from the garage roof and seen Klasher looking up at him.

Here they were again.

He wished he could show him the way again;

That it might be as easy as showing him the right tree to climb.

But Klasher wouldn't meet his eye.

The Unconquerable Klasher

Subdued by Josh crouched on the floor with a stack of file folders.

What happened? he wanted to ask.

But Klasher was gone.

Josh could hear footsteps down the hall.

He could hear Elisa, the nurse, saying,

You can take Booth Nine. The cooker and water are already in there.

If you have any other questions, just ask.

Josh could still feel the kit in his hand like a phantom limb.

Little kit: filter, syringe, and tourniquet.

I have to take a break, he said.

Emma looked at him, *You okay, Honey?*

Yeah, I just need – I'm just going... outside. I'll be back.

Alright. Get some air.

Josh walked quickly down the street.

He went into the alley and leaned against a dumpster.

He couldn't catch his breath.

When he finally did, he sat down on the ground and cried.

He felt like a traitor.

LXIX. The Divide

Jude didn't see what the big deal was, *So you're friend's a junky. So what?*

Tons of people are.

I know, Josh said. That's why I can't take any more time away from work.

This isn't work?

No, of course it is. I just feel like I need to be more... hands on.

Josh, you'd still be sitting around taking notes on classical philosophy if it wasn't for me.

So don't tell me about hands on.

I didn't mean... You know what I mean.

Not really, Jude said. The paper has a lot of influence on people. Way more than you'll ever reach making paper-bag puppets with the junkies' kids at the community centre.

You're probably right. But I feel like I need to be closer.

Too bad. You were getting to be an okay reporter.

Thanks.

Jude looked at him for a minute and sighed, *Alright, man... do what you gotta do.*

Josh opened his arms for a hug, but Jude waved him off, *Go. Save the world.*

I got deadlines to keep. And miles to go before I sleep...

Josh hesitated, *Okay. I'll see you.*

Mm, Jude said without looking up from the article he was reading.

He bit into an apple and circled a sentence in red pencil.

Motherfucker can't write, he said.

Josh didn't feel as relieved as he thought he would.

No matter what he did,

He was always letting someone down.

LXX. On His Own Again

Everyone knew Jude

In the coffee houses, and smoky clubs,

The bars where people privileged enough in mind and body

To call themselves artists, writers, poets

Hung out drinking and laughing,

Wallowing in their designer poverty,

Pontificating on the sins of the Establishment.

The sins of other people.

Jude was prince of these elegant creatures, these ironic vagabonds.

And he was determined to be recognized for it.

It was around this time that Joshua's eyes began to change.

(Mary used to say they changed by the hour, from brown to grey to green –

But Josh knew they were just brown)

But now they were changing on the inside;

He began to see people in a new way.

While Josh had once admired Jude,

He began to see the cracks in the floor beneath Jude's cowboy boots.

Jude's sparkle didn't come from his heart, but from his mind.

From his bold indifference to the people around him.

Of course Jude got angry about the injustice of the world.

Jude wore political outrage like a battered old trench coat.

But he didn't seem to care for the people closest to him.

The only things that got Jude going were the Big Ideas.

He brushed past everything else – the homeless, the addicts, the prostitutes,

his wife and children – swept past them all,

An oblivious prince.

Jude's all talk, Max confirmed.

Josh didn't say anything. It was like slowly waking up from a dream.

He was beginning to understand that he had already taken all he could from Jude.

And now he was on his own again.

LXXI. Star on the Rise

By the time the song was playing on the radio,
Josh had long since peeled back the layers of Jude.
Peeled him down to the pulpy core,
Like stripping the waxy rind off an orange,
To find the rot inside.

Jude's moment had finally come byway of a producer called Elwin Kane.

The song lingered at number six
And seemed to play perpetually on Top Forty radio.
It didn't matter to Josh that he had written it;
It was Jude's now.
Josh didn't care about credit (or so he told himself).
He only wanted the song to ring true.
And he worried that it might not
Coming from Jude's lips.

So here was Jude on every radio talk-show, on every late night banter-fest talking about
his upcoming album.

Here was Jude with his dark blue eyes, his swagger, his smile, singing the song
like it was his own.

But why should it matter? Josh asked himself again and again.

It was just a song.

You're jealous, Max said. It was patently obvious.

Jude's wearing it like a crown. And it's not even his. It's yours.

No. Josh shook his head adamantly, That's not it.

It just seemed inside out

That Jude, who cared so little,

Should be written up in *Rolling Stone*

As '*A New Star on the Rise.*'

LXXII. Outside His Story

No one seemed to know Jude's history.

It was as though, like Botticelli's Venus, he had been born whole.

A man without a past.

That's how Jude wanted it.

He wanted the Myth.

He wanted to be the Myth.

Josh didn't know what wounds Jude carried with him

Underneath his glow of confidence.

But he knew they had to be there.

All children came up scarred,

Pressing their way through hard ground like crocuses in March.

No doubt Jude had oceans of sadness

That he could drown in.

He was human.

But at a certain point, Josh thought,

At a certain point, you have to distinguish yourself from your story,

And stand on your own.

This is who you are.

This is what you've chosen.

And what you continue to choose.

LXXIII. Exorcism

Josh started sleeping on the streets some nights.

He felt the need to be near people in the neighbourhood,

To know what it felt like.

Of course, said the ever-pragmatic Martha. You have a nice hot shower, and a clean bed, and fresh clothes to come home to whenever you want.

*So you can't **really** know, can you?*

Much as it irritated him to admit it, Josh knew Max was right.

Several nights a week, Josh brought his dad's Army and Navy sleeping bag downtown and set it up in the park.

He wouldn't take a bed in the shelter; someone might need it.

Besides, on those nights, Josh didn't sleep much.

He mostly talked to people.

When there was no one to talk to,

Words from songs fell on his shoulders,

Snow or feathery angels.

Other nights, he went home to his mother so she wouldn't worry.

(also so he didn't get so tired he couldn't function)

Mary would ask, *Where have you been?*

At a friend's place, he would reply.

I called Martha, she'd say. *You weren't with her.*

I didn't say Martha, Josh would say, escaping before she could ask him more questions.

He knew she wouldn't understand.

Josh cleared out in his room. He got rid of most of his belongings.

It felt like an exorcism.

Afterward, Josh felt clean, weightless,

Pure.

He pawned off his stereo, his CDs, his records, donated his clothes to charity.

He kept two pairs of jeans, four shirts, his leather boots

And the heavy plaid workman's jacket he'd gotten from his dad.

He also kept his guitar.

His mother thought he'd gone mad.

What's wrong with you? she said. *Are you on drugs? Why do you need all this money?*

Josh wasn't on drugs. He didn't need money.

He just didn't want to own things anymore.

Any money from his job, over and above what he gave his mother each month,

He donated to the Shelter and the Community Centre of the Downtown East Side.

LXXIV. No Door

The little boy scampered into the room and headed straight for Josh.

Josh was sitting in a little orange plastic chair cutting out different coloured noses, eyes, mouths, cheeks for paper plate masks.

The little boy climbed on his lap and smiled, *Hi!*

Josh looked around. He had never seen this little guy before.

Hi Buddy, Josh said. *Is your mum or dad here?*

I don't have a dad, the little boy said. *And my mum's at a pointment.*

Who'd you come with?

The little boy pointed.

He's my brother, Aurora said, sauntering in nonchalantly. She was eleven-years old.

Aurora came by most days after school,

Even though she often said she was too old for this stuff.

His name's Zephyr, Aurora said. *Don't let him freak you out. He loves guys your age.*

Josh looked at Zephyr.

He was small with black hair and dark eyes.

He was maybe two or three years old.

It's nice to meet you, Zephyr. I'm Josh.

Josh offered his hand with business-like bravado and the little boy laughed.

Zephyr – cool name. Same name as the West Wind, right?

Wind? Zephyr said looking out the window.

Zephyr shrugged in the sweet way that baby's shrug, exaggerated and wide-eyed.

What you doing? Zephyr wanted to know, looking at the craft table.

I'm making some different coloured noses and mouths and teeth, so we can make masks.

Like this one, Josh said picking up the example plate he threw together late last night.

You want to make one?

Zephyr nodded, hopped down from Josh's lap, and went to climb on the window sill.

Short attention span, Aurora said.

No school today? Josh asked. It was ten fifteen.

Aurora shook her head, rifling through the bead box. *You got any green?*

Josh got up to look. He found a bag of green beads and pulled them out.

No, the clear green ones. Like these, she said, holding up a partially finished bracelet.

It was on the plastic bead loom.

Josh remembered that she'd started it the week before.

Nice, Josh said.

Aurora was good at that kind of stuff; she was good with her hands.

He searched through the bead box, looking for clear, dark green, seed beads.

He found light green. Grass green. Opaque green.

This is all we have left, Ror. Maybe you can use another colour – make a pattern?

No, Aurora said definitely. It has to be plain green. No pattern.

I'll get some more next time, he said. Can you work on something else today?

Fine, Aurora sighed, pulling out some bright yellow yarn to knit.

Zephyr was turning somersaults on the dingy carpet.

How's your mum? Josh asked Aurora.

Fine. She has a meeting with the social worker, Aurora said.

Why aren't you at school today?

I was tired, Aurora twisted up her long black ponytail.

Bobby came by last night, she said.

Bobby was Aurora's mum's on-again off-again boyfriend.

Last time they were off because he beat her to a pulp

And she wound up in the hospital.

Fight? Josh asked.

Aurora shrugged. Nothing major. We were just up late.

Josh looked at Aurora. Aurora looked at her knitting.

Zephyr came back to the table.

You want to make a mask now?

Zephyr nodded.

So just take a plate, and pick some eyes, a nose, a mouth, teeth if you want... whatever shape and colour you like – and then put the paste on the back and stick 'em on there.

Okay! Zephyr got to work.

Is this your first time here? Josh asked. Zephyr nodded.

He helped Zephyr hold the shapes still while he pasted.

You should come hang out more often if it's okay with your mum.

He usually stays with my Gramma, Aurora informed Josh. But she says he can't stay anymore. Mum's pregnant again, and Gramma's tired of cleaning up her messes.

Josh looked at Zephyr.

Zephyr held up his hastily-made mask with both hands, and grinned.

His name is Nonu, Zephyr said triumphantly.

The face had a green nose, black eyes, a purple mouth, and yellow teeth.

Nonu, Josh smiled. I like him. I like his sharp teeth.

He lives in a partment but his partment was on fire, so now he lives with us.

Zephyr studied his mask thoughtfully.

Horns! he exclaimed.

He grabbed two half-moon mouths in red and pasted them on the top of Nonu's head.

There!

Sweet, Josh said. You want to put a stick on the bottom so he can be a puppet?

No.

Yeah, he's better the way he is.

I need to go to the bafroom, Zephyr said.

You want your sister to take you?

Come on, Zephyr said, pulling Josh by the hand.

Josh looked at Aurora; Aurora shrugged.

You can take him, she said.

Josh and Zephyr walked down the hall to the bathroom.

The boys bafroom! Zephyr said happily.

Upon entering, the little boy slammed his hand on the button of the hand dryer.

I have to go poo, he went into the first stall and inexplicably lifted the toilet seat.

Josh held the door shut.

Don't lock it, Zephyr said.

I won't. Tell me when you're finished and I'll open it.

Zephyr sat on the toilet, his feet dangling.

A guy in an Aerosmith T-shirt came in. The door slammed behind him.

What was that? Zephyr asked. *What was that noise?*

Just the door.

Who's in here?

Just somebody else who wants to use the bathroom, Bud.

The man in the Aerosmith shirt smiled slightly, and turned to the urinal.

What's that? Zephyr asked. *What's that noise!?*

Josh shook his head.

Oh, it's somebody else peeing, Zephyr answered his own question.

You almost done, Zephyr?

I'm done. Is the door locked? Let me out! Zephyr said.

Josh let Zephyr out and lifted him up so that he could reach the sink.

Zephyr got a lot of foam soap. He lathered it around.

Looks like wup cream, he said.

It kind of does.

Josh helped him rinse his hands, and then set him back down on the floor.

You want to use the hand dryer?

Zephyr looked at it for a moment solemnly. *No.*

He wiped his hands on his pants and strode out of the bathroom.

I don't like noises when I can't see, Zephyr said. I always think it might be monsters.

But there are no monsters, you know, Zephyr.

Zephyr considered this.

Yes, I think so, he said. I think there is.

I thought that when I was little too, but you know, the monsters are just in your head.

Yes, Zephyr said practically. But you can't open your head.

He reached up to his brow like he was going to open a cupboard.

You see, the little boy said. No door.

LXXV. Ask

One night Jude came to Joshua's mother's house.

It was late, maybe half-past one.

Jude banged on the door, oblivious to time and convention.

Shhhh! Josh said, as he ushered him in. *People are sleeping.*

I'm not gonna wake your mum up! Jude said, his voice a bit slurred. *Your mum loves me anyway. Right, Joshie?*

Be quiet, okay? My little sister's got school tomorrow.

Your sister's kinda cute, man. Did I ever tell you that? She's real cute, Joshua.

Josh looked at him flatly. *What do you want?*

Jude tsked like an old lady scolding him on his manners.

He pushed past Josh, and went to the kitchen. Josh followed.

Jude was opening up all the cupboards and slamming them shut again.

Don't you guys have any liquor?

You don't think you've had enough?

No. I don't think I have, Joshua.

Josh sighed and took his mother's gin out of the freezer.

He poured Jude half a glass.

Jude smiled like a baby smiling at a bottle,

And gulped it down in one.

Then he sat down at the table and looked at Josh,

Revived.

You don't like me very much anymore, Jude observed.

Josh raised an eyebrow, *I like you. Maybe not at this minute... but I like you.*

No, Jude said seriously. You don't like me. You think I'm a bad person. It's okay.

You can say it.

I don't think you're a bad person, Jude. I just think you're drunk.

I am drunk, Jude agreed. Needed a bit of lubrication if you know what I mean.

Josh paused.

Jude laughed slightly, *No, of course you wouldn't. It all comes easy to you.*

What does?

Everything, Jude said. Everything comes easy to you.

That's funny. I always thought that about you.

Jude scoffed. He was taken with this story at the moment.

Maybe your mother's right. Maybe you are half angel or something.

What are you talking about?

This, Josh. I'm talking about this.

Jude took a stack of crumpled papers from his backpack and spread them on the table.

Cuz I've been trying for weeks, man, weeks. And nothing. Haven't written a word that compares.

Jude looked at the papers. Josh knew the look. It was the look of defeat.

Josh put his hand on Jude's shoulder.

Maybe you just need to take a break. Don't force it.

Jude got up and went to the sink.

He ran the water over his hands and dried them with a tea towel.

He stood there for a long moment, his hands on either side of the counter,

Eyes gazing down the drain.

You okay? Josh asked, taking a step towards him. *Do you feel sick?*

Jude put a hand up:

Approach no further.

Jude looked at Mary's African Violets on the window sill,

The edges of their soft leaves turning brown.

You know it's killing me, man.

Josh didn't say anything.

Something hard had grown around his chest like armour, *What's killing you?*

Asking, Jude said.

Asking for what?

Jude smiled, *You know.*

I really don't.

He did.

Jude looked at him. His eyes were full of pain.

Help me, he said. *They expect an album and I've got nothing.*

Okay, Josh said.

It wasn't what he wanted to say.

He wanted to say, *Go to hell.*

But who, in this world, when asked for bread,

Could give a stone?

LXXVI. Source of Songs

It was strange the words that came into his mind.

Where did they come from?

What were they – old files in the brain – a jukebox of cliches, hopes, fears, sadness?

A rapid fire of little numbers triggered by... God knows what.

But who was pushing the buttons?

Joshua always had the voice in his head, everyone did.

He couldn't describe the moment

When he came to feel

Like someone else,

Outside of himself.

Maybe the switch had always been there, flickering on and off,

And he had just accepted it

The way children accept,

Without knowing why.

LXXVII. Elwin Kane

A few days later, Jude called Josh and asked him if he would come in to the studio;

His producer wanted to meet him.

Jude's producer was a fat man in his forties named Elwin Kane.

When Josh came in, Elwin said, *So this is the prodigy?*

The big winner of radio-play royalty cheques.

Josh smiled embarrassed, and shook the older man's hand.

Hi, I'm Josh.

Elwin Kane. Good to meet ya!

You too.

Elwin gestured for the guys to sit down, and appraised Josh with his eyes.

Josh felt awkward.

Jude said you wanted to meet with me?

Sudden as a light-switch, Elwin snapped on.

Of course, Josh! You're the secret weapon. The one who wrote the song.

I don't know. Jude's selling it.

Ah, don't be modest. I hate modesty. I've been the man behind the man for a long time.

I know what it takes. You want a drink? We got everything.

I'm fine, thanks.

I know you're fine, but would you like a drink?

Okay, water?

Water? Are you for real, boy?

Josh smiled slightly, *Water's good.*

Jude gave Elwin a look, *I'll have scotch.*

Tina, Elwin called to the girl with the thousand braids just outside the door.

Sparkling water with some lemon zest. And a scotch. You brought the material?

Josh hesitated, not sure who he was talking to.

You. Yes, you. You brought the material, Elwin said.

Josh opened his backpack and brought out a pile of paper,

Napkins, loose-leaf, post-its, and pastry bags scrawled with chords and writing.

You ever heard of a notebook, son?

Josh laughed, *I just write on whatever's around. Otherwise I forget stuff.*

Fair enough, fair enough. I was just yankin' your chain.

Tina came back with lemon water and scotch. She set the drinks on the table.

Thanks, Josh said.

Tina gave him a perfunctory smile and left the room.

Elwin rifled through the paper.

I can't make head nor tail of this!

Yeah, sorry. They're just notes. A lot of songs are in my head now.

You gonna play them for me?

Josh looked at Jude. Jude shrugged.

Yeah, I guess. But I could also teach Jude, and then he could play them for you.

I'd rather go straight to the source. We can see if there's anything we might want to record and then you can demo 'em for us. Cut out the middle man.

Jude swallowed, the scotch wasn't going down easy.

Okay, Josh looked hesitant.

He had never sung in front of anyone but Jude.

Except for Martha once.

Fantastic, Elwin said. *Let's hear it.*

Right now?

When you're ready.

Josh took a long drink of water; the carbonation burned as it went down.

He took a breath and unbuckled the guitar case.

When Josh got home, it was late. There was a message on the machine.

Josh, my boy. I'm excited. And I don't get excited often. I want you. The songs are

anthemic. And you – you're the Real Thing, Kid. Nothing sells like the Real Thing.

You're gonna be the next Bob Dylan. Call me.

Josh stood in the dark kitchen staring at the flashing red light.

Hannah's cat came and rubbed up against his legs.

He stood there for a long time gazing at the red light.

They were the only people in the world who still had an answering machine;

(Mary wasn't about to pay for voicemail when they had a machine that worked perfectly)

Josh pressed the button again.

The message played three more times before Josh could fully take it in.

He went upstairs, brushed his teeth, and went to bed.

It was one-thirty in the morning and he had to get up at seven, but he couldn't sleep.

Josh lay inside the awake of the dark, struggling,

Staring up at the blank ceiling.

What should he do?

In the shadows,

A red heart

Radiated.

Josh didn't even have that good of a voice.

He wasn't even good looking.

He was just some skinny kid with messy curls.

Jude looked like a movie star.

He sang like an angel.

I don't even have that good a voice, Josh said to Elwin, his first day in the studio.

The first day he went without Jude anyway.

I'm not even good looking.

When you're famous, Elwin said. None of that matters.

*When you're famous, you **become** beautiful.*

And your voice prophetic.

People are hungry for the Real Thing, Josh. And you, my friend, are just that.

Just you wait, Kid... You're gonna be a god.

A God,

For playing some songs on the guitar.

The whole thing was absurd.

And yet...

LXXVIII. Chills and Fever

The next time Josh saw Jude it might have been three months later.

There had been a stand-off.

Josh knew he should have called,

But he didn't.

Jude came down to the Community Centre early in the morning.

Josh was sorting the broken crayons from the whole ones,

Putting the broken ones in a cookie tin.

Two little kids sat at the table and coloured.

There's someone at the door, the little girl said, distracted from her work of colouring inside the lines of a Fairy Princess.

Josh looked over and saw him.

Jude nodded.

Josh got up and followed Jude into the hallway.

Hey, Josh said.

So this is what you do here? Crayon inventory?

C'mon, man, Josh said.

C'mon what?

It wasn't my idea.

The crayons? No, I'd assume that those kind of decisions come from higher up.

How's the album coming? Josh asked.

Oh, that. It's not happening. I'm doing something else now.

What happened?

You know how it is, Jude said. *Easy come, easy go.*

But the single –

Was yours.

Jude, I – I'm really sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen.

All the same, Jude said.

They stood there for a moment, not looking at each other.

Besides, Jude said. *I'm not a musician. I'm an artist.*

Josh looked at him questioningly.

Jude handed him a slip of paper.

Come to the show, he said.

That night when Josh got home, he couldn't warm up.

Layering the bed with four blankets, two quilts, and a sleeping bag,

Josh curled up under the weight and shivered.

His teeth knocked against each other loud as typewriter keys.

He could've sworn his breath was coming out in smoky clouds.

He closed his eyes and thought about the winter coat he gave away.

He didn't even know the name of the guy who wore it now.

A few hours later, Josh woke up sweltering hot.

He threw off the covers, stripped off his clothes,

And lay on the white sheets

Burning.

LXXIX. Seeds

The world always changed too fast or too slow.

This time it was too fast.

The new song was on the radio.

Joshua's song. Joshua's voice.

Elwin was ecstatic.

Just you wait, he said. This thing is going to take over the world.

Max sat in the studio with Josh nights,

Drinking strawberry milkshakes and speaking her mind.

For a long time, they didn't talk about Jude.

They understood that it would be a kind of betrayal, an unsealing of a pact.

But then one night, out of nowhere, she brought him up.

Jude thinks he's a performance artist, Martha said, picking at Josh's fries.

He didn't say anything.

It's actually kind of funny...

Josh felt a little sick. Maybe it was the junk food.

He took an apple from the paper bag in her backpack.

What about the paper? Josh said, biting down.

He quit the paper. Alex is running it. He says he wants to dedicate himself to his art.

What kind of art is it?

You know, she said. Performance art. People nailing themselves to Volkswagens

and such.

Jude nailed himself to a Volkswagen?

No, no... it's been done. Chris Burden did it way back in the seventies. I'm just saying, in that vein.

So like what?

Okay... For example, he made this tree out of iron bars and nooses and had members of the audience come up, pick a suicide note from under the tree – there was a whole bunch of them, I guess they were supposed to be like fallen leaves – real suicide notes that people sent in. So someone different read each one aloud onstage. And at the end of the night, Jude brought out a chainsaw and cut down the tree. Sparks flying, the whole deal.

Josh furrowed his brow, Why did he do that?

Martha smirked, Why do you think? It got written up in the Village Voice.

I don't know, Josh said. It can't just be for attention, can it?

Can't it?

I don't know, Josh said, looking at the apple.

He must have been anxious; the apple was bitten down to core on one side.

He took another bite.

A seed fell on the floor.

(an animal would eat the entire thing – seeds and all.)

Yes, Josh thought to himself. But I am not an animal.

I'm a person.

LXXX. Eyes Like Paul Newman's

Isobel!

Izzie looked up from her book.

There was no one in the diner that she knew.

A coffee cup clattered behind her and she startled, then went back to her book.

Isobel, the voice said again.

It was a young man. He had dark hair and blue eyes. He was smiling.

Hello, she said, because that is what you say to people who know your name.

Even if you don't know theirs.

Jude, he said. *We met at a reading.*

Izzie looked at him.

You're Joshua's friend, she said.

You remember. For a minute there, I thought I was losing my touch.

Izzie looked at him curiously.

It's a joke, he said. *A bad one.*

Oh, Izzie said.

They stood there for a minute not saying anything.

Jude was looking at her in a different way than she was usually looked at by people.

How is Josh? she asked.

I was going to ask you the same question. You don't keep in touch?

Sometimes we do... not lately. He's touring, I think.

I know. He stole my best girl.

Izzie frowned, *Your girlfriend?*

That didn't sound like Josh.

Nah, Jude shook his head and smiled. *Just a friend of mine.*

Izzie nodded. She looked back at her book.

She wasn't sure if the conversation was over.

Jude glanced at the cover, *'Integrated Principles of Zoology.'* *School?*

Izzie looked at the textbook that she had taken out of the library on seven separate occasions now. There was a polar bear on the cover.

Jude looked at her, waiting.

It's for school? he said. *You're studying?*

Oh no, Izzie said. *I'm just reading.*

Just for fun, eh?

Yeah, Izzie nodded. *I like to read on my break.*

The waitress put a plate down in front of Izzie.

There you go, Hon. Boiled egg and toast.

Jude looked at her amused.

So you like to read textbooks for fun and you order boiled eggs at a restaurant.

Just one boiled egg, Izzie corrected.

So let me ask you this, Isobel. What are you on a break from?

Book Warehouse, Izzie said. *I work there.*

Izzie cracked the egg and started to peel it.

She could feel his eyes on her.

You kind of look like Paul Newman, she said. Your eyes, I mean.

Her face felt hot. She didn't know why she'd said that. She never said things like that.

Jude frowned and smiled at the same time, *Thanks, I guess.*

Your welcome, Izzie said, gently removing another piece of shell.

Isobel.

Yes?

What's your last name?

Klashinsky.

Are you in the book?

What book?

Jude laughed and shook his head. *Nevermind, he said. You got a phone number?*

Yeah... Do you mean this book? she asked, gesturing at the *Integrated Principles of Zoology, 3rd Edition.*

He looked at her like he was trying to figure something out.

Izzie looked down at her plate. The egg was peeled perfectly. No cuts or scrapes.

Isobel, Jude said.

Yes.

Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?

What are you having?

Jude laughed. He looked her right in the eyes, *Whatever you want.*

A warm tingling sensation came over her,

Kind of like when her leg fell asleep.

What did they call that again?

Pins and Needles.

She looked at the Polar Bear on the textbook.

She looked at the glass of water with a wedge of lemon floating in it.

She looked at the perfectly peeled egg, and got scared.

I have to go, she said hastily.

She grabbed her coat, her book, her ten dollar bill.

She left the last on the table

And rushed out.

Izzie walked briskly down the street, hugging her book to her chest.

There were too many people on the street.

Jude called after her.

She did not turn around, but kept walking.

When he caught up, he grabbed her shoulder, and she flinched.

You forgot something, he said.

What?

He held his hands behind his back, *Pick a hand*.

She hesitated. Pointed at his right arm.

He handed her a crumpled napkin.

She opened it up.

Inside was her perfectly peeled hard boiled egg

Still intact.

Pick another hand.

She laughed, pointed at his left arm. He brought out an empty hand, *Try again.*

She pointed to his right arm again.

He handed her something in a bit of newspaper.

She opened it. It was a little pin, a black crow pin. Izzie smiled.

I like crows, she said. Thank you.

You're welcome.

His eyes glittered like Paul Newman's.

She pinned it on her jacket.

Or is it a raven? she wondered aloud, looking at it.

You got me, Jude said.

They looked at each other for a moment; there was a good feeling between them.

We don't have to have dinner, Jude said. *We could have breakfast or lunch or coffee.*

Izzie bit her lip.

Do you like pancakes? he asked.

She shook her head.

Do you like steak? he asked.

She shook her head.

Do you like falafels? he asked.

She shook her head.

Jude looked amused. *So basically, you're determined not to eat with me.*

Izzie hesitated. *I like spaghetti,* she said. *Do you like spaghetti?*

I love spaghetti.

We could have spaghetti.

Okay, Jude said, tucking a wisp of blond hair behind her ear. Izzie shivered.

Spaghetti it is.

LXXXI. In a Crowd of Ten Thousand

Josh felt dizzy. There's nothing to it, man, one of the festival stage-hands said.

He was a scruffy kid, maybe nineteen or twenty, in a Ramones T-shirt.

He handed Josh a bottle of whiskey, To put the colour back in your cheeks.

Josh took a swig.

Take a few more, the kid said.

Josh took another and handed it back to him, Thanks.

John, he said.

John, Josh said. Thanks. You're a life-saver. I'm Josh, by the way.

I know, John grinned. People are talkin'...

What are they saying?

That you're the next one.

The next what?

John just smiled, You nervous?

Ten thousand people. Why would I be nervous?

Just a bunch of hipsters, dilettantes, and old hippies, John said. They ain't got nothin' on you.

Could I have another swig of that whiskey?

Sure thing, John said handing Josh the bottle, and looking at his clipboard.

That's your call. You ready?

Josh wiped his mouth and grinned, *Nope*.

Well, ready or not. Here you come.

Josh took a deep breath and stepped out onstage.

He was blinded by the lights for a second.

He stumbled up to the microphone.

The applause died down, and now it was just him

Alone

In a crowd of ten thousand.

Don't think about it, he whispered,

Hit the first chord

Stopped.

It was a bit out of tune. He tweaked the strings.

In the background, he could hear the roar of ten thousand voices murmuring.

Josh looked up at them.

Hi, he said. Then he started playing.

Afterwards, Josh was flying.

Euphoric.

He had never felt this way before;

Intensely aware of being

Alive.

At this very moment.

He knew something had happened, changed.

Josh was part of the living, breathing organism now.

He had been transformed

From a half-imagined little mongrel into a Star.

His whole life – the onions he chopped for his mother's stock two weeks earlier,

The tears that sprang up and turned real as they fell –

Everything had led to this moment.

Josh! Josh! he turned around and saw John, and some other guys – roadies
and lighting techs.

Most of the other performers were older, established.

They had their own people.

Hey man, you want to come out for drinks when we're done here?

Yeah, sure!

John smiled. He looked a little surprised by the enthusiasm.

Alright, man, hang tight. We'll come get you in a bit.

John turned and walked away.

Josh noticed that he walked with a limp.

LXXXII. No Tears

When Jude first met Isobel, he was immediately intrigued.

No doubt because she was the only one in the room immune to his charm.

On their second date, Jude took Izzie to a play.

It was a post-modernist piece that a friend of his was in.

It was raining outside that night.

Izzie and Jude waded through the downpour to the back entrance

(so they wouldn't have to pay)

And came into the dimly lit theatre.

Izzie was wearing leather boots with zippers up the sides,

A paperclip dangling from a broken zipper train;

A practical solution to a practical problem.

That was Isobel.

Do you go to many plays? Jude asked, as Izzie sat down and straightened her skirt so that it was perfectly smooth on her knees.

I've never been to a play, she said.

Never!?

No, Izzie said. *How many plays have you been to?*

Jude smiled, *I couldn't say.*

A glimmer of confusion came over Izzie's brow;

Then she remembered to smooth it away.

Jude felt around in his pocket and offered her a tissue.

Iris always cries at plays, he said. Do you cry at sad movies?

I never cry, Isobel said.

At movies?

At all.

You never cry.

No, Izzie said. Not since I was a child. And even then, I didn't cry often.

Jude looked at her sceptically, *Everyone cries. You must cry sometime.*

Isobel looked at him.

No, she said solemnly. I don't.

Jude looked at her placid, doll-like face,

Her wide, innocent eyes,

And chose to believe her.

LXXXIII. The Art of Isobel

In the months that followed, Jude talked a lot about performance art.

What I like most about it is that it challenges our ideas about what we see as real and unreal. Because what else is there but performance? Jude asked.

Everything is performance, everything is control.

The body has become a product...

Jude had a bar code tattooed on his arm

That he claimed set off scanners in the self-check out line at Home Depot.

Foucault was right, he said.

Industrialized society had brought with it a deep self-inflicted regulation of the body

That was hard to subvert.

Oppression was no longer just on the outside, but on the inside.

Even so, maybe there was still a way to break free, he said.

And become truly human again,

Or at least a product of our own making, of our own free will.

Isobel, Jude said, because of the different way her brain worked,

Was both more and less vulnerable,

Freed and bound by her lack of emotion.

He began to understand that Isobel was his ticket.

Little by little, he started incorporating her into his pieces.

In one, Jude and a few other guys sat on an old tweed couch,

And 'played' Isobel with video game remotes and verbal cues.

They instructed Izzie to do things, say things,

And she did them and said them.

Through her, Jude could make the invisible visible

The invulnerable vulnerable

In the form of a beautiful, affectless girl.

The art community was unimpressed at first.

But when word got out about Isobel's condition, people got more interested.

They called it exploitative.

Jude agreed that of course it was.

They called it cruel.

Jude said it was making a point.

She was there freely.

But was she really free?

Did she have that ability given her circumstances?

Does anyone? Jude asked. *That's the question I'm trying to raise.*

Jude said Isobel was an analogy, a simpler version of a bigger issue.

She was not an analogy, his critics said, she was a person.

But what is that? Jude wanted to know.

A collection of impressions and desires?

Repulsions and appetites programmed into the organism from birth?

Jude did not believe in the soul;

It was like believing the Tooth Fairy, he said.

Isobel was an experiment in will.

She was there to raise the question:

Could we ever be free

Or were we perpetually controlled by external forces?

Of course people found it discomfiting.

All good art shakes the ground on which we stand, Jude said.

That's the purpose of art.

Love it or hate it, he said.

This is a performance. But it's also real.

LXXXIV. Letters from the Road

The more Josh travelled, the more people he met.

And the more people he met, the truer he felt.

People began to write Joshua letters.

People he didn't even know sent him locks of their hair and stories about their heart conditions.

His mother wrote him letters too.

Just when he was finally doing something that moved people, she was pulling back.

I guess I never really pictured you travelling around playing songs on a guitar.

I know in my heart that there is so much more to you than that, Joshua.

Somehow, it didn't satisfy her idea of a Great Wave crashing upon the earth.

They're calling you The One, John said one night while Josh read one of her letters.

What more could she possibly want?

Josh shrugged. He supposed that an angel in an abortion clinic meant more than a few songs that people liked to sing along to on the radio.

She wanted a Before and an After.

She wanted a Revolution with Josh as the hub of the wheel.

Millions knew his name,

But that wasn't enough.

Mary thought he was made for something more.

Sometimes I wonder what would be enough for you, Mum. Josh wrote to her,

His handwriting recording every vibration of the bus. *If anything ever could be?*

It's only because I love you, Doll, Mary wrote back.

It's only because I know who you are that I expect so much.

But when you say things like you think I could never be satisfied,

You sound like your father.

Josh understood the veiled ultimatum in this observation.

He'd lived with it most of his life:

Who do you belong to, him or me?

I know you want what's best for me, Josh wrote back.

But sometimes I wish you would trust me to figure things out for myself.

Maybe I'm getting it wrong, but right now I'm happy.

I wish you could be happy too.

Reading her letters, he missed his dad.

There were gaps left inside

That no one but Joe could fix.

LXXXV. Figs

Isobel didn't know what love was. She only knew what it wasn't.

Jude told her that most of what we thought of as love was just another myth of capitalism.

A concept invented to sell chocolate bars, nylon stockings, and razor blades.

Izzie didn't understand what love had to do with nylon stockings,

But she didn't tell him that.

Izzie lived in a world of objects, she didn't really understand ideas.

Ideas were not things.

You couldn't count them.

You couldn't hold them.

They weren't really there at all.

Jude said this made her the Ultimate Materialist.

He said this while tracing his index finger around the curls of her pelvis,

Three sides of a triangle from her lower abdomen, over the crevice of each thigh and back again.

His finger drew the curves and lines of her body.

He said it was like drawing a map of the all the places he'd been.

Izzie had never been loved like this.

In a way, she had never been loved at all.

For Isobel was a thing,

And he loved her as a thing.

He was drawing in the borders, he said.

He liked to use metaphor just to tease her. That was Jude.

He'd say something he knew she couldn't understand

And then smile at her sweetly.

Jude brought figs from Iris's garden and fed them to Isobel.

He liked to watch her eat, he said.

It reminded him of the way baby birds gobble worms.

Izzie didn't really like figs.

But for some reason, she ate them anyway.

Jude wanted her to eat figs from his fingers,

So she ate figs from his fingers.

One day, Jude took her to a movie.

It was a documentary about White Supremacists.

Isobel watched the people talk and a terrible feeling came over her.

Maybe the figs she'd eaten had gone bad. Maybe they were rotting inside her.

Why did we go there? Izzie asked that night while they ate pizza in bed.

Jude lay with his head on her chest, resting a slice of pizza on her stomach.

I wanted you to see what hate looks like, he said.

But Izzie already knew.

She hated figs.

LXXXVI. Isobel and the Men

Isobel knew the kind of man she wanted.

He was the exact opposite of her father.

At the same time, she had always understood that it would not be up to her.

If she was going to have anyone,

He would have to choose her.

Izzie had never been short on male attention.

She was blond and fay-like with large vulnerable eyes

That looked curious and ready to be instructed.

Men seemed to like this,

But upon closer inspection, they found something lacking in her.

And that missing something discomfited most people.

At the very least, they found it disconcerting,

At most, obnoxious and strange.

Isobel had learned not to mind; she knew she was different.

As Jude said, there was something wrong in her wiring.

But unlike most people, he enjoyed her hapless naivete.

She was more like an animal

Than a person, he said.

Izzie agreed.

When Jude met Isobel's father,
He made some cryptic remark about truck-drivers and methamphetamines,
To which Frank did not take kindly.
Who the hell is this? Frank demanded.
Jude, Izzie said.
Why do you have a girl's name, son?
It's what my parents named me, sir, Jude replied.
Frank stared at Jude. Jude looked back calmly.
After a minute, Frank stomped off to the TV room,
Grumbling about 'little dopehead pricks who thought they owned the world.'
Jude looked at Izzie and laughed.
I like him!

LXXXVII. Love Stories

John lay on the floor of the motel drinking wine from the bottle.
It was five in the morning and everyone else had pretty much crashed.
Have you ever been in love? John asked Josh,
Gazing into the opening of the wine bottle like a telescope.
Josh slid down the closet door until he was almost lying down, *Yeah. Once.*
Once, John repeated. *I think most people have been in love way more than they count.*
The first time I fell in love, I was in preschool. Her name was Sarah-Jane and she had a clover-shaped birthmark on her left cheek. We used to make mud pies in the rain. In the

playground, she'd hang upside down on the monkey bars. She always wore pretty underwear with flowers and hearts and stuff. I thought she was the funnest, prettiest thing I'd ever seen.

Josh reached for the bottle of Merlot.

Mud pies in the rain, Josh said. Monkey bars and flower underpants. That's romance.

Damn straight, John said. And when I was twelve, I kissed my best friend, Caleb, on his thirteenth birthday. We were having a sleepover, camping in a tent in the backyard. We made out for months afterwards until my dad caught us.

Then what happened?

Nothing. We weren't allowed to see each other. I think we would've avoided each other after that anyway. It was one of those things that we never really acknowledged, so once our parents knew, it was just weird. After that I dated girls mostly.

Josh looked at him. John was just nineteen years old, but he was often wise.

What happened to Caleb?

John laughed, and took another swig of the wine. *His dad sent him to military school.*

Straighten him out, y'know? I never really got that – straightening people out by surrounding them with fit, young men in uniform. Seems counter-intuitive to me. I don't even think Caleb was gay. Just something between us, y'know?

Josh looked out the window at the street light. It was hailing outside.

Little bits of ice fell from the sky and bounced on the pavement.

That's sad...

All love stories are sad, John said. Because, at some point, they end.

That's enough to put you off the whole thing, Josh said.

Is that where you're at?

Josh shook his head, *I've got Max.*

But you don't love her.

I wouldn't say that.

Yeah, but you don't love her love her. You don't love her like she's the sweetest thing in the world.

Josh looked back at the street light, its halo of hail,

Then at the reflections of the room in the window, back and forth, shifting his gaze
inside outside inside outside

All in one.

Josh felt the emptiness spring open

Like an umbrella.

That old feeling of wanting something

He couldn't name.

I guess you're right, Josh said softly.

Of course I'm right.

John flashed his big, bright, facetious grin, *I'm always right.*

LXXXVIII. Poison in the Blood

I don't know who you are anymore.

You're just about the only one, Josh said lightly, taking a sip of the herbal tea

she put in front of him. It tasted terrible.

His mother always gave him herbal tea when he came home because she didn't approve of his dependence on coffee.

He didn't tell her that it was either caffeine or crystal meth.

He had to keep going somehow.

Don't be funny, Joshua. I'm serious. You've changed.

Josh sighed, *I've been home less than two hours, Mum. I'm exhausted.*

And I have to leave again in three days. So can we not go down this road again?

Exactly. Three days. You have no time for anyone but yourself anymore.

Josh sighed. *I have time for everyone. I make time for everyone I can make time for.*

Just not your family.

I'm here.

For the moment.

Mary didn't like Josh, the Rock Star,

Wandering around aimlessly from city to city.

She had envisioned something else,

Something more.

She wasn't sure what she had envisioned.

She just knew it wasn't this.

It would be different if Joshua were working for Doctors without Borders or something like that.

Or developing some major vaccine, maybe a cure for cancer or A.I.D.S.

He would give it away unpatented.

These were the kinds of dreams she had.

Perhaps he could become a revolutionary political leader,

Negotiating peace in places where people were entrenched in hate,

Or stop some horrific ethnic cleansing campaign.

These were the kind of dreams his mother had.

She saw him dying for a cause,

Not playing folk festivals to weeping fourteen-year-old girls

Who literally kissed the ground he walked upon.

She dreamed of Nobel Peace Prizes,

Not a lost generation of teenagers and drifters following him around,

Calling him the Voice of a Generation.

What kind of generation was that anyway?

Living their lives according to songs

That no one understood.

You have so many gifts, Doll, Mary said. Why are you wasting your time on this? Go back to school. Do something wonderful with your life.

She thought maybe it was the women.

She thought maybe it was the fame.

She thought Josh was lost

To a world she didn't believe in.

She had to know it wasn't for the money;

Josh was signed to an Indie label.

He wore the same thing everyday, black jeans, black boots,

Joe's heavy plaid workman's jacket,

Now just a trendy affectation mimicked by millions of fifteen-year-olds.

But Josh had worn it since his dad died.

He hadn't changed.

Josh played for free whenever he could,

And gave all his money away.

But it wasn't enough.

Josh went on social justice marches, union sit-ins, minority rights parades.

He did what he could to inspire people to fight for what was fair,

What was kind and authentic.

But the songs kept coming, rushing past him like fall leaves in a river

that would slip away if he didn't catch them.

Josh didn't always know what they meant.

He did, but he didn't.

And there was a resistance in him to explanations;

People would hear and understand what they would.

You aren't the same, Mary insisted.

She didn't seem to care that James drank beer most of the day,

And slept on the job most of the night.

He was a security guard for the Art Museum.

Neither did she seem to care that Hannah wasn't interested in anything anymore

But clothes and celebrity gossip.

Josh felt bad for his brother and sister. He felt bad for Mary.

He didn't know why people always seemed to hurt the ones they loved the most,

Why there was always a trace of poison in the blood.

Because it had always been up to Joshua

To make their mother happy.

LXXXIX. Klasher's Black Hole

The next day, Josh went to find Klasher.

Klasher was living at the Portland Hotel, working as a desk clerk and a super.

He was still using, but he had it under control.

Just enough to get by, he told Josh.

Next year, once they had this bedbug problem sorted out,

He would go back for his G.E.D.

That's good, Klash, Josh said. I wouldn't want to mess up this job for you, but I was

wondering if you might want to come out on the road next time.

Are you kidding? Yes.

Josh laughed. *I thought you said you liked it here. That you were doing something good for the neighbourhood.*

Oh, that's just what I say. This place is a black hole. I'd love to be back in the land of the living.

People live here too.

Barely.

Josh looked at Klasher thoughtfully. He didn't look great, but he looked okay.

Alright, let's do it, he said. You okay for heavy lifting?

I'm okay for anything that gets me out of this God forsaken place.

Cool.

Klasher smiled in that old mischievous way, *You get a lot of action out there?*

Josh shook his head and smiled, *Not the kind you're talkin' about.*

C'mon, man. You're not a saint.

Yeah, but I try.

Yeah, you do. Sanctimonious Bastard.

What can I say? Josh said. I'm not really the heart-breaker type.

About twenty-seven teen magazines tell me different, Klasher said.

You still reading those things?

Funny. You're very funny.

But you're not laughing.

I'm laughing on the inside.

XC. Revisiting the Old Neighbourhood

Klasher and Joshua walked through the old neighbourhood. It was a grey day.

The wind was strong enough to blow some of their words away

Before they reached the other's ear.

But they didn't want to go inside.

A new house was being built.

It was almost six o'clock on a Saturday and the site was deserted.

Klasher pulled a joint out of his pocket.

You want to smoke up there? he said, gesturing to the job site.

For old times' sake?

The guys climbed up and Klasher lit up.

Josh sat on the plywood floor and looked out the paneless window.

They gazed down on street where they grew up,

Seeing both what was and what had been.

The street had changed. They had changed.

But some things were the same.

The Klashinskys house was still chipped and green.

It fit pretty closely with the image in Joshua's mind of Klasher and Izzie's house.

It was just a bit more run-down.

You visit much? Josh asked, nodding across the street at Klasher's childhood home.

Downstairs, the curtains were drawn. Upstairs it was dark.

Nope, Klasher said.

Josh looked at his fingernails, *What about Izzie?*

Haven't you heard? Izzie's holed up with some guy. She barely leaves the apartment.

What!?! With who?

Your old friend. Jude.

Jude!?! Do they even know each other?

Klasher shrugged. *They do now.*

Josh shook his head, *Jude.*

It's weird, right? To think of Izzie with a guy, Klasher seemed to think it was funny.

He coughed a little, choking on laughter and smoke.

The whole thing is weird, Josh said.

He looked down at his mother's flowerbed

Or rather the mound of dirt she had dumped on the front lawn the year his father died.

All fall and winter, before the tulips and daffodils bloomed, it was just a big pile of dirt

With nothing in it but a few twigs sticking out of the ground,

Skeletal fingers.

What happened to his wife?

Who's wife?

Jude's wife? He's got two kids you know.

Oh. Right. Klasher shrugged. No idea. Probably still around...

Josh felt a knot in his stomach. It might have been guilt.

I don't know, Klash. This doesn't give me a good feeling.

You're tellin' me, Klasher said. This whole fuckin' world's gone to hell.

Josh smiled, *You think it wasn't there before?*

Klasher smiled and raised his eyebrows, *No, I guess you're right. It's just when you're a kid, you think it'll be different when it's your turn.*

Our turn's not over yet, Josh said.

XCI. A Good and Sweet New Year

On tour, people became like family.

People he saw everyday, and loved, and hated, and got irritated with,
And felt lost without.

The guys on the crew became more like family to Josh
Than his real family.

He didn't really know his family anymore, not the way he used to.

He didn't keep in good touch with his brother and sister.

They had their own lives, and they didn't seem to want to know much about his.

A divide had grown up between them since their dad died.

Maybe it was just a part of growing up,

But it seemed to Josh that his family had split along a fault line

That Joe had somehow held together.

You are not one of us, his siblings seemed to imply

Byway of the bitterness that grew like weeds between them.

He had never thought of Hannah and Jimmy as his half-siblings,

But something had changed over the years,

And Josh began to realize that he had become an outsider.

The few times a year they sat across the table from each other,

Josh started to feel less like their brother,

And more like an unwelcome guest.

Over Rosh Hashanah during his second tour, Josh had offered his brother a job.

I'm fine, James said. I have a job.

I guess I didn't realize you were so attached to being a security guard.

As soon as he said it, he knew he shouldn't have.

Sometimes with Jimmy, Joshua couldn't help but say mean things.

No, Josh, James said flatly. I'd much rather be your gopher. It's been a lifelong dream of mine.

Maybe if you didn't give away every last cent to complete strangers, Hannah said.

People in this family could do something worthwhile with their lives.

But Hannah, James said. Have you forgotten? Only Josh can do worthwhile things.

I never said that, Josh cut in.

You don't have to, his brother said. Anyway, I don't want your money. I can pay my own way. Rent, insurance, courses. Unlike you, I didn't just dick around in college for three years, spending Mum's money, and then drop out just before finishing.

You're taking courses? Josh said, trying to change the subject.

You didn't know? Hannah said, raising her eyebrows.

What courses are you taking?

The bitterness slipped from James's voice for a minute.

I'm working on my electrician's certificate, he said quietly.

Good for you, man!

Don't sound so surprised.

Why didn't you tell me?

I'm telling you now. This is me telling you.

That's cool. Maybe when you're done, you can come help us with the wiring.

James raised an eyebrow.

Or not... Josh smiled, putting his hands up in a gesture of mercy.

The corner of Jimmy's mouth flickered.

Don't push your luck.

Mary came in with apples and honey.

Sweets for my sweets, she said, setting the platter down.

She walked around the table and kissed each of her children.

Shana tova umetukah.

A good and sweet year.

XCII. John's Limp

When John was fifteen, he told Josh, his leg had been broken in six places.

He told his father that he'd had a bad fall jumping off a friend's fire escape while drunk.

This, he felt, would be better than telling his dad what really happened,

Which was that he got jumped in an alley four blocks from home.

Five guys he knew from school had held him down

And laid into him like there was no tomorrow.

They were unarmed except for one guy with a metal baseball bat.

This guy had smashed his portion, John's right leg, into pieces.

Bones shards sticking out this way and that.

When John came to, he'd found his phone

And called not his father, not his mother, not his grandparents or siblings,

But the ambulance.

He'd told the paramedics, doctors, and nurses, the fire escape story.

None of them seemed to believe him.

But with no suspects and no one to press charges against,

They just patched him up and sent him home.

John's wallet, the twenty five bucks inside, his cell phone,

None of these had been taken.

The guys from school hadn't wanted anything.

Just to beat John to a pulp.

I always kinda wished they'd taken my wallet, he said. At least then I could've told the old man I was mugged. Would've been a lot better than the fire escape story.

You could've ditched your wallet somewhere, Josh said.

I needed my health card.

Why couldn't you tell your dad?

John shrugged. *Too many questions. The old man would've wanted to take 'em out.*

At the very least, he would've called their parents, maybe the police. It would've brought up too much stuff. And I know he didn't need that. He had enough on his plate.

D'you think he knew you were lying?

I don't know, probably. I mean, I had three broken ribs, a split lip, a black eye, a concussion. Metal bars screwed into my leg. I'm sure they said something to him;

I was only sixteen.

Why do you think he didn't say anything?

Because. He didn't want to know. So he believed me.

That's pretty bad.

No, it isn't. He believed what he wanted to believe. Everyone does.

Not always, Josh said.

John looked at Josh like he was impossibly naive.

Always, John said. That's just the way it is.

Josh picked up his guitar, put his fingers in a few chord positions without strumming, and set it down again.

What about your leg?

It got better.

D'you still have the metal bars inside?

You should see me at airports.

Josh didn't smile like he was meant to.

Does it hurt?

John shook his head. *Nah. To be honest with you, I kinda like it. The scars are bad-ass. And I think the limp makes me look like I got style.*

Joshua furrowed his brow, considering this. He smiled.

You know. It kinda does...

XCIII. Home Away from Home

Joshua and his crew made friends in every city.

When they came back through again, they crashed on their couches, drank their wine, and found out what had been happening since they were last there.

A new movement was growing.

People were doing things they had never done before,

Doing things for their friends, doing things for their community,

Doing things for strangers in the street.

Things they may have thought of, but never acted upon,

Things they may have wished to do, but never had the time and the energy for

Until now.

These ideas inspired other people and other ideas,

The slow trickle of a revolution of kindness.

Josh felt inspired. A lot of people did.

Something was changing,

Little by little.

Something was happening

To make things better than they were before.

After their second tour, Martha decided to go home.

She didn't want to roam around the country anymore; she wanted to do something else.

She started a Community Gathering Place,

A cozy cafe with tables and couches, bar stools and a ceiling lined with twinkle lights,

Tiny white stars.

People would come for organic, fair-trade coffee and fresh, homemade food.

Everyday there would be a few meals that people could eat for whatever price they could afford.

Some would pay ten dollars for a bowl of lentil soup and a hunk of fresh bread so that others could pay a quarter.

And it worked.

They had a free store, a different theme every month.

People gave what they didn't need and found things they did.

You could come empty-handed and take home a new coat or a slotted spoon,

A book or a board game.

There were events almost every day:

Afternoon disco dances for little kids and their adults,

Poetry readings, film screenings, panel discussions, game nights,

Consciousness raising groups, and craft circles;

All the lovely things happening in the city.

The cafe was furnished with mismatched, comfy couches,

Surrounded by beautiful red earth walls.

And on those walls, shows of local artists.

The first time Josh came in, there were bright oil paintings of lush ripe tomatoes,
oranges, and onions.

A fixture in the cafe was a painting of a lemon yellow house,

The last house remaining on the corner of the now busy street.

Ceiling fans with blades of wooden leaves turned overhead,

Keeping time with the music.

There were plants on the rafters, a brick fireplace filled with marigold,

And a sign on the door that said, *Homes for All*.

When Josh came home and saw what Martha had done,

He felt the honour of knowing her.

You're amazing, he said.

I had help, she said.

She told him to sit, brought him Chai and a bowl of spicy potato carrot soup.

Quite a storm, huh? Max said, sweeping raindrops from Josh's forehead.

His boots were leaking and his pants were soaked.

Inside, it was warm and dry.

I hear the ferries aren't running, she said.

Josh nodded. *We were supposed to go over to island today, but I guess it'll have to wait until tomorrow.*

Max shifted from the arm of the couch and climbed onto Joshua's lap.

She grabbed a handful of his hair and kissed him.

I bet your mum loves this new haircut, she said.

Or lack thereof, Josh smiled. I keep forgetting.

So the ferries aren't running. Which means you can stay here with me for a little while.

Josh kissed her and smiled. Her lips tasted like basil.

She was warm and soft, impossibly sweet compared to the wind and the rain outside.

I told Gabe I'd come by the Injection Site today, Josh said.

Gabe, eh? Martha slipped her hands beneath Josh's jacket, slipped them inside his shirt.

Kissed his neck. Josh sighed.

Gabe, he said, reminding himself.

Max stood up.

Alright, she said Go see your precious Gabe. Maybe I'll see you tonight...?

He looked at her, not wanting to leave.

Tonight, Josh said.

Tonight.

Josh got up and threw his bag over his shoulder.

When he got to the door, he turned back to look at her.

She was wearing an orange and green apron tied tight around her waist,

A canary yellow felt flower in her hair.

Max stretched and grinned. She made a little stretching noise.

And Josh, she said.

It's good to see you.

Josh smiled at Martha, a woman governed by rules of her own.

It's hard to see you, Josh said. Makes me want to stay.

Max scoffed and waved a dish cloth at him.

Flatterer, she said. It won't get you anywhere.

XCIV. The Boys

But Josh loved the boys too.

In some ways they were the closest people in his life.

They went everywhere with him, and worked for next to nothing.

They did everything they could to make the shows good without much money.

Josh owed them everything.

Because of them he wasn't alone and obscure,

Or being pimped out by some cutthroat corporate label.

The guys did things in their own ways.

Josh was never quite sure what he had done to deserve their devotion,

But he wasn't stupid enough to question it.

They had become like brothers –

More than that, because they accepted him for who he was

Even loved him for it.

There was no jealousy, no old wounds festering between them.

Sometimes Josh felt sad that he knew the guys better than he knew his own brother.

And other times, he just thought screw it –

It was the way James wanted it.

They were just a bunch of guys he'd met on the road, on the folk fest circuit,

Or in bars after the shows.

Guys who weren't tied down to anything, itching to go,

Hungry for something.

But they gave Josh what he needed, and he was grateful.

They were all different:

Drew who jumped into everything without taking a moment to think.

Nathaniel who read all kinds of strange and interesting books, and never obscured meaning with tact.

Jaime who didn't say much, but occasionally said something so true it woke you up.

Thaddeus, who thought he knew how the world should be, and was willing to make it that way by any means necessary.

Mattie, who had worked for the government before this and knew his way around red tape. Matt would unashamedly admit he loved the good things in life. He was perpetually writing things down in the little notebook he carried around with him.

Phil who didn't argue but just showed people what they needed to see.

Simon who hated corporations and their pandering governments. To Si, people were right or they were wrong – and Si was always right.

Then there was Tom. 'You're wrong and I'll tell you why' Tom. Tommy refused to believe anything he hadn't experienced himself.

And John who made Josh see things in a new way. John who thought well of most people, and even better of himself. To John, everything was salvageable.

And then there was Klasher,

Joshua's rock.

Peter Klashinsky, who had known Josh for what seemed like forever,

And who loved him without condition.

Klasher who told Josh when he was full of shit.

These were Joshua's boys.

The guys that travelled with him,

That made him laugh, and pissed him off,

And carried him through the days.

Joshua loved them all.

XCV. To Become a God

Mary once told Josh when he was still very young, maybe nine or ten, that when she was a girl she had prayed to John Lennon.

To think of it – a girl in white tights, kitten heels and painted on eyelashes –

Praying to the God of pop music.

It was sweet and disturbing at the same time.

As though paradise was just a big bed of protest:

We refuse to be a part of this

So we are just going to lie here.

Wouldn't it be funny if the man who protested the idea of an afterlife

had created it with his words.

As though a man could be a Word

And the word was Peace.

Josh lay on the floor of the van in his sleeping bag.

Outside people were screaming, weeping, waving signs.

Laughing, talking, waiting

For Him.

(For me?)

It was unbelievable really.

And there was no reason for it;

Everything they needed they already had.

There was no reason but the fierce loneliness and confusion,

The hunger of a nation.

(For what?)

Certainly not for Josh.

For something inside them that the songs touched.

As though he had accidentally bumped into the lever of a fed slot-machine
and set off the Jackpot: *DING DING DING – You win.*

But there was no reason, really.

Just some words, just some strings plucked on a guitar.

But the right ones, Martha said. She jokingly referred to herself as his agent.

Josh had never wanted an agent.

Too bad, she said. *I'll sell you to anyone. Even yourself.*

Now little girls with stars in their eyes and posters on their walls

Probably prayed to Joshua at night.

That's just weird, he said.

It's not you. It's what you represent to them.

She told him that no one really knew him

And no one really cared.

She told him the soft way, with her arms around him.

It doesn't matter that it's you. None of them really care about you.

They care about what you make them see in themselves. You're a kind of proof.

A proof of what?

A proof of love. A proof that they aren't alone. That they never were.

Such was the effect of the Star magazine.

When Josh was small his mother used to play a game with him.

She'd sit him on her knee and say, *Which one is Mummy?*

And on every page Josh would point to the most beautiful woman

And say, *There.*

(There you are.)

Contemporary Western Hinduism: *STAR* and *US* and *People Weekly* –

The Gods and Goddesses with all their loves and battles, their intrigues and secrets
splashed across the pages of glossy magazines.

The thin fly leaf pages like the pages of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Torah.

An array of mysterious, omniscient sources.

(Who were these people?)

And some followed Shiva and some followed Vishnu.

And some followed Brad and some Angelina.

And some followed Josh.

People became defined by their opinion of him.

This boy from the East Side of a city nobody cared about unless they lived there,
and even then, it was hit and miss.

This boy who had just wanted to prove that maybe he'd been worth it.

Every spare moment. That was his mantra.

Every spare moment, he wrote down the words, visited hospitals, shelters,

down and out streets in strange cities.

Sometimes he went to rallies, but he wasn't big on rallies.

Too much hatred could be incited,

Anger could overwhelm.

Josh wasn't militant.

He wasn't Jude.

Josh gave himself not to a cause, but to the world,

Every spare moment.

And it wasn't enough. Not even close.

If you're going to do something, do it well.

That's what his dad always said.

Whether it was fixing a car or cleaning a room or writing a story,

It had always been, *No half-assed jobs in my house.*

That's what Joe said.

Do it or don't do it,

But don't do it halfway.

When Izzie came to visit him on the road, they lay sleeping on the floor of Jude's van.

She had borrowed it to come and see him.

They talked until she fell asleep.

She lay next to him in the dark.

He watched her sleep and felt her breath on his cheek.

As he began to drift away, her breath and his came together

And became indistinguishable.

Josh woke up with a start.

(Izzie could sleep through anything.)

The van was rocking from side to side

In a sea of people.

Once, when Joshua had drunk too much wine before going on,

He closed his eyes and fell backwards into the crowd.

He fell softly off the flatbed truck that served as a stage,

And they had held him up, passed him along.

An ocean of hands,

They held him high above the earth.

Admit it, it was good, Josh thought,

As he drifted in and out of dreams,

Izzie beside him.

Sometimes, he woke up with the powerful urge to escape,

Walk away from this city, this country, this world...

To disappear.

But Josh was afraid to change anything, afraid to touch it.

There was always the fear that whatever was driving him

Would leave him

And he would not be able to go on.

Josh woke up again.

The rocking had stopped.

Klasher had driven them somewhere else;

He was sleeping across the front seats.

Joshua's eyes acclimatized to the darkness.

There was a mass of blond hair glowing in the dark.

Isobel

Who didn't understand the word *should*,

Only *is*.

God help us, Josh thought. But what was that?

When some people prayed, they prayed to him

Or John Lennon.

A Prayer to the divine, the magical Other.

'*Stars – They're Just Like Us!*' the tabloids declared.

Stars in their sweats, tying their shoelaces, loading grocery bags into their trunks.

Yes, people thought. *They're just like us.*

Even I could be One.

XCVI. To Meet Again

The night Josh met Maggie, it was like she had come back from the dead.

Her hair auburn now instead of the dyed cinder black it had once been.

Back in the day, Maggie had dyed all the colour out of her hair.

She had wanted it to be *blacker than black*, she told him with adolescent flair.

The colour of nothing.

Josh wasn't sure how he felt about this more human Maggie,

Without her aqua fingernails, her Cleopatra painted eyes.

It was as if some milder, milquetoast version of Maggie,

Some watered-down new edition, had emerged and he was only just hearing about it.

Her sharp edges sanded down, her kinks ironed out –

A sleeker, more accessible model.

Josh missed the old Maggie,

The rough and impetuous Maggie.

They drank beer in some basement dive on the North East side of town,

Where he felt fairly safe from recognition.

Everyone there was hiding out.

Drunks, addicts, construction workers fighting with their wives.

It was the poorest neighbourhood in the country.

A place where people came to disappear.

So you're off tomorrow, Maggie asked nervously. *To Calgary?*

Denver, Joshua said.

Maggie smiled, *Wasn't even close.*

Josh looked down. He didn't know what to say to her anymore.

They were the same he supposed,

But everything else had changed.

You miss home when you're on the road, she said in that way she had of asking a question like it was a statement.

Maggie knew Josh.

The scars on his face, the chips in his teeth –

She had always been his mirror.

Josh shrugged.

Home.

What was that?

(It used to be you.)

Maggie was still theatrical in her way.

She was just more sophisticated about it now.

She looked like a forties movie star, her hair twisted into perfect curls at the temples,

Her lips red.

All she needed were some ruby slippers to take the place of her dainty leather boots.

And Josh could be the Tin Man.

She took his heart,
Left it in some forgotten land of childhood,
Half-imagined, honey-sweet,
And never brought it back.

He wanted to ask her about the old days.
But he knew she wouldn't give anything.

Oh God, that was a loooong time ago, she would say, sighing dreamily, to any reference
he made to their time together.

I can't really remember much from back then, she said. *I was pretty much baked
the entire time, you realize.*

As though Josh had just been some momentary lapse,
An adolescent phase, like combat boots or words written on her knuckles.

You look good, she said,
Because this was something you said to people you hadn't seen in a long time.
It made Josh want to die.

He remembered that once he had split his scalp open goofing around on
the old swing set in the backyard.

Joshua had claimed, blood pouring from the crown of his head,
A hand dammed over it, an anchor to consciousness,
That he was fine.

But Maggie had wanted to see.

She'd wanted to know if the cut went through to the bone.

But Josh couldn't take his hand away.

And here she was, sipping beer,

Looking like she'd stepped out of one of the black and white movies

He used to watch with his dad when he was little.

Who would've thought? Maggie said. *You're a singer and I'm a lawyer.*

Maggie worked for the third biggest law firm in the country.

She was home for the holidays.

Josh looked at Maggie, looked at the one he'd loved more than anything,

And guessed that she only became a starlet on weekends.

Yeah, Josh said. *Who would've thought?*

He drained the last of his beer

Until there was nothing left.

XCVII. A New Life

After six months on the road, Klasher decided he'd had enough of dependency;

He checked himself into rehab.

When he came out, he was fresh and bright, but still a bit shaky.

Josh and Izzie went to pick him up.

Josh hugged Klasher tight. When he drew back, Klasher looked embarrassed.

Hey, Klasher said.

Show us your arms, Josh teased.

Klasher turned his arms to the soft side

And smiled facetiously, *Look Mum – No holes!*

Seriously, man. I'm proud of you.

Klasher nodded. He looked at his sister.

Isobel smiled shyly.

Hi Pete.

Hi Iz.

They didn't hug.

Klashinskys didn't do that sort of thing.

We got you a plant, Josh pulled a little Norfolk Pine out of the backseat of the car.

A plant, Klasher nodded. Okay...?

It has needles, Josh informed him.

Ha Ha. Funny.

I know. Josh said. But seriously, we wanted to get you something to commemorate the occasion.

It's supposed to travel well, Izzie said.

Yeah, and you know what they say about plants.... Keep one alive for a year and you can, I don't know, have a relationship or re-enter the land of the living or something like that.

Klasher furrowed his brow. *Eloquent. And you're a writer?*

Songwriter. Everything else: I'm a total loss. You know that.

Who says the thing about the plant?

I don't know. A.A., N.A...? The powers that be.

Klasher looked at the little tree and shrugged, *Thanks, guys.*

The lady said it likes to be watered once a week at the same time. Half an hour afterward, you're supposed to pour out the water from the drain pan. And you have to keep it five to eight feet from the window.

Thanks, Izzie.

You're welcome.

They went to park and had baguette sandwiches that Isobel had made,

And drank from a thermos of coffee.

Since being with Jude, Izzie seemed to be trying to be more domestic.

So what else is new? Klasher asked, as Izzie spread a blanket on the ground. *Isn't that your bedspread?*

Yeah.

Klasher raised his eyebrows and smiled at Josh.

What? Izzie said.

Nothing.

Izzie sat down and handed her brother a sandwich.

Klasher nodded and took a bite. *So what's new?*

Did you hear about my sister? Josh asked.

I heard something. Celebrity stuff in California. What's that all about?

I guess a bunch of these club kids in Hollywood were breaking into celebrities' houses and taking their stuff. Not money, but jeans and Louis Vuitton bags. A girl involved implicated Hannah.

Is Hannah alright?

Joshua shrugged, She's got a lawyer. And there's not much evidence. They don't have her on camera or anything. She says a friend gave her the Birkin bag. But the whole thing is weird.

Definitely weird, Klasher said. So what's gonna happen?

I don't know. My mum wants her to move back here. But Hannah says she won't. Says all her friends are there, and she loves it. I guess she feels like she fits in.

I don't know if you want to fit in there, Klasher said, putting his sandwich down.

Do you want an plum? Izzie produced three plums from her bag. They're from Jude's garden.

Klasher picked one up and took a bite, So what's new with you, Izzie?

Juice dripped down his chin; he wiped it off with the back of his hand.

Well, Izzie said smiling into the distance. I'm going to have a baby.

Klasher paused mid-bite. He looked at Josh, Did you know about this?

Josh shook his head.

A baby, Izzie. Are you positive. Klasher asked very carefully.

Yes. I went to a doctor and took a test.

*When did **this** happen?*

Well, it hasn't happened yet.

I thought you said you took a test.

Oh – I'm pregnant. I just meant I haven't... had it yet. Izzie blushed. *Well... obviously.*

What does Jude say about it?

Isobel paused and looked at her brother.

He says he's happy.

What about Iris?

Well, Izzie said. She's probably... not that happy.

How could you be so stupid, Iz? How the hell are you gonna take care of a baby?

I will.

How? With what money? With what skills? You're not even with this guy!

Klash... Josh said. Klasher put his hand up.

All the colour drained from Izzie's cheeks.

I'll take care of it, she said. *I will.*

It's not a goddamn plant, Izzie!

Izzie looked down.

When she spoke again, her voice was calm.

I know that, Pete.

XCVIII. Save Yourself

Four months later, they were in Philadelphia, crashing in a friend's attic.

Klasher came upstairs to find Josh writing.

Josh glanced up for a second and then kept writing,

Figuring Klasher would get something and leave.

But Klasher just stood there looking at his pine tree on the dresser by the window.

He touched the needles softly.

Josh looked at Klasher, a little impatiently, *Something wrong?*

Klasher shook his head, *No.*

Josh set down his notebook and sighed, *Then what, Klash?*

I just talked to Izzie. She lost the baby.

Josh felt kind of seasick. He searched Klasher's face for a reaction, but found none.

How did it happen?

Klasher shrugged, *It died inside her.*

She miscarried?

Klasher looked unsure. *They had to take it out. It's called a missed miscarriage.*

Josh look down at the blurred page, *Poor Izzie.*

It's probably for the best, Klasher shrugged.

Josh pressed a hand to his temple.

Was it a boy or a girl?

A boy. Are you okay?

Josh nodded, *Yeah. I just feel bad for Izzie. And Jude.*

Klasher looked at him, *If it makes you feel better, she sounds fine.*

When doesn't she?

Yeah, well you know what they say, don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Klasher, Josh said. Isobel wanted that baby.

I know but – you have to admit – everyone's better off this way.

You don't know that, Joshua said.

Klasher looked back at the little tree, You know, man... you can't save everyone.

I can't save anyone.

Klasher hesitated.

You saved me.

No, I didn't.

Well, if it hadn't been for –

Josh looked at Klasher, You saved yourself.

I would've killed myself. You –

Josh shook his head. No. You did it. You were the only one who could've.

But you –

Josh put his hand up, Klasher. Don't.

Klasher laughed slightly and looked confused. I'm just trying to thank you, man.

Well, just... don't. Please.

Klasher looked bewildered, Okay! I won't say anything. You're a case – you know that.

Josh knew it.

Klasher?

Yeah?

Go away for a bit.

Klasher put up his hands and backed away in the direction of door.

Yes, Master.

XCIX. Guarded Nest

Five weeks later, Josh came home again.

He met Izzie in the park.

She was crouched down by the water's edge, her bare legs folded beneath her.

She wore big black gum boots.

The hem of her white skirt dragged in the mud.

A crowd of ducks surrounded her.

They snapped at the millet scattered before them, floating on the water.

Josh crouched down beside Izzie,

Before her multitude.

She glanced at him sidelong.

Hi Iz.

Hi Josh.

They hungry today?

They're always hungry.

She stood up and brushed her hands off on her dress.

How are you? she asked.

*How are **you**?* Josh repeated.

Izzie looked the same. Like nothing had happened since he'd been gone,

Like time had stopped.

Josh knew that everything had changed for Izzie.

Klasher had told him that since she lost the baby, Jude didn't come to see her anymore;
He rarely answered her calls.

Joshua knew it must have been hard on her.

But today, she looked different. She looked fresh and new.

She was going to see Jude that night; he needed her for a performance.

Do you want to come?

Josh hesitated, *What are you doing?*

I don't know. We don't rehearse. He tells me before the show. I think I just have to stand there.

That's what he said?

Yeah, she smiled. That's what he said.

Izzie took Josh by the hand for the second time in her life.

Come with me, she said. I want to show you something.

She led him down the path around the Lost Lagoon, until they came to the other side.

There was a swan standing in the middle of the path in front of them.

Shhh... she held a finger to her lips and approached.

The swan started to squawk.

Izzie took little steps forward, very very slowly, leading Josh by the hand.

The swan looked as though it was about to charge.

It's okay, Izzie said in her sweetest, softest voice. We won't hurt you.

The swan stood there, watching, ready for anything, but oddly quiet now.

He's standing guard, Izzie said quietly.

She nodded toward the tall grass and reeds at the pond's edge, *Look...*

Josh followed Isobel's eyes to the four little cygnets in their bed of twigs.

Beside them, their mother sat, her eyes on Josh and Izzie.

Aren't they beautiful? Isobel said. *I come to see them every day.*

C. The Doll Show

The theatre was sparse and black.

There wasn't a hint of adornment except for an old velvet curtain.

Josh came in when the lights went down, and slipped into a seat in the back.

The stage was lit up, bright and surreal.

The curtain rose, and there stood Isobel,

A Perfect Doll.

She had long black eyelashes and a thick red ribbon in her glossy hair.

She wore a short white dress with a red sash.

She had red patent leather Mary-Janes on her feet.

Izzie stared out at the audience, sightless

From inside a gigantic doll box

With a plastic window –

Just like the boxes Hannah's dolls used to come in for Christmas.

Isobel's name was on the box in sparkly red cursive.

She didn't blink. She hardly breathed.

Jude came out with three other men and they tipped the box on its back,

Opened the top and slid Isobel out,

Backboard and all.

They stood the backboard up so that Izzie was standing again,

Facing the audience.

She was tied to the backboard with wire.

Massive twist-ties bound each wrist and each ankle

To the inside of the box.

Jude began to undo the wires and pull them free

One by one.

When she was finally detached, Isobel fell stiffly into Jude's arms.

Jude lifted her up and placed her in the centre of the stage.

Izzie stood there stalk straight facing the audience,

Burning red and white in the spotlight.

Jude and the stage hands cleared away the leftover pieces of the box.

They went off-stage.

Isobel stood alone for a long moment.

Then Jude came back onstage.

He walked around her, looking at her from different angles.

Touching her hair, her dress, her fingernails,

Like she was a doll. His doll.

Izzie didn't look at Jude.

She stayed very still.

Jude stood to the side of her, and gathered her hair over one shoulder

So that it all hung down in a shiny mass over her breast.

Jude went behind her and untied the sash.

He tore open the velcro backing of the dress.

Izzie gasped slightly.

For a second, her eyes betrayed life,

But she didn't move.

Josh felt his body tense up.

He had the impulse to say something, to stop the show, but he didn't.

He just sat there

And watched.

Jude went around the front and slid the dress down both arms

Off of Isobel's body.

Isobel stood there onstage in buckle shoes and underpants.

Jude dropped the dress on the floor and picked up a pair of silver scissors.

He cut each side of her underwear

And pulled them off.

He took away the clothes and left.

Isobel stood there alone on the stage

Naked.

After a few minutes, Jude came back.

He bent Izzie's arms at the elbows

And put a piece of white cardboard in her hands.

A word was written on it in black: WEEP

Jude came off the stage and sat down in the audience.

Everyone just sat there

Waiting.

Nothing happened.

They sat there.

After a while, it was difficult to say how long,

Time seemed to change,

Izzie blinked.

Two large tears rolled down her cheeks.

There was a collective sigh of relief.

The curtain fell.

The show was over.

CI. Isobel's Choice

Josh rushed backstage, pushing passed people.

They were talking, laughing, drinking.

They surrounded Jude, flies to honey.

But Izzie was nowhere in sight.

Josh went out the backstage exit, and scanned the people in the alley.

They were talking, smoking, wondering where to go next.

But Izzie wasn't there.

When he got to her house, the lights were on in the basement window,
but the curtains were drawn.

Josh walked around the side to the back entrance and knocked.

Izzie didn't answer.

Josh knocked again.

Still nothing.

Josh pounded on the door, calling her name.

The door opened a crack.

The chain was on.

Hi, said Isobel.

He realized then that he didn't know what to say.

Izzie... are you... I mean... was that supposed to happen?

Izzie didn't look at him.

I'm really tired, Josh. I have to go to sleep.

Izzie –

Good night, she said.

She shut the door.

Three days later, Izzie was dead.

They found her in the basement of the new house being built across the street.

She'd been stabbed thirteen times in the stomach.

The police said the wounds were self-inflicted.

She didn't leave a note.

CII. The Kiss

There were explanations and explanations.

But Josh knew the truth.

The last time Joshua saw Jude was at the funeral.

Jude didn't come inside.

He stood outside in the cool sun of March

And watched the men carry Isobel in a box

Inside and Out.

Jude followed the car to the cemetery at a distance.

He stood under a tree,

Watching

As they planted Izzie's body in the ground.

Afterward, no one spoke to Jude.

No one looked at him.

Josh saw Jude standing there

In the shadow of the oak tree,

And felt the ache twist deeper into his heart.

Josh hesitated, and then crossed the space between them.

Jude looked at Josh. Josh looked at Jude.

A light had gone out in his eyes.

He looked haggard and grey.

It was strange how people could transform

In a moment.

Josh took the raven pin out of his pocket and gave it to Jude.

I thought you might want it back, he said.

Jude folded Josh into his arms, almost delicately,

Like he was something very precious,

And very fragile.

Jude kissed his cheek

And there was genuine sadness in that kiss,

Genuine love.

We always wanted the same thing, Josh, he said.

Jude hesitated as though he were going to say something more,

But thought better of it.

He looked at the black crow in his hand

Then back at Josh, and smiled.

CIII. Turn

Josh sat on a bench in the park.

Little kids were playing on a creaky merry-go-round, taking turns spinning the wheel,

Running alongside and jumping on when the spin got fast enough.

They laughed and yelled at each other,

Oh man, I think I'm gonna puuuke!

James came back and handed Josh a cardboard cup of coffee.

Here, he said. Drink something.

Josh shook his head, *I'm okay.*

Jimmy sat down beside him.

I've got to be back at work soon, he said. You gonna be okay?

Josh looked at him and tried to smile, *Yeah. I'm good.*

You sure?

Yeah.

So I'll see you at Mum's tonight?

Tonight?

James gave him the hopeless look, before he could catch himself.

It's passover, Josh.

Oh. Passover.

So you'll be there?

Josh nodded. *Yeah... sure.*

Good. And listen, Jimmy said as he got up to leave. Get yourself something to eat before then. You look like hell, man.

Thanks.

Hey. That's what I'm here for.

When James was gone, Josh left too.

He walked calmly, quickly,

Stepping out onto busy downtown streets

Without missing a beat.

Josh didn't hesitate or alter his pace;

He just kept walking.

Cars stopped around him.

People slammed on their brakes and yelled profanities.

What the fuck are you doing, man!?! Trying to get yourself killed!?!?

Josh didn't answer.

He kept walking.

You won't even give me this!? Josh thought,

For a moment overcome with rage and desperation.

Not even this!?

You traitor! You sell-out!

The subway entrance appeared before him.

Josh paused in front of the concrete entrance,

The steps that led deep underground.

He took a breath, and looked down at the sidewalk.

An ant carried the silvery wing of a dragonfly upright,

Waving it like a flag.

It flickered in all its shimmering beauty.

Life and death

Bound up in one breath.

All that was needed was a moment's courage.

Josh walked down the steps,

Down into the dark tunnel of the subway station.

He paid the toll and stood on the platform,

Waiting for the train to come.

Josh swayed on his feet a little, dizzy.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he saw everything as it was.

And not only that, but all the contours,

The limits and borders of the mind

Melted away

Until the cracks were indistinguishable,

And everything was part of the Whole.

Joshua listened for the rumble of the train.

You feel it before you see it.

It was coming.

The world was illuminated,

A sudden mirror.

He could hear the train on the tracks

Screeching towards them,

Unstoppable.

How quickly we move,

These breaking waves.

How quickly the breath enters and escapes.

Mind and Body

Heaven and Earth

Man and Woman

Pagan and Jew

Animal and Angel –

It was all

One Thing.

Yes, even God and the Devil,

Indivisible.

The train was there,

Barreling into the station,

All glistening steel and shining lights,

Reflections in the glass.

Josh saw something in that reflection.

He saw Isobel

Standing next to him.

Joshua smiled. The reflection smiled back.

It was not a reflection of him,

But of everything that would come after.

He watched as the world dissolved,

Tumbling down like a mountain of salt into the ocean.

You could have been anyone. Anyone at all.

At this, Joshua's body, his mind
Flooded with brilliant sunshine.

Something that held tight

Let go.

The train was shrieking to its halt.

This was the moment.

Afterward, Joshua climbed up out of the depths.

He climbed up the stairs back into the light of day.

All that was left was sunshine.

Yes, he thought. I could have been anyone. Anyone at all.

Maybe that's all I am.

Josh looked up at the sky – the perfectly clear blue sky –

And saw the feathery streaks of two jet streams,

The crisscrossed paths of two jets

Bright and spreading

Into sunlight.

It was so beautiful his heart stopped

And began again.