

Christian Schlegel

Michigan

Dan asked if I would go with him to Harbor Springs. It would be sixteen hours through southern Ontario or another three by Cleveland, and I said yes. Or, Dan was driving out from Brooklyn and back again for work Monday, and I said he would need company, here I am with my new robin's-egg blue Subaru, won't be cold yet, we can swim in the lake, read me your haibun, we'll listen to Harry Nilsson and talk about our friends, after I put my chapter to bed I'll meet you in Spencertown.

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I don't know if Dan agreed from charity, or if this, our vacation in the first week of classes, was his secret idea. By Buffalo we recognized the car was heavy, reaching 55 only after several minutes' maximal pressure on the accelerator, and so Michigan became before we reached it the story we'd hoped to be able to tell. Between early September, when Dan called and I promised two days' conversation, and October 1, when we watched, helpless, as the car failed, I began thinking of how, and when, I wanted to die, by what means, with what preamble. It was warm and I WD-40'd my bike. I'd heard about the path through East Providence along the brackish jointure of the river and the Narragansett Bay, and only on passing the achingly fine electric blue and green of the causeway and the salt marsh promising seabirds and eager kayak parties surrounding did I realize I had come to see the water before resolving to die in it.

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It had made me happy, the inversion of the "urge toward more life," and I knew finally I was sick, shuddering on waking, sleeping until four in the morning and pacing my apartment, examining the

folds of my eyelids in the mirror, remembering April when I was seventeen, I drove my brother's Mitsubishi to the CVS off Lancaster Avenue, bought sleeping pills, tipped them in my hand in the bathroom Pete and I shared, spent the balance of the week running the hurdles and reviewing for the national calculus exam. In college I crouched out the window of Mark's bedroom and, letting my feet through the fire escape, thought of the urine I'd discovered him to pour from a Snapple bottle, into the gutters and down the stone of Pyne Hall, to the sewers abutting the steam tunnels we'd tried without luck to wander through, quietly to Lake Carnegie. In Berlin I saw I could not hang myself, I did not fall in front of the S-Bahn but rode to the end of the line in Wannsee, where I'd walk into the woods with nothing, lie still beneath a bower, suffer the succession of long nights.

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Dan today has no beard, the removal of which he's described in his writing, it recurs in his haibun, he is five feet, eleven inches tall with the blue eyes of a Pythagorean. He wears a floppy brown hooded sweatshirt and black Levi's running straight from lower back to knees, New Balance computer-programmer sneakers, seafoam green T-shirt with white paint on the chest and in the armpits, I have coveted it the five years I've known him, yet it is an extension of his spirit and cannot be mine. Near Rochester, spinning through I found *Is the Is Are*, which later I heard in its entirety with my friend Claire on Federal Hill, at a renovated theater that, the opener told the crowd, was originally "for porno" and contained several lives' worth of orgasms. I have a crush on the lead singer Cole, I have since I saw his face on a poster, half Kurt Cobain, his idol, half long-lost friend Jon Butcher from the Boy Scouts, two ranks my superior, with whom I was smitten at sleep-away camp in Schuylkill County, and who, I heard recently, flies sorties over Yemen.

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Cole walked on-stage wearing a yellow-and-gray cable-knit sweater so humongous its neck drooped to his elbow, pantaloons sewn of crepe-du-chine, thin

socks, Oliver Twist buffed-leather dancing shoes, sunglasses, a hat with DIIV on it. He has a high voice, is charming beyond the demands of those paying to look at him, —a woman in the front row offered a small fake rose for his ear and he held it, nodding, sipped water with his legs crossed (he, the band, and all the audience were seated). He'd played in July in Pawtucket, Mass., and on being corrected blew out a hank of hair, knelt to the bassist tuning, laughed like a child, and asked the guitarists who would start the song, whichever on the list, what key's it in, who has the solo. Claire and I stood outside. The show had been loud and satisfying, a total artwork of waiting, rocking forward, clapping, whooping, arm-folding, the manipulation of feedback within the ear. Groupies agglomerated in the lobby for posters and to invite the band out for a drink, half of whose members have survived harrowing addictions and are in recovery. Claire asked about Canada, land of her birth, and I said, loons per liter at petrol stations ... LUCKY ACES Chinese Diner outside Sudbury, — the waitress tells us, after denying our credit cards, her son lives in an uninsulated closet in Toronto with a B.S. in comp. sci. ... National Tire Centre ... ferry advertisement Dan saw while looking for Andromeda, "May through November, FamilyPaks available, COMMANDA DEUX."

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Dan read aloud and I drove west along the Erie Canal. I couldn't determine if the waterway was gone, paved over for access roads parallel to I-90, revived only as red and green picnic bridges and weirs, —or still "there" and doubly odd for its lack of utility, the locks too expensive to operate and monitor, and for its conspicuity, its being before all things the ghost of the city in the west of the state, the shroud of the cares of men. Dan had written his poem in Maine, on an island, by the light of fireflies and with pops from a one-hitter so crudded and ancient that, he said, he should've eaten the weed and hoped it stayed down. As he spoke I thought about the days he'd put the poem together, the people in it I loved, Dan with Callie shuffling beatific over the ice, Charlotte and Dave in Iowa City playing pinball, Joe and a college friend discovering a pineapple amid snowfall, scanning for Venus as the sky cleared. I had seen

Saturn the summer Sara and I started dating, while she took pictures in the woods outside Vilnius and I lived in a cinder-block dormitory, reading *Lolita*, eating cereal, eavesdropping on my charges at their booths. I could just make out its rings with my glasses off, my good eye jammed against the instrument, and though I recalled the Scythe-Wielder dropping, hour by hour, the souls of the earth into a sleep presaging death, I felt more strongly the truism I'd learned in elementary school, that the gassy giants were poisonous, soft-skinned balloons. Dan hobbled into a culvert, I got out to prop the hood.

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I had assumed, on seeing Sara and Noah at Jess's thirtieth, there would be at least a minute of our triangular conversation during which I'd make the greatest possible demand on my performing self, would re-learn bodily what I'd known spiritually, that Sara was living with, in love with, developing a shared language with another person, a get-along Sam by any measure. I sweated through my undershirt in the kitchen alcove as they stood opposite, my hand at the back of my neck, and confirmed in the mirror that my asymmetric haircut, from Nick in Cambridge, had turned me into a toothbrush. They were going to Turkey in July. Had I ever been there, Noah asked, and Sara left for a glass of water. We'd crouched on line outside the Aya Sofia for two hours, etiolated, and had been arguing about what to do for dinner, should we agree to Nasim-bey's invitation to eat with his family on the imbiss porch, or stay inside under "klima" and finish our Saran-wrapped olives and honey, more punishment than meal. The building was pigeons and Russian tourists, I alternated kissing her and holding her hand with peering out the high semicircular window hutch, beyond which, I had convinced myself, I could see a fringe of deciduous trees, my studio at the corner of one-way boulevards, a rat-trap four-bedroom, mystifying roommates, ten feet of snow on the village streets, the carpet of an undergraduate library. Sara wanted a bottle of water. In the square a tram conductor slapped heedless men on the sides of their heads, to save their lives and, presumably, his job, and although she and I had squabbled in taxi-cabs, on subways and ferries, at the beach, on the phone in the Yard and once on a

dance-floor, I loved her, more now than I had the week before, and would love her still more the week after. I would miss coming to in the cold with a sore jaw, checking around the pillow for my mouth-guard, and seeing her lying on her back, staring at the curtains. Sometimes I'd waddle to the half-door of my bathroom on Market Street and spit near the toilet, others I'd roll over, saying the name of a Russian cartoon character whose best friend was a crocodile, stroke her hair, and ask if she were OK.

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On the phone Jake told me the city had moved Jess's car, as if by magic, two blocks south, gratis, off the parade route. He handed me to Jess, who mentioned that Sara's parents, stuck on the Triborough and fretting about a flight to Ankara, had intended to come to the party before deciding for Westhampton, and I couldn't believe, in the welter of relief, excitement, and disappointment I felt on hearing this, the concatenation of circumstances that had brought me into their lives. Sara introduced her parents to no one who'd stick around. I met her father on 81st Street one June morning, her mother a month later, and until Christmas that year I was the guy from Pennsylvania who'd broken a wine glass at dinner, spilled gravy on the tablecloth, and seemed increasingly to care for their daughter. Dan stopped reading and asked me to put down the windows, it was stuffy. His poem had reached its third scene, séance at Brown Street, revelation of the dog-ghoul. I was not participating in the literary festival. Dan's panel, on historical novels, included a screenwriter from Los Angeles and a fiction instructor from Williams, —both their books were titled *Noun of False Partitive*, *Tongue of Night*, *Anguish of Stone*. Dan's reading would follow, at the United Church of Christ in Harbor Springs, two hours, thirty minutes north of Traverse City, sixty-odd miles to the Mackinac Bridge, buttressed by private "cottage" communities, where gardeners raked around boulders and shrink-wrapped plastic over the solarium windows. We walked out on the Point, on the little neck of the bay, and Dan read another poem, more elliptical than the haibun, including in it his friend's brother, gone before thirty, having dropped from a ledge while painting a waterfall. We skipped stones.

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Rebecca and I hadn't known each other long when, driving north through Iowa to the Twin Cities, I told her I believed, despite everything, in my Christian portion, an obligation, affirming and impossible, to give myself to those around me without recompense, to gladden in it. We read in St. Paul at a shop catty-corner from the hockey arena, fans adjusting their sweaters in the windows, and Chris wrote long messages in his books before signing. We slept at his and Mary's house and played with their toddler, old enough to rap and eat from his own perch, then drove to Racine, arriving at six as the sky poured low over red fields, nothing, knocking at a clapboard house.

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The kitchen was choked with evidence of life the superabundance of which precluded life, and we said later we wanted to stay longer at the table, a congeries of LaCroix cans, bread wrappers, kale, candles, Merchandiser catalogues, copies of the Racine *Journal-Times*, a cooler, a DEVO record, tubs of vegan butter, commemorative mugs, knapsacks, pens and folders, papers with notes for poetry. We half-sat on chairs that were themselves small tables for journals, sweatshirts, pants, and socks, —there with our hostess, a woman of about forty, and her son, who asked me what I do when I'm at home. The reading was in the back barn, ladder to the second floor, room arrayed around a wood-burning stove, and as Rebecca opened to a Post-It in the middle of her book I moved lines between the half-garbled versions of poems I'd published recently and had toiled over for three years, the new work I'd printed on Super 8 stationery, stanzas written in 2007 and 2010, in my bed on Danziger Street. I thought of Sara who'd have understood: can of Old Style and plate of chili, Rebecca hunched over, cross-legged on the floor, the woman opposite balancing a daughter on each knee, spaghetti-strap Christmas, passive-voice Dracula, boat, little bear, trout. Though I bristled sometimes at the warping effect, I said, of her wealth, and yelled once that she did not relate to "real people," she is the more open of the two of us, the more forgiving.

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Rebecca runs a poetry magazine and lives in Hudson, where I stayed one night in February, having performed with her at a gallery show called “The Dandy.” Before a photograph of a woman with brown eyes and brown hair, bare-chested, bong in hand, a ball of smoke in her mouth, I read haibun of the French prairie and wore Dan’s blue shirt. We had dinner. A girl sat mute at the foot of the living-room cot. I woke alone of a night terror, in my disorientation walked upstairs to another apartment, where a woman in a surgical mask was applying a turpentine-like astringent to the walls, —a specter with gray hair and gills and no nose, reducing the space to its smell. I apologized for my intrusion, and the ghost, accustomed to the anxieties of her children lost in the night, brewed tea downstairs and talked to me until I slept again.

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In our office in Cambridge, Hannah told me I’m “not bad” at certain impressions. Vain as I am, feeling I can capture some people, only some, with a sound, Jon the Englishman moaning, our adviser eating a cookie, Dan is the better mimic, less subtle and more humane. Our friends Ben and Carleen were hosting, before we all left the Midwest, a Seder in their small apartment, the first I’d been to, and as I stumbled in late, schoolbooks under arm, I found the Haggadah complete, afikomen revealed, Evan sitting resplendent in the corner and everyone drunk. Callie asked Dan for his impression, and we looked on as he closed his eyes, calmed himself, and said three times, in a whisper: *you’re a liar*, then a pause, then *and ya pants ... are on ...* before slapping both palms on the table, knocking over his coffee, and screaming *FIYAAAAAAAAA!* in Carleen’s face, Evan falling out of his chair, Ariel choking on a radish, giggling Sara and my weeping. Dan bowed. Jake talked about a massage. We went out to the garden, nineteen-year-olds drag-raced on Burlington. After the Point Dan and I clomped through town, past his friend Katie’s bookstore, up the drive to the intersection where the Subaru was parked, in death as in life, leaves smothering the wiper blades and disintegrating

beneath the hood. We would not be back to teach our classes, nor would the administrators at our institutions see fit to fire us, even as we envisioned our lives without “just-in-time” employ, a ramshackle craftsman in Central Falls, the planting of squash, watercolors, a cabin in Maine. A man on the bay tacked around in a J-Y. Dan demonstrated how a hawk eats. We found the road to the golf course, and after stopping for duffers to send their chip shots back and forth, grass to sand, sand to gravel, we kept on to the Fords’, our hosts’, where Dan emailed his co-teacher and I, with my shirt off, ran on the treadmill for an hour. A 70-year-old man we’d met on the street that morning had finished the festival’s concurrent 10K in 50 minutes and, putting down his corn muffin, he asked us, poets with runny noses, if our stuff rhymed, where he might’ve seen it.

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After Racine Rebecca and I drove the straight shot to Chicago, where she met with her writers and I bummed around the graduated mid- to upper-class neighborhoods ringing the venue, “as in the west the orange sky of evening died away.” Matt, a Victorianist by training and my drinking buddy in New York for years, now working at a magazine, told me, after I explained to him the title and the class I’d taken, during which the professor had remarked on the servant’s erasure from the scene between the two-book *Prelude* and its 1805 edition, that the sweetest lines in the language lay a couple pages previous: boy ignores the dinner bell, a horse he is, will skate with his companions through the dark, lanterns and steam. Much as my friend Tim, careering along the ice at the Stone House Pond and not perceiving the low wall before him, tumbled toward the exposed foundation, splitting open his chin on the cement, so, too, the boy in the 1770s, who would lose his father in life and, later, in the poem he was to compose and revise in his thirties, let go his friendly guide. On the night of my 29th birthday I cracked open my chin on the kitchen floor of Bridget and Luke’s apartment, after having cried with Sara at a bar, whiskeys without eating. When I rose to pee in the stillness I experienced what I’d learn to be called “micturition syncope,” a condition, Dan told me, whereby the sudden change in blood pressure, on evacuation of the bladder,

perverts the drunk man's already sufficiently-altered homeostasis and induces fainting, —collapse from the bathroom, without a sink, into the providential space between the range, on which I would've concussed myself, and the chair, where I might've bitten through my tongue, —a landing, sleeping, naked, on the bottom of my face. I came to to Bridget's ministrations, she offered me orange juice and stroked my hair, and I napped for several hours before meeting my parents and Dan, and climbed the decrepit stairwell to the lofts where my kind-hearted publishers unfolded a card table, set the floor-lamps below which we would read. In Chicago the gallery was shiny, with books in what appeared a bulletproof, tinted vitrine, and without understanding why, I cried at the end of the title poem. I watched my mother, crying, in New York, and told my parents at breakfast I'd slipped while pulling myself from the lap-pool in Cambridge. I remembered, my father paying the tab, the motel at which Sara and I had stayed in Brattleboro when I was preparing for my exams, its pool four lanes wide, a Jacuzzi by the service road where we talked to an older couple in wool scarves and aquasocks, whose son at Marlboro College was taking just then a course on the Romantics, and was confused why, after his sister had spilled scalding milk on his foot, a man would sit in a cell of branches and spy on his friends. The next morning we jogged across the Connecticut on a SnowCat track into New Hampshire, and she gave me a power drill for my 27th birthday, the sound of which she enjoyed so much, she said, I could use it only with her away.

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Dan worried that, if we didn't catch the plenary lecture our first night in Harbor Springs, we might not go to any event. We hitched a ride from the Fords' futuristic, half-sunken house on the outskirts to the high school, overlarge for a town of a few thousand. Stewart, our driver, a festival liaison, and an HSHS alumnus, was about our age, and we peppered him with questions, trying to figure out from whom he'd scored pot as a teenager, —and as a consequence where we, two 30-year-old men with jobs we could leave for days at a time, might buy some, assuming his junior-high source had stayed in Petoskey and kept the business alive. The lecturer, Richardson, spoke

about Detroit, the font from which all prosperity and attendant decency once flowed, now a highway interchange around a late-night downtown of Golgothic emptiness. The talk ended. Attendees chatted energetically with him, baton-twirling, the conflagration in Christmas-land, and we saw Richardson around Main Street for days, arm-in-arm with his wife, the two of them in silver puffy vests, smiling like undergraduates at the trawlers in dry-dock, permanent residents like Dan and me. We wondered whether our friends would leave us for dead, if our apartments, students, and scattered artistic obligations were the pre-condensation piffle of the dream we'd only now begun, —mist-curtain, willows hove to the sea.

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In the side-yard mule deer rooted for grubs. We were not alone in the guest wing at the Fords'. Next-door was an Irish poet, Samuels, of some reputation back home, and possessed of an alcoholism so texturally fascinating, indeed so severe it was in fact no disease but a gravity applying only to him, rendering small movements, handshakes, and laughter Samsonian feats, —a burden about which he did not complain. He'd flown in from Cork an hour before we'd limped down the cedar-lined driveway and met the Fords in their living room, where they wore matching pajamas and, confused as to how to address me, for Dan was the poet and I was his ... friend, called me Sir. They were worried about the first day of the festival, as this was the first they'd mounted, and it had dawned on them, they said, what it meant to manage dozens of writers, beneficently lost, beanpoles like us and men like Samuels, wearing the scraps of two suits, smelling like wet tobacco, down in the basement drinking. The day was finished. We'd not met up with Stewart, although Dan received a message from him, demanding 500 dollars, yeah, that night or it wasn't happening, to which Dan responded with a question mark and a dash, and which produced by way of justification only the affect-free text, two days removed, that everything was fine. We never saw Stewart again. When we spoke of him, driving eastward on the Trans-Canada, Dan said that ours was a golden friendship, his and mine and Stewart's,

for he required nothing of us, acknowledged our failure and not our sadness.

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Samuels was telling a story about his dog, a cocker spaniel mutt of three years. He said to us from the couch, dribbling on it the wine Jim had purchased for him after the evening's reading, that he'd loved him consumedly, taking him to the lake, to school. When they ran together and the light dipped in the sky, he said, he was happy in a childhood not much for happiness. Samuels stinted nothing of the dog's eventual death, and his carrying the body, crushed under a truck, through the street and home to his mother, who chastised him for musing his shirt. The story was so incongruously long, a counterfoil to the conversation we'd been having just before, of cheerful memories, the pets of our youth, that, as Dan and I rehearsed it later for our friends and for Callie's parents, we saw in it the comfort of our own childhoods, spent in basements and near refrigerators crammed with food, and the privation of Samuels's life, for in Harbor Springs, too, he was scraping by, he had run out of money in the airport en route before receiving, via direct deposit, his quarterly payout from the Irish artists' guild. Samuels read Friday morning, in the church on Main Street, where the carpet and its smell were those of the Atonement narthex in Wyomissing, and I felt perfect license in walking downstairs beforehand, to the fellowship hall and rumpus room, to email my students their homework and open a hymnal from the wire rack on the wall, confused as to why "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" was not the first song, and recalling after some frustration that only the Lutherans invest in it supreme importance, for the founder composed it. After damaging his microphone, Samuels worked through his travels in New York and Mexico City, bottles of sauvignon blanc and Lou Reed, before prefacing a poem called "Moon Man" with insistences that its events were true, that he'd met Neil Armstrong at a bar in Dublin, and the astronaut had hexed the moon, where he'd left his soul, and where he wished to return in death. I was excited to learn what of Dan's poem I'd remembered correctly, and in my vanity I knew once more that I was in it, —an embarrassing scene I'd set for him the spring before,

at a party in Greenpoint, introducing myself drunkenly to a writer whose work I admired and, lacking anything else to say, introducing myself again, prompting in my listener an evident horror, as though her interlocutor had malfunctioned. Dan read. The congregants in their pews kept talking, or yawned, some fell asleep, and I thought of the first time I'd heard his narrative "The Police," and, that same semester, of a bike-ride with Jake across the frat-house bridge to City Park's theater in the round, to see Dan and four more friends, none of whom stood on-stage, perform his play "The Stork," a noir with jokes. Jake and I had been talking about a poem I'd circulated a few days prior, a canzone about a young man, birds in trees, and the specter I'd not been able to capture, with any subtlety, of war. It was November. I'd returned from Oakland, where I'd visited Jessica and, in her studio apartment downtown, with its smell of mildew and fresh paint, had had a panic attack so severe I'd lain on the subway tile in the bathroom, which Jess had appointed felicitously with a white shroud over the window, letting in a species of light that stopped at the translucency of the shower curtain, too enfeebled to move through the thing designed to admit it.

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In March I flew to San Francisco and Jess met me in her friend Morgan's sedan. We drove south, neither inland nor along the coast, but through a chain of valleys of a topography I could not then and cannot still now comprehend, with goats hanging off the verdure, and shacks built into the sides of rock-faces so steep I was reminded of the Greeks' postulated Southern man, living in what is now Australia, feet sprouting from the neck and mouth in the stomach. We arrived in Santa Cruz too early to have a drink, and went along the boardwalk past what seemed hundreds of skateboarders of all ages, far more skilled than the wood-pushers I'd watched in Berlin, in the concrete basin by the Warschauer Street tram depot, yet lacking, in their Californian facility, the desperation of the German skate-punks I'd been far too nervous to talk to, drinking maté, rolling dry cigarettes, and complaining about the fascists who'd become PEGIDA within a year. At an arcade by the promenade's end I put two dollars in an electronic

drum machine and selected “Stairway to Heaven,” then waited through minutes of whispering, crooning, and gentle strumming on an acoustic guitar. After we split Jess and I would, for a time, get beer in Cambridge, or dumplings at a restaurant standing in for the Shan Dong noodle house in Oakland’s Chinatown. Dan’s play, today unpublished and perhaps unfinished, has no scene-divisions, was over when the actors began neglecting their lines, and it shares with his haibun what Dan possesses to an almost indescribable degree, a capacity for friendship that is also a genius.

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Dan and Callie lived for years in the duplex on Brown Street, and I sublet half the eastern side for a month in the summer, driving out the English novelist who was to have shared the kitchen and common space with me, but who’d fallen in love in Georgia and was returning to the Midwest to throw together his duffel bags and fly, heartsick, to London. I was supposed to be studying for my general exam, a novel every two days, many of the plays of Shakespeare, *Piers Plowman*, *Gawain*, after the poetry enough Restoration comedy to muddy everything. In September, during the test, when the tall, bald chair of the department, a medievalist, asked me a question about Congreve and was there maybe a link to *Evelina*, it occurred to me I might not pass in that sitting or even come close, and the hours I’d spent reading Dickens on the beach as a teenaged cabana boy, renting umbrellas to families, listening to YouTube recitations of “Tintern Abbey” in my frigid Iowa City apartment might have been insufficient, not complete and concerted enough to guarantee me the accreditation to teach younger versions of myself about the same books, and about the people who’d suffered in them. One afternoon, as I was finishing *Gulliver’s Travels*, Alex came by in his clogs and, over a glass of seltzer, reminded me that Kurt Cobain had slept in the attic above my bedroom, alone in the house with its moth-pocked floorboards and dirt cellar, while on tour for *Bleach*. I’d heard Dan say the same thing years before, when Chris and Mary lived there and were expecting the Atticus I was to see in Minneapolis months later, chewing through the kitchen table and refusing his carrots, and though I pretended to find cheering what Walton had told me,

his beautiful pale body folded on the couch that had persevered in the apartment through microgenerations of poets, single and coupled, I couldn't sleep that night, nor for the week following, as I imagined Kurt, young and frail, hair in his eyes, staring up at the ceiling-slats, the wind through my side westward into Walton and Beatrice's partition and to the river, construction tarps flapping against the I-beams of the music building.

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Somewhere between the early Romantics and Tennyson Sara called and said our relationship, having tottered through spring, was done, and she would phone again in two weeks before going to England. I went outside, hoping to meet Alex reading on the porch, but no one was there for the minutes I watched cars turn right and left on Brown, a van dipping farther along Gilbert into the drive leading to the home of an inscrutable dean. Was the street low or was the curb high. Will cycled by, and with the screen propped and air conditioning escaping into the afternoon, he reminded me that the bike was recompense for his Volvo station wagon, totaled in Manhattan the autumn before, —and on his new conveyance, possessing a better sense of the stitchings-together of the Iowa countryside, he would now ride regularly out to Mount Vernon to read in a coffee shop, twenty miles each direction, or to Oxford to a VFW, where you could sit indoors and smoke without reprisal.

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Dan had finished his poem but did not read to the slowly-dispersing congregation its middle part, featuring me, nor the segment describing what it felt like to be fired over the phone ... the producer for whom Dan was an in-home secretary, and whose leg-breaking on a ski vacation had so disturbed his *modus vivendi* he had immediately to disencumber himself of the poet answering his mail and feeding his Doberman. Dan looked up at the crowd, —me still in my jacket, Stewart not present, the blonde woman we'd met at the Detroit lecture, a San Franciscan having summered in Michigan as a child, with an accent neither Bay nor Lake, and Laurie, arranging

cakes on the table at the base of the nave. I felt I had cried, had been crying, presumably, while he was reading, but I remembered neither tears nor the holding-back of them. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve before hugging Dan, giving him gum, heading down the lakefront trail to ask Mike the mechanic if the shipment was in.

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For Jess's party Jake and I took a weekend room in Prospect Heights, where, as we crawled in to sleep each night, the primary tenant, with a name I never learned, smoked Newports in the sealed, yellow kitchen, petted his labrador, and flipped through a copy of *Time Out*. Weeks prior we'd met in Pittsburgh, site of our reinvigorated friendship in March. We'd ignored each other for months, and with Jake bussing at a Cuban place and delivering affidavits by van before smashing into a glass cubicle on his way out the office door, he was as ready to read poetry aloud again as I was to leave Cambridge and sit in a bar. Jake had arranged for us to perform at a revival movie-house in an alley south of Polish Hill, and had invited a gang of Pittsburgh's mustachioed roustabouts, including Albert, whose intake of the beer we'd bought, to thank people for listening to our poems, did little to blunt, or indeed encouraged, his appreciation of them. Jake opened and read new work. A quatrain he recited twice: And it came to pass, not long after, that it nailed rain, both kinds, human and divine. Living on rice, and living on beans and rice, I can reach into another life. "Ghosts" was much longer. Young people sit in a split-level in New Jersey, prepare for a reality television show shortly to be filmed, about that property's haunting and the methods trained professionals might use to de-spiritualize it. Albert rolled a joint under his phone's flashlight. We cleaned up the empties, bade the sound-tech farewell, and drove with two acquaintances of acquaintances to Gooskie's down the road, leaving at the venue-door a mother and her seventeen-year-old son, who, having seen the event's advertisement buried in the classifieds page of the *Post-Gazette*, had taken a break from their college tours of Pitt and Carnegie Mellon to hear us, before continuing to Gettysburg. At the bar Jane and Molly asked Jake and me how we'd decided to become

poets, and Jake said that, as a child, he'd wanted to paint, and one afternoon in October he walked through the grape fields behind his parents' house in Harborcreek, and saw, lifting above them, a hot-air balloon with FOURNIER CONSTRUCTION on its side. Jake wrote a song about the docks. I played drums, I was a dancer, I cringe at my partner's face in the last number of *Swan Lake*, when I grabbed her under the arm instead of on the shoulder, praying I might support her. The yelp of confused pain had been so loud my teacher, Miss Carol, had whispered something to the choreographer. And Lisa went below as the principals stretched for curtain call.

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Jake's new room in Pittsburgh was not on Polish Hill with Emmy but Uptown, a mile from the baseball stadium, in a house his friend Danny had bought out of foreclosure, with a few thousand dollars for taxes his band-mates had thrown in. We drove there after having jogged to the Confluence of two of the three rivers, and at the coffee shop we bumped into Tilly, who told us her truck had broken down right as she was leaving for St. Paul and a float down the Mississippi, and now an old friend from Mystic was swinging through to take her and her dog. Tilly's face, open and clear, had at its top a white tattoo of a totem of the sun, and she'd shaved the part of her skull where a baseball cap would sit, leaving round it, in a punk's tonsure, her long, fair hair, the ends dyed pink. Tilly drove with us through the rain to a bookshop near the university, and afterward to the house where she was squatting with Rufio the Aussie, no tail, sensing the truck's fate, hopping into and out of its cab as we watched the clouds roll in from the suburbs, children's hospital, Eastern Steps, licking the bed-lining, hanging his head out the back window.

◦

The party was on Troy Hill, at a split-level Jake and I had visited the year before. Friends of Albert's lived there and, in the previous outing, I'd had to piss in the upstairs powder room's sink because the toilet bowl seemed, from what I could perceive in my duress, to have cracked totally from its housing, a ceramic ornament leaning against the seafoam

wallpaper, trickle onto the blue carpet. The poster on the mailbox read THREE WAY BIRTH DAY, and as we entered I had the suspicion that, in the months since I'd been at the house, the band of revelers, including a man in a sombrero and 2014-shaped New Year's Eve sunglasses, had not only not changed but had brooked no interruption. The group was sublimely free, the bedraggled high spirits of western and central Pennsylvania, who, on learning I was born and raised in Berks County, offered genuine condolence, but when they told me they were from Chambersburg, Carlisle, Moon up the road, Elco High, North Allegheny, accepted nothing of the sort in return.

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People wore black pants, canvas sneakers, and a variety of knit hats in the cold, and it was through this motley of wool and denim I saw a woman picking an eyelash from the lip of the glass bottle she held, setting the bottle down, blowing the lash toward the grill, and taking a very large and adroit hit from the piece someone had put in front of her. She exhaled the smoke with a laugh and two coughs. Jake signed up for karaoke, women performed "Landslide" separately. It turned out that Mattie, a painter from Washington Township, had studied one summer in high school not far from where Jake was saying his masses in a navy suit in Harborcreek, and when I mentioned I was visiting and in the process of moving my person and seventy-some belongings from Somerville to Rhode Island by way of Pittsburgh, Reading, and New York, where my friends' parents had catered an event to ring in her fourth decade, she said she'd once ridden through the night in a van with no airbags, to help install a boyfriend's opening in what was now a gallery in Olneyville, but the Chevy had dropped its transmission somewhere outside Worcester and the boyfriend, working all the next night, had had the strength to put up only one painting, of Mattie drinking wine in her underwear and socks, and to sweep the rest, never to be installed, into a corner. She kissed me on the ear before she left. Months later, after I'd stumbled half-blind out of a classroom behind my students, she sent me an email with a picture of the miniscule fake 100-dollar bills Albert

had stuffed into the piñata that evening, and which the first of the birthday boys had exploded in one swing, sending nips of tequila, condoms, and micro-Franklins, a bacchanal for Hop-o'-my-Thumb, across the yard and into the fire.

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Transmission's in fine shape, Mike, Jr., told us, but the catalytic converter, scrubbing the exhaust of a federally mandated percentage of its toxins, was clogged, requiring immediate repair, as it was nothing short of a miracle we'd made it there alive without the converter melting through the chassis, platinum pooling in the engine body. The Fords lent us their truck and Dan and I decided to hike. We drove south to Traverse, on a single road whose name and number changed every ten miles, and around to Sleeping Bear Dunes, where, Laurie and Jim had said, we might as well go if we didn't mind the grit, the wait, and the lightning. A guard waved us through, and Dan told me, as we took off our shoes and rolled our pants, that he'd written his haibun in May and June, in a cabin behind a mosquito net, while a dozen sculptors and dramaturges and composers and their family members orbited the main residence, dragging with them a melancholy intensifying Dan's own. The night his college friend had called to say his brother and only sibling had drowned, Dan had listened, mumbled something into the receiver, and jogged around the island three times, stopping each circuit to watch the seals beaching themselves, barking at the rock-wall above which the cottages sat and in which their artists worried and ate. Years before, Sara had called me from the same island and, annoyed as I was with the high-school children around me, I started to yell, the connection cutting in and out, as though she were not merely inconsiderate for leaving me to care for twenty needy Dionysians, but that Maine itself, in its prolonged northeastward trysting beyond Canada, was proving with Sara how far they both could be from me, how long they could stay away without severing our bond completely. And yet, when we spoke the next night and the call was clearer, I remembered Sara had asked me if I felt all right about her being there, just as, years later on Long Island, the party that was our last time together now over, she said she feared that, in Iowa City, and outside the

Utica Village apartment where we'd spent the month lying around and fighting, I would decide, for good, to leave her.

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An hour before we'd felt the car was wounded and in need of care, Dan and I had stopped, on his insistence, at Niagara Falls. It occurred to me, as we approached on the American and again on the Canadian side, that I knew nothing about it. We parked in an arbor and went back to the visitors' center, a mall with a theater, and as we moved closer to the grand crevice the spray became a local rain, and Dan and I slipped under an awning and watched the *Maid of the Mist* steer sideways, run its thrusters beside the wall of water, as a hundred men, women, and children in red ponchos took pictures and waved.

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I recalled a story Mark, now a lawyer in Boston, had told me, after he returned from a summer in Delhi, —one afternoon, sick in bed with diarrhea and probable anemia, he had received a call from a French girl also volunteering at the orphanage, asking if he wanted to visit the Taj Mahal with her that weekend. By feat of willpower, a chorale of romantic heroism urging him on, Mark cleaned himself and boarded the bus with Céline for the day's journey to the site, during which time he talked to her about university in Lyon, and wondered inwardly how the mansion-tomb would compare to the pleasurable stretch of conversation on the plastic seat, with a window all to themselves. When they disembarked and began walking, however, Mark saw that crowds of people, some demonstrably American in Tigers hats and shorts, were bent over, or standing with the palms of one hand against the sides of their faces, turned halfway toward the Taj, —positions of supplication Mark had read about in early tourists' accounts. And when he allowed himself to look fully upon it, he knew the hours he'd listened to Céline, now standing by him, touching his arm, were sublime in the way he thought things could be, whereas the white of the building, and the enormity of the mourning of the man who'd made it, were sublime in a manner wholly different, of a special order because of necessity

removed from daily cares, divided from them, for the depth of the man's suffering, and the anguished projection of it forward, could have no analog in the ceremonies of eating, talking, deal-making, prayer, and solitude comprising a life outside that loss.

◦

Sleeping Bear Dunes rose from the parking lot, a beige sand-cliff, and as we climbed we saw tourists staggering downward, an English couple arguing about where they might spend the night, for their cards had been declined, they did not have gas to get over the bridge to the UP and, eventually, to Canada. I turned back, looked at the man-made marsh where the rill feeding the lake had been dammed for jet-skis and Sunfish, and when I said I would not make it to the beach, Dan pulled me up by the collar of my T-shirt, clapped me hard on the shoulders and, with a mixture of loving-kindness and frustration sweetly borne, said we'd reach the lake in an hour or die trying. After the first crest the visitors were gone, and Dan told me about Callie and her sister's childhood, their cousins he adored, and the house in Maine where, over Christmas, everyone sang carols in six-part harmony, re-inscribing the reality of what he'd believed impossible, a flock of family near and distant with all loving each other and all, or most, being friends.

◦

The path narrowed, the next ridge gave not onto the lake, as I'd imagined Dan to assure me, but onto another, witchier simplex of dunes and grass, and yet another, this last bearing in the minute change of the coarseness of the sand the sign of the presence of a body of fresh water, one so gigantic that the light fog, forming above and around it and having drubbed the land for millennia, had compressed the rocks to crystal, ash, mud, silt, and a dampness rising as if from beneath. The lake was before us. Dan and I horsed around and, for a quarter of an hour, debated whether or not we would swim, as the air temperature was around 55 and the water, though frigid, did not kill us when we submerged our hands. We sat on the shore until the dark descended over the far embankment. I leaned my head on Dan's shoulder

before standing, putting on my cap, buttoning the bottom of my shirt, and casting about for a large stone to heave with two hands behind me.

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I remembered, as I pulled onto 146 by Worcester, that I'd first heard of anyone living in Providence in Westhampton, at the weekend Jake called even then the Big Chill, and to which he'd brought a woman named Hillary, a painter and great sport, whom he'd met at a bar in Ridgewood on Tuesday and asked to drive out with him Thursday. Sara's parents' house had been cleaved in half a hundred years before, and mules had moved it to the adjacent plot over two weeks. Now on the patio under the green striped awning I sat with Sara next to me, drinking beer and waiting for Dan and Callie, Margaret, Char and Dave, Jess, and Katie and Katie to arrive, and asking Jake about Kurdistan, from which he'd returned that week. He talked about a zoo he'd visited with an interpreter, after his friend had left for the front lines to film the Daesh, and about a tiger they'd stood with, pacing its cage, spitting through the bars. Sara went upstairs to make the beds. Jess and Margaret pulled into the driveway with a back seat of bags of wine and pickles and bread, Char and Dave from Rhode Island came in the side door, surprising the party already gathered, and he let Sara tug his beard as he exhaled the vapor from his electronic cigarette and kicked his sandals into the hallway. Dan and Dave played the guitar and sang. Sara, whose aversion to that kind of music-making is absolute, went upstairs and I followed. As I saw her moving into the bedroom I knew the active thing, the spirit that had brought me into loving her, was gone, but the permanent passive element of that love, as if by sleight-of-hand, took me, it rose and fell in me, and settled somewhere as we sat at the foot of the bed and kissed and talked, and told ourselves we'd sleep for twenty minutes before returning to the feast.

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When I woke I saw that nothing had changed. It was still the cusp of afternoon into but not yet evening, and I was alone on the twin cots Adnan and Alison had pushed together in the '80s, when they'd had money enough to furnish the dining room and to

make do in the upper floors until the infant Sara arrived, assuming control of her corner with its view onto the yard and the grazing deer. As I went along the back staircase I heard Dan laughing, really shouting, and Dave giggling, and the two Katies asking why Margaret had been sitting on the soccer ball, and I could hear the food being cooked. I heard Callie and Jake arguing, after their angrier argument that morning, about who was the first to conciliate, and I went to Sara and heard myself saying the thing I repeat as I'm parking the car in front of my apartment, clearing out garbage from the foot-wells, dropping my bag on the futon, falling into the bed I neglected to make on Monday, and I phone for Dan in Brooklyn to tell him I'm safe.

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