

In a Strange Room

by

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I have endless gratitude.

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For my family, whose love cannot be put into words except to say that it has carried me my whole life. This is for you.

*I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his axe,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.*

– Robert Frost

*Of memory, which makes so large a part of
the excellence of the human soul, and which has so much
influence upon all its other powers, but a small portion
has been allotted to the animal world... That they have
very little remembrance of any thing once out of the reach
of their senses, and scarce any power of comparing the
present with the past, and regulating their conclusions
from experience, may be gathered from this, that their
intellects are produced in their full perfection.*

– Samuel Johnson

In a strange room you have to empty yourself for sleep.

– William Faulkner

HENRY CARSON

APRIL 2, 1923: BORN IN BELMONT NH TO JOHN AND VIRGINIA CARSON

DECEMBER 6, 1925: JACK CARSON BORN

1928: BLACK TUESDAY MARKET CRASH

SPRING 1935: AXE DROPPED ON FOOT DEFORMS TOES AND CAUSES LIMP

FALL 1937: ATTENDS TILTON PAROCHIAL SCHOOL

WINTER 1941: PEARL HARBOR BOMBED

SPRING 1942: HIRED BY EXPEDITION FROM BOSTON UNIVERSITY CATALOGUING FLORA IN NH

MARCH 26, 1943: JOHN DIES OF HEART ATTACK

APRIL 1944: EXCUSED FROM NH DRAFT BOARD

FALL 1944: ENTERS BOSTON UNIVERSITY FRESHMAN CLASS, MEETS MARY LARSEN GRAY, WORKS AT THE WHARF CLEANING FISH

AUGUST 1945: ATOM BOMBS DROPPED ON NAGASAKI AND HIROSHIMA

SPRING 1947: VIRGINIA MARRIES ALFRED PACKARD

SPRING 1948: PROPOSES TO MARY

MARCH 14, 1948: MARY DIES OF INFECTION AND PNEUMONIA

1948-1952: FARMS, SUBSTITUTE TEACHES IN BELMONT

JANUARY 2, 1952: VIRGINIA DIES OF BREAST CANCER

SPRING 1952: MOVES TO KERHONKSON, NY, FARMS

WINTER 1952: ABANDONS FARMING, BECOMES DELIVERYMAN FOR THE BREAD BOX IN KERHONKSON

SUMMER 1953: ROSENBERG EXECUTION

DECEMBER 1955: MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT BEGINS

FALL 1960: BECOMES BIOLOGY TEACHER AT RONDOUT VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

APRIL 1961: BAY OF PIGS INVASION

SUMMER 1962: MARILYN MONROE OVERDOSES

FALL 1963: LEE HARVEY OSWALD ASSASSINATES JOHN F. KENNEDY

SPRING 1964: BEGINS TEACHING HONORS ECOLOGY COURSE

SUMMER 1967: RACE RIOTS OCCUR IN DETROIT AND OTHER CITIES

SUMMER 1975: TRAVELS TO EGYPT

SPRING 1976: ADOPTS STRAY CAT

SUMMER 1977: MEETS ANNE BRECKENRIDGE

FALL 1978: JONESTOWN MASS SUICIDE

OCTOBER 14, 1979: HOUSE BURNS DOWN WHILE AT ANNE'S

FALL 1979: REDUCES TEACHING TO PART-TIME, REBUILDS HOUSE

WINTER 1980: JOHN LENNON ASSASSINATED

SPRING 1983: CHALLENGER EXPLODES

SPRING 1985: RETIRES FROM TEACHING

FALL, 1987: SUFFERS HEART ATTACK, PACEMAKER INSTALLED

SUMMER 1991: GULF WAR BEGINS

WINTER 1991: USSR DISSOLVES

FALL 1997: MOVES TO MOUNTAIN VALLEY MANOR

Squirrel

Squirrel is paused outside the window on a small spot of dirt. Cheeks swollen, whiskers quivering, he has just run to this dirt compelled to bury an acorn. Nut still in his mouth, he scrabbles out a pocket in the earth, lifting his head to look around every so often. Placing the nut in the pocket, he pushes some dirt over it and then pats it down like a little baker kneading dough. This is how he has been spending the days of fall.

And after the snow covers everything, after the cold takes over and the smell of the forest and the leaves is frozen in the air and carried away by the wind, he will try to find his acorns again. But he will forget where he has put many of them and they will rot forever or go to seed, or other creatures will pilfer them first – any number of unforeseen things will happen to them, but for now he caches each nut carefully: each a tiny treasure to bury, to protect.

Spider

Spider carries all she needs to live and to hunt inside her body. Wherever she settles she spins a gyre of silver in the air and presides over it with merciless authority – for her prey, entry into her palace is unforeseen and exit is forbidden.

As I lay and stare up at the ceiling, into the depths of the craquelure, I wonder if any poor, tangled creature ever tried to use Spider's web against her? Not that Spider could ever misstep along the precarious lines, for she is the perfect acrobat. Writhing only makes matters worse, but if some creature could manage to pluck, to stroke the crossed threads in such a way that that a song – a wispy aria I imagine – echoed across the web, perhaps Spider would delay her ruthlessness. Can creatures do unthinkable, magical acts when approached by death? Can music delay even the most disciplined masters?

Or does Spider already see all trapped creatures as musicians? Since her first web she has delighted in the requiems of the hopeless, the laments of the dying.

Luna Moth

Luna Moth is an endangered creature. I have never sought her out – she is nearly impossible to find – though she has come to me occasionally when I am distracted and least expectant. From far away her flight seems desperate, like a sputtering candle, but up close one can see that she is composed, beautiful in her lilting flight. She is green and full of life, and her paper wings have elegant eyes painted on them. Once she lighted on my arm for twelve seconds or so, and I am lucky to have seen her for as long as I did.

Most amazingly, Luna Moth lives for only a few days. Is this not what makes Luna Moth beautiful? She has no mouth – we creatures who strive for longevity hold nothing to this capsule of life, this creature that does not try to forestall death. Even her name, Luna, seems to curl off the tongue like a tendril of smoke and float immediately to another world. When I watch her I feel as though I am recalling something beautiful – the voices of my parents or others, perhaps, who seem to have lighted on my arm for an equally short time. Luna Moth is like a memory with no power to endure.

Shrew

For students especially it is most interesting to think about the extremes of the ecological world. Pygmy Shrew is the smallest mammal in the world – as small as the tip of my finger. Shrew's heart can beat twenty-five times per second, and for more or less two years he eats twice his own weight in insects and seeds each day. Of course, the shrews around here are different – bigger, longer lived, perhaps. Pygmy Shrew lives mostly around the Mediterranean Sea.

But now and just now he is here – I cannot see him but I can feel him on my palm, or perhaps in it. His tail is faintly quivering, his heart beating furiously and his whiskers stroking – exploring – my fingerprints.

Nautilus

I worry that the divinity of Nautilus will be tarnished by an attempt to describe her. I could try to start with one adjective: marbled. But this is insufficient, for how many others are also marbled? So I add another: smooth. I could continue with the additions of spiral and nacreous, lissome and elegant. One easily gets spun around and lost in overlapping words and ideas. Flowing, mottled, vitreous, auburn, polished – these too apply. Though each adjective takes me slightly closer to Nautilus, they will never bring me into her embrace.

I could try another approach – Nautilus is a moon gliding through a cloud break in the night sky. She is an ornament on a child's mobile. She is a fern not unfurled, an eye, and yet equally so a knot in a log. She is a galaxy, a dream, a storm, a stone, a ram's horn. She is you and I, she is the earth, and she is a language, a sound, an echo.

For all of these things that she is, I struggle to find anything that she isn't. This leads me to wonder if there is also nothing that isn't her.

Will I ever know Nautilus? Inside her shell is a pattern of colors and shapes that grow smaller and smaller as the shell spirals infinitely in on itself. But though this pattern endlessly diminishes, does it not also become infinitely long, infinitely large, infinitely complex? Who can hold in his mind the idea of Nautilus, this indescribable creature, who in turn holds everything inside her?

Damsselfly/Dragonfly

This has been the first summer in which I haven't see two creatures I have been accustomed to seeing since I was a child. I always admired their ease of flight, especially on the occasions when they land briefly on my knee or shoulder. It is not their self-assuredness that impresses me so much as the fact that a creature capable of such playful movements would ever choose to be still: they elate in every moment of life. But the nights are growing longer, the days shorter – to see them I would have to visit a pond or stream soon.

If I were to be given the honor of becoming one myself, reincarnated if you will, I could not choose between Damsselfly and Dragonfly! She is smaller, thin and elegant, he is larger and more robust, but these are paltry differences. Damsselfly and Dragonfly are yoked by their great resemblance.

Perhaps then the true reason they do not hesitate to rest on one's arm, to gently pinch the skin and stroke their wings slowly, proudly, is that they wish to be noticed closely, so that for a brief moment one recalls that there is indeed a difference, no matter how slight. They believe that they are only a moment, a few strokes, perhaps, from freedom.

I anticipate certain events. Drinking tea this morning I realized that some day I will run out the honey I still have from home.

The certainty of an approaching future squeezes hard around the kernel of belief that it might never come. With the curse of foresight I know these futures are fixed, yet I still do not entirely expect them – I may never entirely expect them – and on the day they come to pass I will think, I had no idea that this would really come to pass.

But there are some who go along without foresight – empty of anticipation and of expectation.

There is beauty in their way, and calm, the kind of feeling I seek – and sometimes find – in a spoonful of honey.

Owl

Birds that flit and warble during the day may have no idea that Owl exists, for her reign begins at nightfall. In the forest she waits incorporeal, her painted speckles of brown invisible against the branches and the sky, until a small creature darts across the ground, dwarfed by the darkness and deafened by its own feet crunching the leaves. Owl, whose flight is as silent as her perch, falls upon the lost creature less obtrusively than moonlight and brings quiet into the forest once more.

I used to rejoice at her hooting even as I wondered at its meaning. I have not heard her for some time now, though her absence has made me wonder if meaning is really to be found in the silence itself. Her calls might serve only to divide the silence, measure, delineate and qualify the silence, amplify the silence.

As I watch her staring at me unblinking from her perch in the corner, I wonder: is she speaking?

Camel

I remember: there was one set of tracks in the sand. I stood under the unbearable sun that morning as it began to heat and dry the desert. I saw the edge of a hoof-print collapse; a few hundred grains tumbled down. As the wind picked up, the sand began to flow and at once the tracks from the night before disappeared.

Camel walks great distances across the world's deserts, and I have often thought that she navigates the world's greatest maze. There are no hedge walls or lines of stone to follow; the hopelessness lies in the fact that the landscape is always changing. Storms whip the dunes so that even if you can keep your bearings as the sand stings your face, when you open your eyes, everything will have changed. And yet Camel survives; she lives by letting the sand flow around her, letting the desert shift under her feet.

I look out the window and imagine Camel. She would stare, unnerved, at the rocks and trees that look so familiar but that she knows cannot be the same as the ones she saw yesterday. She begins to doubt herself, seeing her own tracks seemingly permanent for the first time, conspiring with the rocks and trees to convince her that she has somehow returned to where she had already been. And the stream, the one she had stood by and drank from just the day before, it can't possibly be real, she thinks. It must be a trick of the light or of the air, she thinks; a mirage.

I was in Egypt for only a short time, though a woman I met there asked me to stay or to take her with me. Memories of her, incomplete and shifting, incomplete and disappearing, come to be now and again.

Ant

Lester's grandchildren are here today. They were so energetic, they couldn't focus on anything. They made some people nervous, but Lester was happy and talkative. He let them play with his cane and look at his hands through the magnifiers next to the papers. They are outside; I saw them a moment ago through the window running around in the hedges. Lester is so proud of them. Now it looks like they are crouching over something on the ground – perhaps they are looking at a plant or a file of ants under the magnifiers.

They had been trying to get him to jump. They wanted to show him how high they could jump and see how high he could jump. He refused, but Hank and some of the others got into it too, urging him to try, joking around of course but still, Lester demurred and grew sullen. I have always felt that Lester and I are of completely different sorts, but I pitied him then. The moment didn't last long – I dropped my coffee and the mug shattered and glass and liquid went everywhere. The kids were ushered outside and right now it looks as though they are making little mounds in the loose dirt of the garden.

Snail

Who but the active feel the pressure of the light of day, the changing of seasons? If I were to guess I would say it is late summer and that at this moment moonlight lays softly on the trees. Perhaps it will frost tonight.

I have the deep, still pool of my memory in which I am suspended, or crawling through at a snail's pace. Time barely passes: all that I have and all that concerns me is within.

Cavefish

When I was a boy I imagined a creature that would only – no, *could* only live in waterfalls. Though I was enthralled with this idea, I kept it a secret. The creature would be thin and flat, streamlined and planar so it could maneuver as it pleased. What a lively time it would have, swimming or flying (which would it be?), weaving through droplets or rising on plumes of spray.

Now, however, I found that the creature has been recently discovered, although not as I imagined. Underground, there are hundreds of miles of river that cascade through limestone cavities – this is his home. Cavefish clings fast to the stone faces as water rushes endlessly past, no window to the sun or moon, the trees, the world outside.

I am disappointed that these creatures are so insipid. Cavefish moves little and slowly, he is blind (though he anyways lives in complete darkness), and feels nothing but the endless flowing water over his back and rock under his stomach. Perhaps he hears the water or perhaps he lives in silence. He always faces one direction, upstream, uphill, for turning causes the water to catch him and send him hurtling away.

As I sit at my desk with this piece of paper, I remember I used to wish I could be this creature I thought I had invented.

Arctic Tern

Eratosthenes was the first human to measure the circumference of the globe. He used only shadows and mathematical reasoning to do so.

Arctic Tern also knows the circumference, though she pays it no heed, for she is creature of the sun. She migrates from pole to pole and back again every year, helped only by the wind and the light. She will likely fly a million miles in one lifetime.

I was reminded of these feats this morning. My sleep was erratic and I woke early. I opened the window and felt as though my being pushed out into the cool air, towards moon and into the channel of light that was reflected through space at me and me alone. I remembered throwing rocks into still water and the ripples that pushed out. A breeze brushed my face and I closed my eyes, and for some reason at this moment I remembered dropping a rock into the water watching the ripples expand into nothing. I remembered the sound of the bells that echoed over the countryside from the steeple at Tilton, and the shade of the apple trees in the back yard.

The moon eventually dipped below the horizon and the sun peeked out, making millions of dew beads scintillate in the grass.

Arctic Tern is a creature of the sun, willing to follow the summer from pole to pole to bask in endless light. Eratosthenes is a creature of Earth, a cartographer and geographer. And in the early morning, as I thought of Tern and Eratosthenes, of feats and ripples, memories and bells, I fancied myself a creature of half-shadow, a creature of the Moon and of dusk and dawn.

My memories do little but tire themselves out. There is a sheet of glass congealing over them, and with each iteration of remembrance it grows thicker, more impervious. To penetrate this I need sources beyond myself: conversations, photographs, letters, and even places reveal what in hindsight feels as though was there all along though buried, inaccessible. But I have very few of those reminders around – the glass has grown cloudy over long periods of my life, and the scattered instances I think I remember clearly are abrupt, isolated.

Owl

The frame is brown, simple, and square; the owl wide-eyed and stern. I look at it every morning the same way that I can't help but count down with the numbers on the doors each time I walk down the hall, though I know them by heart, though they never change. I notice the weather every day too, and I forget the weather every day. Though it's only through a pane of glass, the outside is far away – left down the hall, past the rooms and farther, towards the still life hanging at the end before the lobby and then to the left again, out of the door when it opens, and then the air will enshroud your face.

I can see people coming and going from my perch at the window, I can watch them go arm and arm with a son, with a daughter, hand in hand with a grandchild. I see the people in wheelchairs being pushed, the cars that wait for them to cross.

I have started using a walker. It rests by my bed while I sleep, sits by my chair when I write. It has, in its way, made me more mobile, or at least given me a greater range. There was a man next door who used a walker too, and I remember his gait as he pressed on the frame, turning at chunky angles, scraping along. My walker is different, slightly; it has a little seat between the handles where I can turn around and sit for a minute if I want.

Toad

This morning I woke and thought of Toad. Most know him as wrinkled and fat; he does nothing but schlep around and eat. Squalor or discomfort is nothing to Toad, who seems unbothered by most things. Why is it Toad, the indifferent galumphing blob, the little Laughing Buddha, that has come to me today?

Each winter, Toad nestles in mud or leaves and lets himself freeze through. Ice gradually forms on his skin and in his blood. At some point his heart cannot push the ice crystals through his body; his lungs can no longer inflate, and gracefully he slips into non-existence. Toad knows somehow that he will lie undisturbed in the mud and that in a few months the spring thaw will bring him back.

And when finally it is Toad's time to die, I imagine he is not anxious or upset, for he has practiced for it all his life. He has no capacity to worry or be upset and dies calmly without ever believing that it is the true end of his life, for perhaps it is not – this he has proved many times. After the stillest of nights I sometimes think of Toad.

Coyote

More and more the moon speaks to me. Of course we are a collection of past actions and occurrences, but I have been wondering lately if we are not molded more by the actions – innumerable – not done, the paths – innumerable – not taken. The moon casts a half-light over the earth, it is the reflection of the sun and the obverse of day, the shadow of actuality. These paths not taken are there in my thoughts like the moon is there, distant and blurred, a mirror. We face each other directly but there is an impossible barrier of emptiness between.

Though of course the moon cannot hear, Coyote addresses it with unanswerable questions. It seems right to appeal in that way that he does, in a chorus of howls that seems to capture all words and sounds that could be spoken and yet means perhaps nothing at all.

Snake

My brother and I used to sneak out of the house at night in the summertime to roam the deserted streets of town.

We discovered not just the feeling of being unobserved or invisible but of being nonexistent, seen by only each other and perhaps the moon. (It is like reading without knowledge of movement or time, or the moment you wake from a dreamless sleep after having just lain down) We could look at the house from the street and sense our sleeping parents, our room, our possessions and even ourselves inside.

Once a heavy summer rainstorm rolled in and we were caught a half mile from home. We ran back to find a shimmering puddle on our floor. After sloughing our wet clothes, our father woke and discovered us rummaging for towels.

It is a painful memory; we were given the belt. I could not sleep that night for my skin stung wherever it contacted the sheets.

There are times when, looking around this room I have come to inhabit, I feel I am outside of it, separate somehow from its contents – including myself. I feel nonexistent once more; I see my room as though from the outside, like a snapshot, a summation of my life.

I wonder if Snake feels this way, every time she molts. She too leaves behind her pains in her diaphanous skin, able to see clearly for a minute a ghost, a portrait, a vision of herself.

Seahorse

My parents took our family for a drive to the coast of Maine, but at the shore my brother and I were upset to find no sand, no ships in the offing, and no room to swim amongst the rocks and seaweed. It was not until my mother led us to a barnacled outcropping that we forgot our disappointment: hidden there was a little pool of water left by the tide.

I felt close to my brother at that moment as we stared with fascination at the tiny world below. Attached to a drab weed, camouflaged and swaying slowly, was Seahorse. His tail was wrapped around the plant and he stayed that way the whole time we watched him; even when waves began to crash in he clung still, desperately, sloshing along with the seaweed. We retreated farther onto shore, but for the time being Seahorse stayed put. Then, Seahorse's pool – and my brother and I felt it was our pool as well – became a chance spot in the ocean.

We spent an uncomfortable night in a campground and at my brother's insistence we returned to the same stretch of shore the next morning, but Seahorse was gone. I wondered if some wave had torn that plant out of the ground – Seahorse had seemed so firmly attached to it, perhaps they were sailing off somewhere together in the deep.

At that point it ceased to be Seahorse's pool and it ceased to be our pool. I asked my brother about it in a letter when we had both grown, and he didn't remember Seahorse, though he had been to war and back and had no reason to think about Seahorse or our family travels for quite some time.

Red Kite

Like Red Kite with her forked tail, navigating the updrafts and eddies. Time may seem to run in one direction as along thread or a river, but it is more a breeze you must navigate by feel, by intuition. Red Kite is a bird of prey, confident in the air, all the world below. Invisible eddies spin and whirl, joined even by her own movement and her own breath. I am in a whirl: I feel the tug in both directions, like Red Kite with her forked tail, navigating the updrafts and eddies.

Goat

My decision to move off and farm was from Walden of course, but more than that it was Mary's death and then my mother's shortly after.

Goat ate the scrub grass and bark, leaves and weeds, even clothing off the line. He would butt me, climb on the shed and wheelbarrow and jump any fences I built. He never left, though, and I soon learned to let him be. When I grew my own food for a year, all of my own food, I could not have supported any other animals, but Goat thankfully took care of himself.

With my mother gone I left Belmont and the church, striped myself of expectations of happiness and sadness alike to start my own farm. I took the money left to me and bought a cabin and a few goats, put in beans and potatoes, squash and onions – helpful, hardy crops that sat nicely in their rows in the field and then in jars of brine to save for winter. What I grew served that one purpose: physical sustenance.

That year I learned that Goat's pupils are rectangular. I had no experience with Goat (we had always raised a few ewes for wool growing up), but I soon came to love the half-dozen I had. That year I reread Walden and other forgotten books; I farmed; I scraped dirt continuously from under my fingernails, preserved beans, and drank Goat's milk.

But I could not sustain that life. In the winter I got a job at a bakery. I became a part of the community, if only from touring the town in the bakery truck. Food is what makes everyone happy – I realized during that though each food has their place, I would rather deal in muffins and pastries than rows and rows of beans and potatoes.

Dog

When I first started, I worked as the deliveryman. My route included two restaurants, a grocer, and three-dozen homes – the bakery had a good following in Kerhonkson. I enjoyed placing the loaves quietly on the steps when nobody was home, and I always imagined them to be a surprise; I imagined that upon returning to their house the people would delight at the unexpected presence of the newspaper-wrapped bundles.

As I was returning to the truck once, I glanced back to see a dog attacking the bread I had just put down. I ran as fast as I could, ready to give it a kick, but it turned and looked up at me so disarmingly that I stopped my foot.

He had no owner in sight and he was as friendly as any dog I've met. His tail batted pieces of crust across on the ground and bits of gnawed newspaper dangled from the corners of its mouth as he looked up at my face, confident he had done nothing wrong.

In 1985 or 1986 I wrote about myself more seriously, deliberately – a documentation of my life at that point began for want of a hobby. I completed six long chapters but stopped in frustration – I was struggling with details and chronology, I was overly self-analytical, and I found myself tempted to dramatize and exaggerate so as to alternately feel sorry for myself or elate in myself. I wanted my own life or at least my writing to be important to the world, to everyone, to Earth, and the symptoms were all an effort to give meaning to the activity rather than to draw meaning from it.

I threw the manuscript in the stove. I couldn't think of anyone who would want to read it, myself most of all, though I had half a mind to feed it to my goats – they would have eaten it with a little honey, even plain. But perhaps brother might have glanced at it, or less likely Cheryl. Now, I would read one or two pages if I could.

Jack

I remember when we were quite young, before I went to Tilton, my brother and I would lie on top of our sheets at night and talk or sometimes lark into the moonlight. We weren't too similar growing up, at school or with our parents, but at night it was different somehow. At night we were close, we were brothers.

The summer that I saved his life, though, was different. All he did was overestimate or lose for a moment his strength, and all I did was swim out to him with a float, but the scare took hold of him deep inside somehow. He always put on a good face for our parents, of course, but I knew; I knew simply because he buried himself in his sheets each night.

I was working for the botanists from Boston University when he signed up. He had a hell of a time convincing my parents to let him go at 17, but he managed it. I used to have letters from my mother begging me to intervene, but I would have been no help. Of course he ended up torn apart, on a gurney with bags of other people's blood flowing into his arm and through his body, but he survived.

I thought of Jack again before sleep last night and so he appeared in a dream. He was in a room vaguely familiar and he had a child pulling, hanging on his arm, though he too never had any children.

Cat

Herodotus recorded that when a house would catch fire in Egypt, men would guard it to make sure that no cats ran into the flames.

She appeared, a stray, and settled into my life – I was helpless to turn her away. She was tawny, with ears that would twitch at the sound of the wind and paws that would scrabble sometimes in fraught sleep. She would sit on my lap and read with me, scratch my hand with her tongue when I turned the page. I encouraged her to live outside – leaving the door open, forcing her out even, but she would paw at a window until I let her in.

It is easier to think of those times now: she is gone, and I was not there to watch over her. I could have believed she burst from a heat-shattered window, could have trusted that she was safe and content elsewhere, but what really happened was that my photographs burst from their frames, my books and papers returned to smoke in the sky, and my companion turned to ash and dust.

At some point her grace and poise must have given way to panic and madness. I was not there but I can see it, because what happened to her has happened to others. With Mary there was a fever, a panic as her body was heating up, poisoning itself and nobody could save her, and though it was so long ago the echoes haven't yet faded. Sometimes I think that my whole life has served to constantly draw me back to her, through that day when I overloaded the stove, even here and now too as I recast the memory of it all.

And perhaps it was the same too with that woman when I was traveling, the one before Anne and the cat but after Mary, the African who did not speak my language but

saw that another fire burned that night as I wended down the street, drunk and alone. She could feel heat on my breath, see the flicker of something in my eyes.

I was terrified but I was liberated as well that first night, age 52. I could feel something thrashing inside of me; I shook. I did not, could not open my eyes but even then with my eyes squeezed shut I thought of nothing. A short while and it was over. Later I concluded that there was nothing at all to be forgiven – it was catharsis, it was a few American dollars.

Doe

I have lived most of my life – all of my life – alone. Lester jittered over his food at dinner as he asked me if I minded not having any close companionship or any nearby family. I said that it was fine, that solitude is truly companionable. But the focus of the table turned back to him as he began to talk loudly about his own family. The implication that there was some flaw in the way that I lived, some flaw in the way I felt was offensive, and all the time Lester was talking as though he had some wisdom about it that it was his duty to impart.

Living alone, away from other people, has been my way.

I got a pacemaker after my heart faltered. Thankfully I was outside when it happened and a passerby saw it happen. Afterwards I got my first regular prescription, and that winter I hired a snow service.

Another memory comes to me: during my recovery, I was in my chair at the window browsing the newspaper – the war was ongoing – and upon setting it down, I saw a doe had come gently to the window and was eating acorns. We stayed like that for some time – she would bend down to the ground, pick up a nut, raise her head, and then chew slowly. I watched her face, her eyes, for as long as I could before she wandered away.

Bobcat

During the night he ranges far, not seeking anything but letting his path, his quarry, come to him as they will. During the day he sleeps in one of many dens he has made for himself – whichever one he happens upon.

Anne told me that the black spots on Bobcat's back (that he himself cannot even see) are fabled to have come from burning coals scattered across his fur by a cunning rabbit. Regardless of how he came by them, they are wholly his; they give him the power of concealment and quietness, of obscurity, of mystery.

She saw Bobcat a few days before I went to her house. He did not rush, she said, made no effort to hide, she said, but somehow the shadows rippled around him so that he hardly seemed to be.

It wasn't a happy dinner that night, and like Bobcat we traveled far. I slept there, at Anne's house, but the morning never came. The call woke us and by the time we got back to my house it was just smoldering. We sat in the front seats, protected by the windshield but watching nothing, barely thinking. Cat was gone, and we were gone as well.

Mary

She died young, of infection and pneumonia, and her parents died too of course but much later than their child. I wonder now if I am the only person who remembers her.

I grasped at Mary after she was gone, thinking that what we had was pure love, vowing to never let her, the memory of her, wane. But it has, for memory can never be trusted to one person. An undetectable decline began long before the glass that protected her pictures shattered and the photographs curled to ash, long before Anne, the cat, even before the bakery, before the school. It is the way of things that I, like everyone, am a palimpsest, and on me Mary has been overwritten.

I have one thing of hers left. She gave me a watch and chain in anticipation of graduation and though it survived the fire and I have saved it all these years, it doesn't keep time any more and these days I no longer use any watch at all. But I have on occasion wound it up, and it has these little gold hands that twitch in place behind the scuffed glass. The watch rests in a box on my bureau, but the chain that used to carry it is long gone, broken at some point or merely worn out.

Reindeer

Once during that bitterly cold fall I walked along the outside edge of an old stone wall that seemed to run forever into the distance. I wasn't exactly sure where I was or where it led; I felt as though the sun gave no warmth and only hazy light as though shining through a glass bottle. I had little track of time. I imagined I was following a fence built by the Sami people, reindeer keepers who would enclose their herd into immense tracts of land: the biggest pastures on earth. In the summers, the reindeer move across miles and miles of shrubs and moss, but as the winter approaches the Sami herd them into a smaller and smaller area to share warmth and protection with one another during the darkest, coldest time of year.

And so I walked, the sun following my path overhead, my body neither tired nor energetic. I ran across crumbling sections and intact sections, gaps where I could have easily passed through and other sections recently rebuilt – mending is the constant struggle of the Sami as well. But I wasn't thinking about her or her death. I wondered, half seriously, if the Sami would take me in, if I could learn live in that secluded land where a single day can last for months, always on one side of a never-ending fence. I came suddenly across a road that I knew returned home, and so I took it. I arrived to the porch exhausted, body, eyes and head aching, thankful to have made it back.

Geese

Envy I don't often feel – the world is how it is; how it is meant to be. But I was at the window just now and heard them honking, saw them in arrow formation overhead, doing what they are meant to do. I wanted to be there, with them.

Slug

I dropped it, the maul that I was too young to be working with, too weak to be raising over my head. It wedged between the bones of my toes, some of which snapped and some of which shattered. Most clearly I remember screaming, looking at the underside of the canopy and screaming as sunlight stippled down through shades of green. My father ran out of the house at once, wrapped me up as best he could and carried me home, though I still left a trail of blood that the doctor could have followed to our house. It did not heal well even though I kept off of it in a bed and then a chair for weeks and with a cane for a month more.

When I would put on my sock it would snag on my toes, or tear if my nails were a little long. Now I can feel storms before they arrive, when the low pressure comes through. Even the toes that weren't hit by the maul have hammered over on that foot as though they are flinching, trying to shrivel away from the mangled bits. I imagine it looked like a crushed bunch of grapes; the jumble of skin and flesh with a crooked, contorted stem no longer holding it all together.

Eventually I walked though I could never run without lurching slightly. But the limp is part of me – I know nothing different. Perhaps all I can really say about it is that like Jack, I would have gone to war.

Weasel

If you do not kill Weasel upon sight, he will not sleep until all of your hens are dead. He will find a way into the coop at night even if you think it safe and then bite the necks of the hens one by one until he is surrounded completely by bodies. Only then, in the void, will he sleep.

But Weasel is a handsome creature, and in the light looks curious and intelligent. I was never a reliable shot, but I was even worse when Weasel was in my sights. It is as much Weasel's fault that he kills as it is my fault that I cannot help but feel sympathy.

Once, at my father's request, I shot Weasel as my brother eagerly looked on. And in remembering I conjecture: as Weasel dies, to him all other creatures cease to live as well. The cessation of life around him is his obsession, his compulsion, whether I participate or not. For his sake I hope, I believe, that he cannot focus on his own death when it occurs, that consistent with his life he sees only the deaths of those around him.

Wren

Again I think about that woman, her burnt skin, her wiry hair and the foreign sounds that came out of her mouth and mine. For a while I had dreams about her, not about the act but that we were living together and we still could not speak to each other. At the dinner scene she would point to the thick glass salt-shaker, I would point at the blurred form of a biscuit or soup, and we would grab at the food and each other, gasping, howling. And once a small brown bird flew into the window in my dream and I woke up, stranding the two of us at the kitchen table in that strange room, that vision of a world not to be.

It is Janice who sits carefully by me these days, though not on Mondays and Tuesdays and never at nights. We have a routine and I know her voice, her hands. Once early on Janice asked if I needed a knife with my meal. *What? Wife?* But I didn't tell her what I thought I heard; she repeated herself and then I declined.

But *she* actually proposed to me, twice, even before she took payment and then again afterwards she uttered that broken phrase she had picked up. I refused immediately, abruptly both times, but I am now as I was then not without sympathy. She has had the same dreams as I have, with the salt and the grasping and the window.

Snapping Turtle

She lives in fear. From first sight, you see that she is slow and her shell is too small. Vulnerability has taught her watchfulness and pugnacity, has taught her to claw and snap, to bite and tear. What does she feel – loathing? Pity, for herself? Why does she cry when giving birth – and cry she does, actual tears – out of the water where her tears can't dissipate, where there is no current to carry them away?

It is disappointment. Snapping Turtle has worked her whole life to simply survive, to steel herself against pain, to hide her vulnerability, and to face the world with a grim courage. But she has never mastered the urge within her to reproduce, to pass on the suffering of her kind.

Squirrel

Squirrels are digging acorns here and there outside the window. They will survive on them until the spring when the food will be plentiful again, when they will bear litters of hairless, helpless, blind and mewling kits in their nests in log cavities or in the crooks of branches.

And of course there are some seeds that have been forgotten, left to rot in the ground, but some seeds were never even buried in the first place. If Squirrel senses that she is being watched, spied on by another who might retrieve the nut after Squirrel turns away, she will dig a hole, pretend to place down the nut, and then fill in the dirt. The nut will really remain stashed in her cheeks as she ferries it away to another location. But this is a day of harvest: Squirrel has reclaimed another and scuttles away to eat it.

Cockroach

If you want to kill a cockroach you can deprive it of air for 45 minutes. You can submerge it in water for 30 minutes to drown it, or you can leave it without both food and water for a month and that would perhaps be enough. They are pests that make their way into your house and avoid poison and thwart traps. Cockroach's body is flat and hardened, able to find comfort in dark cracks and holes and able to run faster than 3 miles per hour.

But there is a misconception about Cockroach – he is not impervious to radiation. His cells reproduce just as ours do, if only at different rates, and radiation is proven to mutate the DNA of reproducing cells.

There are times when upon sitting down, intending to write, the page itself begins to smolder and repulse me. My eyes refuse to look down at the page, they tell me that they want to look at things far away, farther than merely out the window into the yard. The feeling trickles to my legs that itch and strive to move, but I am bored of walking these well-lit halls with the thick carpeting. I wish I could go farther.

How strange that regrets come and go, that feelings of regret have little to do with whatever previous action one "regrets." What I mean is that past actions, paths taken and not taken, return to us as regrets in times of strain but are all but forgotten in times of calm. I mourn when unhappy memories swirl in my mind, but it is not the content of the memories that is mournful; it is the very act of remembering or more so the conditions that caused those memories to surface.

Yesterday, instead of writing, I napped.

Anne

I was with Anne for three years, but it seems now to have been no more than seconds. What did we do, where did we go? I lost our way once when hiking along an old logging road. What I thought was a loop ended up being, well, nothing. I had brought a light and the terrain wasn't difficult, but nonetheless as the sun began dropping and the mosquitoes awoke we grew more and more scared. Finally, we came upon an unknown paved road and I stopped a car while Anne sat silently on the berm – we were several miles from where we had hoped to be.

I wish I could remember more readily happier memories. All of my memories of her seem to congeal and rigidify, to push other memories away even as they tire out themselves.

Swallow

My memory of her is like a swallow trapped in a house. The swallow may fly in an open window during the day or down the flue as the embers cool. Once in, she will make her way throughout the house, crashing around in the strangling rooms until someone guides her with light and darkness to an open door. Upon seeing the escape Sparrow will fly out, and the house will be no different for it as though she was never there, as though nothing had happened.

Cow

Janice refilled my pill case before breakfast today. The letters MTWTFSS are bold and red, and through the plastic I can see the pills like strange colored seeds. I always take them – I do – because they badger me about it, they tell me that I can't forget to take them, that it is my job to take them and that it is their job to make me take them – intravenously if they must. My body needs them to be healthy.

I remember one night in Belmont – it was summer – standing in my room, still sweating after having worked in the hayfield down the road. Having spent all day without a shirt, my back was throbbing from the sun and red welts from the hay crossed over my forearms, stinging triumphantly. I can still picture the marks of my labor like a brand on my skin.

After the hay was packed into the barn, we filled the silo with the grain that would feed the cows during the winter. I did help out in the winter too, over school breaks, shoveling sawdust in the barns mostly, sending the grain cascading down the chute and into the feed box for the cows twice a day. Someone was always lowing in the barn, and all of them would shuffle about, pushing against each other. Their bodies heated the barn nicely.

But I'm sure that I enjoyed the summer tasks much more, despite the strain and the hurt it caused or maybe even because of it.

Earthworm

I visited the doctor yesterday – I had a dizzy spell – and he told me that he was a biology student of mine and spoke fondly of class, mentioning the earthworms we dissected. It sounded as though the worms were the only part of class he remembered specifically, but that is fine – I didn't remember him either. Every semester we would put on our gloves, our masks, stretch out and pin down a worm on a piece of wood, set it under the light on the middle table and study his anatomy. We would separate the various parts – the gizzard, the crop, the heart – and talk about how worm could sometimes regenerate lost portions of his body.

It was a transient ischemic attack, he told me. I shouldn't worry, he told me, about a "minor stroke," but I do have to take more medicine that will balance something inside me, medicine to make sure my blood circulates properly, medicine that hopefully won't conflict with my other medicine.

Octopus

We know very little about Octopus. We do know that she is smart, and her brain is not just in her head but all through her tentacles. Her whole body can think for itself: it can change colors, it can squeeze to fit inside a discarded glass bottle, it can stalk prey, trap prey, or lure prey. She has no bones, being a cephalopod; her strength comes from the hundreds of suckers that line her arms.

To have memories in my hands that are not in my head, memories in my feet of cold, perhaps, or dirt, memories in my neck of the brush of a hand or the splash of a drop of sweat, to re-feel these things, to recall them but all without my mind – that would be to live as Octopus. But Octopus is not a social creature and has no social aspirations; her intelligence is for hunting and survival. And this she has mastered, for though she is without bones and suspended in the water, escape from the embrace of Octopus would take more than a ton of force.

Possum

I used to walk on a sylvan path at night when the moon and the trees made splotchy shadows across the ground. One night, not watching my feet, I stumbled over something soft. Possum is known for feigning death and emitting the smell of fleshy decay when approached. He cannot control this reaction: he faints involuntarily, though that night fainting proved to be more dangerous to Possum as I landed a blow with my foot to his side. But he was unhurt, and the stroke of my foot seemed to wake him up; he scuttled away, hissing, his white pelt shimmering through patches of moonlight.

Possum came to mind immediately after a bout of coughing. I don't know why then as opposed to when I coughed earlier, or sneezed, or when I was careful not to trip on the upturned edge of the rug or when the gust of wind through the open window made a piece of paper eddy to the ground.

I must own other memories – many others – waiting ready in ranks but that will remain uncued.

Bee

We are decorating the living room today for the Christmas party. I could help with the baking, but plenty of folks always do that – the kitchen is probably full of people getting in each other's way – and I still have to find a gift for the exchange.

My first year I was assigned someone I had not met who lived on the floor above. Cheryl. I gave her a jar of honey I still had from my bees at home. We figured out, because of the honey, that I had been her daughter's teacher, and that her daughter had even been to my house. I used to bring the kids out in the spring to study the bees – we would peek at the hive and then walk to the fields with the daisies and the Queen Anne's Lace, watching them crawl through the flowers, pollinating the blossoms, flying laden and giddy back to the hive.

I liked her; I wish she were still here. Her daughter, if she hasn't moved, is artist who works with colored glass out in Chicago. That same year Cheryl gave one of her pieces to someone else – a small stained glass hanging – and I remember being scared while holding it; it was so delicate, it could so easily break.

Honey is the only food that never spoils. I have heard there is honey, still good, still sweet, buried in the pyramids. The jar I gave her was simple, made of glass with a copper colored lid and seal. The honey was light amber and it seemed to capture sunlight each day and hold on to it throughout the night. She wondered if she shouldn't just leave it, let it sit in the sunlight like a bronze sculpture, but I insisted that she eat it.

The hive belongs to the new owners of the house, if it has survived. In my room I still have one jar of honey left, in which is suspended one bee that had gotten trapped while I was collecting it.

The bee came out once in a spoonful intended for my tea, but I let that spoonful fall gradually back into the jar. I make sure to carve gently around her now.

It is never wholly sincere to wish for a life completely and utterly different. I realize how naïve that is, and also how absurd. A sincere wish of mine is that I could go out of doors more readily and more often these days.

Still I read and I write and I eat, and these pleasures are not always available to others just as the pleasures of others are not available to me. Re-reading is my most enjoyable pastime – even the books I have read a dozen times (I am not so different from a Christian, am I?). It is comforting, perhaps, to know the ending from the start, but more so I find that it is easier to get lost, to peer into another world as though from a vacuum, when you already know your way around. When rereading I only accidentally notice pagination, unlike the numbers and names on the doors that I read every time I walk past.

Birch

Now the snow has stopped falling outside my window and the new moon has peeked out from behind the clouds, but the day was much less calm. There was alcohol in the eggnog and the fire in the hearth blazed hard, the birch logs curling, churning in a bright fury behind the glass fireplace doors.

All I said was that it was painful to look at the fire, which wasn't even true – now the memories carry little bite – but of course Lester and the others then wanted to know why fire was painful for me. They were amazed when I told them.

They asked what the cat's name was, but she was a stray and I never named her – she sat on my lap whether I called to her or not. She slept by the warm stove when I wasn't around, especially on days like this, and when I arrived home and walked in the door she wove around my legs as though leading me in a dance.

When she first came to me I searched her for ticks, for sores or for scars, and though her paws were worn and chapped I found no serious injuries. Still, I never figured out what tormented her outdoors; why she would scratch at the window, the door, and bolt inside when I opened it.

After I rebuilt the house, I planted a tree for her, a birch tree. Birch grows fast and is often the first wood to return to scorched soil – within a few years the tree I planted became just one of many on the property. When I was looking at the fire today I was not sad about the house or cat, I was thinking about the birches that herald the return of the healthy forest, and I was wondering if cat even tried to flee that day, the day that it burned.

Fox

You spot creatures at night by their eyes. Most folks know this from driving, glimpsing the reflection of eyes in their headlights on the side of the road, but of course drivers pass uncaring and with their own eyes glossed over, unblinking. But when you are walking and when the forest is still enough, when there is a saturated moon and when your eyes and their eyes shimmer with light that has already been once reflected, that is when you truly see creatures at night. You see eyes alert, floating, before they snap away like the slash of a pen-stroke and then maybe you will see a bushy tail or amber back in a distant patch of moonlight.

Chickadee

Through the window I recognize her at sight – the little black cap, the beige stomach, the gray and white patches on her cheeks and wings. She stays in this region year round and looks most handsome in winter.

With the window open for a moment I hear once more that she is a songbird. I remember that at the house she recognized me – she would come to the feeder when I filled it, trill her refrain and hop after the seeds on the ground. At the end of the day there would be light three-toed prints amongst the shells in the snow like a signature, or like the delicate notation, somehow, of her song.

Spider

Indeed there are many creatures who are actually invisible at night, creatures who escape all detection and in doing so beset our imaginations with thoughts of where they might be poised and what they might be poised to do. But Spider disassembles her web each evening. During the day I sometimes fear her, as stumbling into the sticky threads is easy – even sunlight does not reflect off of Spider's lace. But by night they are gone and there is nothing to make you shudder and grasp at your own face, wondering if she is not now crawling in your hair or on your jacket.

Leech

There is a bus leaving for the YMCA pool right now that I can see out my window. I loved the water, though I haven't swum in a few years. Instead of a pool let me have a lake, a river, even after the rain has churned it up, even if the bottom is mud and rocks, even if a leech comes and fastens softly, uselessly to my body. I never liked the chlorine, the clamor, the lights and the goggles that stretch your skin to trap a pocket of air in front of your eyes.

Now water comes as bath after bath for me. Janice helps me in, soaps me, sponges me, helps me up, dries me. Most accidents, I am told, happen in the bathroom. Though I do nothing but sit, I feel drained each time she lifts the sponge, squeezes it over me so the water hits heavy on the top of my head, runs down my face. The sound of her voice is overlaid with echoes, hollow splashes and slaps of the water, and all of it accompanied by the blue veins of my arms, the knobs of my feet, the penis simply there between my legs, the thin hair on my scalp.

Rattlesnake

Each year of her life Rattlesnake adds another segment on her rattle, making it louder, raspier, and heavier. Each segment indicates: age, strength, experience, adaptation, survival.

And yet the rattle, used to prevent oblivious beasts from stepping on her as they traipse across the prairie, is not living flesh. It is dead and dried; it cannot feel pain; most of the time it is merely dragged along the ground. And just like Rattlesnake's scales, segments slough off unnoticed here and there, becoming quiet pebbles on the sand.

Termite

I like the things that I have: my photos, my books, my walker. I keep the door open to my wardrobe and I can see the line of shirts loose on their hangers, the tennis shoes and the slippers on the floor, the cap on the hook.

I like my things but still nothing here is from before the fire except for the watch and one of the shirts was the one I was wearing that day. I wore that same shirt many days after when I was rebuilding with the man I hired to help me – David. When we were still sorting through the debris he joked about how I did such a thorough job of killing the termites that eat the house from within that it was such a good job that he was sure they would never return.

I refurnished it and tried to go back to how things were but I couldn't really settle even after years. I never worked full time again and the house never looked right – my foxglove and strawberries never did as well and I would bet that it is still that way. The soil itself was changed.

Then I left that house. They said that it didn't have to be permanent and they told me that if I worked at it, if I regained my strength, I could go back. I wasn't sure what I wanted because I knew that though I could maybe go back like they said it would never be far enough.

After a few months I sold the house that I built but that was never really mine. It was just collecting dust on the alkaline earth.

I didn't set the fire on purpose but I certainly was the one who caused it. The fire has been in me my whole life and the fire catches all. It caught us even while we sat there, Anne and I, in the car, windows closed. Somehow, it was inside, and I am sure now that it was carried by me. Afterwards the smoke lingered and I coughed for days.

The fire is in me still and it is always trying to escape. You can see it on my pillow after I cough; my pillow is burning just a little. I knew, coughing at night, that something was smoldering inside of me. I don't want to but I will cough again and again, not an echo but an escalation, and something will catch. I will cough on the thin little page, and everything will catch. I can feel it.

We could have married and it would have been so easy. That night she knew me, all it took was her to watch me walking along the street. She watched me the whole way, and she knew me better than I knew myself, I see now but didn't then. I did something I never guessed I would do, and it scared me.

Woodpecker

Woodpecker hits his head against the tree, pounding over and over again, pounding like blood, pounding with abandon. Woodpecker moves to the next tree, repeats. How does he stay sane? I can get dizzy from nothing, no pounding, no contact at all.

I didn't follow what they were saying about it. They asked if I had been taking my medicine. I have.

I feel like that night, drunk.

Janice has been gone for days now, but I shouldn't be upset, he says, she is not my wife, hw says. I don't have a wife, I have a man nurse now, a sore bald man. He doesn't like to talk about Janice, only about me and my hands. I should have asked him about why, why this is happening to me, but I asked about Janice. He said there was something wrong with my hands – there is nothing wrong with my hands. Maybe they have a little soot on them or something, but there's nothing wrong. Janice would agree with me.

Rabbit

I told him that it was just dusty in here. He said that cleaning had happened like it always does, but I know something must have been neglected. What does a pulmonologist know about the housekeeping services? It's dust. Next week I'll do it myself, but nobody is helping me. Everybody here, they are a bunch of rabbits, popping into my room all day, kicking up more dust. How do they expect me to get better with all they're doing?

I saw her peeking over somebody's shoulder when there were a few people in the room. But of course she didn't even come in, it was too choked. I know she is around because I can see her outside the window coming and going. She should bring the kids in sometime, so I can meet them. But this place wouldn't be good for them either. Everything is going to dust. I need a new room, one that's steady, one that's not a damn crowded warren.

Owl

I am being closely monitored.

She seems like she is not there, not looking, not watching, but she is there, seeing all. I can feel her, especially at night. She never turns her head but she could turn it all the way around if she wanted. Either she doesn't watch with her eyes or I don't stray far enough to demand it.

I don't know what to do. I just sit here, staring, like wide-eyed Owl on the wall.

Maggots

My fingers. My veins. My hair.

My feet. My mind. My ear.

Maggots – living maggots.

Face maggots, Brain maggots.

Heart maggots.

Maggots.

Vulture

Vulture enacts a familiar ceremony to veil death. She circles the dying to heckle and taunt them to confound and beleaguer them because those in the final depths of death she hates most of all. (She ingests so frantically as to choke on the skin or the scales until all is gone except a faint outline, maybe a few bones or maybe a stain but whatever it is left is just an easily forgotten twitch of death left to pockmark the earth.) Vulture's compulsion to curtain death is cowardly, it is deception and self-deception and one can see that this practice has made Vulture bald and ugly.

(Some have claimed another meaning for Vulture's custom of spiraling for hours high in the air before beginning to feast on the dead. It ominous it is obsequious but it is also rhythmic and soothing and hypnotic they say. It implies a faith that every passing will accompany a return and that every departure necessitates an arrival. Is it so bad to have faith in her? If only she were not veiled in black, if only she did not always seem to be hiding something.)

I said things to Janice weeks ago and I touched her when she was changing the bag. I can't believe that those things were inside of me, that I was capable of lifting my arm and reaching, grabbing, pulling, what I was capable of telling her as she cleaned my goddamn shit. I am thankful for my febleness — she was able to twist easily out of my grasp, to smooth her shirt as I silently looked on and then she walked away. The man came in shortly after and finished.

He was gruff; he spoke about my hands and it was my hands, but not just my hands. All of that was inside of me, came out of me out of my brain and guts and heart and my penis and hands and lungs, out of my mouth that was dry and coughing a lot then but could still be employed to say what it said with no hesitation because it was inside all of me, waiting. And I write this now with the same hands and brain and guts and everything else, but the real confession is not about the deed because folks know already they can't help but know, they rightly know what I did because I could not hide it even if I wanted to — the confession is that all of that is still there, still smoldering inside of me, Henry Carson.

Cattle

After years of being shot by settlers and constricted by spreading railroads and land appropriation, the population of Bison in North America dwindled to around five hundred.

In a repopulation effort, many Bison were crossbred with Cattle in the hopes that the hybrids would be more vigorous, more virile. Both male and female offspring had the same features as Bison; however, the males were sterile and the females exhibited no higher frequency of birthing as had been hoped. The female hybrids were released and further cross-breeding was abandoned; however, as the population of Bison was so small that Cattle DNA disseminated widely through the Bison population. There is no difference in Bison's phenotype due to the Cattle DNA; however, Cattle genes will remain with Bison's population for as long as the species exists.

Raccoon

Raccoon, at some point, will eat from your garbage. One night you will be tired and not put the lid on tightly, you will leave the bag of trash just off the porch, or the wind will knock the whole can over dislodging the contents, and Raccoon will feast. Her paws will scratch through the bag, her masked face will cast around for danger, her tail, alternating black and white, will balance her as she climbs through it all and despite all the commotion that may result you will only know about it when you wake in the morning.

She has forgiven me. I wrote to her; she came and sat in the chair by the desk and told me that I was still a sweet man and that it has happened from time to time with others too. She asked me to never think of it again, to strike it completely from my mind, as though it never happened.

Crocus

The smell is the first sign always. I cannot describe it except that it comes from deep within the earth.

Then perhaps it is the feeling of the sun, stronger than remembered. Or it is a feeling inside not unlike confidence or pride.

Because of these changes I know: I will see the crocuses soon, I will see the crocuses soon. The earth will hold true to its promise of spring. They are small but not timid and they will poke out of the brown grass and bloom purple and yellow.

Stork

For her home Stork chooses a swamp or a stream, secluded and quiet, where her legs can become reeds in the shallows and her body can become the shadow of a branch, illusory protection for the fish and frogs below. For her prey there is no respite – Stork is loyal to her nest and her swamp, and returns to it each year. But one can easily forget about her migrations, for seeing Stork – her feet mired in mud, her neck crooked and unmoving – it seems that she has taken root, become a fixture of the swamp.

And with no syrinx, she cannot make a sound. She is slender and stoic, unimposing but curious, like a floor lamp one has always had but feels may have moved from its spot the day before.

Moth

I trust that the moths who bang headlong against the window glass at night repeatedly, incessantly, indefatigably, are acting rightly and in accordance with nature; that somehow every blow, every effort, releases little moth-endorphins; that they continually receive affirmations that what hasn't succeeded must be attempted again with equal vigor; that what is behind the glass is for them the most worthy goal or the only goal; that they are doing themselves no harm in these actions; that the memory of failure is no barrier to resolve, or the memory is sublimated to additional resolve, or that there is no memory of failure, if it can even be called a failure; and that their efforts are good and true however they are applied. Even Luna Moth, though she lives for only five days, joins them in their Sisyphean task as I sleep.

Lion

I had a habit; after reading for a while, especially when the book was engrossing (my body stiff from sitting still for so long, trying to not disturb the cat on my lap as I turned page after page), I would go stretch my legs by walking the border of my property. Like most of the land around here, mine had been clear-cut and farmed over a century ago, though now the fields and pastures have given way to forest once more. The only remnants of that era are the stone walls, the mossy lines of rock that still mark the boundaries of my plot.

And once, much earlier, I travelled to see the pyramids in Egypt. I walked between them with camels, saw pictographs on the walls, the profiles of falcons on the sandstone, and of course the most august of all: sphinx. Half lion half human, power with restraint, fear with reason, Sphinx watched over it all.

Returning home, I walked the line of the wall once again. I suppose most every person works as hard as every other – always with a quarry, always with an imagination, in the company of lions.

Flounder

I first heard that Flounder grants wishes while I was working on the wharf. She would come in sometimes, accidentally, and this guy would hold her up to look at her eyes a foot in front of his face. He would ask for something impossible – to be rich or to be a king or actor. After a while I could be facing the other way and hear him bellowing and I could picture exactly what was going on.

Flounder is the subject of one of my most favorite lessons, one I've told and retold through the years. Beige and speckled, she dips in and out of the sand at the bottom of the ocean as easily as getting into bed. Her eyes, though they start apart, drift to the same side of her head so that she appears as nothing more than a pencil sketch on paper. She is simple this way, living in two dimensions, looking up and up.