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Three Wild Animals

Tanya Ludlow

Three Wild Animals

A Creative Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate Studies

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

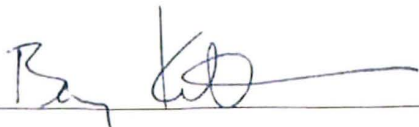
Masters of Arts in English

Tanya M. Ludlow

December 2015

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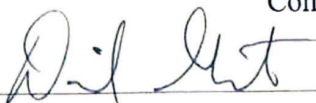
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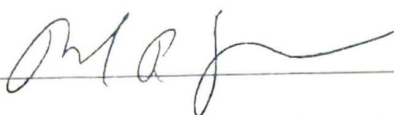
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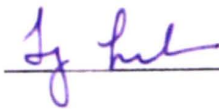
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Dedication

To my professors and thesis readers for their patience and their enduring encouragement.

To my husband who always takes me seriously. To my babies who have taught me a thing or two about the basics.

ABSTRACT

TANYA M. LUDLOW. *Three Wild Animals* (Under the direction of PROFESSOR BARRY KITTERMAN.)

"Three Wild Animals" is a collection of three short stories that are connected thematically through the idea that human nature is, at its basic level, driven by animal instinct. In "Wolf," an elderly man negotiates the uncertain terrain of his failing body and mind and recalls a past experience as a symbol of the cruel order of nature. A woman in an unhappy marriage and an escaped exotic animal in the story "Tiger," explore the juxtaposition of liberty and imprisonment, both literal and figurative. The final story, "Dog," takes an enduring symbol of man's supposed dominion over nature - through the process of domestication the transformation of an apex predator, the wolf, into a helpful companion and 'best friend' - and recasts it as the manifestation of a character's darkest fears. All of the protagonists are ordinary people who are faced with the disquieting knowledge that beneath the veneer of the civilized manner in which they live, there exists a violence and chaos over which they have no control.

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It had been seven years since the Colonel's wife had died, and he still slept on his side of the bed. It wasn't a romantic affectation – he had tried to sleep in the middle of their worn queen sized bed, but sleep didn't come easy with the new territory of space, and when it did come it was fitful and in starts and stops, his dreams restless and broken. He only tried for a few weeks before he was once again neatly ensconced on the left side, his slumber so deep and restful that he barely stirred, the blanket on the right side of the bed smooth and unwrinkled, like a placid lake. He usually slept quite well. Whenever he got together with his old army buddies, and it came time to describe the litany of abuses old age had foisted on their bodies, the aching joints, the dwindling vision, he was always silent when the subject of sleep came up. His friends described their exhaustion in the early evening, the insomnia, lying awake and staring at the ceiling for hours. And just when their blue-veined lids closed heavily over their weary eyes, it was six A.M. and their bodies fidgeted, the coughing spasms jolted them awake, the weak light around the edges of their curtains called them insistently from their broken sleep. They would marvel jealously at the slumber of their grandchildren, or how as young men they could snatch restorative sleep in their army bunks, at the desk when doing overnight CQ duty, or against a tree when out in the field. They wistfully recalled their former ability to sleep, their greedy appetite for it, how they could stay awake for two days and then recover by sleeping the third. How on R&R they could drink and carouse with women of questionable character, the smiling juicy girls in the Philippines and Thailand, the grim Eastern European exports in Germany and Korea, day and night, crash for fifteen hours,

tangled in the sweaty limbs of some anonymous delight, and then get up and report for duty, fresh as a daisy.

Not that the Colonel didn't have his own physical complaints. It was just as well that sleep came to him so easily, as he wasn't able to eat past four P.M. anyway, not without suffering horrendous digestive upset. He could never drink coffee for the same reason. His knees were also derelict, the miles and miles of running in formation with forty pounds strapped to his back, the ruck marches, racing up and down unsteady terrain, all of this had the cumulative effect of grinding down the cartilage into nothing. He had thought the cartilage would be worn down smoothly, but sometimes it felt like there was gravel in his joints, and he would even wince when he flexed his legs if it were cold out. In this respect, his ability to sleep like a young man was both a blessing and a curse. In his dreams he was always young, and his dreams were so vivid he could feel his healthy and vigorous body, the young blood racing through his veins. He often dreamt about his time in the military, and he was once again a fresh-faced lieutenant, or maybe a major in his prime. In his dreams he was ordering other men about, scrutinizing their uniforms, pacing up and down in debriefing rooms, engaged in fiery shouting matches with other officers. In his dreams his young body made love with the young bodies of past lovers or his wife. He was always a particularly athletic soldier and made a point of exercising with his troops, even when he reached the ranks of where you didn't have to make that kind of effort. He'd always prided himself on his physicality, and even when he had staff positions he made sure his body was still fit and taut, casting disapproving looks over the soldiers who were starting to look doughy in their uniforms.

When he woke up from his sleep and lurched his creaking body into the bathroom (which always seemed like an emergency in the mornings, an aspect of his aging body that provoked considerable distress) he was sometimes shocked to find, there in the mirror, a seventy-something-year-old man with watery eyes rimmed in pink, his skin wrinkled and papery, blotched with liver spots.

It was only in the geography of his face and his failing body that the Colonel felt his mortality. His mind was still sharp, unsoftened by the soporific effects of time that he noticed in his peers, the slipping of details and dates, the blank looks while their mind grasped at the thing, the word, the name, brushing at the edges, the grip getting weaker until they just gave up altogether and fell into the abyss of forgetfulness. The Colonel was very careful not to slip up in this way; he chose his words very carefully, always projecting what he was going to say ahead of time, vigilant against the appearance of weakness. His greatest fear was to be a doddering old man falling asleep in his soup. He found it disgraceful that many of his friends, who in their youth and prime had been of such stalwart character, seemed so easily to give in to the eroding effects of old age, as if time itself were whipping against them like a wind on sandstone, wearing down the edges and peaks, laying siege to mountains and reducing them to pebbles, the pebbles to sand. Although he slept easily, these thoughts burdened his days, nipping at his heels like hounds, always in the background of his conscious thought. And whenever he slipped up – momentarily misplaced the name of his first grandchild, had trouble recalling what he ate for lunch the day before – the whispering voices in the background jumped to the forefront of his thoughts, braying like a pack of dogs falling upon a terrified fox. He did mental exercises meant to sharpen his brain, and walked three miles a day no matter the

weather. On a purely cerebral level he knew that one day he was going to die, that his body, which was now an uncomfortable shell of what it used to be, paradoxically too stiff and too slack, would stop moving, stop breathing, the weary heart stop beating. He knew all of this, and he supposed he accepted it because there was no alternative. He just didn't feel like it was true, in the same way that his mind, a thing full of pep and vigor, didn't match the decaying edifice it was housed in.

To make matters worse, recently his children had stepped up their campaign to get him to move out of the large house he had shared with his wife, to a more manageable sized place closer to one of them. He had a daughter in Arizona and a son in Florida, and neither missed an opportunity to shell him with stories about the agreeable weather, the conveniences of condo style living, the plethora of winsome 'mature' ladies looking for 'a companion.' He knew they meant well, but he found their constant exhortations to be patronizing. He wasn't about to go down south to sun himself like a scraggly chicken in a yard. In his more paranoid moods he thought his children were trying to drive him deeper into the arms of old age, that their very plan would induce senescence rather than alleviate it. He liked to tell his children they would have to pry his cold dead body out of his house, and he was only half-kidding. Sometimes though, in the dead of winter when the cold seeped through the windows and into his very bones, or when he was stooped over picking weeds in his garden, mowing the yard in the ferocious heat and humidity of summer, cleaning out the gutters while perched precariously on a ladder, he entertained these notions of a different life: shuffling through the sand on a beach, lounging by a pool in the Arizona desert, arm in arm with a woman who smells of powdered roses. He couldn't deny that the idea was tempting, but it still seemed like giving in, and not once in

his life had he ever 'given in,' not once. He knew if he ever did capitulate on this subject, as soon as his plane landed in the land of sun and forgetfulness, and he stepped off it, he would be planting one foot in his very grave.

As reticent as the Colonel was about actually moving from his home in the cold Midwest, he did visit his children and grandchildren in Florida and Arizona quite regularly. He never stayed for long, a week or two at the most, just long enough for his grandchildren to warm up to this rather formidable old man who periodically showed up to give them stiff hugs. They were always well behaved on his visits, sneaking peeks at him shyly around corners, gazing at the dentures in the glass by his bedside with awe and horror, creeping by in hushed tiny voices as he napped stark upright on the sofa, stifling giggles as the drool pooled in the corner of his open mouth, the lower lip trembling at the exertions of sleep. He had never said anything, but even the youngest children knew their grandfather didn't like to be seen like this, had been caught off guard by the sneaking insistence of sleep, a silent assassin falling upon a lone sentry.

It was during one of these visits, during Thanksgiving at his son's house in Florida, that the Colonel had his first heart attack. It was a comparatively mild episode, and frankly the Colonel thought his shame of it happening in such a public way, right at Thanksgiving dinner, was more painful than the actual coronary itself. At least, he consoled himself, they were more or less through with the actual meal when it happened, that he didn't manage to ruin the dinner entirely. But whenever he thought of that episode, the way his children shot up from the table in a panic when he had groaned and clutched at his left arm, his gnarled fingers clenching and unclenching, his face so red it was the color of the burgundy they were drinking with the meal, and he was sure it was what was

in his eyes that caused all the children present to burst into tears – the sheer animal terror. He had felt he was going to die. He could barely gasp for breath as an unseen hand constricted his heart in an iron fist. All this had lasted only minutes though, and even by the time he got to the hospital (he had insisted that no ambulance be called) he was feeling much better physically, exhausted, but much better. But the shame – the loss of control, the overwhelming feeling of helplessness, and all of this in front of other people – continued to plague him. His children were even more insistent that he move closer to them, and whenever his daughter called and they spoke of it, she seemed on the verge of tears.

His second heart attack was in his own home, in the spring following his first coronary. He had spent the unusually hot April morning digging up the flowerbeds in the back of the house when he felt a familiar twinge in his arm, the shortness of breath. He had quickly but carefully walked into the house, picked up the phone, and dialed 911 all while shaking an aspirin out of the bottle with his trembling hand. The EMTs had found him gasping on the floor, his hands wringing the rug at his sides, his eyes bulging like a fish's. His children were able to make it to the hospital by the next day. The doctor explained that this was a much bigger episode than the one before, that the attack had wreaked considerable damage on his heart's tissue, that he must be vigilant about taking his medications. When he asked about his chances of having another attack, the doctor shrugged helplessly. 'It's a little touch and go right now,' the doctor explained. 'You could have one in a month, or you could have one in ten years. You take exceptional care of your health, but these things can be tough to predict.' The Colonel wanted to ask him if the next one would finish him off, but he couldn't bring himself to in front of his children

who were staring somberly at their feet the whole time the doctor spoke. He meant to ask at another visit when they were alone, but he somehow never got around to doing so.

The second heart attack had unnerved him completely. He didn't think it was the awareness of his mortality that caught him off guard. It was the loss of control. Everything in the carefully braided cord of his life was unraveling, the link between his health and his mind exposed in all of its fragility. Even while he recovered in his hospital bed he felt a tremendous shift in the clarity of his thoughts, the thoughts that had been so sharp and focused dulled as if a great fog were seeping in, creeping in through his nose, the tunnels in his ears, the thin almost lashless cracks of his eyelids while he slept. When he got home, he found that trudging up the stairs was a chore, and when he got to the top he was briefly overcome with a feeling of disorientation – where was the bathroom? Was this really his house? He had to force himself to get out of bed in the morning, the daily ritual of shaving and dressing which had formerly comforted him, now seemed like a tedious exercise in uselessness. He had a follow up with the doctor a few weeks later, and was pronounced to be recovering perfectly. After the physical examination, and while the Colonel was carefully buttoning up his shirt, the doctor mentioned one of the biggest enemies to recovery was depression, and it was a common occurrence in his cardiac patients, but that taking a prescription antidepressant could alleviate symptoms before they even happened. The Colonel's sharp response was a surprise even to himself. 'I don't need a heart doctor to tell me what's going on in my head.' 'Of course,' responded the doctor, momentarily taken off guard. 'But if you need to talk to anyone anyone....' The Colonel cut him off. 'I'm fine.' He left the office quickly, not even noticing that he had neglected to fasten the cuffs of his shirt.

He tried to fill his days with the chores, habits, the routines that had previously provided a structure for his waking hours, but he found it hard to settle back into his life. He felt restless; an unbalanced feeling that tagged even the smallest of his daily activities. He would be cleaning his dentures and then forget where he placed the cap of his denture cream, peering into all the nooks and crannies of the bathroom floor where he was sure he dropped it, only to discover it was sitting on top of the toilet reservoir. He no longer spent time at the Veterans Center with his old army buddies. Although their glowing stories of the days of yore had not changed, he found himself impatient with their indulgent yarns, was irritable and touchy at their petty complaints, intolerant of their familiar camaraderie. He found himself, instead, taking long and pointless drives to the old and familiar parts of the city, out to the alien suburbs that had sprung up out of nowhere, acres of identical houses in what used to be cow fields and fallow meadows. Once as he negotiated the endless cul-de-sacs of one such neighborhood, he became so hopelessly lost in the labyrinth of roads with blandly cheerful names like 'Fair View Drive,' that he pulled over next to an empty playground and grabbed a worn map under the passenger seat. He searched the detailed Omaha map for the road he was on – Quail Run Way – but he couldn't find it. He was puzzled until he realized, of course, that this neighborhood had been built long after he purchased the map. He got back in the car and sat there, utterly lost in a city that he had lived in for over thirty years. He would have stayed there all day, but school had let out, and as the children filled up the playground with their buzzing noise and play, he realized that it wouldn't do for an elderly man to be hanging out by himself in his car. He started the engine and rolled away from the curb

and realized that it didn't really matter where he was going, or if he was lost. Just as long as he was going somewhere. That's all that mattered.

One day he decided to go to the zoo. In the newspaper that morning he had read about the opening of the new desert dome, a geodesic environment of forced aridness, a paradoxical barren moonscape in the fertile Midwest plain. The animals in the desert dome weren't particularly exotic, although he was amused to see an animal called a rock hyrax, one of a group of humped over rodent-like creatures who all had expressions that reminded him of unpleasant aunts, animals the informational plaque informed him were more closely related to elephants than anything else. They clung to the precipices of their manmade cliffs on their stubby little feet, casting dour glances at the visitors leaning against the safety rail surrounding their enclosure. Next to the rock hyraxes were some peccaries nosing the dirt absentmindedly, stirring up the gray dust at their feet until it coated the wiry hair on their backs. A mountain lion loafed on a concrete ledge, its fawn-colored ears periodically flicking away a pesky fly that had somehow penetrated the hermetic atmosphere of the desert dome. The colonel wondered how the mountain lion felt being mere yards away from the peccaries with all of their squealing and dust baths, if the eons of evolutionary honing of predatory instincts sometimes drove the cat mad, wondered if it ever attempted to broach the concrete moat surrounding its enclosure, clung to the thick wire fencing that arched its way to the very ceiling of the dome, testing the fence with its thick whiskers and unsheathed claws, eyes wild, the peccaries trembling and huddled at the far end of their exhibit. He looked more closely at the mountain lion, especially at her eyes to see if she would give herself away. In the fifteen minutes that he stationed himself in front of her exhibit he only saw the narrowed slit

eyes of a dozing cat. He continued along the path that wound its way through the geodesic dome, passing some equally somnambulistic African porcupines, a few desert snakes the color of sand, coiled silently in terrariums, their unblinking eyes regarding the thoughtfully arranged interiors of their glass enclosures, the sun rocks, the painted landscapes on the rear wall, here and there a dead mouse draped over a shallow dish. Seeing the desert dome didn't take him nearly as long as he thought it would, and after the last exhibit in that strangely artificial world of painted rock and sleeping animals (the last exhibit turned out to be Gambel's quail, which was rather surprising to the Colonel considering he had seen the stout bodied little birds with their question mark shaped tufts on their heads in his own backyard) he decided to see the rest of the zoo, or at least the animals he was interested in.

He hadn't been to the zoo in years, not since his children were children. Things had changed immensely; the zoo seemed bigger, slicker than he remembered it. He noticed a number of bronze animal sculptures dotting the grounds, a baby elephant resting on its haunches in the middle of the sidewalk, a seal balancing a ball on its snout next to the food court. He noted, with disdain, small plaques that accompanied each sculpture, and each plaque read 'Warning: in direct sunlight statue may get hot and burn exposed skin. Please exercise caution.' That was certainly new. Still, all in all, the zoo seemed much improved. He wondered why he hadn't taken any of his grandchildren to the zoo on their trips out to visit him. He made a note to remedy this at their next opportunity. He recalled taking his own children to the zoo years ago, the way his son would press his nose against the glass of the sea lion tank, watching in wonder as the animal gracefully slid through the water, air bubbles streaking away from its whiskers,

the tufts of ears pressed against its head. His daughter loved the elephants swaying slowly back and forth to mournful music that only they could hear, their trunks curling and uncurling against the ground, caressing each others' backs, mournfully stuffing hay into their pink mouths. He thought about how most of the animals his children saw must have been dead and gone by now – although he was surprised to read on a sign by the elephant exhibit that one of the pachyderms, a tearful female named Patti, had been at the zoo for forty-eight years, which meant that she was there when he took his children thirty something years earlier. He was ruminating this last point when he stumbled upon the big ape section of the park. He was greatly surprised to be deep in thought, and then look up to see an orangutan lounging in a swaying tire tied to a denuded tree with a rope. He had meant to bypass the exhibit altogether. There was something about apes, monkeys in general really, that greatly disturbed him. Their humanoid forms perhaps reminded him too much of real humans, their bare faces and hands triggering some recognition buried deep within his amygdala, or whatever part of the brain stored prehistoric memory, the part that causes the swift intake of breath at the sight of a snake (even your harmless garden variety) parting the grass, that instinctively recognizes friend or foe, and harbors a great distrust of things that do not fall easily into either category. As he watched the orangutans swing around lazily on their tire, moving with a swiftness and finesse that belied rather squat and awkward bodies, and then moved on to the chimpanzees poking around the dirt in their large enclosure, he realized that what so bothered him about the big apes was that they were at once familiar and alien. Even the tiny marmosets, the size of rats, were like little people clambering about their cage, and he turned away in embarrassment as one of them brought a sparrow-sized baby to her breast and started

nursing. He was puzzled at the way other zoo goers found the primates' antics so amusing, laughing and pointing when they really should be gazing on in horror at the stuffing of brown chunks of bananas into their mouths, the hunting of insects in each other's fur, the periods of deranged leaping about and screeching (the chimpanzees were especially offensive on this note). He found he was much less bothered by the less human-like the species. He grudgingly accepted that the marmosets were generally rather cute (when they weren't exposing their tiny nipples and nursing like miniature heathens) but that the chimpanzees were awful. Even worse were the baboons – these didn't fall into his neat categorizations as easily as the rest (they almost never walked upright, and their elongated faces didn't strike him as human-like at all) but there was something about their scruffy mud-colored bodies, the large male stalking aggressively amongst the troop, stealing food and cuffing the smaller ones who shrieked and leaped away, the engorged vulvas of the females in heat, that frankly horrified him. He read on the information plaque that although they were mostly vegetarian, they were regarded as pests by farmers in many places they inhabited because they would kill young sheep and lambs. He was sure they were clumsy hunters, the kind of animals that tore their prey limb from limb while still alive, rather than precision killers, like the sleek cats who suffocated their victims before consuming them. The baboons were brutes.

The colonel thoughtfully ruminated on this point as he trudged slowly around the primate exhibits, following the concrete walkway that guided the shuffling zoo goers from exhibit to exhibit. It was just beginning to dawn on him that he hadn't eaten since dinner yesterday (a cheese and ham sandwich with peaches and cottage cheese, just like his wife used to make) when he realized he was in a dark viewing tunnel where the

walkway had dipped into a covered area with a glass window so the creatures could be viewed from the floor level of their enclosures rather than the vantage point from above like most of the ape enclosures. He felt a little caught off guard, a momentary irritation as he confusedly looked around to get his bearings. He was not the type to mosey around deep in thought. The covered area was cool and dark, and he found himself in front of the viewing area for the gorilla exhibit. He must have walked by the overlook for the animals before entering, but he hadn't noticed them. They were quiet compared to the other primates, and he noticed that most of them were sitting on piles of hay, thoughtfully munching on chunks of sweet potatoes and red-skinned apples. One was carefully regarding a large stick in its leathery hands, turning it over and carefully examining deep grooves that appeared to be filled with peanut butter. He recalled a sign mentioning these 'enrichment' devices, diversions to keep the animals occupied so they didn't get depressed in the zoo environment. These rudimentary toys kept the primates occupied, but the colonel reflected that other species with fewer proclivities for play largely ignored these attempts at cheering them up. There was, for example, the scruffy brown bear restlessly pacing the margins of his exhibit, bright red balls resting untouched amidst shriveled leaves and fallen twigs in a depression in the concrete flooring of his home. Still, as he watched the gorilla scoop thick wads of peanut butter from the stick and bringing them to its mouth, he felt that some sort of primitive satisfaction and accomplishment was involved. But was it the same as being in the wild, the jungles of East Africa (where, according to the information card, this particular species of gorilla originated)? Surely peanut butter in a stick paled in comparison to rooting through a verdant rainforest, the treasures to be found in a fallen rotted tree trunk, the mysterious jungle, silent in the dawn

as the mist lifted over their nests (he read that gorillas constructed a new nest every night, and he couldn't decide if this was decadent or admirably fastidious) or filled with the raucous calls of tropical birds. But then again, in the zoo there wasn't the terror of leopards slinking around at night, or poachers with rifles hunting them down for bush meat and selling off their orphaned babies to the pet trade. He couldn't decide if the zoo was a paradise or hell.

He watched the gorillas munching on their nests of hay for several minutes, and then continued walking the path through the viewing tunnel. He could hear voices on the other side of a tight turn, laughing, jocular voices, the unmistakable kind of sounds emitted from a group of young men, individuals jostling for rank, playfully punching each other, verbal jabs, probing for weakness within the ranks. As an army man he was familiar with these sounds; he always thought that, as an officer, his main purpose was to take the raw and undisciplined material of young men and sculpt it into something useful. The soft edges, babied by years under a mother's eye, had to be chiseled and hammered into sharpness. Lesser commanding officers and NCOs only did it half right though; the Colonel knew that of equal importance was redirecting the cruelty of youth – the lack of compassion, the quickness to anger, the way outsiders are ostracized and heckled, the use of violence without forecast. Ostensibly, this part of the molding of young soldiers was informed by the idea of esprit de corps, that the function of a unit and its disparate parts - the company, the platoon, the squad – was dependant upon individuals putting aside their personal and group biases in order to act as a single entity to accomplish the mission. He even had a useful and personal anecdote that he related to every entering class during his stint as an instructor at Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning. He would relate the

story of an unnamed private who was continually harassed, physically, verbally, and psychologically by his peers. He was weaker than the other soldiers but didn't have the personality to compensate for it. He was called 'fag' and 'pussy' on a daily basis (as a lieutenant in the company, he personally witnessed these acts. He had no idea what went on in the barracks after hours, but he could only imagine, or try not to imagine, as was the case). The command in the unit turned a blind eye towards his treatment, chalking it up to 'boys will be boys,' and the Colonel always made it a point to admit that as an inexperienced and new officer he himself did nothing.

The harassment culminated into an incident during a battalion run where the soldier – his thin chest wheezing, his face red as a lobster, falling out in every sense of the term – was so viciously castigated that he wet his pants. There was the initial shock that rippled through the formation, as the weeping kid trudged along, the dark patch on his light gray shorts widening, creeping upwards, the glistening trail on his skinny leg, the wet shoe print on the concrete that followed him, that the soldiers behind him temporarily broke ranks to avoid, or else awkwardly hopped or goose stepped over. The NCO calling cadence ahead of him sensed a change in the rhythmic footfalls of the formation, the hoarse whispers between the soldiers, and looked sharply at the man next to him. The colonel saw a hushed exchange, the NCO exclaiming, 'what the fuck,' and then falling back himself, steering the kid out of the group by his elbow, the two of them disappearing behind some trees at a turn in the run. The group ran on in silence until another NCO had the presence of mind to take the position of cadence calling and the group got itself together, sealing the hole left by the absent soldier, falling into rhythmic steps, finishing the run just as they started: as a single entity.

Afterwards, of course, there was a rush to deal with the aftermath, the implications. There were terse meetings between the company commander and the NCOs, the squad leaders, the platoon leader of the soldier. No one ever saw the soldier again. The commander being mindful of how this incident would reflect badly upon himself and his leadership, had probably transferred the kid to another unit, or expedited a hasty discharge from the service. There was a rumor that someone had seen him with the group of misfits and washouts at Headquarters lining up for chow, no shoelaces in their boots (partly as a precaution against suicide, partly to humiliate them) shattered wrecks looking around nervously. This last part, and the actual sordid details of the run, he left out of his speech to the cadets at OCS. He always asked the class, however, why exactly it was wrong of the unit to let such harassment slide, and someone in the class always got the answer right: permitting such behavior interfered with the mission. This wasn't about individual dignity (something he supposed they had started teaching in school and universities, because he himself had never heard such a thing growing up or during his education, soft sentiments for a soft generation he always thought when he heard it) but about the morale of a unit, the ability of the unit to function towards one end, and every unit had a mission and the mission was compromised if even one person was unable to do the job for whatever reason. If there was any redeeming quality to the anecdote it was that he could, hopefully, instill a proper sense of decorum about such things to the new generation of leaders. The Colonel was not the romantic type, but it didn't mean he was without his affectations.

Despite his attempts to redeem this incident through didactic demonstrations, the more often he told this story, the more often he was aware of a great ambivalence on his

part to hold the men in the unit responsible. There was the unspoken idea that the soldier had brought this upon himself; he was weak, watery-eyed, and nervous, an object of contempt rather than pity. Some people did not belong in the army, and if he failed to adjust to the unit culture, it was only natural this weakness should be rooted out like a malign tumor, an apple spoiling the bunch. Or maybe it was that every group had to have an omega wolf, that lowest member of the pack, the sniveling scapegoat who had to be ruthlessly forced into submission, reminded of his place, to show his belly to his aggressors, an apologetic dog smile masking the fear. He didn't know it at the time, but later in life while watching a wildlife show he had learned the omega wolf actually served an important role in the social dynamics of the wolf pack. The omega wolf served to absorb and mitigate pack aggression, and he (or she) diffused pack instability by providing an outlet for internal and external stresses. It had been years since he had been an instructor at OCS, and decades since he had seen the young man, but as he watched the wolf pack torment their omega on the television, the kid's face suddenly swam up through the layers of his consciousness, the pasty cheeks, the dirty wire-rimmed glasses, the oily sheen of his skin, the cystic acne tracing his jaw line. What was the wave of emotion he felt? Was it shame? Revulsion? He had turned off the television, forced the kid's face back down, down past the uncomfortable layer of sentiment, and closed the door. He had picked up a newspaper, and that was that.

But now as he approached the callow voices in the darkness of the tunnel, he felt a surge of anxiety, a great crushing presence pressing against him. He broke into a sweat and looked behind him, and was momentarily panicked. The path behind him was empty, a dazzling square of light from the gorilla exhibit traced on the floor, a humped

over patch of darkness from one of the gorilla's shadows. There was only forward, forward into the darkness, forward towards the voices which were becoming fainter, either because the group was moving away, or because the pounding of his heart and the rush of blood in his ears was getting louder, the mechanical 'swoosh' sound increasing, blackening his peripheral vision. He struggled to get his hand into his pocket, pulled out the bottle of aspirin, and popped off the top. And then, almost magically, a lightness, the blackening of his field of vision going white, watching his hand drop the bottle, the pills falling to the floor, bouncing, skipping, resting. And now he was level with the pills, one inches away from a staring eye, the mouth opening and closing, gasping like an ancient fish hauled from the icy depths, beating its ragged tail against the peeling and splintered floor boards of a boat, against the flapping bodies of other fish, the fisherman with his back turned, concentrating on hauling another load up and over the edge, the gulls wheeling in the sky, calling, wheeling like broken kites against the cold light of the sun.

Tiger

The tiger had come to the house every day for a week, and even when she didn't see him she could feel his golden eyes upon her from some hidden place in the tree line just beyond her yard. The first time she saw him was like a jolt of lightning – she had gone out back to clip the lily stems in preparation for winter, and as she bent over the ashen stems with a pair of shears, she noticed a slinking movement in the periphery of her vision. She knew what it was before she turned to face him, something primitive triggered in the deep recesses of her brain, buried under the grocery lists, bills to pay, appointments to keep, chores to undertake, all the minutia of modern living suddenly stripped away, and she was naked save for the pair of shears she clutched to her chest. He stood between her garden shed and the tree line, gave her a long stare, and then disappeared into a patch of tall wild grass. It was as if he had melted into the tawny amber sheaves, leaving her with her thudding heart and the shears. As soon as she saw him she knew the shears would be useless. She was scared. She was astonished. She had never felt so alive.

She only saw him for a moment, a moment that seemed endless in the interim between the time they locked eyes and the time he melted away in the field. She couldn't help but think that it only took a moment to die, that if he had the inclination he could have easily bounded the fifty or so yards that separated them, that it would have done no good to turn and run even if she had the will, but she wouldn't, she would have stared into his mesmerizing copper eyes, even as he fell on her, the flash of teeth, the unsheathed claws. She had never seen a dangerous animal before, not one that wasn't in a zoo. She thought of the big cats she had seen in zoos, dozing in a stupor, or manically

pacing, and how the ones that paced didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular, the blank stares as they neurotically paced back and forth, wearing a path in their shabby enclosure. They looked pithed. She knew the zoos fed them and gave them 'enrichment activities' like large rubber balls and artificial waterfalls to play in, but it still seemed so wrong, or at least unsettling. She couldn't even be sure they were real animals, because if a real tiger or lion is defined by his dominion over the forest and plain, then what were these apparitions? Still, she wasn't such a romantic that she didn't realize that even these half tigers, lions, and leopards were dangerous, that through their dozing slitted eyes they were quietly waiting for something to cross their path. An opportunity to stretch out their bodies that reposed in their dreadful enclosure, and underneath were sleek and muscular. She recalled a few years back how some kids were harassing a tiger at the San Francisco zoo, and the beast somehow leapt over its enclosure and killed one of them. She was sure his death must have been horrible. But after she saw the tiger in her yard, she wondered what the tiger must have felt as it escaped its bonds, its tail twitching with the electricity of the newness outside of the enclosure, its heart pounding as it narrowed its gaze on the taunting teen who was now white with terror. She wondered if a tiger could feel triumphant, or could even revel in ironic twists of fate. Or maybe it wouldn't. It would just be an animal, a powerful animal, zeroing in on its animal prey as he turned to run, shrieking like a rabbit in a snare.

She called the police department to report what she saw, and was rather surprised at the skeptical response of the officer.

"A tiger, you say?" The officer drew out the word 'tiger' slowly, as if she were hard of hearing, or a retarded child.

"Yes, a tiger," she snapped back.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." There was a long pause after she said this, as if the man were considering how to respond.

"Stay inside and we'll send an officer to check it out." He didn't sound convinced. And just like that she was unsure of what she had really seen. She hated that in her, the way she was so easily convinced, swayed, unbalanced by other people. She had to repeat it to herself, 'I saw a tiger!' so that by the time the officer's car swung into the gravel driveway, she was so flustered she fairly flew out the door, announcing breathlessly,

"A tiger! In the yard!"

"Is it there now?" The officer looked around warily, his hand unconsciously fondling the butt of the revolver at his side. He was one of those cop types with an almost shaved head, a thick fold of skin at the base of his neck, and he wore wrap around sunglasses even though it was a gray autumn day. As soon as she saw him she knew he wasn't going to believe her.

"Well, no. It went into the field."

She led him to the yard and pointed to the place the tiger stood before it had melted away into the grass. She and the officer stood by the small garden shed, and he poked absentmindedly at the brown November grass with a stick. She could see he was having a difficult time believing it. And now, with this other person next to her, it was as if the spell were broken, and she was having a hard time imagining a tiger standing here in a yard at the edge of a suburb. The officer began questioning her, and he was not doing a great job of masking a pointedly patronizing tone.

"So, what did the tiger look like?"

"Um, it was orange with stripes? I don't know, about three feet at the shoulders.

And it was male."

"How do you know it was male?"

"Because he had huge balls, that's how."

He smiled at this last comment, and looked at the overcast and dull gray sky as if trying to figure out a way to tell this apparently hysterical and mistaken female that it was unlikely there had been a tiger at all. Impossible in fact.

"Are you sure it wasn't a very large house cat? You know, there are bobcats in these parts. If you've never seen one before it might be easy to mistake it for something else."

"I suppose that could be true..." She felt defeated, but then memory came flooding back to her. The ochre coat, the slash of black stripes, the white fringe around his face, and especially his eyes. She could see the wilds of India in those eyes. But she couldn't figure out a way to express the sheer animal magnetism of the tiger to the officer, not in a way that didn't sound loopy and absurd. So she agreed that she must have been mistaken and thanked him for taking time out of his busy schedule of setting up speed traps or eyeing minorities suspiciously, or whatever it was that cops did in suburban Omaha (not that she said all of this) and waved to him from her porch as he backed out of the driveway. She also decided she wouldn't tell her husband either. He wouldn't believe her. And besides, she knew he kept things from her as well. Like that woman.

The woman. She didn't like to think about her, and whenever she tentatively broached the subject with her husband he responded so defensively, so dismissively, that

she was at once unsure of her conviction and absolutely convinced he was having an affair. 'Oh God,' he'd say, rolling his eyes, sighing in exasperation as if she were an implacable child. He'd breezily announce with a sweep of his hands that she was an impossibly bored housewife, that she watched too much reality TV with all its lurid and dramatic situations, that of course he loved her, etc., and it all sounded good, but then she'd catch the narrowing of his eyes, the way his glances darted at her, studying her reaction to his pronouncements of innocence. He was trying to sniff out what she knew, what she believed. The way his eyes didn't match his mouth made her sick to her stomach. She knew in her heart something was up, but only had a few solid clues – there was the earring she found in the car ('I have no idea where that's from! Probably one of YOUR friends!'). The hushed calls he would take on his cell late at night ('Oh, it's just Jake from the office – he and his wife are having problems, and he needs to let off some steam') that ended abruptly after she asked him whom he was talking to. Sometimes when he got home from work he sat in the car in the driveway for at least ten minutes talking to someone on the phone. That was new. As she spied on him from behind a curtain panel at the window, she reflected on how much she hated the way her suspicions had pervaded every aspect of her life. Everything he did or said was taken by her, considered, probed, and placed in either a good or bad pile in her mind. What did it mean that he bought some new clothes for work? What about the fact that he dropped by a fruit stand on the way home and brought her a bag of apples? Where these the same? She felt as if she were going crazy. Even when they made love (which admittedly wasn't often, but she hadn't noticed any marked increase or decrease in this matter) she wondered if he were thinking about someone else, if he caressed this other person the same way, if he were doing

anything different that he learned from someone else. Still, despite her suspicions, she didn't know what she should do about them. She couldn't imagine following him to work, or confronting him outright. She knew she would just end up looking foolish, uncivilized, and just like those ridiculous women on those TV programs her husband had dismissed. Still the thing ate at her, she felt like there was this worm inside her brain, a pale and slimy worm, curled up and nibbling at the pulsing matter around it. It was rotting her from the inside out and there was nothing she could do about it. So she carried on her routine, waking, housework, dinners with forced conversation (on her part anyway). She felt like a marionette forced to go about her daily work, the strings pulling a tight little smile when she passed people in the grocery store, another one working her arms when she got a carton of orange juice out of the fridge. One day she was cutting a chicken breast and in her mental fog her hand slipped and the knife slashed deep into her index finger. She dropped the blade and looked at her finger, watching the blood well up from the thin slit, how it pooled around her the rim of her nail bed, collected at her fingertip, the carmine drops splashing against the cutting board. She spoke and was surprised at the sound of her voice cutting through the fog; 'I feel nothing.'

Ever since the tiger came though, everything was different. Everything was clearer; sounds, smells, the fall colors. When she lay in bed she could hear the wind rushing through the withered leaves on the trees, a dry crunching sound. She noticed the neighbor's calico cat permanently stationed in the dry area under a fir tree in their front yard, languidly napping or watching the cars drive by. It looked so cozy and marshmellowy in that classic kitty pose, front legs tucked under its chest, tail resting by its side. But she noticed that whenever a small bird flitted near it, or a squirrel rustled in

the leaves, all of the angles of the cat changed. The eyes opened, and even as it sat still as a sculpture, the body seemed hard and sleek as if ready to explode, to leap out from under the tree like an arrow. She finally realized what people meant by the crisp fall air - she could smell apples, hay, and whenever she was outside the air filled her lungs so she could feel its invigorating touch even in the deepest cavity within her chest.

The second day she saw the tiger, it was in the same place, standing next to the shed. The moment she turned the corner from the back door to the yard she saw it, so still it might have been painted there. It gave her a long and wary stare, and then turned, and once again melted into the dried grass in the field. She waited a few minutes, her eyes riveted to the field, and then did the bravest thing she had ever done in her life. She walked to where the tiger had stood. As she stood there considering the wonder of the experience, her heart racing with both fear and excitement, she noticed a flash of color against the shed. There, caught in the weathered wood side, was a snatch of orange and white fur. She gently plucked it from the splintered wood and smoothed it against her hand. It was soft and light as air and felt like feathers. She looked out over the field and knew the tiger lay somewhere, carefully and quietly watching her.

The next day one of her neighbors came over and asked if she had seen the family dog.

"Elly's been missing for two days now. It's just not like her." The woman was both anxious and annoyed. "The kids are worried sick about her. They just won't stop hounding me about it."

"Sorry. I'll let you know if I see or hear anything. What does she look like?"

"Oh, she's a yellow lab mix with a pink collar. About this high," and the woman gestured to her knee.

"Poor thing, I'm sure she'll show up. Maybe she's just having an adventure?"

"Oh, she wouldn't last a minute out in the wild. She won't even sleep in the garage without crying." After they said their goodbyes, she watched the woman tramp down the driveway in the dimming autumn twilight. She walked to her kitchen window, looked out into the yard, and wondered.

Her husband was late for dinner, again. As he sat at the table eating, she watched him and suddenly realized he was a messy eater. He shoveled the spaghetti in his mouth like a starving man, the oil and tomato sauce ringing his mouth, flecks of spatter on his plate and chin, pausing periodically to gulp his glass of water like a fish. She thought all this, but didn't say anything, calmly regarding him while sipping on her glass of wine. She told him about the lady and her missing dog, and he laughed, barking like a seal.

"She probably ran off to get away from that woman. Remember last summer how she nagged her husband when he was mulching the yard? Ugh, you'd think her fat ass would offer to help. Besides, dogs run off all the time and come home. Deep down they're wolves you know." He looked up from his plate and looked at her, the first time he had done so since he got home. His eyes narrowed. "Since when do you drink on a Tuesday night?"

"Since when were you an expert on dogs?" As soon as she said it she lifted the glass to her lips and tried to hide her smirk. He shifted uncomfortably at her retort.

"Well, if you're going to be all snappy I'm going to the den to finish some work."

"Fine. Tell her I said hi." His jaw set and he pushed himself away from the table, the chair screeching against the floor.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I can tell you that I'm not going to take this kind of shit in my own house."

"Be my guest. Leave." After he left she sat, finishing her wine, watching the food he left on his plate congeal and harden. Formerly she would have been flustered, her mind would have turned the incident over and over, examining, probing, but now she just sat quietly, enjoying the last few sips in her glass, listening to the sigh of the heat coming through the vent, and in the background, her husband stomping around in the den. She didn't even think of what she was going to do next.

The next day she found a dead deer at the bottom of a shallow depression behind the shed. It lay on its side, the neck arched back in rigor mortis, thickly lashed eyes half closed and sprinkled with dirt. The naked claws of its rib cage jutted towards the bleak November sky, and tufts of fur and hide were caught in the dry stalks of grass surrounding the site. 'The kill site,' she thought, the words caught in the electric hum of her racing thoughts, the pounding heart. She reached out and touched one of the hooves splayed into the air. Then she heard the tiger. Or maybe she didn't hear him, only felt the presence of a being nearby, felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up, the hot flow of blood and adrenaline rushing to her face, her tingling fingertips. She turned slowly, and there he was, not fifteen yards away, in a gap between two forlorn winter trees. He was sitting like a sphinx, his smooth orange coat stretched over his back and hindquarters, the white tip of his tail twitching back and forth. His mouth was slightly parted, and he panted in agitation, periodically lifting his upper lip in a snarl, flashing his ivory teeth, his

blazing eyes riveted on her own. She could see his pupils, pinprick and pitch black, the glow of the iris like a copper penny. The condensed steam from his breath poured out of his open mouth into the crisp fall air. His ears were pinned back against his sleek head. He was magnificent and terrible, and she would have looked away or averted her eyes in sheer terror, but she was somehow caught, caught like a rabbit mesmerized by blinding headlights on a dark country road. They both stood without moving for a long moment, until the tiger wrinkled his nose in another snarl, and swiped the trodden grass in front of him. She slowly backed away, still facing the tiger, fifteen, twenty, then thirty yards, until she felt the gritty concrete of her back porch under her shoes. The tiger hadn't moved an inch. She turned and opened the door swiftly, and locked it behind her. She looked out of the back window but couldn't see where the tiger had sat because of the shed. She was sure he had gotten up and was busy dismantling the deer, or what remained of it. She made herself some tea and sat by the window, trying to imagine the gory scene unfolding behind the shed. She wasn't scared anymore – somehow she realized the tiger wasn't interested in her as food, that it just demanded respect and space. Still, she would have to be more careful when she was outside. Much more careful. As she sipped her tea, her hands wrapped around the warm cup, a half-formed thought made itself known. As soon as she recognized it, considered it, was both repelled and excited, she knew she was going to go through with it. She put her nose against the cold glass and breathed, forming a half circle of condensed moisture. She pressed her hand against it and sat back, studying the fine lines of the handprint, the clear view of the shed through it, the blurry woods around the edges. She thought she could hear the crunch of bones and imagined the tiger gnawing on the deer's thigh, peering into the dark abdominal cavity. And then

the heater kicked in and all she could hear was the thick hiss of air and she was alone with her terrible thoughts.

More pets were disappearing from the neighborhood. She learned from a gossipy acquaintance that there were rumors of satanic cults, children gone astray, MTV culture. The gloomy neighborhood Goth kid, a teen studded with piercings and acne, slouching around in a black trench coat and menacing Doc Martens that appeared several sizes too large, was regarded with suspicion rather than the usually eye-rolling indulgence. The winter had set in its full desolation. The sky was bleak and gray, the nights stretching longer and darker, the weak rays of the sun barely piercing the thick gloom in the morning. She wondered if the tiger was having trouble finding food – she vaguely remembered an article earlier that summer about the town culling the local deer population because of an outbreak of a disease, something that caused the deer to wither and die. There were pictures of the afflicted animals, gaunt and decrepit, their patchy hides stretched over jutting ribs and hips, deep hollows above their dull eyes. She wondered if the cull meant there were less deer around for the tiger. She wondered if he was snatching up cats and dogs, stealthily hugging the ground as they came out of their cozy houses for fresh air and potty breaks, carefully placing each huge paw in front of him as his targets lolled around gleefully, inching forward, until he was close enough that there would be no escape.

When she went shopping for Thanksgiving, she bought two turkeys. She thawed them both, and placed one outside by the shed. The next day it was gone. She made it a habit of leaving the tiger something every day, because she was sure he must be hungry. She was sure people were keeping a closer eye on their pets, not letting them wander the

neighborhood, and she wondered what the tiger could be eating. She saw him several times, and she thought he might be a touch thinner than he used to be. It was hard to tell though – he was still imposing, and his coat seemed to be thicker and more luxuriant now that the weather was colder. She left something behind the shed for him at roughly the same time every day, at noon, except for weekends or when her husband was home, because she didn't want to arouse suspicion. Once, after she left some old steaks that she found at the bottom of her deep freeze, she watched from the window as he slunk through the trees, disappeared behind the shed, and then reappeared only a few minutes later. She had a view of the field and as she watched him stride purposefully over the cold hard ground, the stalks of grass flattened forlornly in the bitter cold. With all the denuded trees and even the dry grass and leaves from fall all but disappeared, she wondered how no one else had seen him. There was something about the winter that drew people inward, bracing themselves against the cold as they left their cars, houses, and offices, their eyes planted on the ground in front of them in order to avoid slipping on ice, the soporific effect of entering a warm home, dozing on a couch, languidly watching television and drinking tea while sparrows froze to branches just outside the window. Ever since the tiger had turned up she found herself feeling stifled indoors, pacing from living room to dining room, upstairs to her bedroom and back again, or staring out the kitchen window hoping for a glimpse of him. He still frightened her – she was no fool – but she found his presence oddly reassuring. And each moment she laid her eyes on him was like coming up for air. The electric thrill wakened something deep within all the subconscious muck she hadn't realized she was drowning in. She wondered how no one else in the neighborhood knew there was a tiger watching them at their domestic scenes

through frosted windows at night, padding silently past forsaken swing sets and playhouses, his tail twitching in the frigid winter air.

She saw her husband's car parked at a hotel downtown. She drove around the block three times just to make sure she wasn't seeing things, but it was unmistakably his silver Audi, the familiar yellow air freshener dangling from the rear view mirror. She parked a few cars down and turned off the engine. She waited for a quarter of an hour, the still air turning cold around her, watching people huddled in their parkas against the cold come in and out of the hotel. She contemplated storming into the hotel, demanding that every door in the place be flung open, the startled faces of businessmen and runny-nosed children, people poking their heads out of steaming bathrooms, as she strode from room to room like a US Marshall on the hunt for a fugitive. Of course she would do no such thing, and she doubted the hotel staff would humor her even if it were allowed. She sat for a while and then turned on the engine and drove home. He would be home for dinner in a few hours, and she didn't want to be late.

She took a freezer burned salmon her husband caught in Alaska on a trip a few years earlier out to the tiger. It was heavy, almost twenty pounds, its partially open mouth and opaque eyes filled with spikes of frost. She remembered when he had brought it home from the fishing trip, how triumphant he was, and how beautiful she thought the fish was with its mouth lined in crooked teeth, the deep red of the skin on the humped over back. They were going to grill the whole thing and then eat it like savages, picking at the pink flesh while drinking beer and watching the sun dim on some balmy summer night. Instead, they had moved twice and never quite got around to this culinary adventure. She couldn't bear to throw the thing away as it seemed like a terrible waste,

even though it had been thawed and refrozen at least one other time besides their moves. She was glad the tiger would eat it. Somehow it seemed fitting that one magnificent creature would be consumed by another. After she finished preparing their own dinner she went outside to place the now thawed and dripping fish behind the shed. She carefully descended the steps, gripping the slippery fish in her bare hands, and when she looked up she saw that the tiger was waiting for her. He stood just next to the shed, his eyes gleaming in the weak early evening light. They only looked at each other for a moment before he set his ears back and leapt forward, sleekly covering the distance between them as she stood petrified at the bottom of the steps. She dropped the fish and raced up the stairs, opening the door and slamming it behind her just as the tiger's face reared up against the window, his paw against the glass, a primal snarl barely muffled by the hollow core door that separated them. She was trembling against the wall, holding her breath, when he dropped down and disappeared from view. She cautiously edged towards the door and peeked out the window. He was lying with the fish wedged between his front paws, sensuously licking it all over. She always imagined big cats would eat in a manner akin to house cats – daintily nibbling around the edges, whiskers pinned against the face to keep them clean. But after licking the fish, the tiger tore at it with his huge yellow teeth, tearing huge chunks of flesh, gobbling the fish's head whole like something out of a nightmare. She was repulsed but couldn't look away. There was something about the way he ate the fish, the dead seriousness, the nervous glances around it, and when he had finished, he looked up at her and snarled. She saw it in his eyes, the once serene feline stare replaced by desperation, the ridges of his rib cage clearly showing under his

coat. He was starving. He stared at her anxiously, his black rimmed lips curled in a snarl. She heard a voice behind her.

"What are you looking at?" She turned to face her husband. As he spoke, he walked casually to the window and looked out. "Are there deer out there?" She looked back out the window, but the tiger had vanished. Her husband shrugged. "I don't see anything." And then he turned and looked at her. "Hey, your hand's bleeding – what happened?" She looked dumbly at her hands. Her left thumb had a deep oozing scrape. She must have gotten it when she dropped the fish, its jagged teeth raking against her skin as she flung it away from her. She tried to act casual.

"Oh, I just thought I heard something, that's all." She walked towards the stove where the pasta sauce was cooking. She felt the blood hot behind her eyes, her racing heart, and a strange numbness at all her extremities. She could feel him looking at her. She swore she could even smell him, the sweat, the thick odor of sex he'd absorbed from the hotel room where he'd spent the afternoon. The fleeting image of him and some woman (her face when she tried to imagine her was always a blur, a question mark) naked, pressed up against each other, their fingers digging into each other's backs, gnawing on slick shoulders and necks, swum into view as she stirred the thick tomato sauce, watched the bubbles murmur around the edges. But she thought of the tiger again and dropped the spoon. She swore softly as some of the burning sauce landed on her cut thumb.

"Are you ok?" Her husband walked over, and they both looked at the wooden spoon, slowly disappearing into the sauce like it was quicksand. She spoke quietly, but confidently.

"I'm leaving you." He didn't say anything, so she went on. "I know you're having an affair. Don't lie to me anymore." She didn't look at him; she didn't need to. They both just stared at the sauce, bubbling around the edges of the pan, the indentation where the spoon had sunk in.

"I'm so sorry." His voice was cracking. She turned to leave, but he grabbed her hand. "Look at me. I never meant it to happen. I don't know what happened between us, we just drifted apart, and then...and then it just happened." She looked into his eyes, and he really did look sorry. He was on the verge of tears, and she remembered a time when they had just started seeing each other, when he had dropped by the coffee shop she worked at and slipped a note in her apron. It had said, 'I just had to see your smile.' It seemed so long ago, when they were young and had their whole lives ahead of them. She wanted to weep, partly out of relief that she wasn't crazy, but mostly for those two young fools who had their whole lives ahead of them and had no idea what that meant.

"Do you love her?"

"No."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes! I don't know what happened to me. I promise it's over with her. Just give me another chance. I just... I just..." he paused looking for the words. "I just want to go back to how we used to be."

"Me too," she replied, at almost a whisper. But she didn't know what that really meant.

"Listen, what about marriage counseling? A buddy at work told me that it saved his marriage. I'll do whatever it takes." For the rest of the evening they sat in their living

room, drank wine, and talked about their marriage like it was a troubled teenager who, nonetheless, had the potential to make something of himself if only he could get on the right path. It was tearful, brutal (especially when she made him detail the affair, with a bartender as it turned out) and exhausting. Still, by the time they trudged up to their bedroom and made awkward love, she felt as if all the soul sickening feelings that had been eating at her for months like a worm riddled apple, had fallen away. As she drifted off to sleep in his arms, listened to his easy breathing, felt the rising and falling of his chest, she felt a deep soporific relief.

The next morning she told him that if they were to make their marriage work they would have to move. Definitely out of Omaha, and preferably out of state. She argued that they needed a fresh start, that as long as they stayed in that house, the lingering ghosts of the affair would never let them get past this terrible time in their marriage, that they would never achieve the sort of happy and dreamlike future they talked about the night before. He agreed, and decided that as he was a fairly well established lawyer he should have no problem finding work elsewhere. A few days later he told her he had worked out a position in Kansas City, and that they could be there in two months. They would put their house on the market and rent an apartment in Kansas City until it sold. It was all going to be just fine. They talked and talked and talked about the future, how she would go back to school and maybe get a graduate degree in education, how they would have children, how they might get a dog. They talked so much sometimes her tongue felt thick in her mouth and she felt lightheaded from breathing in words and not air. She threw herself into planning the move, organizing their belongings, discarding or donating the things they didn't need, fixing the leaky sink faucet and the other small home

improvements they had put off. They went to Kansas City several weekends in a row to look for apartments. They had long dinners together and even rather giddily built a fire (something they had only done once before) during a snowstorm. As they snuggled on the couch and stared at the leaping and crackling flames, she thought about the tiger. She looked out the window at the snow falling silently and blanketing the yard, the car, and the fir trees drooping under the weight. Since the night he had confessed to the affair, she hadn't gone out back to feed the tiger. She didn't like thinking about the tiger. The tiger was part of her past, that part of her life when her marriage was crumbling, where she shuffled from room to room in the house in utter loneliness and desolation. She had made him give up his affair, so it was only fair that she should give up her secret obsession as well. She convinced herself that he was a wild animal, and that he could take care of himself. She even half way wondered if it had ever happened, that perhaps in her delicate mental state she had conjured up the animal, that it had slunk out of the dark, jungle-like recesses of her psyche and thus, was only real to her. But then she would remember his golden eyes, the way his tail whipped back and forth, the snatch of fur that was laying at the bottom of her lingerie drawer.

They moved in early February. The real estate agent was skeptical about their chances of selling in winter, 'Especially a doozie like this one,' she had said, rolling her eyes towards the window in her office, tapping her lacquered nails impatiently on the desk in front of her. 'But if anyone can do it, the team here at Keller Williams is your best bet.' A few days after they placed the for sale sign in the deep snow of their front yard, they loaded up their belongings in a moving truck and headed to their new life in Kansas City. The house looked forlorn as they drove away, empty and gray, spikes of icicles

hanging from the gutter. She wondered if the tiger was behind the shed, waiting for her in the weak February light.

They had been in Kansas City a month, and had barely settled into their new life when the real estate agent called them. They had received an offer on the house, and the buyers wanted to close as soon as possible. It was all falling into place. In April she had to drive back herself to sign the closing documents as her husband was busy adjusting to his new office. And besides, they now had a puppy who needed to be attended (a fluffy white thing who, although not potty trained thus far, had already endeared himself to them by leaping into their bed every morning and thrusting his cold black nose in their faces, greeting them with a goofy canine smile, whining, wagging his tail, and showing them his soft white belly). As she drove closer to their old house, their old life, she began feeling more and more discomfited. It was spring, and although the landscape was sodden from the rain, the trees still bare and dormant, their naked limbs thrusting towards the bleak sky, she could see green shoots peeking through the cold hard ground, and now and then, a burst of cheerful yellow daffodils swaying in the wind. Still, she felt unnerved when she passed by familiar places: the Exxon gas station on the Interstate exit closest to their house, the neighbors' houses staring drearily at the street. She knew that she used to live here, but it all felt unreal, as if their old house were in some underwater world and she was holding her breath and swimming towards it, compelled to reach it, but fearful of what sea creatures were now its inhabitants. The real estate agent's car was already in the driveway, and she assumed the woman was waiting for her in the house. She parked, and walked towards the front door of the place she used to know so well, was at once familiar and unfamiliar. It was open, and she could hear the real estate agent talking loudly on her

phone in the kitchen. She walked through her strange and empty house and into the kitchen just as the agent was finishing up her call.

"Why hello! I'm sure you're dying to sign these papers and get out of Dodge." The real estate agent smiled at her brightly, revealing a smudge of red lipstick on her shiny white teeth. "How was the drive up here? I hope it didn't rain too much. We've been getting tons of rain around here, just tons." As she talked she pulled out thick folders from her brief case. "The notary should be here in just a few minutes. So, how is Kansas City?"

"Oh, it's great. We're almost totally settled in. We even got a dog –" but before she could finish, the real estate agent gasped and reached out to her, grabbing her arm.

"Oh my goodness, did you hear what happened just down the street about two weeks ago?" The agent's eyes lit up, and she leaned forward conspiratorially.

"No. I mean, we've been awful busy, and I'm not a big news watcher." The agent's hand was still on her own, and although she felt uncomfortable she wasn't sure how to extricate herself without it being awkward.

"Somebody ran over a tiger! A real tiger! Can you believe it? They think it was responsible for all those missing pets." The agent's hair bobbed with excitement, the red smear of lipstick on her teeth glistened. "The news said it must have escaped from someone's house. I mean, who would keep a real tiger in their house? Just imagine if it were summer, what with all the neighborhood kids playing outside..." The agent rattled on and on, about how if one of HER pets had gone missing she would sue the county for not investigating the pandemic of disappeared Fidos and Mr. Mittens, how the tiger had been hit by an elderly woman driving her Buick during a March blizzard, how the tiger

didn't die right away, but had thrashed around in the snow, hind legs paralyzed, how the old woman had almost had a heart attack, the reports of the neighbors hearing its roars right up until the responding police officer shot it to put it out of its misery.

She looked out the window as the real estate woman kept talking, gleefully recounting the sordid details. The agent's hand was still on her arm, which had gone curiously numb and cold. She looked at the shed and remembered the first time she saw the tiger, and her heart leapt in her chest. The lilies she was deadheading that day were beginning to thrust their tender shoots out of the cold bare ground, coming back to life after their long winter death.

"Isn't that just amazing? Can you believe that animal was just strolling around this place and no one even saw it?" The agent pursed her lips and shook her head. "I wonder where the dang thing came from."

"That's incredible. I can't believe I missed all the excitement," she dully replied. She excused herself to the bathroom and stayed there until she heard the notary knock at the door.

That night the tiger came to her in a dream. He padded soundlessly up to her and laid his tremendous furry head in her lap. He rubbed his head against her thigh, pawed at the ground, and arched his back luxuriously as she sat and marveled at his sumptuous coat, the deep black stripes gracing his back, his soft paws, the ivory claws he playfully sharpened on a tree. He walked away from her and turned, beckoning her to follow. She walked behind him as they followed a path deeper and deeper into a black forest. She could hear strange creatures rustling in the thick foliage around them, and the trees and bushes pushed in on her, raking her face, catching her dress. She was having a hard time

keeping up with his slinking body, and could barely keep the white tip of his tail in sight as the forest got thicker, obscuring the sun, and finally all light. In this inky darkness she crawled on her hands and knees, terrified and alone. The night animals were out, and their foreign cries mingled with her own ragged breathing. Finally, she was in a clearing, alone, her dress torn to shreds, the light of the moon casting frightening shadows all around her. The tiger burst through the opposite end of the clearing, racing towards her, his teeth glinting in the darkness. She was paralyzed with fear, especially when she saw that the tiger looked so different. His coat was strange and patchy, with weird blotches instead of stripes, and she realized with horror that this was not her tiger; this was a stranger to her. She tried to scream, but couldn't even open her mouth.

When she got back to Kansas City the next day she looked up the news stories about the tiger on her computer. Everything the real estate agent had told her was more or less correct. There were even pictures of the tiger, taken after the officer had shot him. She was horrified at his twisted body, his sharply bent and broken back, the tongue hanging out of his open mouth. In death he looked nothing like she remembered – he seemed smaller, his coat disheveled, the paws smudged with mud and dirty snow. She noted his jutting ribs and realized that he was on the verge of starving to death before the car hit him. In fact, a Fish and Wildlife officer noted in one of the articles that the autopsy found the animal was so desperate his last meal appeared to be fast food wrappers, something he probably found on the side of the road.

Dog

The dog was at it again, barking its head off, a hysterical noise that ranged up and down in pitch and tone, like a demented opera singer practicing her scales. The dog – a dirty blond pitbull lab mix, incongruously named 'Basil,' which she thought more befitting a wan British boy with a permanent case of sniffles, rather than a scraggly mutt – could be barking at anything, cyclists, a squirrel, or perhaps even nothing at all, standing in the middle of the front yard across the street and barking up at the sky, or running up and down a well worn path on the fence line, yapping ferociously at people walking down the sidewalk, children walking to the park, the neighbor's cat that sauntered along teasingly, poking its nose into the scraggly dandelions growing up through the cracks in the side of the path, its utter faith in the chain link fence making it bold. The cat drove the dog mad, and sometimes he'd get so frustrated that he'd start viciously attacking the fence, salivating like a rabid animal. Once his barks had turned into shrill shrieks when he'd gotten his snout stuck in one of the rusted out diamond shaped links, and the old woman who lived there, Mrs. Frick, had rushed out and disentangled him, and all the while the cat had lazily regarded the scene through slitted eyes, casually reclining in a patch of the sun like a dissipated old man enjoying a girly show. Occasionally the dog actually escaped the confines of his yard, and during these times the cat was nowhere to be seen. The dog would roam the streets of the neighborhood with a deranged yet strangely empty look on its face, chasing cars and bikes, shitting in people's rose bushes, eating decaying animals in the street, and terrifying children by rushing up to them and alternatively barking in their faces with his foul breath, or bowling them over and stealing their gloves and balls. Sometimes Mrs.

Frick attempted to catch him, and it was painful to watch the old lady stumble after him, swiping at his collar as he dodged and scampered off, croaking his name after him, 'Basil! Basil!' It would have been more painful if the old lady was amiable and sweet, but as it was, she was a bitter old thing, the type to keep children's balls if they landed in her yard, and even worse, she sat all day long on her porch smoking cigarette after cigarette, and never even attempted to quell the hysterical impulses of her pet, no matter what god awful time in the morning or night he was making the racket. If she ever began to feel sorry for Mrs. Frick, she would try to remind herself that there was a reason no one ever visited the house, and that the old woman's only source of companionship was a hellhound with hotspots.

Before they had the baby, she and her husband would be alternatively annoyed and amused at the animal's antics. It was annoying on Saturday mornings at seven A.M. when they were trying to sleep in and he started up a racket. It was amusing when they watched the cat taunt him (especially if they'd had a few drinks). It was macabre when they saw him wolf down a squirrel that had been flattened in the street, vomit it up, and wolf it down again. All in all, the dog was just part of the neighborhood experience, and just like the drawbacks to owning an older house like the one they lived in, the leaky faucets, the drafts under the doors and by the windows, the dog's irritating existence somehow added to the charm of living in a neighborhood where families knew each other, where an old lady like Mrs. Frick could be forgiven her inadequate animal husbandry for the mere fact that she was one of them, that she belonged. As her husband noted, while watching the dog rub his anal glands joyfully against the fence, 'It's the village idiot.' If the worse thing that could be said about their neighborhood was that

there was a moronic dog that lived across the street from them, well, it wasn't such a bad deal after all. It was a lot better than finding out you lived across the street from someone on the sex offender registry, or next to a meth lab. Or at least that's the way she liked to think about it. She'd repeat it to her husband when the dog started barking in the middle of the night, shattering their sleep with his insistent howls. 'It could be worse,' she'd sigh as he sat up in bed. He'd usually reply, 'Oh yeah? Well it could be a lot better.' Or if he was in a foul mood, he'd hiss at her, 'Dammit Lydia,' leap out of bed and pace the room, because there was nothing else to do. They thought that the cops probably had more pressing matters to attend in the middle of the night, and the one time he had marched over there in his pajamas and yelled at Mrs. Frick to come out and shut up her damn dog, the dog was whipped into a frenzy and barked even more fanatically. Her husband had slunk quietly back to the house once he noticed neighbors turning on their porch lights, and hesitant faces peeking through folds of draperies. Although most of their neighbors also loathed the dog, she and her husband were a lot newer to the neighborhood than Mrs. Frick who had been there since the dawn of time; they knew their place. And so they put up with the dog. Besides, they both worked during the day and his nocturnal episodes were once a week at the most, so the dog just existed at the fringes of their life as an external nuisance.

And then the baby came. She was now eight weeks old, and Lydia still found it strange to call her by her name, so it was always, 'the baby needs to be changed,' or 'don't wake up the baby!' rather than 'Lucy is grumpy,' or 'put Lucy in the stroller.' She wondered when this would change, as it was just so hard to imagine this tiny squalling lump to be a human as she understood humans to be – a being with language, a nuanced

set of emotions, sentient. She knew that motherhood would be challenging, but she really had no idea what the reality of this would entail. Nothing could prepare her for the exhaustion in the beginning, the dead sleep interrupted several times a night by the baby's wail, the way her physical body felt leaden, how she had to peel her eyelids open, and how underlying this exhaustion was a deeper urge to respond, an anxiety that streaked through the soporific spell her limbs and mind were under, and that no matter how tired she was, she staggered out of bed like the undead heeding an irresistible enchantment, a film of grit on her teeth like dirt from the grave. She would feel angry and resentful as she picked up the baby, and then immediately an intense guilt would wash over her as she settled into her nursing chair and brought her baby to her breast. She had gotten used to the exhaustion, but she didn't know if she could ever come to terms with the powerful emotional upheaval that had entered their lives from the moment the baby, red faced and squalling, had emerged from her womb. She spent her days lurching from one extreme to another. There was the dreamy-eyed wonder when she regarded the tiny snub nose, the ears covered in a fine down of hair. Then there would be a frightening and almost primal hysteria when the baby wailed and would not be comforted. And the worst – a numb boredom in between as the baby slept but she herself felt too ragged and anxious to do the same, but also too exhausted to attend to the housework or even read a book. She thought about her life before the baby, her job, her friends she used to meet regularly for drinks or coffee, but whom she now saw very little. She didn't have any nearby family either, so while her husband was at work and while she waited warily for the baby to wake (she knew it was a bad habit, but she made sure the house was absolutely silent during the time Lucy slept) she stared out the front window. She stared at the dog.

At first she wasn't specifically staring at the dog – the dog was just part of the landscape outside the window, something to rest her weary eyes on as she sipped a special tea, pungent with fenugreek, that was supposed to help her milk supply. The baby was born in September, but as the weeks inched on into full autumn, and then winter, and as the leaves on the trees and bushes in her yard turned and fell, as the roses wilted, and the day lilies shriveled and drooped, the landscape turning orange, and then brown and gray under the weak winter sun, she found herself staring at the dog in his similarly denuded yard. It seemed to happen in one day; she was still drinking the tea, even though the thick licorice smell made her stomach turn, and as she settled into her couch for a brief reprieve from the demands of her baby who was swaddled and slumbering in that rapturous sleep that only infants and children can achieve, she looked out the window and found that the only thing in her field of vision was the dog. He had grown out a thick winter coat, but she was surprised to see that he also wore a sweater over his heavy matted fur, and it was bright orange and streaked with dirt, and had a long tear in the side. He was sitting upright and very still, and to her disquietude, she realized that he was looking at her as well with those empty eyes. They weren't exactly empty, but she couldn't figure out a better way to describe them. Unfeeling? Unknowing? None of those descriptions captured the alert and yet thoughtless quality of the gaze. It was as if the dog were seeing her for the first time, which she knew couldn't be true because they had already lived in the house for several months before the baby came. They stared at each other for several minutes, and she barely breathed as she looked at the dog who, probably as a result of his winter coat and the ridiculous sweater, looked bigger and more

menacing than ever. She wondered if he could smell the baby. She wondered if he could smell her fear.

She kept the curtains closed after that, peering anxiously around them several times a day to see if the dog was there. She knew it was ludicrous – 'all this fuss over a dog!' as her mother would say, so she didn't tell anyone about her newfound anxiety. She also knew that she was behaving strangely, that even though the dog was a menace to squirrels and cats, she had never heard of him being violent towards people. Even though he barked ferociously at people walking along the sidewalk next to the fence, he had never attacked anyone during one of his sprees through the neighborhood. She knew all of this and would repeat it to herself in a stern voice if she were alone, or mutter it under her breath if he invaded her thoughts while she was out in public, in the produce department at the store, or at the doctor's office for a well-baby visit. If she saw a dog, any dog, or even overheard the word 'dog' in passing conversation, she became overwhelmed with images of the dog leaping up at her, ripping Lucy from her arms, and shredding her to bits. When she was at home it was even worse. She would peer around the edge of the gauzy living room curtain, and if the dog was there she would break out into a nervous sweat at the sight of him, stalking around in his yard, or sitting like a concrete ogre staring at her home. But if she didn't see him she would experience only momentary relief. Then she would wonder where he had gotten to, and would imagine him creeping up the stairs into the house, and into Lucy's room, where he would sink his yellow teeth into her soft white body, ripping it apart before she could even scream, while she herself would stand at the bottom of the stairs petrified with fear. There was no relief, no reprieve, and even in her dreams she was continually running and carrying Lucy

in her arms in some blighted dreamscape full of dead twisted trees and bloated carcasses, with the dog snapping at her heels, his hot breath on the back of her neck.

And if it wasn't the dog it was something else, always something tagging her thoughts. She would read a story about someone dying in their home of carbon monoxide poisoning, and for weeks after she would lie in bed, awake, wondering if their carbon monoxide detector had ran out of batteries, cracking the windows open with the idea that the poisonous fumes would dissipate faster. The fact that carbon monoxide is odorless, tasteless, and colorless horrified her to no end. They would all die in their sleep. No one would find their bodies for days possibly, while their corpses stiffened and yellowed their sheets. Even worse, she would think of their baby's body in the other room, the ruffled pink crib bumper like the padding in a coffin, alone in death. Her husband told her she worried too much; during the rare times she met up with friends they always told her she needed to relax. During a conversation with her sister, who didn't have any children of her own and insisted on sending Lydia puzzling gifts that only a childless person would think of— delicate lace booties, a workout DVD that somehow included the infant in the workout, a gift card for a manicure — Lydia tentatively brought up the subject of her increased anxiousness, the gloomy miasma that had settled over her daily existence. Her sister had paused thoughtfully before diagnosing Lydia with the 'baby blues.' 'Oh, I've read all about it. It has something to do with hormones or whatever. Just remember, you have an adorable baby, and that's all that really matters.' And it was true. She had a beautiful baby, a decent and good man for a husband, and she was financially secure. She didn't know why she wanted to burst into tears when her sister told her this. She could only reply, in a voice stretched thin, 'I know. I just thought

that I should be enjoying this more.' As she spoke on the phone she peered out the window and watched the dog pace back and forth along the fence, a thick wet mulch of dead leaves under his feet, the exposed ends of wire on the fence snagging tufts of fur, and here and there, a shredded piece of the orange sweater.

She spent the month of November alternately caring for the needs of her baby and restlessly pacing the corridors and rooms of her house when the baby was sleeping. She rarely left the house, just once a week for what always seemed like a doomed grocery expedition. With all of the baby gear and preparation it took to leave the house, she wondered if it was worth it. Even though she woke up every day at seven A.M., she was never able to leave the house until the afternoon, and by the time she had lugged the diaper bag, the baby carrier, all the accoutrements meant to make life with an infant more streamlined, into the car, she was already exhausted. Still, they had to eat, and so she soldiered on, with Lucy wailing in her face in the produce department, the thick and acrid smell of shit spreading up Lucy's back when her diaper failed to keep its contents, well, contained. She always felt like a failure, especially when Lucy was fussy and screaming, and the other people in the grocery store shot her looks of pity or disdain. Once, in the checkout line, Lucy had started from her sleep and had begun crying, and while she hysterically tried to soothe her with one hand and load the groceries onto the conveyer belt with the other, she could feel wet patches on her chest as her breasts started leaking. An older woman in line behind her clucked her tongue and spoke, over the baby's wails; 'I think she's hungry.' Lydia didn't even look at her, just hunched her shoulders, and continued the grim task, Lucy's hot breath in her face, and handed her card to the cashier who was pursing her lips in irritation. She felt humiliated. Then, when they were back at

house, she still had to unload the groceries, a task that never failed to incite panic. If Lucy were asleep, she'd take the car seat in and gently place it on the ground in the living room, praying that she wouldn't wake up. But if the dog were out, he'd start barking as soon as she left her car, which would often wake up Lucy, and so she'd rush Lucy in and then make several trips to the car and back, all while being serenaded by a screaming baby and an insane canine. Sometimes she thought it would almost be funny, like some facetiously cruel gag, if it weren't happening to her. Once, in her rush to get from the car back to the house and to Lucy, who was now screaming and red-faced, she had stumbled and fell to the ground. The bag containing the eggs and milk, fell on the driveway, the eggs smashed, the milk carton cracked and leaking, the liquid from the shattered eggs and the milk congealing together in a viscous ooze, settling into the cracks in the concrete, while she stared on all fours, paralyzed by the screaming, by the frenzied barking. She closed her eyes for a moment, and then stood up and walked calmly to the house, and slammed the door behind her. She picked up Lucy, buried her cold nose in the baby's neck and cried, her heavy sobs mingling with Lucy's high-pitched wails.

She told her husband about it when he got home from work, and they had both laughed at the melodramatic absurdity of the story. He cleaned up the mess in the driveway, went to the store and bought more milk and eggs. Sometimes she thought about how she waited for him to walk through the door every day, how she leaned on him to rescue her from their baby after a long day of fussiness, and she found this idea both reassuring and mortifying. She was, after all, a thirty-year-old woman with a college degree, not some whimpering dolt who needed a knight in shining armor. Still, when he wasn't at home at his usual time, she found herself becoming more and more anxious,

constantly peering out the window, jumping up from the sofa when she heard a car drive by and then sinking down again in despair when it wasn't him. She would fantasize that something horrible had happened, that he was lying in the twisted wreck of his car on the interstate, crushed by a semi whose driver had nodded off, or he had hydroplaned into oncoming traffic, wasn't wearing his seatbelt and was now draped over the hood of another crumpled automobile, his dead eyes staring at the exploded glass around him. There were just so many ways a person could die. Of course, she knew this before she had the baby, but it was the same way a person could 'know' what it was like to be financially destitute, which is rather different than actually watching a bank foreclose on your house. It was as if after the birth a switch had been turned on, that the finite state of their physical existence, her husband, herself, the baby, had been illuminated, thrust into the foreground of her conscious thoughts. Death was everywhere – she knew that nothing about the world had changed, but she was suddenly aware of her precarious position in a chaotic and unfeeling universe. On the news there was nothing but murder and mayhem, and there was nothing she could do about it. She watched as families pulled the limp bodies of their children out of mortared houses somewhere in the Middle East, and she read about a father who had killed his own two children and himself after losing a custody battle. How had she not seen all of this awfulness before? In Nevada, a hatchet wielding man had attacked a woman walking down the street pushing a stroller. In Ohio, a mother had put her baby in the trunk of a car while she prostituted herself, and the baby froze to death. Nearly every week she heard about a newborn being abandoned in dumpsters, in wastebaskets at gas stations, suffocated with plastic bags by the twelve-year-olds who bore them, stabbed with sewing scissors, drowned in toilets. The world

was infected with a horror, something that she and her family would never be truly safe from, no matter how cozy their current existence was with their craftsman house, the prudent ways in which they spent their money and saved, the healthy meals they ate full of organic produce and hormone free dairy, their reasonable and genteel attitudes towards both politics and religion. She realized that all of their attempts to be productive and conscientious citizens and human beings were self-indulgent yarns they both told themselves and lived, that their very lifestyle was futile in terms of shielding them from the violence and chaos of the world, and a fraudulent sham they had bought into in order to convince themselves they were 'good' people.

Her husband was getting concerned. 'Jesus, you have got to stop reading that stuff,' he told her after she recounted a news story about a child who had been eaten by a bear while on a family camping trip. 'I'm just being informed,' she said back, even though she knew how ridiculous that sounded. 'Bears?' he said. 'You aren't serious, are you? You know, I'm beginning to worry about you. Maybe you should talk to someone. You've been a little anxious ever since the birth...' He was bouncing the baby gently on his shoulder as he said this, patting her gently on the back as she softly hiccupped into his neck. She felt him looking at her, and she realized she hadn't washed her hair in a couple of days. She knew it must look greasy, pulled back into a haphazard ponytail. She was wearing the same sweat shirt and pants she seemed to live in lately, and although they both often joked about the lack of attention paid to their own personal hygiene at the expense of the new tiny person in their house who demanded an amount of attention inversely related to her size, she knew her husband found himself slightly disturbed by his wife's constantly disheveled appearance. He didn't know if this was a perfectly

normal period of adjustment to the demands of an infant, or if it meant something more. Lydia just looked out the window. The dog wasn't in the yard at the moment. 'You're probably right,' she said. 'I'll look into it.' She knew she wouldn't do anything of the sort. She just didn't know why.

After this conversation she resolved not to read or watch the news, and to get out of the house every day, even if it only amounted to a walk around the block. She still wasn't sure what was going on in her head, but she sensed that the stultifying atmosphere of her house, the seductive prospect of staying in sealed against the weather, people, the frightening world at large, was part of her problem. They bought a stroller and a fleecy liner to keep Lucy bundled up and warm in the brisk winter weather. Every day, usually after lunch and when Lucy would most reliably be asleep for a long period of time, she dressed her baby in a woolen outfit, put her own puffy winter jacket on, and ventured out into the neighborhood. She was surprised at how little she really knew about the neighborhood, how even though they'd lived there for six months already, she found herself lost in the maze of streets. Once she stood at an intersection for five minutes, puzzling over the map on her phone, trying in vain to discern her position. She knew where she was in the most general sense of the term, and was only a five or ten-minute walk from her house, but the two streets at whose intersection she was standing were completely unfamiliar. Lucy began to stir in her sleep, and Lydia put her phone in her pocket and pushed the stroller in order to get her to fall back asleep. She turned down one street and then the next, anxiously peering into the stroller to see if Lucy was waking up, and when Lucy started crying to be fed she stopped, fiddled with the pacifier, and when she looked up was startled to see that she was only four or five houses away from

her own. As she walked into the house with the stroller, unstrapped Lucy, and pressed the baby's cold little nose against her lips, she caught sight of herself in the foyer mirror. Her nose and cheeks were flushed from the biting winter wind, and her hair peeked at all angles from under her hat, but she was smiling. She pressed her face against Lucy's and got close to the mirror. 'See that?' She pointed at Lucy's reflection. 'That's you.' And then she pointed out her own reflection. 'And that's your mama.' Lucy stopped fussing for a moment and stared thoughtfully at their reflections. Then she burst into tears. 'Oh, all right,' said Lydia, laughing. She threw down her coat, settled onto the couch, lifted up her shirt, and started feeding Lucy who made grunting happy noises and finally drifted off to sleep, her eyelashes matted with tears, a pool of milk in the corner of her mouth.

She was finally beginning to feel more like herself, and she credited the walks with soothing her restless mind, not to mention finally putting a dent into the substantial padding on her body that she still hadn't shed since Lucy's birth (she only had about fifteen more pounds to lose in order to get to her pre-pregnancy weight, but that numerical figure did not manage to reflect the vast differences between her body before the pregnancy and the one she ended up with after the birth. There was the curious flab of skin on her belly, which while she was pregnant was stretched taut, and which now dribbled over the top of her jeans, and even more alarmingly, pooled next to her like a strange fleshy pet when she slept on her side. There were the jagged stretch marks on her hips that were fading into silver. And her breasts – my God, they were like strangers, hugely swollen with milk. The areolas had slowly darkened and widened during the pregnancy until they were twice the circumference they were originally, and a deep chocolate color. They leaked milk all the time, whenever she heard Lucy cry or even

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thought about her baby, spraying into her husband's face when they had sex. 'Holy shit,' he had exclaimed in awe when this first happened, wiping off the droplets of milk from his face and chest. Sometimes she thought about the self-contained and sensible vessel she used to inhabit. She knew that she might shed the pounds, but that the body she used to own was now lost forever. She thought this would bother her more than it actually did).

She found a playground only a few blocks away, and chatted with other mothers in the neighborhood. She made some friends and even walked fairly regularly with the mother of twin boys Lucy's age two streets over. She felt like she was slowly coming out of a period of darkness, and sometimes when she got into bed she realized she hadn't had a negative or disturbing thought all day. She was even fairly used to her former tormenter, Basil the dog, and although when she started her walks she used to cringe when she left the house, or returning, when the dog started streaking back and forth against the fence, the howls pursuing her as she walked quickly down the street, her heart racing, the prickle of sweat on her back, looking down at the pavement sliding underneath her, or at her daughter's chubby face, she now barely even noticed him. He had become part of the landscape again, had faded into the background, along with all the dark anxieties, the questions, the horrific images that used to occupy the forefront of her existence. Whereas before she felt helpless before them, prostrate with fear, she now felt more in control, able to push things down when they swam up to her consciousness. She thought of them like furniture in a derelict mansion covered with drop cloths, substantial but inert. She operated her life around them, and mostly it was okay, but sometimes she bumped them around the edges, and then it was like moths fluttering up, halos of dust

drifting into the shafts of light coming through bleary windows, and she had to hurry to smooth everything down again, had to use her little tricks to recast the spell before the thing lurched to life, possessed grand pianos and armoires trudging after her fleeing form down decaying hallways framed by ragged curtains, stained velvet wallpaper.

One morning while she was walking quickly down the path to meet her friend, the mother of the twins, for a walk (she was running late as usual) she ran into the dog. He had escaped from his yard, and before she could even properly register the fact that his shaggy and menacing form was loping straight for her he was right next to her, alternately barking in her face and then snapping at the stroller's wheels with his yellow teeth. She screamed at him and kicked him, her boots landing hollow sounding blows against his side that was covered by the stained and filthy sweater he had worn all winter. Lucy woke up and was shrieking as well. Almost as soon as it started, Mrs. Frick was at the scene, yanking on the dog's collar while at the same time exclaiming, 'He won't hurt you!' She was bent over and struggling with the lurching dog, and when he realized she wasn't letting go he suddenly sat on his haunches, his tongue hanging out of his mouth like a pink animal covered in bits of dead leaves and grass. They all stood for a moment, Lydia with her trembling hands on the stroller, Lucy crying and grasping at her pacifier, Mrs. Frick bright red and struggling to regain her breath, the dog panting and looking at some spot in the distance. Then, as if it was all rehearsed, Lydia calmly put the pacifier back into Lucy's mouth, Mrs. Frick mumbled an apology that Lydia accepted with a terse smile, and they each went their separate ways. Lydia pushing the stroller to the park to meet her friend, Mrs. Frick dragging the dog back to the yard, his nails scratching against the pavement, waving his lumpy tail as she muttered to him under her breath. Lydia

recounted the story to her friend, and they both laughed after passing a reasonable amount of judgment against both the dog and Mrs. Frick. Her friend said, 'Oh my God, I would be terrified, especially with the babies,' shaking her head. She mentioned animal control, but Lydia said it was no use; the dog wasn't really dangerous at all he just had a fetish for wheels. They both laughed at this, and their conversation turned to all things babies: was Lucy sitting up yet? Were the twins sleeping well?

They finished their walk and as Lydia trudged back to her house in the biting cold she thumbed a small whole in her glove where it had snagged on the dog's teeth. She didn't think he had bitten it on purpose, but as she replayed the incident in her mind, the chaos, the barking, the screaming, one detail was still unsettling. She had never been so close to the dog before, and she realized that the decrepit yellow sweater he was wearing had a small black label on it that said 'Osh Kosh B'Gosh,' and was not a dog sweater at all, but a repurposed child's sweater. She didn't know why this one small detail of the whole incident bothered her, but she couldn't stop thinking about it. She told her husband about the incident when he got home, and he was furious, stating that if animal control wouldn't do anything but give the old woman a fine, then he was going to call a lawyer and sue her until she got rid of the animal. Lydia calmed him down, and said what she always did: It could be worse. What if she moved and someone more awful moved into her house? What if she got rid of the dog and got a new one, one that was even more horrible? Her husband gave her a resigned look and shook his head. He asked her, 'Why are you so scared of things that haven't even happened?' She was holding Lucy in her lap and blowing on the top of her head so that the hair shot up and then landed back down on her nose. She was thinking of the yellow sweater, of the dog, of the unmentionable.

For the rest of the winter she felt like a person going through the motions. Here was her physical body washing dishes. Here was her physical body going to the store. Here was her physical body calling her mom. Here was her physical body going for a walk with her friend and their babies. As she negotiated these mundane activities, her psychic energies were devoted to keeping her mind tranquil, in a numb fuzz. She felt like there was a disease in her brain, black tendrils creeping up in between the moist folds and lumps, splotches of darkened matter spreading like an ink blot. The intrusive thoughts were getting louder, more insistent, more noxious. There was the idea that she and her family were doomed. There was the idea that the world was doomed, that she and her family and all of humanity would perish in some awful apocalyptic scenario, mushroom clouds, bands of roving men praying on the survivors. There were other more plausible fears. Car smash ups. Suffering a stroke while she was bathing Lucy, twitching on the bathroom floor while her baby drowned quietly in the tub. She hated to be alone with Lucy for reasons like this, and when she wasn't out in a public place or walking with Lucy, she waited anxiously for her husband to return home. Even though she had always wanted to stay home for at least the first two years with her children, she thought it might be better if she went back to work and put Lucy in a daycare. But then she considered the anxieties that would entail and decided against it. She wondered if these thoughts would ever pass, or if she would be forever plagued and tormented by the thing in her mind that wouldn't let go. The only time she felt like her old self, at ease and quiet, was when she woke up for Lucy's first morning feeding. She would hear Lucy stirring in her crib, pick her up, and bring her into the bed that was soft and warm from the heat of her and her husband's body. She would lay on her side and listen to Lucy nurse, the soft sighs of

pleasure, her breath deepening, the intervals between sucking spreading, her lashes dusting her cheeks. It was very early and still dark out, but by the time Lucy was asleep again the gray dawn was filtering through the windows and she could hear some of the neighbors' cars start and drive off down the street. She imagined the lights turning on in houses on her block, in the town, this side of the earth stretching and blinking as the other side turned dark and quiet, the sun slipping away from that side to her own. It felt like the world was sighing as the inky black of night faded into light. Her husband would wake up, ease himself out of bed, and start getting ready for work. She could hear the shower running as she dozed, and before he left he would come back in and give them both a kiss. Sometimes she was already asleep again, a cool black and dreamless sleep, her baby at her armpit, breathing in the milky smell of her breath.

At the end of March the crocuses and narcissus in her yard began peeking even though it was still cold and the ground seemed as barren as a grave. She found it hard to believe that they would do so after being abandoned all winter, especially because she didn't take any special precautions with them in the fall. Weren't you supposed to dig them up? Place them in a cool dry space? Cover them with straw? Her frazzled brain found any number of reasons why they shouldn't lurch back into life, but here they were, just the tender green shoots, and then, a few weeks later, bursting into bloom. There were birds too, warblers, catbirds, singing in competition with the robins, a group of whom seemed to stick around all winter, poking around dejectedly in the snow, but were now building nests in trees covered with buds and emerald shoots. Everything was louder, more effervescent, and although Lydia was enjoying the weather and the sunshine, the rest of it unnerved her. People were shedding their winter coats and hats, and you could

see everyone's faces again. There seemed to be more traffic in the streets, more children at the playground. The dog had shed his yellow sweater and spent half the day rolling around the yard, itching off his winter coat in great patches that blew with the wind and clung to the fence. She still took her walks, but she really preferred to watch all of this from her window. When she was outside it was just too much. As she walked towards the playground, the children's voices were clearer, sharper, and sometimes she had to stop and take a few reassuring breaths before she resumed walking towards all that untainted happiness.

It was early one morning, barely seven A.M., when she saw the deer. She was folding laundry on the couch and saw it walking on the near edge of the street in front of her house. At first she thought it was a dog, and then she didn't know what she was looking at entirely, and then her brain registered its large ears, tawny hide, the pointed feet. She knew there were deer around but had never seen one herself. It seemed so out of place amongst the fenced yards, the sidewalks, the cars parked in the driveways, like if it were to leap it would crash against one of these things. It was hesitantly picking its way through an alien landscape, its ears swiveling forward and back, taking careful steps. A car drove by and honked, and the deer leaped sideways onto the sidewalk, its nostrils twitching, looking wildly around with great black eyes. It was so close to her house she could see delicate white whiskers on its chin, the black tip of its tail swishing nervously. She thought it might be heading towards a small patch of woods just around the corner, and wondered why it didn't bound away. It was greatly agitated. Then she saw, just a few yards behind the doe, nestled against the tire of her neighbor's car parked in the street, a tiny fawn. She didn't know they could be so small; this one was barely bigger

than a large cat. The fawn's body was curled up, its neck and head lying on the ground, curled up against its flank. It had a heavy pattern of white dots that were so close together they looked in some places to be stripes. The fawn looked damp, and she wondered if it had been born very recently, perhaps in the last few hours. The deer nosed the fawn and it got up on wobbly legs, taking faltering steps behind its mother. Then Lydia heard the dog bark. Mrs. Frick must have just let him out, and he was racing back and forth against the fence, howling and snapping. She saw him focusing his efforts on the corner where the two chain linked fences joined, saw him nosing a gap, pushing his head through, the legs scrambling against the bare ground, worming his shoulders through, his mid section, and with a rush, his hindquarters and tail. Lydia didn't think she could handle watching what the dog was going to do to the fawn, but she couldn't tear herself from the window. The dog stood there for a moment staring at the deer and the fawn, which had dropped to the sidewalk and curled up again. Lydia thought the doe would leap away, not looking back. Instead, the deer lowered its head and began trotting towards the dog in large bounding steps. The dog shrank back, his tail dropping between his legs, and turned to run, but the deer was already upon him. Lydia could not believe what she was seeing. The deer was stomping and kicking the dog, rolling it with its pointed hooves. The dog was barking in high-pitched shrieks, and she could hear Mrs. Frick screaming, 'Oh my God! Oh Basil! Stop! Stop! Help!' It was over in less than thirty seconds. The deer trotted back to the fawn, and they both disappeared around the corner. The last thing she saw of them was the fawn's striped and spotted hindquarters, still wobbling, and the smooth strong legs of its mother as they made their way to the woods. The dog was crumpled in the street like a dirty towel, but she saw his tail thump up and

down when Mrs. Frick reached him. She was going to go out and see if Mrs. Frick needed any assistance, but she heard Lucy crying upstairs. As she turned and leapt up the stairs towards her crying baby, her whole body was tingling with energy and excitement. It occurred to her that the world was full of fearsome things, of chaos, of horror and unmentionable tragedy. And as she gathered Lucy up into her arms and petted her, it also occurred to her that there were other things in the world as well, things full of mystery and equally unaccountable. She thought of Mrs. Frick and the dog in the street. She thought of the deer and her fawn, the doe gliding silently through the woods, nosing the dappled fawn into a fern covered hiding place.