

*Tyrone Jaeger*

## These Are My Arms

We're in the kitchen and messing around with glycerin when I get a phone call from the irate mother of one of my students, who's upset that her son is watching pornography for my English class. She says I shouldn't get her wrong because she knows the filth playing at every movie theater in town, and how they let kids of any age into those movies, but is it necessary to assign this crap, especially when she's shelling out \$17,000 a year for a private school? I tell her that James is supposed to be reading the book, not watching the movie.

"Does it make a difference?" We've got water boiling in a spaghetti pot on the stove, so I sink a saucepan, half full of small glycerin cubes, into the angry, bubbling water. My wife has informed me that we're double boiling.

"Filth is filth. Porn is porn, even at high-speed with Beethoven in the background," she says.

"So . . . you watched it with him?" I say. She hangs up the phone.

Darla says to stir the melting cubes. Orleans tugs at my pant leg and sticks a life-sized, plastic cockroach in her mouth. "Let me see, Dad," she says, the roach wedged between her cheek and gum.

"Who was that?" Darla says.

I pull the cockroach out of Orleans's mouth and pick her up. She just turned four but still loves to be held, and so she wraps her primate legs around me. She's wearing a silly blue wig Darla bought for her to play dress-up. Orleans says she wants a sister named Lucybelle and refuses to take off the wig until we produce said sibling.

"Can I stick the bug in now, Dad?"

"Not yet, Orleans," Darla says. "Wait until the soap is in the molds."

I stir. "James' mother is pissed because he's watching *A Clockwork Orange*. He's supposed to be reading the book. He picked it. I just okayed

it.” I teach high school English, and Darla works at home and watches Orleans grow. Ten cubic molds are lined up on the kitchen counter. I wouldn’t even know where to begin with any of this soap-making business, but Darla is a website designer, and one of her clients is a soap-making-kit wholesaler. Darla also volunteers as a website administrator for an organization that protests companies with unsound environmental practices. They perform *eco-tage* (which, to me, has always sounded like art made with twigs and dirt) by setting fires at Humvee dealerships, spiking trees in forests about to be stripped, and sabotaging heavy equipment at the construction sites of luxury housing developments. Darla’s not personally familiar with the people involved. Everything is top-secret, anonymous, encrypted, but arrests and unforeseen accidents do occur. The website’s maintenance is in no way criminal.

We dance to The Clash in the kitchen. Darla and I have agreed that the simplicity of punk rock music is good for children. After a few brief hip-shakes, I pour the melted glycerin into the molds. Orleans stands on a stepstool, playing with a pile of plastic bugs and animals, along with Mardi Gras beads to make soap-on-a-rope. Orleans drops in Mr. Cockroach, Miss Dog, Señor Cat, Baby Grasshopper, a Fly, and one plastic ring she had hidden in her pocket. Darla looks through the kitchen window out into the backyard, where the late October wind scatters brown leaves over the dry-bleached lawn. Orleans pokes at the soap. “Ouch!” The clear gel sticks to her fingers.

“Jeremy, keep her away from the soap, please.” Darla rinses the soaped saucepan, hair falling over her lips.

“Yeah, Jeremy, keep away from the soap.” Orleans laughs.

I lift Orleans from the ground and gently pin her to the kitchen floor. “Tickle torture,” I whisper into her blue wig. She squeals. I get her just below the ribs, then the armpits and feet, and she fights, laughs loudly, screams. Orleans’s face is an ever-changing mask. A burst of light freezes us, but it’s only Darla’s camera. I kiss Orleans’s forehead.

The phone rings. It’s James. He apologizes for his mother, says the movie was “eggiweggy, droog.” He’s already talking like the characters in

the movie. He'll never read the book. Like any number of my favorite students, James was kicked out of public school. They're at-risk; you can ask them. James always carries cameras with him, all kinds—digital, 35-mm, Polaroid, super-8, video. His father is vice-president of pet food development for a national dog food company, and when the weather is turning cold, like it is now, a mealy smell oozes from the dog food plant and stinks up Denver. James is making a *mobile installation project* of his own life. *A Clockwork Orange* gave him some good ideas. I tell him to read the book, to do the assignment. Sounding too much like the English hoodlums from the movie, he says, "Just doing some preliminary research, my brother." I ask James when he'll return the dog masks he borrowed from school, and he assures me he's almost finished. I have to admit, the most interesting part of my job is watching the creative ways my students break the rules.

We carry the soap molds out onto the front porch, where the cold will help them set, and look out at Sloan Lake and the park; beyond, the Rockies are topped with the season's first snowcaps. Downtown stretches on the other side of the lake, and when the air is clean the skyline is a crisp series of building block right angles. Today is a Red Day, however, and this means bad air quality and haze. Blue Days are clean days. On Red Days, burning wood is prohibited, and city officials request that driving be kept to a minimum. I worry about Orleans's lungs, but Darla says the girl has stronger lungs because she was born a mile high. I suppose this is true, but I'm afraid like most parents. Asthma, ADD, OCD, school phobia, hyperactivity, laziness, genius—the kids at Nat Mota High School, where I teach, have it all. Parents feel better when they label their children—it helps quantify and qualify their failures. Darla kisses me on the cheek, and at the same time, we turn our heads to watch Orleans push her finger into a cooling bar of soap.

Monday morning, Donald Mota, Nat Mota High's director, calls me into his office. "So what's this about you assigning dirty movies?" He sports a full, gray beard and exclusively wears khaki pants and shirts. Lining his office walls are the mounted heads of large animals, mostly from Africa, where he used to big game hunt. Nat Mota, *the person*, was

Donald's father and a big safari guide, who taught English to many villagers in Zimbabwe. In my classroom, four elk heads decorate the walls—all shot by students that Donald took on hunting trips back in the early 70s. My students call them *The Four Elk of the Apocalypse*. Donald calls the students *feral youth*.

Of course, nowadays we don't sponsor armed hunting trips. In the afternoons when I'm assigned fieldtrip duty, I take the students to museums—art, history, firefighters, train, natural history. We hike in the mountains, do art projects, visit zoos and caves and cliff dwellings. We've visited Loveland Wilderness Ranch, where folks with PETA memberships tell you about the horrors of commercial farming and meat production while you pet turkeys, cows, and sheep. Today, we'll see an exhibit of Allen Ginsberg's photography, but I don't tell Donald this. Secrecy allows me a certain degree of autonomy. The Beat writers aren't part of the curriculum, and neither are profane Englishmen like Anthony Burgess. Violence and colonialism are the impetus of history, but we teachers are told to stay away from *prurient texts*. I tell Donald that James was assigned a book report of his own choosing. Donald says that I should have assigned the book, and furthermore, all books need to be cleared through him.

"By the way, Jeremy, two Inuit masks are missing from Sonja's room. I shot those canines myself. A genuine Inuit made the headdresses in sixty-three." He combs through his beard with an ivory letter opener. "Keep your ears open. They'll talk."

"The dog masks?"

"Would you prefer that I just gave the keys to the students, let them have reign? I'm trying to run a school here." I know the masks he's talking about; they're hideous, more werewolf than wolf. The snouts are intact, the eye sockets empty, beads and leather tassels hang from the ears. One morning last week, I arrived early and removed both—James was working on a project and thought they'd be perfect. I couldn't have asked Donald for permission. Instead, I gave my trust to James but in the way that Siegfried and Roy submit faith to their tigers.

It's a Blue Day, and when my homeroom students enter before first

period, they carry the smells of a cold and clean morning mixed with cigarette and marijuana smoke, sweet perfumes and hair gels, breakfast cereal and chocolate milk. Nat Mota is the last resort for many suburban kids who just aren't making it in the public schools, one last hope before reform school, rehab, or life with a GED. Nat Mota is small—only a hundred kids. Every morning in my homeroom this year, the kids leave word-play, which they call *cryptos*, on the chalkboard. They like to gut words and leave them sprawled out like carcasses. Today the board reads: *Openmanship open man's hip*. My homeroom students are my advisees, and I have charge of them in the afternoons as well. So, at 1:30 I'm sitting in the fifteen-seat van, waiting, while they finish their cigarettes. "Let's go," I say. Grumbles, mumbles, disregard. James, a senior, sits up front with me, and his partner in crime, Dolly, sits on the bench behind us.

"Jeremy, you see Doll's new tat?" I saw the tattoo in third period, sophomore English, but Dolly sticks her foot up on my armrest anyway. Her pink Converse sneaker needs a serious washing. She traces the red-and-black devil and his long tail, which wraps all the way around her ankle. It shines with petroleum jelly. "This is my leg." She grins.

"Don't you have to be eighteen to get a tattoo?"

"Dog years, my droog," James says.

"Is this it?" I ask the rest of the van. They look around like they don't recognize one another. Someone says, "Wait, here comes Andy!" Like some backpacked monster, Andy clumsily jogs toward the van. He's a big kid, a book in his hand, his black plastic glasses cocked at an angle. James snaps a Polaroid. Andy plops into the vacant spot next to Dolly, who still has her tattoo up for inspection. He slams the door, and *bam*, we are all breathing the same cold air. From the back of the van, someone growls and someone else barks. James hands Andy the Polaroid, and Andy says thanks and fans it, waiting as his worried face materializes. James takes one each day Andy is late for the van. Andy plans to sell the collection on the Internet when James becomes famous.

"So, do you like it, Jeremy?" Dolly says, her hand displaying her ankle like merchandise. Beneath her black beanie, her green eyes are hon-

est and wanting. It's important to her that I like it. Dolly's mother typically calls the school at least three times a day. Theirs is a trying household—fights, absent nights, drugs, threats, all within the walled paradise of Denver's southern suburbs. The thing is, Dolly is perfect in my class, and really, I could say the same for most of the students.

"You know, the conception we have of Satan with a beard, that's not historically accurate." Andy leans over Dolly to get a better look at the demon in question. He's still breathing hard and smells of ranch potato chips. "The image of Satan with a beard developed with American propaganda against communism. See, Satan looks like Lenin." He touches the devil's inaccurate beard.

"I like it a lot," I say. "I like the tail especially."

Dolly beams and then punches Andy in the arm. "John Lennon didn't have a beard!" She rolls her eyes and looks back at me. "Go ahead." So I touch the shiny, black beard. Her skin is greasy with the protective jelly, and it occurs to me that I've never touched a tattoo this fresh, a scar this new. I wrap my hand around her ankle and easily touch my middle finger to my thumb. I poke at the red flesh. "Oh, Satan," I say, half to myself, half aloud. I look at James, who is filming with his phone. I narrow my eyes in displeasure and wipe my slimy hands on a tissue. He shrugs.

At the Mizel Center for Arts and Culture, we walk through the display: *Snapshot Poetics*. Ginsberg and pals surround us in their Beat glory. The ticket seller looks at the kids with obvious suspicion. It's a small gallery, and if it were a museum, the ticket seller would have notified security—they usually do. My students walk with notebooks in hand, scribbling notes and pointing. These kids are big pants and visible underwear, raver bellbottoms, safety-pinned shirts, cocked baseball caps, and black fingernails—they are rocker geek, computer nerd, gangster-poser, skinny punk, post-Grateful Dead hippie, and deceptive prep. Kevin points to a photograph of Neal Cassidy and Timothy Leary. "The bus, the bus, the bus," he says, his voice impatient, as if he might get left behind. In class, we've read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and on his own he read *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Now he punctuates exclusively with exclama-

tion points and ellipses. He hikes up his pants, grabs his pencil from between his buzz cut and pointed ear, and scratches his over-punctuated notes. I've asked them to interpret the narrative in the photographs. Out of the corner of my eye, I see James pull a tiny digital camera from his pants' pocket. He snaps a few shots from the hip. He drops the camera in his pocket and smiles at me. I mouth the words, "No photos." Short of frisking him, there's really no way to stop him, and anyhow, his shots are often good teaching tools.

The kids know the writers and personae in the photographs—Keseey, Kerouac, Burroughs, Cassidy, Ginsberg—and when they aren't familiar with someone, they want the lowdown from me—Corso, Ferlinghetti, Snyder. We've done a Neal Cassidy/Beat tour of Denver—Holy Ghost Church where Cassidy was baptized, 23rd and Welton baseball games, Five Points jazz. James, Dolly, and Andy huddle around a photograph of Kerouac—it's the picture on the front cover of *Desolation Angels* that Dolly has carried around in her backpack all semester. James mocks the pose, hand deep in pocket, forefinger and thumb to lip, a masculine inhale. I walk over to a photograph of a naked Allen Ginsberg dancing on the beach. Kevin scratches his buzzed scalp, looks at me, and says, "Bow-wow."

"Okay, so what's going on with the dog masks?" I say. Someone whimpers. I close my eyes in frustration and confusion. James says my name behind me, so I turn around, and he snaps a picture. He turns the digital screen toward me, and there I am asleep on my feet. Ginsberg's photo-gray testicles hang above my right shoulder. "No photographs." This is one of those moments where I feign control.

It's Saturday night, so Darla and I get a neighborhood teenager to watch Orleans while we go to a movie. We watch an independent film down on Broadway, and afterward, we sit in the warmth of our all-wheel-drive economy car. Darla's face and hands are bathed in neon streetlight, and the flushed clouds press closer, like an atmospheric womb. The pink light reflected on Darla's forehead promises snow. Orleans is asleep by now—the teenage girl once again bored because we don't have cable television. We believe television is poison, and we certainly don't use it as a

babysitter. Sometimes we *play* TV, making up and acting out our own little shows. Yesterday, I made up a show called *I Love Lucybelle*—Darla snorted a sarcastic laugh, but Orleans didn't get the joke.

Later, as we make love, Darla says, "Do you ever picture me as anyone one else when we have sex?" I answer in the negative and pose the same question. "Sometimes. But I don't imagine you as a person. I see you as a natural disaster, a mountain crumbling, an earthquake, or a flood." When there is nothing left of us but heavy breathing, I touch her stretch marks. I pull back the covers and, by candlelight, examine the grooves in her skin, wrinkles and waves of time. "Your stretch marks, Darla, it's like glaciers ran the length of your belly." She rolls her eyes and says goodnight.

The next morning the board says, *artifice. if art, ice. I'm free! (zing!)*. The chalkboard graffiti mouths bark and growl all day. Later, I see Donald in the hallway, and he says the masks are back safe and sound. He winks at me and says something about tough love tames the savage beast.

At home, Darla returns from the grocery store, and Orleans and I sit in front of the full-length mirror in the hallway. We're playing *I Love Lucybelle*. She puts the blue wig on my head and calls me Lucybelle. She ducks her head behind mine, so just the top of her rat's nest and her eyes are visible. "Dance," she says. She holds my elbows and moves my arms. I'm a blue-haired puppet. When she lets go, I continue to flap my arms, and she does the same. I have two full-size arms and two midget-size arms. I am the limb-impaired Lucybelle, Shiva of the American suburbs, breather of bad air, destroyer of strip malls, parking lots, and shitty public art. Darla makes a sandwich of Orleans between us. Our six arms dance. "Lucybelle's got six arms," Orleans says. I want to say *has*, but the blue wig looks good on me, and I could dance like this all night.

After dinner, I clean out my school bag. I find a DVD that says *SATIN SATAN SAT AN SAT AN SAT*. It's not unlike my little darlings from Nat Mota to slip gifts into my bag: I've collected photographs (usually of me), poems, *i'm a rock* written on a stone, a leaf with black magic marker that said *please don't leaf me*. Once Orleans falls asleep, Darla and I curl up on the couch with a heavy blanket and cups of tea. A devil is rep-

resented in graffiti on a concrete wall, and the opening credits roll, or rather spill, from the devil's graffiti mouth. *SATIN SATAN SAT AN SAT AN SAT* starring *Alibis and Knive*. *A Dog Gone Good Production*. Photographs change rapidly across the screen. Babies, kids, parents holding kids. The photographs stop, and there are the hideous dog masks, covering the heads of a young man and woman. The tone of their flesh gives away their age. They growl. The long strands of fur and hide cover both of the performers' bare chests. *Oh, Satan*, a low, slow voice says. Darla looks at me and smiles, as if to say, *You assigned this?* "I only assign reading and writing," I say. A concrete wall, maybe a warehouse, or a factory. On the wall, red spray paint reads: *P-u- r- in a dog, c- how?. daddy. d-day. dy dad dy!!!!* And suddenly the actors are growling, sniffing one another. The side of a breast flashes by, a shrunken scrotum zips across the screen. There's sniffing and now biting. The girl is short and has a devil tattooed on her ankle. "If this goes where I'm thinking, we need to shut this off," I say.

"Just wait," Darla says. "It's not bad. Really." On the concrete floor, the sniffing, pawing, and gnawing continue, and then we get it—full-frontal nudity. I go for the remote, but Darla grabs my hand. Dolly and Kevin disappear under a sheet beneath the table. The sheet moves like an epileptic Casper the Ghost, and somehow it doesn't come off of their bodies. There's a lot of barking going on, and the photographs start again, slowly moving across the bottom of the screen, like teletype—James, his mother, his father, more James, birthday parties, dinners, sleepovers, angry faces, fingers pointing, a row of houses, the Nat Mota Mansion, my hand with my wedding ring wrapped around a tattooed ankle, a dog food factory, the Denver skyline, my face, students' faces, Andy running late, and back to the dog food factory. The performers sigh and collapse underneath the sheet. The camera pans up and rests on the logo of a dog standing on its head. Fade to black.

It's all over school the next morning—boys slapping Kevin on the back, he looking much too proud. James pulls Kevin aside and looks angry. The chalkboard reads, *dog do doog good od god*, and I erase it

immediately. Boys flick their tongues between V-ed fingers at Dolly, and the girls shun her, whisper and laugh. It's hard for me to look at her without picturing her naked and masked. She goes home sick after first period. Like the students, I stare at the clock all day, remembering how slow time passes when you're conscious of it. I take small steps, reach slowly for things, speak in carefully measured words, a monotone of thought and action. I give writing prompts to keep the classes quiet. When James approaches me after class, I pretend to be absorbed in grading. It's a Red Day, and when I'm outside, I can smell his father's dog food plant.

I make it home in one piece. Darla says that maybe I should turn the movie over, extricate myself from the situation. But she knows I can't; it would be too much like betrayal. "Damage control, honey." She kisses my hair.

It's another Red Day. The cow goes *moo*, the students go *ruff*, the chalkboard goes *carefully, care fully, ly careful* while the headline in the morning paper goes *Eco-Terrorist Freshman Dead in Front Range Suburb*. I'm sure Darla has read the paper and received encrypted emails from people she's not personally familiar with. A University of Colorado female freshman died while attempting eco-tage. The Global Emancipation Machine (GEM), the organization Darla volunteers for, poured cement into the gas tanks of heavy equipment at a housing development under construction in a Boulder suburb. The high-priced development has been hotly contested, but the contractors won out. Although there were several perpetrators, only one female (name withheld) was found underneath a dump truck's six-foot-high tires. It slipped out of gear when the eco-radicals climbed on it. Spray-painted on the tire was *Responsible Growth?* During lunch, I call Darla, but there is no answer.

When I get home, Darla sends Orleans outside to play. As soon as the girl is out the back door, Darla's eyes fill with tears. "That's not supposed to happen." There is nothing I can say to her to make things better. She sets her jaw tight and says, "I posted notice of a vigil. GEM is calling the girl a martyr." I want to insist she quit the volunteer work, but I don't. I fix the three of us tomato soup and garlic toast. Orleans says that Lucybelle would probably like apples, so I slice some Granny Smiths.

Even with comfort food, tensions are running high, so I promise a trip to the mountains tomorrow.

I escape outside, but the air is thick with the dog food factory's stench. Leaves cover the ground and fill the gutters. I stare at the guilty oak, whose leaves I've fought against all fall. Orleans comes outside and says she wants to help. I tell her to bring the garden hose around to the front of the house so I can rinse the gutters once I get the leaves out. It's getting colder and she's not wearing gloves or a hat, but she does have the blue wig firmly in place. "Get some warm clothes on first," I say. She says she will and runs back inside. I get the ladder and pull the decomposing leaves from the aluminum gutters. Tentacle-like branches hang over the roof, trying to thrust their way inside our home. Orleans is back outside again, spraying the hose. "Don't get wet," I say. I should tell her not to waste water.

Darla opens the front door and says I have a phone call. She tells Orleans to get inside. Orleans looks shocked and then smiles. She still has the hose in her hand and has soaked the oak, as high as the water will reach. "What? I'm making leaves grow back." Water drips from the branches, like her own personal rain shower. She stands in the mist, and her grin refuses to leave.

On the phone, James' mother says that she spoke with Dolly's mother, who got a call from someone else's father, and "that movie is going to be the end of your teaching days." She recognized my voice and remembered my wedding ring from a parent-teacher conference. I tell her that I have no idea what she's talking about. She tells me that she knows for a fact that I have a copy of the movie. "Do you know that that girl's parents are going to press charges?"

"You think I told them to make that? It was filmed at *your* husband's plant."

"So you have seen it. I used to think you were good for those kids. I did, but we're a Christian family. My husband's already talked to our lawyer and the next call I'm making—" I hang up. The light is fading outside, and the western horizon—the Rockies—is washed in orange-red light. Red Days always make for better sunsets, but this one looks like an ulcer.

“Somebody’s here!” my blue-haired daughter yells, running through the living room with wet shoes. The doorbell rings. I walk to the door, expecting it to be the police, the FBI, or Donald Mota with a safari rifle he’ll use to put me down like a rabid dog. “Go clean your room,” I say. Orleans gives a long, drawn out, *But!*, and then skips to her room. Her blue head pokes around the corner. I whisper to Darla. “That movie is all over. They want my job.” I wrap my arms around her and place my forehead against hers. “Lawyers have been contacted.”

I open the door and James stands there, hands in his pockets, eyes on the porch floorboards. “Let’s take a walk, James,” I say. He steps back out onto the porch, looks at the oak tree that is still dripping water and the sidewalk icing over. We cross the street and walk into the park. The ulcer drips onto the lake, and I’m reminded of a line of poetry about the sky having a nosebleed. A man with a cardboard sign draped on his back pedals by on a bicycle, leaving a trail in the snow. We follow the same cement trail around the lake. “Your mother called me.”

“She’s gone mad.” He keeps his eyes from me. Geese beat their wings, large bodies lifting off the ground, but only moving a few feet. Their white necks absorb the ulcer light, and I notice that we’re all blushing. “I didn’t make or distribute the copies. Kevin—”

“What were you thinking?” It’s getting colder by the second. The snow starts to fall in big flakes. James and I slow down, and when I look at James, there are tears in his eyes.

“Dolly’s parents . . . I think the cops will be at my house if I go back.”

“If she were my daughter, I’d be kicking your ass right now.”

“My father has lawyers.”

“I didn’t say that I am *going* to kick—”

“I’m not worried about the cops, I mean. Dolly makes her own choices.”

“Dolly’s fifteen.”

“It wasn’t sex, and we all knew the risks. If you had any idea how hard we worked—” James lights a cigarette. I resist the urge to ask for one. *They knew the risks.* He blows the smoke straight up into the air. The wind blows waves, like scales, on the lake. The snowflakes are red embers falling from the sky. It’s like a bomb went off—somewhere so close that I

brace for the aftershock.

“Why didn’t you think? Why didn’t I think? Who the hell are you trying to get back at, James?” He stares at me, wondering if he is supposed to answer the questions. He doesn’t say anything, and I realize I have failed. He can’t answer because I didn’t prepare him, maybe I only challenged him, dared him even. I imagine Dolly crying in her room as she prepares to run away. Donald is writing a formal statement placing distance between the school and me. He’ll call it a treaty between him and the newspapers. Tomorrow all of us criminals will be in the newspapers, damned along with pornographers and rapists, gunmen and drug dealers—all the terrorists. “You didn’t have to include me.” I expect someone to say *Cut!*, that the red snow will suddenly stop falling, that we will go back to our dressing rooms and try to get a better take tomorrow.

“I thought you’d be proud of us. Will you at least watch the movie with me?” James says, his voice quiet enough to melt snowflakes. “So I can explain.” And then there we are, James and me, sitting in front of the television. Darla has Orleans in the bath, washing her with some of the insect soap. Orleans shout-sings, *Mama’s getting the sea painted green, so I’m washin’, washin’, washin’ in the wild wild West*, and I dog-ear the sound of her voice, saving it for a saner moment. James narrates his director moves—the why, the how, the where. He presses pause when he wants to make something clear. *See this? See that?* he says, and I wonder what the point of this screening exercise is. The film ends, and just as James says, “You taught me how to write that,” a bare-naked Orleans runs into the living room and plants a big kiss on my lips. She looks at James. “Goodnight, Dad’s stu-dent!” She runs to her bedroom, her naked rear end shiny and damp, cleaned with roach soap.

James looks after her and smiles, slightly embarrassed by my daughter’s lack of modesty. The roof contracts from the cold. James scoots forward on the couch and turns to me. “I’m sorry,” he says. I want to run into Orleans’s room, interrupt the story about Lucybelle and her peacocks (Lucybelle and Lucybelle), and say my love out loud, over and over. I know the oak branches are turning white with snow, and I would like to show this to James. Darla and I could teach him about the shapes of trees,

the way the roots are like a mirror image of its branches.

In bed, Darla and I decide that I'll call Donald first thing in the morning. A candle on the dresser makes her freckles dance, and the tears she cries for the dead eco-activist magnify those freckles. She says that I'll still have my job, but we both know better. I place my hand on her abdomen. The lines in her skin guide me, the Braille of the child we created together. She places her arm across my chest, and I drift off into a heavy, dream-filled sleep. I'm up on the roof, spraying water onto the snow-covered trees, which turn brown as the snow melts, and soon icicles form. Something tugs at me, pulling me into consciousness. I open my eyes and believe I'm still dreaming, but then I smell the burning candle. Orleans stands on a chair next to my dresser where the candle sputters. She's so little. She reaches toward the candle. I raise my hand, as if I can stop her from the bed. I try to speak but am unable. Orleans dips a finger into the candle, the hollow formed by the flame. I feel a moment of terror from which I gather the strength to tear my head from the cavity of sleep. She pulls her finger back, quickly, just as I manage to say, "Orleans." I lean out of the bed, almost falling on my face. She turns to me, and her finger is red with candle wax. "Orleans," I say, louder than I mean to.

"Nighttime voice," she commands. "Mom's sleeping." I sigh, and she looks at her waxed digit. "Dad, look, it's stuck to my finger. It didn't even burn." She walks toward me, her finger extended. By the time she takes the few steps to the bed, I am on my knees. I grab her around the waist and squeeze her to me. She wraps her skinny arms around my head and face. The soft wax covering the tip of her finger brushes against my whiskers. "You're squeezing too hard, Dad. Don't you want to see?"

"Sorry. I'm sorry, Orleans. You scared me is all."

I pull her into bed with Darla and me, and she is asleep as soon as her head hits my chest. When I place my hand on Darla's arm, we're all touching—the three of us are one. I listen to the snow piling on the roof. I wait, my eyes open, hoping the snow will cover the city, the streets, the house, and that in the morning everything will be frozen solid and the three of us, together, will be forever trapped inside our home.