

*Editor's Note: This is Part Three (and the conclusion) of "Windows". Parts One and Two were featured in the Winter 2007 (#1) and Spring 2007 (#2) issues of **The Puritan**, respectively. Along with Part Three, they can be read in PDF format on the official website.*

Drew stares at his reflection. He is alone in a washroom in the basement of his office—a secret place, submerged, three floors underground, past white-tiled corridors and closed closets. In what seems to Drew like the silent, sleeping hold of a ship: where he likes to piss or shit or masturbate, hidden away, taking his time.

A washroom with two stalls, two urinals, and two sinks, polished white porcelain and stainless steel. Drew looks for an offending puddle or piece of paper, lying inert and hideous, as in *other* washrooms, not his.

The stone and silence outside his body are heavy, lonely. The lights flicker and Drew struggles to escape a ringing, insistent and high-pitched, that makes his skull feel packed with cotton. He tips his head from side to side, cupping his palms over his ears, listening.

Drew closes his eyes, sensing the flicker of the fluorescent bulbs through clenched skin. Flickering in bursts of activity, unbound by rhythm or sense. In dialogue, tapping out a language of current and signal, understood only in the shared space between bulbs. Unnerving in their tone, *are you there? are you there?*

Drew opens his eyes. He stares at his reflection, and what stares back is a ghost, a white sheet. He coughs, his throat muscles working, on fire, until he spits a grainy mouthful of saliva and phlegm into the unblemished white sink. He watches as specs of ash, silt, spin in tiny orbits in the circle of his spit. Then he turns on the tap and rinses the stain away.

He sticks out his tongue, slowly, gingerly, dabbing at his lips, tasting dust. Drew's glasses sit awkward and ridiculous on his face: broken and comical. His watch flashes in the mirror along a fracture, smashed against a car door in the frantic scramble away. The strap of his camera is torn, useless; his briefcase somewhere *out there*, lost, buried in the blizzard of ash. The camera sits dusty and scuffed on the counter, near the wall.

Slow still, careful, Drew begins to button his shirt. His fingers move in tandem, top to bottom, respecting the garment. Once unbuttoned, he strips. He shakes a cloud of dust and glass onto the floor, listening to the shrill pitter-patter of rough glass striking smooth tile. He grimaces, placing his shirt on top of the counter. Then he takes off his glasses and places them on top of his shirt.

Drew is deliberate, precise. He squirts liquid soap into his palms and rubs them together. As he scrubs his neck and face and hands the scent of eucalyptus and disinfectant mingles with burnt hair, jet fuel. Drew gags, drooling rose-coloured mucous, his eyes red and wet. Straightening, he bunches handfuls of rough, brown paper towel, soaking them in the hot stream from the tap and scrubbing them against his neck and arms and chest. And what emerges in the mirror is something newborn, mewling—dripping wet and pink, swollen from tiny cuts and lacerations that swirl and dash across living flesh. Drew heaves, squinting in the flickering light, his eyes small

and black and beady, his skin hot and alive with pain. He tries to think, *this is a picture*, but cannot see a picture. Drew stares at his reflection, silent.

He sees the women cowering beneath the car, screaming. He sees the men smashing the shop windows, angry, desperate for shelter. He sees the white, roaring cloud that rolled and shook, storm-like, through the streets.

The door opens.

Drew turns, revealed, conscious of his age and his bare skin. Opens his mouth. A woman stands in the doorway, her mouth closed and unmoved. She is short and blond, somewhat heavy-set, wearing a blue jogging suit—*Adidas*—that is covered in the same white ash.

Drew picks up his shirt, puts on his glasses, embarrassed. The woman stands in the doorway, holding the door with her foot, staring. Drew watches her legs and her crotch and a dark stain that widens, quickly, seeping through the fabric of her pants.

She's pissed herself, he thinks.

"Some things you'll remember," she says, suddenly, her voice soft and high and girlish.

Drew nods, not knowing what to say.

"I was on a roof to the south and when the people were falling, jumping, they looked like ripples of fabric. They looked like blankets or tablecloths."

Drew tries not to look at her crotch. He wants to say, how can you say those words: *people, falling*.

"And there was my friend beside me with her kid. And her kid kept asking about the bodies, pointing at them. So my friend said that they were birds. She said that they were birds and that they were flying. I don't know."

Drew smiles, widely, perceiving instantly that this is not the right thing, not the right gesture. He drops his hands to his sides.

"What do you think?" she asks.

The question is an imposition. *What do I think?* Drew thinks about his bathroom, the immaculate surfaces. He thinks of secret hideaways, sanctuary. He thinks of the abrasion of words, floating by in the bunker-like room—words like *bodies, jumping*. Drew feels angry, frustrated by the fact that the woman has pissed herself in *his* bathroom, that words beyond pictures are thrown between the intimate flicker and stutter of the bulbs. But where a man would be an intruder, a violation, the woman is *simply there*, an apparition, misplaced. A reminder of the shaken boundaries.

Drew picks up his camera. He passes her in the doorway, soundless, buttoning top to bottom. He looks back, from the hallway, just as the door swings shut: the woman immobile, wet, sealed inside a men's room in the bowels of an office.

Walking again, carrying his camera close to his chest, up and out of the vault, up the cool staircase, Drew feels himself waking up, beyond the dull rhythm of ascending stairs, moving his body. He cradles his camera, protective, imagining the film in the canister as sealed, as classified. He feels himself thinking.

This is normal. This is normal but there are no more towers. This is New York City and I am Richard Drew and I am doing something I have done over and over but there are no more

towers. The strange feeling is not fear or confusion but focus, the ability to act in the face of the unthinkable. I am a rational human being. I can work and produce and record. Normal.

He thinks of the towers and the new skyline and forgets the woman with her wet pants, her impositions. He feels only excitement, a growing joy, the world renewed and remade in the floating, infinite present. And he, lucky enough, privileged, even, to bear witness, to record, to draw snapshots out of Sodom and show the world the wrath of inhuman forces: gravity, fire, impact.

Drew cradles his camera while memory falls back to being young, to a time before he knew just how precisely his hands could work with his eye and his will. How easily he had done what he had imagined possible only after years of dedication, experience. How even as a child, discomfited and clumsy, he had stepped forward into the flash of the bulbs, and seeing death, white and terrible, he had captured it. In the darkroom, later, realizing that he had actually captured it *well*, with neatness and grace. And how in her face—Ethel Kennedy's, pleading and wild and slowly seeping into focus—he was hated for it, this recording.

Drew steps among clean people, riding elevators to office rooms, cubicles. Drew steps into an elevator with a young man, listening to a radio, pressing his forefinger against a black speaker in his ear. Drew hears the sound of a broadcaster giving the news, grave and exact.

The doors open. Drew walks through the shared space of the Associate Press, cubicles squared by cubicles, white walls and blue-grey carpeting. He breathes the dry office smell, the bright light from the windows, the cool tickle from the air conditioner. The cutesy knick-knacks and photographs, post-it notes, quotation magnets, novelty pens and pencils, notepads that say *from the pen of*. Personal touches from employees, turning cubicles into high school lockers, some semi-rebellious, some bare and austere and clinical. And beneath it all the tangles of wires, the outlets, the blinking lights that give connection to the windows of the world.

Drew finds his space. He pushes the morning's notes and folders aside and turns on his computer, watching a black screen turn blue, white, blue.

Drew wants the chance to work and cull from the morning a photograph that will change the shape of the event, give it meaning in retrospect, framed and focused against the body buzz of raw experience, memory. Something that will serve as stand-in for forgetfulness, a reference point to the unbroken stream of years that will separate all feeling. What he does not want is conversation, gossip, the campfire roundtable of photographers and clerks crouching in his office, consoling and commiserating.

He peers over the wall of his cubicle, nervous, expecting the clusters of scared men and women, talking and chewing, speculating, using words that bristle with transgression, cynical knowledge: *al Qaeda, jihad, Kabul*. Talking about the planes that went down in Pittsburg, Washington. The unfathomable dead.

There are no clusters. Men and women move quickly from office to cubicle, from elevator to desk. Drew listens to the sound of keyboards, clicking and clacking in unison, fingers tapping out the old litany of work. He hears desk chairs swivel over

carpet. He listens to printers and fax machines and telephone calls, hushed, cell phones set to vibrate.

The sound of work being done, not for pay or love but for work itself. Work that means responsibility to memory, an awareness of the *event*.

Drew settles into his chair, connecting his camera to his computer. He opens folders, double clicking. A procession of images links across the lower half of the screen.

The red haired model, blue blouse, tan slacks. Freckles, eight months pregnant. Bryant Park green and sunny, the sky an unbroken blue. He scrolls through the thumbnails, looking.

The towers: steel and bright and incredible, the skyline taken and possessed. The ruin of smoke, the dark cloud. The faces on the streets, holding palms over mouths, eyes wet. The hiccupping sobs, the face saying *no no no no no no*, like a little girl tantrum, hopping up and down. The looks that said nothing. *I'm not here*.

The pinioning bodies, falling men and women, like pennies or cigarettes tossed from bridges. The illusion of the slow fall, the graceful cutting of air. The shirts and jackets torn savagely from skin. The eventual impact, the closing of distance, unexpected and disappointing. Impact never found in the frame; only the freefall of limbs and fabric, gravity's grip on earth-bound flesh, clumsy and incomplete.

Drew stops scrolling through thumbnails. Over years of taking pictures, watching for the right frame, for basic elements, timing, lighting and shadow, he has developed a particular eye: toned and trained, entrusted. His eye says stop, and he stops, trusting entirely.

He maximizes an image, full-screen, pulling on his beard. He looks at the picture and then minimizes it, again, now anonymous. He stands and looks around his cubicle, at other cubicles, gazing out over bent people surveying digital film. A woman passes Drew's cubicle and moves toward the elevator. He waits until she is across the room before he sits down.

This is the picture, his eye says, silently. He maximizes the image and rests his chin on his fists, propped on the desk. He stares into the monitor, jealous, sitting close to the screen to guard the shot.

The man falls upside down, his arms straight at his sides. One leg is in line with the rest of his body, while the other is bent at the knee, giving the image a strange asymmetry that makes Drew think of the Hangman card. He wears a white jacket or shirt, dark pants. The man is black or Hispanic. There is no sky or cloud or other natural point of reference in the background. All that can be seen beyond the man are the vast, vertical lines of the towers.

The man bisects the towers perfectly: one positioned in the far background, the other near foreground, differentiated by shadow and pattern but otherwise identical. It is this strange arrangement, this artful composition, which takes Drew's composure. He stares at the lines of the towers, the line made by the man, his position between the two. He thinks of the three objects before him: tower, man, tower, and sees all three fallen, lost, removed, ghosts on a skyline that will never look the same.

He stares in the monitor but does not feel someone staring back. He waits for the feeling of transgression to wash over him, the accusing stares and the pleas for aversion, Ethel Kennedy back inside his head, crying and begging. When no feeling comes, Drew moves closer to the screen. He feels that this is the picture he has hoped for, has waited for, biding his time, practicing on people and places that everyone forgets. He feels large suddenly, larger than himself, and covers his mouth unconsciously with his hand. All the joy and the excitement, the world renewed, and yet the first scraps flaking away, leaving something warm and tender, something impossible to deal with, something terrible and profound and—

There is no one recognizable staring back from the photograph, no one to plead, no one to tell him *stop*. Drew understands but sees, suddenly, that there *is* someone there, looking at him. Not in the blurry mess of the man's face, but larger, surrounding the image; a double exposure. Someone like him with his wants and his build and his voice.

Drew sits closer to the screen. In seconds he realizes the absurdity. He shakes his head, as if to say *how stupid*.

Drew stares at his reflection, barely visible, surrounding the image of the man falling on the screen.

* * *

"But that makes for good journalism," Matt says, almost wistfully. "That's what you're here to do, right?"

I give him a glance; return his smile that says we're both in on the joke. I'm not sure which one of us he's trying to soothe. I'm not sure if he's trying to defend our occupation, accept some notion of cynical truth, or just shoot the shit. We stare forward through the windshield at a cemetery in the sunlight, lines of tiny bouquets.

"Right," I say, sliding my hands over the steering wheel, watching for mourners.

"You're not here to make things *right*," he says. "You're not here to be a saint or a saviour. Just tell them the truth, give them the opportunity to *know* it."

"It's not their truth," I say, tired of this. I crack my knuckles, compulsively. "It's not really a truth at all. It's just a photograph. And I'm not sure if it's actually him."

"Well, didn't the family ...?"

"I don't believe them. At least a part of me doesn't believe. It's almost better for them if it is him. Then it's over and they don't have to bury an empty casket. So to speak."

"They bury the photograph," he says, quickly.

The wind presses a red petal against the windshield wipers, caught between the glass and the rubber, and we both watch it flutter, helpless. I feel sorry for being this way. I feel sorry for needing Matt here with me while I do this.

I look out across the rows of tiny plots, the simple and sorry markers pressed together in the manic endeavor to save space. Dying is expensive; I miss the grey absolute of the tombstone, the cracked engraving, the weeping angel. The large and

twisted sprawl of a church graveyard, black branches, tendrils of mist. Being part of a piece of earth, in which sleep is long and heavy.

My own death, planned in paper and ink and in a computer database, leaves me feeling cheated: my ashes in a steel box, on a shelf, until someone comes and scatters all that remains of me.

Sunlight moves across the grass and the occasional tree, cutting through clouds that have come and gone all morning. I unzip my jacket and place it behind me on the back seat. Matt does the same, placing his Styrofoam coffee cup on the dashboard while he negotiates his sleeves. All the deaths in my life—friends, family, acquaintances—have had their funerals in the rain, in drizzling, cold, horrible rain. I can't imagine a sunny funeral. I can't imagine a funeral that wasn't in November.

"The whole thing seems worse in the summer," I say. "I mean the blue sky and the contrasts. It would've been better in a storm."

"We wouldn't have seen as many jumpers," Matt says.

I pause. He thinks I'm talking about the day the towers came down. I'm not, but it doesn't really matter; everything comes back to it, easily, in a breath. I don't bother clarifying.

"Maybe," I say, watching the petal slide along the glass. It disappears in a gust of wind. "Maybe the dust and the ash would look more like snow, like something normal."

"Kids collecting ash on their tongues," Matt says.

"Having ash ball fights," I say.

"Making ash angels," he says.

It's a bad joke, but why not? I feel heavy and slow. Americans fly the flag and hold tribute concerts, give firefighters tremendous memorial services, promise revenge. America moves on, shaken and paranoid and angry and sometimes, it would seem, together, despite the differences that make it what it is. And then there's me: an outsider, a Canadian, unable to wake up without thinking that there was only one moment of grace, and now it's gone, forgotten—right after the attacks, in that dizzying moment where anything seemed possible, any act of depravity or bravery, any re-imagining. A moment that made a glance a longing, a cry.

A stream of black-clad figures begins to wind toward us, toward the gravel path and the line of waiting limousines and cars. They pass from shadow into light.

"The pastry chef's people," Matt says. "*Let the lamp affix its beam,*" he adds, pretentiously.

"Here is the difficulty," I say, starting again. "I'm supposed to show this man's wife and daughters a photograph of his last few seconds alive. These people are, apparently, taken with the notion that their father would never take his own life. I'm supposed to show them the photograph and say: *see, here, he certainly did. He was brave. He still loved you. Now you know. Deal with that.*"

I look at Matt.

"And then I go home and write a story about it."

"Catholics are supposed to be good at reconciling suffering," he says, considering. "It's the whole point of taking up the cross. They can deal with that."

"I look at this picture, Matt, and want to *groan*. I look at it and want to scream. The photographer must *ache* for this man."

"He suffered. He was probably innocent. A pastry chef?"

"I mean, where is God?"

I know this is something that Matt cannot answer, but I want him to try. I don't want to go to church and I don't want to pray and I don't think I will ever truly believe, but I want him to try.

There are moments of awareness, of yourself and your larger situation, your friends, your memory. Here is another: I am in a car in a cemetery, asking my friend, secular and depressed and academic and overweight, to tell me, rather hopelessly, that God was there. God, in all the horror a life can witness and digest and not be broken by. Horror by man and history, a nightmare.

"Have you ever read *Night* by Elie Weisel?" Matt asks. I regret having asked him, almost instantly. I regret looking scared and weak and full of this dread, vast and nebulous.

"No," I say.

"There's a section that stuck with me. The narrator is forced to watch the SS hang a child. As the noose is slipped around the child's neck, a nearby man—a Jew, a prisoner—calls out something like *where is God?*"

I see the faces of the mourners. They lead children to car doors, to games and release. I take the photograph out of the folder and unbuckle my seat belt.

"So they hang the child, but he doesn't die right away. In fact, it takes a terribly long time for the child to die. There's lots of suffering. The man from before again calls out, *where is God? Where is He now?*"

Matt frowns. "The child dies, finally. The man asks again and again, where is God, etc. The narrator doesn't expect you to see what he sees, but you believe *him*, at least. You believe that he saw it. He says that all along, God was there, not waiting to intervene and not waiting to harm, but there, suffering. That the child hanging on the gallows *was* God, *is* God. A God who suffers with us."

I open the door and walk toward Tino, his arm around a woman I don't recognize.

"You believe that he saw it," Matt says.

I want to think about when I was small and used to lay in the hammock stretched out between two maple trees in my Grandmother's backyard. I used to fall asleep to the sound of cicadas and the sight of the blue sky, the crosshatch canopy of leaves.

I want to think about riding my bike late into dusk with my friend, twelve or thirteen, buying ice cream with money that was new and freeing, knowing even then at such an age that youth was fleeting and perfectly ending.

I want to think about self-sacrifice and the things I did for my wife, the little gestures that were there in the beginning, the surprises and the sentiments.

I want to think about my first job as a reporter, that terrible newspaper in suburbia but to me the sweet release from school and blue collar repetition, the cycles of my family that could doom a man into playing out the past, endlessly, until the look on my father's face after working a double shift became to me the motivating fear, the reason to escape.

I walk back to the car, thinking. I open the door and sit down. I place the photograph back inside its manila folder and pull the seat belt across my chest.

"So ... how did it go?" Matt asks, expectant.

I look in the mirror. "I spoke to his daughter."

"What did she say?" he asks. He was watching me through the windows.

I want to think about Heaven, a Heaven for everyone, where all your ex-wives are yours again, where your puppy that was hit by a truck is made whole, where your grandparents are still old and wise and waiting for you. A Heaven that requires no work, no pain, no challenge.

I want to think about one tiny moment of grace.

"What did she say?" Matt asks again, guessing.

I start the car.

"She said, *that piece of shit is not my father.*"

* * *

Eric watches his wife cooking. He watches her break a tan eggshell against a steel bowl and then separate the shell into halves. He watches yellow yolk drip down into a bowl filled with flour. Her fingers move quickly, in control.

He likes to watch her white arms flex and relax as she grips a wooden spoon, stirring the flour that resists being mixed. He likes to see her hips shake, butting the side of the counter. He likes the way her shirt rises, likes seeing her stomach, likes watching her lips quiver silently with the strain.

Eric forgets who she is. He imagines a different life and a different woman: a wife without ideology or debate or struggle. An arrangement and exchange codified by unquestioned boundaries; something pre-modern. He watches her fingers grip the handle of the spoon, watches the slight rise and fall of her chest, and forgets his city and his age. He longs for the strain of punishing work, a vocation of pain and hours. In watching April prepare food he becomes enormously aroused.

The modern April, the April of his yesterdays and all the days of his future, a companion of vociferous opinion, of challenge and rebuke. The April who has proven incapable of giving Eric what David gives him endlessly: comfort without questions, problems, sex and conversation that lead nowhere. Hours that evaporate in clouds, rain, sleep.

April who is conflict and tension and radical desire, sex that means death, the entire heart.

Eric stops watching. He moves around the counter and slips his arm around her hip. She continues raking the spoon in violent circles around the bowl. He feels the muscles working in her arm and back, feels her jeans rubbing against his legs and crotch and chest. He becomes hard and pushes against her, feeling good. He puts his nose into her hair and smells, not knowing when he first knew her scent, only that one day it ceased to be strange and faint and suddenly became universal, heady, painful.

She turns and looks at him, her chin dusted in flour. He grips the back of her head, hard, and kisses her lips. She pulls away, quickly, and continues to stir. Eric disentangles himself, feeling a loss of heat, and walks away, out of the kitchen.

"Where are you?" she calls, after a second.

"I'm right here," he says, opening the door to the hallway. She can hear the hinges squeal. "I'm going to the roof."

Outside, nine stories up, New York City speaks and shimmers from a million bulbs. The night is cool, breezy, and deep blue: not yet dark enough to reveal the meager light of city stars, the moon. The hum of traffic and voices floats up from the streets, engulfing in echo and similarity. Eric rubs his arms, keeping warm, and thinks of the sweater he left in his apartment, folded on the bed. He walks across the roof, listening to the sound of his shoes hitting wet asphalt. He picks up a lawn chair blown over by the wind, setting it on its legs. Then he stares across the skyline, his eye pulled from one window to another.

He wonders, as he does every time, if this is something he could ever paint: the lights blurring into collective, losing edge and distinction, becoming something more than individual halos, the feeble wattage of personal bulbs, desk lamps and nightlights. He thinks of candles dancing in cathedrals, the way the eye squints to lose definition of space, texture, form. He wants to paint but knows he will not. His hands are smooth, untarnished, free from the bind of drying oils, acrylics, clay. He thinks of lights and the million lives before him, growing old, dying, being born.

Eric breathes deeply—the wind in his nostrils and lungs cold and bracing. He leans over the edge of the roof, looking at the sidewalk and the alleyway below. He reaches out his arm, pointing his fingers to the ground. He counts *one, two, three*, and prepares to jump. He pulls up his arm and closes his eyes, thinking.

The show canceled, *The Tumbling Woman* withdrawn from display. Jerry sanely and carefully making a choice to withdraw his support. The papers resentful and proud, Andrea Peyser declaring his intentions vile and exploitive. Bomb threats lurking in the whispers of gallery staff, critics. Eric thinks of the stages of frustration that lead from the attacks to the construction of the piece, the aftershock.

How in the initial months of creation the piece was always for and about the event. How in carving the look on the falling woman's face he had thought of himself, of his friends. He sees Neil Levin—connected, wealthy, powerful—sitting down to lunch on the 106th floor of the North Tower. He imagines the frantic cell phone calls, the dust and the noise, the lurch of the floor. He remembers the call from Christy, the tears and the despair: Neil gone, everything shattered. He wanted to show something like a

mirror, an image of the accelerated sadness. How this mirror, in the end, was assumed to embody hatred and careerism and exploitation. When everything in it was pity, love.

He remembers leading Christy into the studio, turning on the lights, saying *this is it*. How instead of disgust or rage, or perhaps worse—indifference—she turned and cried.

This hits me in the gut, Eric, she had said. *It hits me in the gut.*

The sculpture itself a work he was proud of, conscientious of what could have gone wrong, what worked, miraculously, what was the effort of tireless rendition and correction. How the falling bodies of the past bled together into the final pose: terrified, awkward, helpless. How losing control of the piece worked to its benefit; he remembers saying this to April, tired, knowing that in the hours and minutes of work there was a power in the materials assembling themselves, a power in the stages of preparation. How the final product was an eerie image of the grimace lodged in his imagination, so much so that he lost the nightmares, the falling dreams. *By exorcism*, he thought, falling asleep.

He asked Christy, Neil's widow, if she shared the same dreams. She didn't answer him; it was noisy; she had to leave.

Only in the moments after the final amendments could Eric feel the weight of what had come before. How the day the towers fell was sufficient but not necessary: how the falling dreams were waking thoughts long before the planes hit.

Each aging awakening was a stage of frustration, from childhood through adolescence to the noisy mishmash of maturity. He wanted to be an artist but a human being first. How it was inevitably difficult to provide a definition of what he thought he was, naturally. The stages of identity crashing around him, gathering debris, philosophical frustration: moving farther from the sun, losing his reason, his sense of progress. Feeling closer to an ape than a machine and then more robotic than ever, his dreams and subconscious ruling his fate, somehow overnight. The vespers and psalms of spirituality explained away by funneled cognition, moving further inward to discover a different sort of ape: violent, manipulative, greedy, eating the earth and pissing in the water. Each step toward confusion made through a veil of frustration, lifted by the clever tossing aside of all that gave him hope.

And his hands, shaky and swiftly falling apart, having to perform the act that would give this frustration an image, an icon of itself, to stand perfect and in stillness and to give that hope back.

He had failed, the papers had told him, to do that. He had exacerbated the wound, pulled on the stitches, showed people a truth that was obvious but unnecessary to bear.

It hit me in the gut, Eric, Christy said, feeling more for Neil than ever. Eric closer to Christy, to Neil, to the man in the photograph that eventually became his stand-in, perfect before the later distortions of art: Richard Drew's *The Falling Man*, his real name something prosaic and mundane, a sound engineer, bisecting towers in freefall, a drop of over one hundred stories. His death as empty as the sky.

Eric perceiving that the veils of frustration were false floors through which he was falling. How nothing relevant or practical could prevent the pull of gravity, the movement downward. Falling toward something grey and unnamed. And his hands and eyes fumbling to find an image, an emblem of this descent: already there in the frame, played out in the lens: *a man falling down*.

Eric merely taking his own copy, playing his own rendition. Feeling the image itself almost holy in its terror, ugly and yet incapable of being obscene. Eric looking for himself in the frame, finding vacant pixilation.

He began to sculpt.

Eric stares into the night sky, his eye unfocused. Amidst the shining lights of the city he is a sliver, a shadow. A powerful gust of wind rips across the roof, upsetting the lawn chairs, throwing handfuls of gravel and stone against the door. Eric feels the cold air and draws his arms tight against his chest. He keeps his eyes fixed in the sky, the pitch space, the million city lights drowning out the stars.

He asks himself, *what are you looking for?* He stares into the atmosphere, his eyes wide and cold.

Eric catches sight of a passenger jet, a tiny, blinking ornament in a sky darker than imagination. Still staring up, he tries to light a cigarette, holding his hands together over a lighter. The flame flashes quickly and then falters, the wind too strong. Eric puts the cigarette, one end wet from his lips, back into the package.

What are you looking for?

Eric stares into space, afraid: afraid of going unseen, unnoticed; afraid of the hovering eye, of being watched. He settles upon a quaint idea of God, remote yet supremely compassionate, foggy around the edges, uncertain. Eric walks toward the door, the stairwell, forgetting the question.

His feet hitting the stairs, Eric thinks of Drew's photograph, the awful symmetry. And what arises, finally, is not the realization of another false floor, another lifted veil, but a daring sense of participation. He registers the problem as set by thought, his ability to think through the unthinkable. The grand and sobering fall, his own, the falling man's, the world's; the dynamic uncovered as the interior life of the heart. He is involved, inextricably, fundamentally, and this frees him: frees him to work, to respond, in dialogue with immense and terrible pain.

He opens the door to his apartment, kicking off his shoes near the closet. He steps into the kitchen but finds it empty, dark. An orange glow emanates from the oven. Eric leans forward and spots a rising cake through the small window. There is a pile of dishes in the sink, the tap dripping hollowly onto a steel pot. He walks through the kitchen and toward the bed.

April lies on her side, her head on a pillow, cutting the bed in half. Her face reflects the changing colours of the television, her eyes fixed and glossy. The room is a submerged and sunken blue, underwater, the television a white ripple of light.

Eric sits on the edge of the bed, his hands in his lap. After a moment, during a commercial for a brand of liquid plumber, April turns her body, crawling toward Eric,

and puts her head in his lap. Eric unconsciously pushes his hands through her hair, rubbing along her scalp. She clutches his side, pulling on his shirt.

Eric thinks of David and feels a million needles of remorse. He closes his eyes, still sensing the edits and changes on the television, still aware. He feels free to work and respond but the artifact, the product, seems incapable of truth.

He looks down at April, her hair tousled across his lap. He tries to think of a question. *What was I looking for?*

On the television is a giant, rotating hamburger. Meat as shiny as glass, tomatoes and lettuce lush and glistening. Dabs of ketchup and mustard peek through cheese like tiny rosary beads.

"Eric?" April whispers.

"Yes," he says, his eyes on her hair.

"You're a good artist," she says. "You're a gifted artist. Don't question that."

Eric smiles, his chest throbbing. April turns, looking up, and her eyes are wet.

"Thank you," he says.

Her lips tremble and she grimaces, pulling and twisting his shirt. And suddenly she is making noise, animal sounds, tears running down her cheeks. She sobs hard, her eyes clenched, her face contorted, a mask.

Eric's jaw drops, stunned. April's voice is high and warbling, shattering in its volume.

"Oh gawd how could you how could you how could you how could you ..."

The oven buzzes, the cake halfway through its cycle.

* * *

Jonathan Briley wakes from a dream that he will not recall.

In his dream he is eleven or twelve, struggling against the will of his father, a titan, towering over his play and his body, tall and hard and stubborn. Jonathan pleads for his own way, his own will, wanting the physical game to go on into the late hours of dusk, the sky still orange and radiant with the setting sun. He sees the running shadows of friends, children his age, streaking down sidewalks, scattering among trees. He does not want to go back, to bathe, to be cloistered. He hears his own voice rise out in protest, high-pitched and petulant. Submission to the tall crooked figure he can barely see against the sunset is the greatest injustice, thinks Jonathan, a child.

But like all children, Jonathan submits. He re-enters the house where he was born and the games and the players are forgotten. He rests in the submission he has unknowingly given as a gift, more satisfied in the gladness and calm he has brought upon his father than in the freedom of the evening, the laughing voices, the strain and the competition. His father who is loving and kind and terrible, always the same echo of impression, despite the years and the bending of the body. Still and always his father.

Jonathan wakes not remembering, seeing only the shape and press of faces that combine and disassemble, receding again into parts of his memory that are silent and asleep.

His eyes open, slow and sightless in the still-dark bedroom. He listens to Hillary beside him, her breath slow and regular. He knows by the moon shining through the window, the absence of birds, that he can go back to sleep. This sleep is precious and heavy, settling quickly upon his body and mind, leading him back into avenues of rest that show him face, feeling, colour. He does not shift or turn from the position he has found himself in until the sun rises, the birds sing out in renewed surprise.

Now, awake for good, Jonathan feels the weight of sleep hang hard and painful upon his limbs. His alarm clock begins to scream, shrill and precise. With a rattling groan, Jonathan reaches across Hillary and fumbles with the dial. Hillary grunts, disturbed, rolling over onto her side, awake for the short time it takes for Jonathan to rise, throw his feet over the side of the bed, rub his neck and arms, and leave the room. He closes the door behind him and the room is again possessed by sleep.

Jonathan walks toward the bathroom. He raps lightly against the white wall with his knuckles. Inside, squinting before the vanity lights, he rummages in a closet, searching for towels. He unfolds a long green towel and hangs it on a hook attached to the door. Before long Jonathan is undressed, testing the temperature of water that falls from the showerhead. He feels good in the hot water, filling his mouth and spitting jets that arc toward his feet, humming something he cannot place. He lets the water hammer against his face and neck, staring into the steam and pressure for as long as he can stand it. Then he wipes his eyes, turns off the tap, and reaches for his towel. He dries his skin and steps onto a bathmat, yawning.

Jonathan's thoughts are sleepy, cumbersome, not fully conscious. He imagines scenes of his childhood, but they are not quite his own. Images and associations, some real, some forged in dreams, leave Jonathan remembering fragments: fragments of fear and desire and love. He thinks, for a half moment outside the regular workings of his mind, that these fragments could be re-assembled. That there was a shattering, sometime, somewhere, impossible to trace. That putting the pieces back together would be an act of courage, would grant courage; a wholeness of mind. But these are sleepy thoughts, not really his own, or so truly his own they are unrecognizable. He abandons them, yawning, his teeth white and even in the mirror.

Jonathan opens the door to his bedroom slowly, as quietly as he can manage. He tiptoes across the floor toward the closet and the dresser, opening drawers and taking clothing from hangers. He sits on his side of the bed and pulls on a pair of boxer briefs. Hillary opens one eye, awake, and notes the colour of Jonathan's underwear: blue. She watches him lean over the bed, watches his spine bend and protrude through his dark, smooth skin. She notes the colour of his socks: black. Jonathan stands and pulls on a pair of dress pants. Hillary watches him, her eye a sliver, feigning sleep. His pants are black; she notes the orange t-shirt he will wear beneath the white uniform of the restaurant. She does not know why she notes these details, but in the fog of her mind they are like stages of prayer: positioning of the body, supplication of the limbs. She falls asleep thinking of Jonathan's clothes, knowing that she too will soon have to wake and shake the sleep from her thoughts.

Jonathan performs the precise rituals of his morning, as he does every morning. He lathers his cheeks with white cream and draws a razor across his skin. He trims his goatee with a pair of tiny scissors, staring into the mirror. He rubs scented lotion over his face and slaps his cheeks. He runs a stick of deodorant under his arms and runs his hand through his hair.

Under the bright lights of the kitchen, Jonathan brews a pot of coffee, pushes bread into a toaster, cuts an orange into slices. He drinks several glasses of water, standing at the sink, easing the hot dryness of his throat. He pours a small glass of juice, just to taste, and flicks on the television in the living room, keeping the volume low. His eyes stare at the television, not listening to the anchorwoman on the news channel, her tone bright and awake and cloying. Jonathan spreads peanut butter and strawberry jam over the bread that pops from the toaster, golden brown. He bites into the toast and then into a piece of orange, sucking the juice and ripping at the fibres. The coffee machine sputters and gurgles while he stands against the counter, waiting. After what seems like a short eternity the coffee percolator slows down, gasps, and is silent. Jonathan pours a cup and places the pot back onto its heater, knowing Hillary will appreciate the gesture.

Jonathan moves into the living room, the television still on, and sits on a couch, his cup of coffee hot between his hands. He picks up the remote control and begins to cycle through channels. He watches a professor of linguistics teaching a classroom of young men and women the vowel shifts of an ancient language. He watches a Rastafarian woman try to sell her services as an oracle, a diviner. The word prophecy scrolls across the bottom of the screen in bright yellow letters. He watches a commercial for an educational facility, a young Lebanese man smiling, saying the word knowledge. He watches a southern preacher, a man of fat jowls and shaking rage, speaking of faith that can move mountains. He watches an infomercial that tells him how for less than the price of a cup of coffee a day, he can change a child's life. He watches a documentary on a martyr, a woman, burnt to death in a public square.

Jonathan turns off the television and sips his coffee. For a moment he feels lost, adrift, unanchored by direction or motivation. He feels an inadequacy, a poverty of skill or knowledge, and again the tremors of childhood quake in the sleeping parts of his mind. He feels fear, the world hostile, uninvoiting. He wants to crawl back into bed, suddenly, forget the drive into the city, forget the contract. He steels himself with the thought of the weekend, something he and Hillary booked off together to be with Gwen and Alex. He steels himself with the thought of eventual release, of reward that is always receding, postponed. He sips his coffee and walks back into the kitchen, imagining the towers, the vertigo, the sunlight.

Rinsing his plate and his knife, he eyes a post-it note near the cupboard. He peels it off the wood and reads,

Dad, Can you buy me some AA batteries? Love, Gwen.

He folds the note in half and slips it into his pocket. When I was a child, he thinks, that's the way I thought. I thought like her. I thought and understood like she does. Now I'm different, somehow, and now those thoughts are gone, put away somewhere.

Jonathan again feels inadequate, ill-equipped, as if he were still a child, now trapped inside a grown man, expected to provide and converse and work, bear pain, assume responsibility, make love. What do I have, he thinks, that gives me the right to be alive. I have no knowledge and no cards to tell the future. I have no money for the poor and no courage to burn. And so where's my faith, faith like Dad? Put away somewhere too, maybe. I just wanna sleep, God. Why can't I have that?

Jonathan walks into the bathroom and brushes his teeth, spitting into running water. He wipes his mouth on a hand towel and turns off the light, his shadow a silhouette in the mirror.

Back inside his bedroom, he drags his briefcase from the closet, opening the latches to double-check one final time if he has all the tools he will need. Satisfied, he shuts the case and sets it on the bed, gently, not wanting to wake Hillary. Then he takes the white coat from his closet, stiff and uncomfortable, and puts his arms through the sleeves.

He looks through the window as the sun inches up beyond the horizon. He sees the dew still clinging to the leaves and the grass. Birds sing in exuberance, a full-throated sincerity incapable of giving less. Jonathan places his hand against the glass of his window and watches the world waking up, the world that will wake up again and again, with or without him. The earlier doubt and fear diminishes in his thoughts, not from the indifference of sky and leaf and sparrow, petal and wasp and knotted bark, but from the shared morning: the morning he shares will all the living, joined with all that lives, moves, breathes. And joined to the living he feels a hope that cannot move from thought to word, but lives profound and tender in feeling.

Jonathan watches a sparrow lift into the air, and every hair on his head stands up, accounted for, part of the same cup.

Jonathan takes his hand from the glass and walks around the side of the bed, watching Hillary breathe in the quiet passages of sleep. He sits near her bent knees and watches her face. He reaches out and presses his fingers against her wrist, listening through the tips of his fingers to her pulse. He bends down to her wrist and kisses her open palm, smelling her skin.

Jonathan turns off the lights in the kitchen and laces his shoes. He opens the front door and takes a breath. The air is cold, moist, but by the bright light of the sun the day promises to be warm and clear. He opens the door of his Saturn and sets his briefcase down on the passenger seat. He double-checks the trunk for the rolled black electric cable. Then he sits in the car and closes the door.

Jonathan turns the keys in the ignition. As the engine coughs into life he squints into the rear-view mirror, watching for cars, his foot hesitant on the pedal, and the words and the fear from the television fall away from him like tinkling brass and cymbal, useless, empty, without profit or joy.

He glides down the driveway and into the street, moving, thinking, inching closer to home. He thinks of the pulse in Hillary's wrist, the small scrawl of Gwen's note, and can almost remember his dream, his father, the passing shadows of love.

Hillary opens her eyes in a bedroom filled with white light, bird song, the scent of Jonathan's aftershave. She puts her nose to her palm and smells.