

Cutter

Wood is not enough and stone not enough. The house is trembling always, and everywhere John sees rotting, cracking, paint peeling, pipes leaking. If the decay is not apparent, it is because it is hidden and pernicious. He feels panicked, as if the house might fly apart at any moment—nails shoot from wood, the walls shudder with fatigue and collapse. The friction that holds the nails is a poor and pitiful force with gravity and entropy conspiring against it. John walks through the house touching the walls with his fingertips. *Hold fast*, he whispers, *hold fast*.

Mary will be returning from the library board meeting soon. He checks that the boys are both asleep. Roger is six and Oliver will be turning eight in few weeks. Mary has been planning a party for him—knights, costumes, dragons. She has asked John to clear a bower in the woods, a request he has neglected. He and Mary are both scattered in their energies, as if they could mount one half-decent love between them. He hopes they both avoid the children enough to keep this unevenness hidden from them.

Mary has been put in charge of the library's evening lecture series; the previous month's was a bit of a disaster. The speaker was a poet, widely known by name but little read. He arrived drunk and read without humor a series of poems about jizz and farting. He breathed ponderously through his nostrils. He offered no reflections when he finished, just snapped his book shut, shouldered his coat and left.

For her the lectures are a vital leavening agent to life so far from the city. They add a civilizing texture without which she would feel that time was moving backward. The women of the board are more focused than Mary on self-betterment. They have traveled little and believe firmly in the idea of progress. They have appointed Mary to find the next speaker with the goal of avoiding the seamy flatness of the jizz poet, and, at the same time, drawing more of the men in

town to the lecture. The women present it as a matter of broadening the appeal of the series, but each feels silently that they would like their betterment validated by the interest of men.

When Mary comes in, John pours her a glass of wine.

“They want more men to come,” she says. “Do you know any speakers men would be interested in hearing?” John is the editor of a magazine attached to a small art museum; he thinks of his work there as an ongoing attempt to cast light into the darkness, but his job, like everyone else’s there, is defined in terms of raising money. The women at the museum all dress in colorful accents and their hair is erratic. They speak urgently about everything, everything is so wonderful, so vital and exhilarating, so breathtakingly unique. Men, generally speaking, hate them all.

“What about Hugh MacPhearson?”

“He’s a bore,” says Mary. “And he always makes me feel like he’s doing us all such a favor.” MacPhearson writes a mystery series set in town. He had three or four mildly successful books, but has since written an additional twenty that clog the shelves in the bookstore.

“How about if I make you some dinner?” he says, and retreats to the kitchen. She follows him in and sits silently while he poaches some salmon for her and makes rice and asparagus. She feels spoiled, which she loves, and ticks off for him the board’s restrictions for speakers.

“No one political. Not too obscure or pretentious. No self promoters. Someone from outside of Putnam, but not too famous. Dynamic, but not flashy. Engaging without pandering. No ‘storytellers’. The board thinks that men like history, or Russians. What would make Hal come out, do you think?”

Hal is their neighbor. Hal is so utterly Hal that he is difficult to describe. He is in sales, which he relishes. He favors complexly patterned golf shirts and no-iron khakis with loafers; he never seems to wear the same clothes or shoes, yet always looks exactly the same. To John, in his ruffled world, this is some sort of aesthetic miracle. Hal is round, but solid, densely packed.

When John heard the space shuttle explosion had been caused by a chunk of foam tearing a hole in the wing, he thought immediately of Hal's stomach, of a chunk flying free and tearing through the side of a car, of Hal like some swarthy Babylonian god, destroying cars by hurtling pieces of his stomach at them.

"Pornography," he says, and she laughs. "Or a professional golfer." He sets her place for her. He has even thought to add a garnish, which he knows will delight her. It does.

"You could get Pettigrew." Pettigrew is an explorer, an old man who cannot remember the names of the rivers he has traveled. He was in the British army after the Second World War, and wrote some books about the desert in the late fifties. "Might be timely."

She eats and he has another drink to keep her company. The evening lapses into a customary silence—when they have run out of conversation about the day and both wish to pass the intimate and fraught conversations of the night unengaged. They read in silence. Mary leaves for bed and John sits in the study, reading a draft of an article written by a graduate student. The writer has described an image of Blake's as procrustean, and John is irked that he cannot remember exactly what it means. The definition in his Webster's is not helpful: "hard, rigid"; he suspects this is as far as the graduate student got, skimming his thesaurus to find appropriately obscure vocabulary.

As he leafs through Bulfinch he can feel his own memory rising to the surface. The robber. The bed. A pleasant, lively dinner leading with gentle, ineffable logic to a walk up the stairs. Sympathetic smiles all around—solicitations of comfort and ease. The iron bed, surrounded by the implements of torture, perhaps a painted flower at the head. The glint of a saw, imperfectly cleaned.

John finishes editing the article. It is not good, but it connects to the needs of the magazine—the prestigious feel of its dense obscurity, the dedicated scholarship of the student, who looks appropriately wan in his photo. John fixes another drink and reads an Italian novel in

translation; he wonders if the awkwardness of the prose is poor translation or expert translation of some intentional awkwardness.

His days are marked by textures of reading—newspaper, memos, ponderous emails from the Director, a trade journal, a novel for pleasure at lunch, endless drafts of the new exhibit catalog, print vendor proposals. Without reading or the prospect of it, he becomes anxious. He uses reading to try to change his moods—something heavy like the Italian to make him feel substantial after the queasiness that editing the student article has brought on.

He checks to see that Mary is fully asleep before changing into pajamas she has bought him. He slips into bed, breathing as gently and unobtrusively as he can. He gets under the covers and ceases to move, knowing that sleep will arrive even if he does not settle more comfortably.

Pettigrew is suspicious of the telephone, so Mary has to find him by circling through town for several afternoons. She catches him as he staggers out of the underbrush on a roadside, his woolen socks trailing burrs and flax. He has a groomed mustache and is in that state of healthy old age where he has looked the same for 20 years—craggy but upright, steady on his feet; what comes next is precipitous decline and it will come in a year or two. He assents to speak, provides a list of necessary equipment and their specifications, and then shuffles away.

The library ladies are thrilled. There is much discussion of appropriate refreshments—goat cheese? Tented cakes? Baklava? One confesses, giggling, that she has always thought Baklava is an Austrian winter hat. Another asserts her preference for French rather than Austrian hats, especially for dessert. None of them have actually met a real Austrian. Mary dissuades them from having a themed reading. They agree, but there is further giggling about hat eating and the Austrians.

On the night of his presentation, Pettigrew arrives, shabby but proper, and stands against the wall near the front, waiting for Mary to guide him. People take their seats—an old couple, he already dozing off; the earnest ladies of the board, ramrod straight, filling up the front rows; three

divorcees—the smell of white wine and perfume; a lean, intense boy with paint on his hands; and John.

The lights go out and Pettigrew steps forward, the textured light from the projector falling across his face. He shows maps of the Ottoman Empire, the Sudan, Abyssinia, Anatolia; red lines trace the routes of the 3rd Expeditionary Scouts. Pettigrew's narrative consists mostly of dates and supplies, of distances and rations.

“Five men on camels can travel twice as fast as ten men for periods of a month or more. Groups larger than sixty are so slow and difficult to supply that there is no need to engage them militarily; Oases will not yield the water to support them and the desert itself will thin them to reasonable numbers. Large scale attacks are logistical wonders, as they require dozens of small groups to arrive at exactly the same time via different routes, mount their attack, and be able to disperse again before the oases are exhausted.”

Then, in grainy black and white: camels, tents anchored in gravelly washes, striking young men with rifles in their laps squinting into the distance; a young Pettigrew, with short hair and a full beard, his cracked lips coated with dust.

“The Bedu are a tribe that trace their lineage directly to Ishmael. They value dignity highly and their own lives not at all. They have no knowledge of medicine or nutrition; they survive by breeding camels and banditry. They freeze in the cold and suffer the heat and hunger and thirst. They believe they live the finest possible lives because the harsh conditions they endure shape them into the strongest, the most noble and the most free men on the earth. They pitied those of us who had the misfortune to live other, more sheltered lives.”

John realizes he has never looked at life on these terms before—what shape is his life making him? He has cobbled a life of components—marriage, children, cars and appropriate clothes, acceptable leisures that let him look at beautiful things and smell beautiful smells, that let his children laugh and not cry—that let them feel safe and loved and never think that the world may

end. He has ulcers and spends the odd Saturday on the can shitting bile if he drinks too much coffee or gin. His back hurts, and his heart. At night, his teeth ache. He gets winded on the stairs. He is 38 years old.

Pettigrew shows some slides of British gun emplacements, and a blurry slide of running camels, taken from the air. He talks about the discovery of oil and the disintegration of the Bedu, of the rise of airplanes and the loss of the desert as a refuge.

The lights come up and the ladies struggle to find instructive questions (Could they improve our scientific methods for breeding cattle? Were the camels treated badly? How did they educate their women?) Pettigrew bears their attention with awkward patience, and leaves.

Mary cleans up the refreshments and John helps to stack the folding chairs.

“Well, what did you think?” asks Mary in the car.

“Very interesting. Especially to think about how long their lives were the same, and how rapidly they have changed. I wonder if they are happier now that they suffer less.”

“If they have survived the evils of comfortable clothing and proper medicine? The awful burdens of regular meals?”

He laughs.

“Just imagine the dentistry,” he says, and trails off.

John runs the babysitter home; the boys have been good. When he returns, Mary is in bed with a book. He thinks he may give her a kiss goodnight tonight, but she is carefully ensconced. He retreats to the study and tries to read—the Italian, a monograph on Renaissance body art, but the words are vague and stubborn. He sits with his hands trembling, looking for what would be right to read, when he is seized by a startling and necessary idea. He is some minutes with the preparations.

He checks in on Mary and shuts her door gently, waiting after the click to hear if she stirs. He debates about turning on the bathroom fan—better to mask his own noise? Or be able to

hear if someone is coming downstairs? He turns on the fan. The boys are both asleep. He descends.

In the downstairs bathroom, John lets the blade press against the skin of his forearm—sees it elastic and resistant. He thinks for a moment how remarkable skin is—durable, regenerating, vulnerable. He waits for some 6th grade facts to leap into his mind, how skin is stronger than steel, or would stretch to cover a football field, but none come. He pulls; the knife is sharp—he has sharpened it for this purpose. A short wedge sits white and naked for a moment and then blood wells up. The pain was sharp, but is already indistinct. He makes a second cut, deeper and longer than the first—he is braver now—and then a third. The third is the smallest, but deep. The blood on the knife makes him ashamed and he pushes to finish before he loses his nerve entirely. The blood flows over his arm now, obscuring the cuts. It is brightly, impossibly red, as if it can bear no relation to himself.

He watches a moment longer. The cuts well and the blood runs evenly, not jerking out with the throb of his heart, not a product of his sporadic life. And then he grabs the towel he has made ready (white) and presses it into the cuts. He kneels at the edge of the bathtub and rinses away the excess blood. He daubs at the cuts and then presses down hard to stop the bleeding. He is elated.

In the kitchen, he gets out a gauze pad and tape and hydrogen peroxide. The cuts are still bleeding slightly as he cleans and binds them, but they do not hurt. In fact, his whole being feels charged and alive as he secures the gauze, tears the white tape and draws down his sleeve.

Back in the bathroom, the sight of the bloody knife is shocking and degrading. He feels weak. He throws the towel and the knife into a bag and then takes it out to the garage. He scrubs the bathtub, the bathroom floor, the sink in the kitchen. He can feel the indictment of the knife out in the garage. He changes into clean pajamas. The gauze is still blazing white, like a badge of honor for which he has been, in the past, gloriously worthy.

He rises early, before the boys are up. He makes coffee and leaves as quietly as he can.

The supermarket is filled with old people, as if a plague of age has struck in the night and he is one of the resistant few. Even the cashiers are old. The aisles smell of lemony disinfectants or their absence—the chemical idea of what spring might smell like.

He steers to avoid a blockade of women clustered in among the muffins and overhears them complaining. They never complain about the freshness of vegetables, but about the aging fleet of shopping carts. And the answer is not simply new carts, but a new store, or, more appropriately, a NEW STORE. This one is soiled with use (their own). If only it were 10% larger and shiny—they seem to think that is a good ambition for almost everything in the world.

Looking for towels, he frets about matching the shade of white. He selects a knife, hesitates, then gets two. Planning for his own weakness shames him further. The cutting is no longer an impulse but an activity; it has become a history of deliberate steps and a plan of future degradations.

When he gets home, he finds the house is still quiet. He replaces the towel and the knife, and hides the second knife in the garage. If she finds it there, will it be stranger than if she finds an extra knife in the drawer? He shifts it to the drawer, but wedges it in the top, above the silverware holder, where the chopsticks are, where it might have shifted accidentally. He changes his shirt for a fancier one, and even irons it quickly as he hears stirring upstairs. He makes the boys lunches for school and packs their backpacks. Mary comes down and notices the shirt; she supposes he has put it on for her; it is just the kind of small, formal gesture that feels to her like love. Under his shirt he can feel the tautness of the tape.

Roger comes down, chattering already on the stairs, before he can see them, before he is knows that anyone is there. Oliver emerges dressed in the same clothes as yesterday. Mary sends him back upstairs. John helps load them in the car amid Roger's bright and breathless talking.

Back in the house, John resolves to clear the bower. He changes his shirt again and, because he has no tools, heads to the hardware store. Putnam's is still a family business—a square-headed father and his square-headed sons, though he cannot remember their names.

In the hardware store the metal—the screws and bolts, bins of nails, chains—all of it shines with the promise of order, of durable building and the knowledges that lie behind it. Plumb. Even the word has a reassuring fullness. The smell of oiled metal makes him think of handguns, of their surprising weight, of their feeling of sufficiency.

He buys gloves and clippers, or loppers as they seem to be called, and a brush saw. Their house, and the houses around it, used to be farms. Stone walls run through the woods where the fields were divided. Maple and oak and birch have grown up, but the forest is still young. The underbrush is dense with honeysuckle and sumac and burdock, and many of the young trees are suffocating under vines.

John begins cutting a few trees and braiding the others into a looping tunnel through the underbrush. He finds a patch of grass and fern under a low-spreading hemlock. He lops some young birches and weaves them into a crude entrance. His cuts ache, and sting sharply whenever the brush hits them. Underneath the bandage, however, his arm feels surprisingly strong—he can feel the muscles moving smoothly, responding as he demands of them.

Throughout the day he hears gunshots in the distance at regular intervals—probably a boy with a new rifle, practicing on bottles, or song birds. The boom and echo provides a refrain of violence, of violent acts in the peaceful day, or of the preparations for violence. Men planning for killing, or boys learning to take their place in violent ways of being. He imagines the boy, thrilled to have a real gun—just as John had been—eager to try it out, to see if it could really bring death. To bring death. The gun goes on and on—for an hour, then two—firing faster, then slower, then faster again but pausing, it seems, only long enough to reload. Someone has spent the day shooting. That day, and many others are gone.

He finishes clearing the brush in the late afternoon; he can hear that the boys are back from school. He sits among the ferns and listens to them run and shout. He thinks about sneaking in through the garage, but he stays. The sky is orange, and then purple, and then black. The whine of mosquitoes rises. The boys have gone in, have eaten dinner, are, no doubt, in their beds. He tries to look at the clouds, at the emergent stars, tries to listen to the birds and the insects, to the fall of night, but remains preoccupied with his own discomforts and his endurance of them. The early summer evening is cool; the ground is surprisingly lumpy and scratchy. His shirt is thin and he shivers, twitches as he is bitten.

Without resolving to do so, he reaches a point where it seems necessary to spend the night outside. He imagines if he can fall asleep somehow, despite his discomforts, he will have triumphed over something, over some conception of himself. He tries to watch the stars moving, but they do not. The night seems impossibly long, the compressed hours unfolding in a way that makes him anxious and bored at the same time. He tries to see the shadows changing as the night deepens, tries to imagine the sun on the other side of the world. The night continues without relenting; he does not sleep, at least not as he understands it—he becomes aware and then unaware.

No rain comes, but he can feel the dew well up. The black disappears and the sky becomes light. He is thrilled with the idea that he has survived. He sits waiting for the sunlight to reach him through the tunnel he has made—patient for the world to roll underneath him—all of its seas and shores, all of its mountains. The light strikes his upraised knee and slides down his leg, at once intimate and immense, the sun and earth in service to this moment he has been waiting for. The sun at the horizon accelerates, is up. He rises and returns to the house.

Mary is awake.

“Where were you?” she asks, because she is irritated and because she ought to.

“Out,” he says. “I got finished late and was tired. I fell asleep.” He tries to make this sound casual, plausible, as if such a thing were even faintly possible.

“There is blood,” she says, pointing. The bandage has bled through.

“I know. The locusts, I think, have sharp thorns. They were heavier than I thought.”

“Let me help you,” she says. He extends his arm like a child. She strips off his dressing. The cuts are no longer bleeding but look fully liquid, as if surface tension is all that is holding back the blood. They look antiseptic—perfectly even, well-spaced, like a contract awaiting signatures. She does not look at him while she rinses them with antiseptic and gently lays down fresh gauze.

“Those are deep,” she says. “Are you...do you think we should have someone look at them?” What she wants to say is *What have you done? What is happening to you?* She presses down the tape, wishing for each of her movements to transmit in its code: *I am alarmed. You are not who I know.* She lets her hand linger for a moment: *I don't want to understand this. I don't know what is happening.* She looks finally in his face, which is lit and distant. His cheeks are flushed from the heat of the house, from shaking off the dampness of the morning. She feels he is lost, and wonders if he will return, if she would like him to return for reasons other than comfort.

“I’m stiff,” he says. “Ground is hard.” And he laughs. He turns from her and climbs the stairs.

He likes the look of dirt on his own hands and the smell of the forest on him. He feels like this is a secret he should share with the sleeping boys. He wants to shake them from their beds, from warmth and comfort, put them out in the cold and darkness. They are both curled under their covers, pink and softly peaceful, the work of sleeping past. The boys are ignorant of his impulse to damage them, oblivious to a gaze that is assessing their capacity to suffer, to adapt, to weather hardship and change and deprivation (for the chance at joy, he tells himself, for beauty out from under the glass). He has no desire to hurt them, but feels in this carefully constructed unreality that they are being held back from the world.

He needs to get ready for work, but he wants to hold the smell of the dirt and dew on him for as long as he can. He fills the sink with cold water and dunks his head in, letting the water run over his shoulders and down his back. He does not shave nor shower, but gets dressed in clean clothes. He calls out a cheerful goodbye to which Mary does not reply.

Sitting at his desk in the afternoon, his arm starts to itch under the bandages. His leafy, earthy smell has faded, overwhelmed by the chemical smells that surround him, of his desk, the carpeting, his clean clothes, that he exudes; he dredges up some splinters from under his nails for the last of the smell of the night. He is weary in the afternoon, but still exhilarated; the world feels endlessly variable, as if any line of action may be considered, any thought arrive, any turn be left or right and every moment charged with what might be done or undone. For a moment, he worries that she has found the knife, and a wave of shame passes through him. Tomorrow, at least, is garbage day, and the knife and towel will be gone.

Mary is going out again that night, still the library—a subcommittee on renovations. He will be careful to be asleep before she returns. She does not mention the cuts.

He buys extra gauze and tape that he keeps in his desk at work. He watches the edges of the scabs grow pale and crumbly—he lifts them off to see a pale white mouth and a deep red throat that wells up. This feeling is as important to him as the cutting. He inflicts the cut, but the healing comes unbidden—does its work without prompting or effort—hidden—automatic; it gathers what it needs without demanding, and the healing happens, finishes, the white line like a signature. It gives him faith that the whole world works this way—that it is inflicted upon, gathers itself and heals. He feels purged for a time, hopeful.

The morning of Oliver's birthday is hot and dry. Mary has made costumes for all eight of the boys who come over. There is a quest for the knights out in the yard and down into the basement, and out to the bower. Somewhere is a dragon, filled with candy.

Mary has dressed John in a tuxedo, which makes him feel festive, although it is nine o'clock on Saturday morning and the sun is glaring in the sky. He has a whiskey and then another. In the bathroom, he shakes a handful of Mary's pills out into his hand. He takes two and slides the rest into his pocket. The boys are tearing through the house, roaring and clashing plastic swords against cardboard shields. The cat flees. Mrs. Hendershot asks when the new edition of the magazine will be out, and what exhibits the museum is planning. John ties a balloon and praises Roger's fortifications.

From the yard he can hear Mary's voice, and there is a surprising warmth in it for the children. She loves them, he does not doubt it.

The boys shriek as the dragon comes down and they scabble for candy. Mary enters, beaming, and John rises to cut the cake. She has made it in the shape of a tower, with a ring of candles along the carefully crenellated edge. Oliver takes in a breath to blow out the candles, but then decides to try to lop off the flames with his sword. He hits the tower near the top. The cake spatters the ring of boys and Mary's face darkens. The boys all laugh, but Oliver has realized his mistake. He gathers pieces of the cake onto a plate and struggles to reassemble them. Mary forces out a laugh and retreats for paper towels. John cuts rough squares. He begins to scoop ice cream onto plates, and the oblivious boys devour them.

Roger cries during the presents, at the sheer injustice of it not being his birthday and for the interminable time until it will be. His cheeks are flushed and grubby and his eyes have an odd flatness to them. The Hendershots leave, then the Wheelers and the Kerrs, and then abruptly everyone is gone. The boys sit calmly watching a movie and there is a small fire in the fireplace.

Mary makes a light dinner, but the boys have been eating candy all afternoon. They trudge up to their baths and into their beds. John rises through his pleasant fog to kiss them goodnight.

Oliver has piled all of his new toys and books onto his bed with him and is touching each one in turn. Today his blessings seem bountiful and he is overwhelmed by them. He settles himself against the mounds of plastic and wood, against the spines of books.

"Tell Mom I'm sorry about the cake," he murmurs. "I just...I didn't." His eyelids waver and John kisses him on the forehead to save him from crying.

Roger has thrown himself down on top of his covers. He is wearing pajama bottoms with fire engines on them, but no top. His chest looks impossibly small and frail and he seems to be heaving in his breaths. His face is pinched and damp; he whimpers, not awake but not fully asleep either. When John stoops to kiss him, his eyes open and there is a terrible, alien wildness in them. A moment later, he flails his arms out defensively, as if he is having a dream of fighting.

Downstairs, Mary sits with a glass of wine, her book closed in her lap.

"It was a lovely party," he says. She smiles and stops smiling. He knows what she wanted—for the boys to have had a small, unforgettable adventure, and to have sat politely with their cake recounting it, thanking her. The measure of her success is thirty years away—will they tell their children about the dragon party? Will they remember the cake shaped like a tower? She has the impulse to plant memories in them, to ensure that their childhoods are happy by stuffing them with discrete, memorable events. The boys were happy, are happy.

"Roger seems to have a fever," he says.

"Yes, I know."

"Probably just worn out from the excitement." As if the force of the day, the intention of filling him with memories has overwhelmed his capacity to receive them. John looks at her with great tenderness, feeling all at once her yearning to be good, to have done well. He wants to embrace her, but she has opened her book.

John retreats upstairs and takes off his tuxedo jacket and his stiff shoes. He looks in again on Oliver and then Roger. His younger son is huddling, asleep, in a small corner of his bed. John climbs in next to him and wraps his son in his arms.

He has read that our instruments can detect energy entering the solar system with the force of a single snowflake striking the ground. He smiles to think of alarmed scientists, red lights flashing and dials oscillating, their scopes trained on this small, radiant nova of warmth. His son's fever seems necessary then, not dangerous or alien; it is his son's body, like his own, healing, learning to heal, to be resilient, being shaped.