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## Through the Window

THROUGH THE WINDOW, the day probably looks less distant than it is, Sebastian decided. Or he himself wasn't ready to interact with it. *One step into a new day changes the course of time*, he read once on a sign at the mall. For today he chose a T-shirt with blue and gray geometric shapes, and loose underpants. He stared into the emptiness of Brighton Street, without having the apocalyptic sentiment that a personless street is an empty street, or any other train of thought. The sunlight strode in and out of the breaks in shade. He watched this with all his mind but no judgment. Sebastian was an innocent boy. His questions were never careful. He believed that the world was just a little way off, a small thing to discover. He still very much liked the taste of apple juice.

Sebastian didn't leave his room anytime before 8 a.m. After 8 a.m., his mother wouldn't ask questions or be worried that he might not be a normal boy. His mother spoke with a lot of other mothers at churches and parks and nonprofit banquets, and all the normal mothers agreed that normal young boys don't wake before 10 a.m. on Saturdays. So 8 a.m. felt like a compromise. She appreciated that he was special; she wouldn't appreciate it if he was . . . odd.

He could hear the dishes clinking downstairs; mother cleaning off yesterday's hardened chili. Sebastian couldn't stand the sound of clinking dishes. It was too irregular and tonelessly sharp, and, cramped up in his room, he felt the sound forced itself on him. Sebastian grabbed for his MP3 headphones and turned on "Gentle Waves." He disliked his mother when she did the dishes in the morning, before he could come out. But he disliked the feeling of resentment much more, so he opened his arms at his sides and began swaying back and forth like the sea. When "Gentle Waves" ended and "Jungle Nights" began, he scurried like the chimp shaking canopies of the Amazon and dropped his legs over his bedside like vines.

Downstairs his mother finished the dishes and as a small triumph sat with her legs out the back-porch window and massaged them in the sun.

She wore a nine-and-a-half-year-old ivory maternity dress. Sebastian came down.

“Beep beep,” he said.

“Sebastian,” she said smiling. “You’re not wearing pants.”

“No pants today. No sticky sweat legs.”

“Shorts then.”

“Yes. Shorts.”

He reached into the kitchen cabinet and pulled out the yellow bowl, then prepared oatmeal on the stove.

“Smart boy,” his mother said. Sebastian nodded.

“Special boy.”

He nodded again.

“What do I say?” she asked.

“You say never change, Mother. And I promise I never will.”

She grinned, sighing. Another small victory, maybe a nap soon.

“Will you get the mail, babsy?”

“Watch my oatmeal.”

Sebastian groaned before opening the front door. It all played in front of him, like it always did. In the sun he would squint, then a car would pass, followed by the mail truck, then biking girls, two of them, his age. He hated people his age. He preferred them older, when they spoke less. There’s a swirling incompleteness in those who are still growing, which is offset by a lot of blathering. He sensed all that. Nevertheless, there would certainly be people out, and they would talk about his underwear. He groaned.

Outside, all his predictions came true, again. He walked with his head down, stopping to warm his feet on the blacktop driveway, then cooling them in the grass. A feeling is all, on his way to complete a task.

“Babsy,” his mother called. “Your oatmeal is ready.”

He went “Beep beep,” then tarried on his way to the mailbox. The tan girls rode past on bikes, with hair that was blond on the ends but brown toward the scalp, and with silky little bodies. Oscar Meyer Weiner limbs.

“Hi, Sebastian,” like a rehearsed choir. He’d heard the greeting millions of times before, even before he was born. It attacked, rising high in pitch then slowly decaying in tone and volume. He wanted to speak to them, but his first instinct was to spit on them.

“Hey, wait,” he called after them.

The girls skid to a stop. They were sisters, evidently, or else they de-

cided to be friends solely on the basis that they resembled each other. Maybe that's the origin of friendship. By observing them, Sebastian collected abstracts on the structure of the world. Without realizing it, of course.

"Where did you get that basket of apples?" he asked. They laughed. He wasn't sure if it was at him.

"You're funny, Sebastian."

The smaller girl had a basket of apples hanging from her handlebars. She seemed the tougher of the two, because she didn't speak.

"Goo goo ga ga." He danced in the street and did something funny, only because they said he was; then he stared at them deadpan. "I'm serious. I love apples."

"We got them from up in Ryder's Woods," said the taller one. "They're the best red apples in the whole world."

The apples were plump and perfectly domestic. A sheen spread across Sebastian's eye.

"Can I have one?"

"Why are you only wearing underwear?" asked the smaller girl.

"Worms," said Sebastian. "Worms eat apples."

"We need all of these for mom's pie," said the older one. "Just go get some yourself. Ask your mom to take you, it's just across those tracks." She pointed to the house where Manny, a normal eleven-year-old boy, lived. At rare times, Sebastian heard loud rumblings from behind that home. He imagined it was heat thunder, not trains.

Sebastian nodded.

"You're weird," said the little one. Her first words to him. Sebastian decided he liked her.

WHEN THE GIRLS LEFT, Sebastian lifted his bare foot and saw that he had stepped on a blackberry from the neighbor's overgrown bush. The jam looked to him like bug guts, and he shook his head rapidly in disgust and ran to the grass to rub it off. Another car drove by; the man inside stared at Sebastian with furrowed brows. He made a mean face back, then stomped inside.

"Your oatmeal is getting cold," his mother said unemotionally, adding, "and I bet your tush is, too. Please go put on shorts."

Sebastian looked sad, and she knew why. She asked him to do small tasks like going to get the mail because she knew it posed a challenge for him: the different temperatures, the coarse gravel, the people. The

people. He has to adjust someday, she thought.

“Mom, can you put some apple in my oatmeal?”

“We don’t have any apples, babs. Put some shorts on and come eat.” His mother turned to grab a broom from the storage closet and walked coolly to the kitchen. For a moment, Sebastian felt irrational rage, without having the experienced insight that rage by nature is irrational, or any other train of thought.

“Beep beep,” he mumbled, then ran to his room.

ON SEBASTIAN’S WALLS were overlapping drawings of dinosaurs, spaceships, a pink monster named Karen, and torn-out notes from old writing tests where his teachers wrote “Great improvement; very creative; well thought out.” He flopped on his bed and stared at the ceiling, which was blank except for one goose feather hanging from a string. His mother washed the feather so he could keep it, combed through its soapy strands with her nails. The glazed memory of this felt unreal to him, as from a dream, and yet there the feather hung.

Then the bronze girls rode again through his mind; two playing cards ticking away between their spokes. Those perfect red apples reflecting diamonds of light from the sun. Sebastian was *practically* ten years old. Well, not quite ten... but he felt ten. He felt one hundred! Not that it mattered. It was the second Saturday of the month, and mother always cleaned on those days. He wasn’t allowed to go very far unsupervised. Also, he didn’t have one of those silly baskets.

Sebastian slipped on his shorts without letting the fabric glide against his legs, and grabbed notebook paper and a green crayon to create a map of Ryder’s Woods. He stared at the page as fanciful ideas whizzed around his inner eye, caught in a rapid orbit of anxious de-liberation. He could lie . . .

He *could* lie, but deceiving his mother felt like a task too great and too embedded with sorrow to even consider.

So he drew. He scribbled the green crayon across the notebook page to imagine the map of a place he had never been. Soon there were trails, rivers, secret treasures, and beasts guarding the hidden passages through the woods. Eventually a tall tale began to take shape. A story was all he had to tell his mother, like any story he had told her before. Stories aren’t lies. He discovered, through the directionless movement of his creation-wielding hand, the answer.

There *was* a monster, and Karen was her name.

And she was a beautiful young girl riding a bicycle.

Sebastian's wrist began to cramp. He twisted it around, listening or feeling, he couldn't discern which, and lifted open the window to let outside power come in. Outside power was wind, but wind carried heavy things with it. Wind carried voices and ideas, people's gossip, and general pieces of mind. Wind carried the cool effect of the earth spinning and working. Sebastian knew, even if the rest of the world didn't, that the earth spun backward. He felt sorry for it.

He lay down on the stiff carpet of his room. The carpet had to be stiff or Sebastian would tear it up—and this happened before—because too much fluff tormented him with itch. He welcomed the outside power blowing sinuously on his pale skin from the open window. It stung a little, and made his nipples stand up. He curled his legs and scratched his thighs. The outside power would help him with his lie—er, story. The outside power *was* lies.

A little after the half-point of day, when the sun went from scarlet white to a plump shade of orange, Sebastian walked cautiously down the stairs. All day before, mother had been puffing up the house, maybe for an invasion of fathers: men who would sweep in and scrape away his young delicate coating. They would instruct him on how to be hard and sturdy, frozen but hot at the same time. Men were a curious thing to Sebastian.

But around this time she'd be finishing up in the garden. On her hands and knees, sweating and grunting. This ceremony of toil produced bushes, vegetables, flowers, and trees. And when she came inside (perhaps it was the outside power, playing its tricks on her), she moved to the fridge for a glass of ice-cold water. After that, *plop*, she was asleep, alone with her face deep in the cushions of the worn floral couch.

This time—the trading between two suns—had an effect on his mother that he couldn't comprehend. There she was, a mess of sweating flesh. White thighs thick from mothering, her back moving up and down with dreamful breathing. The difference between sleep and death for Sebastian was breathing. If someone was breathing, he did not need to worry.

He placed the slice of notebook paper on the coffee table where she'd see it upon waking. He did this slowly, prudently, because lies are more easily told impersonally. On the page was a crude drawing of the woodland map, and on the back was the rushed explanation of his whereabouts:

Mother, the monster is REAL. Karen is her name, she is pink, and she is giant, and worst of all she is REAL. Luckily, for the both of us, I know her weakness. Karen happens to be a prepubescent girl who is allergic to apples, avocados, and most legumes. Since we do not have apples, I have taken a can of pinto beans from the cupboard to vanquish the monster. Don't worry, I have not ventured far, though I may be awhile. I'll be back for dinner.

p.s. We should always have apples.

Sebastian knew the only way to get his mother to bite was to make up a tale so far-fetched only he could have believed in it. She would read it, be amused, and not worry. If he had created any sort of logical explanation, she would have tracked him down, grabbed him by the ear, and dragged him fuming all the way home.

So he grabbed a can of pinto beans to give his story crystal-clear validity and headed straight out the door for Ryder's Woods and his own backpackful of crisp, delicious apples. And he didn't stop before exiting his home this time.

SEBASTIAN LOOKED at the small, rustic board engraved "Ryder's Woods" that was posted on a narrow strip of bark and wondered who made that. He imagined an old settler centuries past, with a Stetson hat and a fur coat, and a young horse. A horse named Ryder. Sebastian liked filling in curiosity with stories. This made life a small thing to discover. He decided that the forest must have started off unsanctioned, a place for outlaws to hide and drink and tell their own stories and late in the night hop on freights to bigger cities. Sebastian smiled at this but it also scared him. He was afraid of ghosts.

Plus he couldn't see groves of apple trees ahead. But he did see an opening in the woods, beyond branches crazily tangled and prickly red weeds making snares for young boys. He wished he had worn pants and for a moment considered turning back. But, luckily, there was one thing that overpowered Sebastian's fears, and that was his fixations. When he wanted something, he needed it. This caused a lot of headaches for his teachers and, most of all, mother.

So upon his very clean, spick-and-span blue sneakers he maneuvered around mud, roots, brambles, making himself known by beep-beeping along the way and whispering to the ground-lumps that tripped him, "I'm sorry, I'm just looking for the apples," and wincing at his clumsiness. He got dirty nowhere but the bottom of his sneakers, which he

knew mother could clean off and make perfect again. With a tremble in his throat, he began singing to overturn his aching nerves.

Slithering through the woods like a snake, beep beep  
 I won't fall or make a mistake, beep beep  
 Red delicious apples yum yum, beep beep  
 pluck pluck pluck from the big ta—

His tune was cut short by a large shadow moving across the path. Sebastian ducked, scampering to the shelter of a tree. He looked up, squinting, and smiled as he easily identified the long wingspan and blood-red beak of a turkey vulture—thinking, moreover, how smart he was to spend so many hours in his room flipping through *Birds of North America*. He recalled two things about turkey vultures: they have a uniquely sharp sense of smell, and. . . *Ah!* Sebastian screamed. Another thought cut short as a thorn crept up and bit him on—of all places, his most sensitive—the leg. As he held back tears, his lip began to quiver: the furious tingle of being overwhelmed by experience and stimulation, unaware in his mind but pulsing through his little, incomplete shape. He ran out of the monstrous thicket and into an open meadow, where the sun again shone.

His leg was bleeding where the thorn got him. A healthy dark red stream dripped down his calf. Sebastian panicked about what to do. He hadn't thought to bring Band Aids or a clean cloth, and the outside wind power was already aggravating it. Of course he would most certainly not use a leaf or pond water to clean it off. So he just let it drip into his sock and tried heavily to concentrate on the colors flooding his view.

CARTOONS SECOND, his mother first, and school dead last: these were his life's teachers. From his mother he learned things of the home, things of love, like wrapping carrots before storing them back in the fridge. Cartoons taught him about the world, about characters and physics, and, in a grander way, influenced his developing perception.

He knew, for example, that vultures fly where ground things die; but he didn't know just how insatiable a vulture's appetite is for death. Before him, in the clearing of Ryder's Woods, slumbered a dead meadow. All the grass and thickets of the woods had burned black. The bushes and the baby trees, all singed and gangling. A few spots still burned with lazy fire flickering to the whim of outside power, producing a spiraling haze of thick smoke.

This was the most confusing place Sebastian had ever been to in his life. It was irrevocably dead, yet still held so much color. Shades of purples, reds, relentless shreds of green. All the signs of death—decay, ash, cremation—were present, yet it breathed like it was only asleep. Mother Earth could burn and not be killed, he decided, but wasn't sure.

The turkey vulture swooped past him again. Sebastian trailed it with his eyes and saw beyond the burned meadow the promise of more greenery. He thought *Maybe this is a special vulture, like how I'm a special boy, and maybe she too is finding the apple trees.* He set his legs a-running and bounded across the ashen field. With each step, the crunch of bones, hollowed-out foliage with the life burned out of it. *Sheesh*, he thought, *I think I'm in hell.*

The vulture landed a handful of lunges ahead of him. Sebastian slowed himself down and saw the cutthroat bird gnaw a wounded dog in the scorched earth. The dog was almost camouflaged among the ashes. The poor thing whimpered and tried to fight it off but was too weak.

“Hey!” Sebastian barked. “Hey, you monster! *Yah yah yah!*”

The boy waved his arms and hollered at the winged beast—an agent of Karen, no doubt. Only Karen could have burned this sacred land and maimed the stray pooch living in it.

The vulture regarded Sebastian with a few wet blinks, then flew to watch on the crisped branch of a nearby tree. It fluttered its massive wings, and waited.

THE PROBLEM WITH CARTOONS is that they exaggerate a child's distance from despair. Sebastian realized—without having thought it—that in his beloved animated world violence defeats itself by proving to effect no harm, but that's a big fat lie. It's a bigger lie than all the crap that comes from outside power. Sebastian was angry again, only this felt more real; this felt ultimate, and his eyes began to water.

Fires, and roadside bombs, and trains like the ones that pass in front of Ryder's Woods, and the edge of cliffs—of course, in some way Sebastian always knew these things were dangerous, that's what mothers are for, but he never really believed it, never felt that sickness of understanding until this very moment, staring at the trembling creature lying alone on a giant grave. A grave waiting to be buried, with a poor dog trapped inside.



*What now?* he murmured to himself: the simple-minded, sheltered boy that brought him here. Looking down, he saw that the blood had dried on his leg—and that he had goosebumps, which he hated. Sebastian looked around for someone who could help. He looked in all directions, and then, feeling hopeless, looked up to the sky and thought of God: the tall, bearded wizard that grants wishes to good boys who help with laundry and know how to use a vacuum (requirements in which Sebastian was expert).

Sebastian's mother took him out of church after the third week. He struggled standing still for so long and would often drum-tap on the wooden pews during sermon, which irritated the old faces. The high notes of the organ upset his ears, and he would shake his head rapidly to get the noise out. The old faces didn't like this either. Mother assured him it was all right. He was a special boy; they could find their own special place to pray. And sometimes they did, right before bed, pray on the side of his mattress. Mostly mother spoke the words, while Sebastian admired the feather hanging from his ceiling. But he often paid attention, and learned how to do it.

He looked at the ground again. It was dirty, just as he expected, so he couldn't kneel. He worried that god does not accept kids that don't kneel, but decided maybe if he still closed his eyes, god would accept the prayer anyway.

*Hi God. This is Sebastian Belsky. I know I lied today and told my mom I was going to vanquish a monster and I hope you can forgive me, but really it doesn't seem so much like a lie anyway. I want to ask for a wish, because I know how to vacuum and do the laundry, among other things. I wish for this dog to get up and walk out of the forest, where someone can find him and bring him to the doctor. He doesn't look so good, and I think he might be dying. I'd be very happy if you granted this wish, so I can continue looking for the apple tree. Amen.*

When Sebastian opened his eyes, he was discouraged to see the mutt still lying in the frightful field, motionless. He thought he saw something in the corner of his eye and shifted his head.

"You all right there, boy?"

THE MAN INTRODUCED himself. Sort of. He mostly explained his presence.

"I walk here all the time and I'm not used to seeing others. Animals, sure—like that mutt over there. Yeesh, looks like mange has it now.

Damn thing is redder than a tomato. But people. . . well, I suppose yeah, people too. . . but, but never from this close. Heh. Sorry if I ambushed ya.”

The man wore a gray suit like the kind Sebastian saw TV lawyers and crime bosses wear. His tie was a dark purple, and his thick brown mustache covered his upper lip. It quivered like window shutters when he spoke. Sebastian didn’t trust this man. He didn’t trust anyone whose clothes spoke for them. The man’s shoes had scales.

“What are you wearing a suit for?” Sebastian asked. “Out here.”

The man raised his chin and sniffed the air, as if it brought him emotion. “Boy, the wilderness is my temple. I come here to reunite with what is infinitely larger than myself.” He bent down to pull a tuft of blackened char up from the ground and toss it in the wind. They watched the dark particles blow into serpentine wisps, then disappear.

“Chewing gum?” The man offered Sebastian a stick. Sebastian refused. “Yes, son,” the man continued, chewing now, “It’s not my well-being, it’s not my vice, nor is it my recreation. It’s my religion, and there is only one place in town that can offer me that. That’s right here, in Ryder’s Woods.”

“Why are you wearing a suit?” Sebastian bit his tongue.

“Out of respect and, perhaps, vanity. I want to look my sharpest when I connect with this enormous. . . *thing*.” The man was waving his hands around. Sebastian saw his fingers were swollen at the joints. “Do you know what I mean, kid? Why are you out here?”

“I’m getting some apples for me and mother.”

“Ahh, yes. The infamous tree bearing the supplest red fruit is just beyond that distant treeline, on the other side of this wretched field.” He pointed toward the reward.

“What happened here?” Sebastian asked.

The man groaned, shook his head, and kicked some earth.

“Men,” he spat. “Fearless men. If you ask me, every man should fear at least one thing. That’s why we invented God, kid. The scary one. So men of great power still have to fall to their knees with the feeling of unbearable smallness, like the rest of us. Men who don’t fear God aim to become him, and burn the earth.”

“Men who want to be God burned the woods down? Men like you?”

“Me?” The man chuckled. “Gee. I may not be a great man or even an honest one, but a powerful one? No sir, not me. You know how you can spot a powerful man? You can’t see ’em. Oh, sure sure, you can *see* him, but not for the man he is. With powerful men you really only

see their work, their doings. They are overshadowed by the impact of their operations and become invisible. Invisibility is power. Like how the fire here has gutted the land and made it invisible. Fire is power.”

“Well,” Sebastian said, pouting, and not entirely convinced. “What kind of a man are you?”

“A confident one,” the fellow grinned. “And clever too. Look.”

The man pulled out a tussock of wrapped green leaves from inside his suit pocket. He walked to where some of the land was still sweltering with embers and knelt over it.

“Kneel down with me,” he said.

“I’d rather stand.”

The man shrugged, and stuck the wrap of leaves in the embers until they began smoking a thick white trail into the sky.

“Go ahead,” the man said, bringing the leaves to Sebastian’s face. “Smell it.”

Sebastian sniffed the burning leaves. The man wafted the smoke into his face.

“What’s it smell like?” the man asked.

“Oh my gosh!” Sebastian smiled. “Like flowers.”

“It’s sweetness, huh? It’s fun. Aromatic art.”

“A pretty thing we can make with fire.”

“Precisely.”

The man handed Sebastian the scented herbs to play with. When Sebastian brought it over for the dog to smell, the man laughed and waved his sweaty forehead with his hat. The dog had only a few black and gray patches of fur left. The rest of it was only pink, quivering skin; bumpy, and covered in scars. Its nose twitched at the fragrant splendor. The tired thing was breathing.

“Well, kid,” the man said. “I’ll show you the way to the apple tree. The sun sets eventually, you know that? And your mom won’t want you out.”

“I can’t leave this dog.”

“Leave it. Thing’s good as dead. Plus, that vulture over there looks hungry.”

“I can’t leave it or the vulture will eat it.”

“Exactly, kid. That’s nature. Survival of the fittest. We all got to eat.”

“You can go. I’m not leaving. It’s breathing.”

“Not for long, junior. Not for long.”

The man laughed and tipped his hat, turning to leave.

“Well, thanks for talking, kid. Nothing so rare as humble conversation.”

He walked off with a little skip in his stride, whistling, perfectly visible—just a man, without duty or success, going forward to connect with some enormous thing.

SEBASTIAN FELT GOOD to be alone again. Men were a curious thing; always butting into space like that. Oily strangers who would visit for dinner, talk about money and expensive machines, ask to “skip rocks with the boy” and be admired. They would wear suits just like that, and stare at mother the same way the vulture stares at the lonely dog, wanting something that Sebastian couldn’t quite guess. His little body somehow great enough to stand in between them. And even though Sebastian liked this particular man—who had shown him how burnt leaf could smell like flowers—what good is *any* man when he can’t rescue a sad animal? Big men only care about the enormous things, not tiny, helpless things, Sebastian decided.

His stomach grumbled, reminding him of the deserted oatmeal and the way morning-twinkle played on the girls’ apples. He ran his fingers across his eyelids and let out a long frustrated groan in his gruffest, most pubescent voice. It was around two p.m., and the sun seemed to hover over him like an examinatory lamp. He thought, *It’s not far away, there’s plenty of time*, before he would let himself get angry again.

A blackened branch jutted out from under the dog’s skeletal belly, looking stiffly uncomfortable being sat on by such an unsightly thing. Sebastian walked closer to the dog and, seeing that it wasn’t going to react fearfully, positioned his shoe over the branch.

“Beep beep.” He kicked down, attempting to lever or jolt the dog to its feet. The branch snapped in half. The dog didn’t move; instead, it looked up at Sebastian for the first time. Its eyes were squinted, but Sebastian could see the sun and his own tiny reflection in them. The eyes seemed so clean and beautiful, as smooth and glistening as the apples. They looked at him like no eyes had ever looked at him before, with faith. Sebastian had not yet learned the meaning of this word—faith—and therefore didn’t understand the feeling he was having. He felt something grow heavy inside him, so heavy it made him fall to his bare knees on the dirty, bug-biting ground. He reached his hand out. Mother told him once that if he wanted to touch a dog, he must let it sniff his hand first. Sebastian never before wanted to touch a dog. He watched the creature’s nose. It didn’t twitch or wiggle.

Its eyes kept looking straight into him. Sebastian began to feel discomfort in his body. Nervousness. Embarrassment. There are no words for it in a child's vocabulary.

"HEEEELLPPPP!" "HEEELLPPP!" "HELP!" Sebastian screamed over and over, the dog unflinching. Nobody around. Sebastian started to wonder if the man who appeared was a phantom, if the little tan girls were phantoms, if the woods themselves made spirits of all its visitors. Maybe it was the old settler getting them—the descendants of his huntsmen. Sebastian looked into the distance and wanted to see Ryder, tried to see him, but he didn't exist. It felt bad to be alone again.

He put his face to the ground and wished he'd brought something in his backpack to eat. He'd never seen the earth's dust from this close up. He'd always been afraid to. So many more tiny things, weird sprouts and moving specks. It wasn't ugly. It was just like more patchy fur.

The little boy was terribly hungry. He looked up at the vulture, who was still waiting.

THE DIRT FROM the burned ground stained his bare legs, mixing with his blood, which had dried like black ribbons, glomming into his sock. He was filthy. The outside power blew from the west, and his shirt stuck to the sweat on his back.

*My whole body is dripping*, he thought, his moans of agony passing into declarations of uncomplicated fact. He lifted himself off the ground and stood shaking, afraid to move in any direction. His stomach growled as he recounted his long day with a kind of fugitive regret. How could he have gotten here? So many outside feelings—the blood, the sweat, the dirt, the burning hot sun—tainting his sacred cleanliness. Spoiling what he had taken such careful measures to preserve.

*Preserves*. Mother told him what preserves were, and he had seen commercials for them on television. Raspberry jelly for toast was a preserve, a thing that could last forever in the fridge or unopened in the cupboard. And then he realized that he really hadn't done much (though it felt like a lot for a little boy amid forces outside of home) since he'd reached into the cupboard and grabbed the can of pinto beans to give validity to the fable of an allergenic, pink monster girl named Karen.

Oh yeah, the beans!

He pulled the can out of his backpack and popped the tab on the lid. The white beans were cold, slimy, and without flavor but he devoured them anyway. The iridescent can-goo oozed down his chin. Sebastian was gassed with protein-rife ecstasy, when the dog made a stir.

The emaciated creature hacked up dust and charcoal. It rolled over on its side, hardly able to keep its eyes open. Sebastian chewed and swallowed, appetite not completely appeased, and still bearing half a can of pinto beans.

He kneeled before the creature, laid the can on its side, and placed it in front of the dog's nose. His heart jumped at the first lively movement he'd seen in the beast. Its nose fluttered awake at the touch of sharp aluminum, and its eyes grew big and sharpened focus. It rose up from its defeat by the rotten hands of fearless men and plunged its muzzle into the open hole of the can.

Sebastian watched the dog lap up every last drop of liquid. Its long red tongue swirled like swinging rope and—he knew dogs don't smile, but—well, the hurting thing seemed like it'd been tickled. Sebastian sat down in the dirt and laughed. The dog's face was stuck in the can and it couldn't get out. The boy laughed harder and harder, holding his gut and falling onto his back in the ashen ground, rolling around, contorting his body to the medicinal climax of laughter.

The vulture perked its head up, aroused and disturbed by what appeared like inedible life.

The dog was finally able to pry itself loose with a paw and rested his patchy head on Sebastian's lap, still licking the fresh moistness off its lips. The sun looked at them through the branches.

He stared back at it, and it was then that Sebastian noticed he'd given his body gleefully to the contamination of the outside powers. He wanted more than anything to slip out from underneath the dog's ghoulish head, but couldn't, because the dog had faith in him. It felt good, laughing and rolling in the dirt and being laid on; it felt like . . . like maybe, he was attached to some . . . *enormous thing*.

Love. Sebastian knew this word. His mother said it to him, in times that looked like this, when his flu-ridden head rested on her soft pillow thighs. Maybe when you love something you don't care so much about its germs crawling all over and nesting inside of you.

SHE WATCHED HIM through gapes in an oak's branches, resting her arms on clumsy knots of the young tree and smiling. Her son was not

the glowing mythology child (the sort whose fulfillment is chief of a small straggly society at the playground), but the way the sunset was starting to fall on him, she felt she'd never seen a child so perfect. So special. It was the picture of him she always wanted.

Of course, through the window she'd seen him become jealous of those girls' apples, for he loved apples and—even more—loved clean, faultless, expressionless things. So when he came inside upset, she knew that his two greediest senses, smell and touch, would brood over that vision and desire to misery until sweetened with possession, however momentary. Perhaps other mothers, waking from a midday catnap to a letter that said her child had journeyed off to defeat some imaginary horror (or real one, since Sebastian could only express his attitude toward phenomenon by translating it to story) would run about and stagger with worry, but Sebastian's mother only laughed at the green-crayoned note as it warmed her hands with little incorrupt lies and intention.

She was glad there were no apples left in the cupboard. Ryder's Woods was the perfect task for him. A task that, while sowing vegetable seeds, she wept he wasn't prepared for, knowing right well he was at that moment plotting his escape. But as she watched him for the last hour, rolling himself on the earth and trading all his hesitations for relaxed laughter, she realized that he had a way of protecting himself in this world. A piece of her prayed God was with him.

THE DOG WAS BLURRY from her distance and eclipsed by the boy's shadow, but she could make out its stone-like protuberances and its human-like melancholy. Sadness in animals forms a bond more conscious and immediate than any other connection. She knew right then that it'd found a home.

The sun was sinking lower in the ground, and the wind grew chiller. As she lifted her arms from the young tree and slunk toward a clearing in the woods, her old, bedraggled maternity dress caught on a twig and ripped at her forever cellulitied pouch. She fingered the hole in her gown and a tear of relief fell down her cheek.

"Sebastian!" she screamed, feigning outrage.

The boy jolted to meet his mother. And the dog's legs wobbled as they rose.