

FIRST MOVEMENT

 I open my front door and walk down the porch steps to the flowerbed and my wife, sitting on her heels like a meditating monk. She is pruning. I slip on her a necklace of my teeth, my tongue for a pendant, because we have discussed the future names of our children, our funerals, dinner tonight, and this is all that's left to say. She rises, thrilled, and points to my parents who stand in the driveway. I unbolt my abs and haul out my guts, placing the pile at my father's feet, and he's so proud that he divides like a cell and is beside himself—one absolutely still, stoically nodding, the other drowning in the lake that pours out of his face. For my mother, I break open my ribcage and hand her my lungs. She fits them in her shoes for support and when she walks away I can already see the balance and bounce my breath gives to her step. The sidewalk is smooth. The street is clean. The usual screams of misery and pain float up from the grate cut into the curb, so I rip off my ears and toss them sewer-wise. My friends are everywhere, on bicycles, on porches, on the roofs of houses. We wave and come together for a bonfire in the backyard that eats up the air. I scissor off stripes of my skin and write down my forwarding address and fuck the barriers of Geometry and Time, we'll always keep in touch. The neighborhood shrinks and the city swells. A woman in a pinstripe

suit is trying to hail a cab. I detach my dick and slap it in her hands. Perhaps she can get some use from it, hasn't done me much good. Two bored kids loiter outside a Laundromat. I give one a loose muscle fiber, one a stray vein, suddenly both run around, overcome by enthusiasmos, unwinding me like a spool of thread until they have woven a double-slide, monkey bars, a bridge, trapeze rings, and a swing-set with every last micro-filament. The sun is white and high and commuters shield their eyes from the gleam of my skeleton. At the doors of City Hall, I unscrew my skull and scoop out my brains, dip in my pinky like a pen in an inkwell and scrawl across the threshold *you want my brains you can have my brains—not my compliance*. A couple blocks down, there's a group of 3rd shifters standing in a stupor while waiting for the bus. I shake off my bones and rearrange them as a bench. They sit and sleep against each other like siblings. My sister plays in a dark hollow at the central city park, beside a silted stream, and under the umbrella of a willow tree. She's carving her initials in the trunk with a buck knife. She is so small. I pluck out my peachpits and drop them in her palm. She puts them in her pocket and says with a diamond smile, "They'll be fine." The wind rushes through the trees and the buildings and the corridors of the isthmus towards the on-ramp of the Highway. It's raining. The cars decelerate and congeal at the intersection, wipers going mad, and in the meridian, on an isolated patch of concrete, bathed in copper-penny colored streetlight, is a man with a sign that reads ANYTHING HELPS. ANYTHING HELPS slouches and hooks a thumb in his belt loop. He's still as a mountain, but his eyes are skittish, and his face reminds me of students before the beginning bell of class, drunks at the tail end of drinks, a crowd after a violent crime, families at cold meals, and every dismal lost driver at a stop

sign. The rain quits, the gray wall drifts past, and the old universe unzippers itself into a new universe where there's not a pitiful person soaked to the bone but a fragrant and molting creature of light with a million shimmering marionette strings securing his body up to the sun in the sky. Nice trick. I'll give you the fist of my heart and its everyday rhythm, but don't spend this how I think you will in the concrete beyond.

SECOND MOVEMENT

 A voice called her name from the other side of the door, and it lifted Vera Lyons out of her brown study. She shoved her brother's journal between the cat-shredded cushions of the couch and smoothed her hair with her hand, twice. She moved to the wooden trestle desk at the opposite end of the Mystery Machine. She sat in her tall metal chair and folded her hands in her lap and faced the attic window, as big and round as a bass drum, and pretended to escape. Vera, diffuse as she was, passed through the glass without much friction and floated down three stories, landing softly on the fine powder in the front yard. It had stopped snowing, finally, but the world wasn't white. The streetlights gave the trees and lawn and sidewalks and cars a sick yellow tint.

And she could hear it, the yellow tint, an annoying low buzz that never rose or fell in pitch, reminding her of gloomy parking ramps, supermarkets at night, and the basement of Horizon Elementary, a name which made Vera shudder even though she wasn't cold. She remembered Ms. Dewer's 5th grade classroom vividly. It smelled like a heap of dirty clothes in the closet. The desks in tight rows. The gray walls covered with faded watercolors on pastel construction paper. The geometry workbook didn't even have any proofs, just long word prob-

lems and every answer listed in the back pages. A stupid waste of time. Five minutes ago the class was discussing Geography, a subject Vera adored, but it was cut short by Ms. Dewer, who forced everyone to put away their maps and take out their math. The relative ease at which the class went along with this jarring tonal shift from the Deserts of Africa to the Area of Planes made Vera think of assembly-line robots, but not all the kids were fully programmed. Ms. Dewer, with a constant light touch of menace, directed their attention away from cell phones, tablets, and real live friends and back to the exact page they should be working on in the workbook, and yet, despite her lidless eye, this whole time, a lanky boy one row to the left and two desks ahead of Vera was being terrorized.

This boy combed his thin black hair to the side and had the nose of a smashed button. He picked this button as if searching for a frayed end to snip. He wore a striped orange and blue polo shirt that was much too small and the boys in adjacent seats were poking pens and markers and paperclips into the sides of his exposed belly. They poked and poked and poked and the lanky boy took it, as if the pokes were static shocks or mosquito bites to be swatted off. The boys didn't laugh. Only the slyest of smiles passed between them, some secret and satisfying language. Vera, watching it escalate, watching the boy flinch with each poke, sensed a deep and complex history behind the action, the weight of daily cruelty with each jab. She had a moment of bitter anger, at Bremen for being dead, at the school for its pride, at her mother and father who didn't trust her one bit. She looked down at the workbook and read *If a piece of square paper has a perimeter of 32 centimeters and Mark's dog, Yankee, tore off $\frac{1}{4}$ of the page, then what is the area of the remaining paper?*

Vera slammed her pencil down pretty hard on the desk with the intention of breaking it in half, but no one noticed, because at the same time the lanky boy spun around and attacked the kid jabbing him from behind. The fight went from zero-to-sixty in three seconds flat. Ms. Dewer rushed out of the room. The class was shouting, squealing, and enclosed the boys in a circle and tracked with them as they careened throughout the room. An adult male voice, a piercing and stable voice, belonging, she would soon learn, to the Vice Principal, cut through the commotion: *Stop this now!* The class went silent like a group of soldiers after an execution. The lanky boy, amped up to dangerous levels, took that moment to scream at the top of his lungs and pick up a chair and charge the VP, who was not intimidated. *Go ahead, Derrick. Go on. Are you going to throw that chair at me, Derrick? Only idiots solve their problems with violence. Are you an idiot, Derrick? If you throw that chair at me, you'll be an idiot and you'll be expelled. I guarantee it. I will make it happen.*

A striking image flashed in Vera's mind: a black rat with a gash across its stomach, bleeding, weak, and afraid, cornered in a garage by a crazed and frothing Doberman waiting for the best moment to go in for the kill. Derrick froze. He put down the chair, totally ashamed. Without another word the VP escorted the fighting boys out of the room. Ms. Dewer, who had been hanging back by the door, issued a bland apology to the class and instructed everyone to return to their Geometry workbooks. Just like that. Vera gazed around at the class, heads down, hushed, toiling away. She did not want to believe what was happening, how easily everyone forgot that a second ago, a boy was reduced to an animal and then hauled away. It made her want to throw up. She stood up from the desk and took three steps to the door.

Ms. Dewer, eyebrows arched, asked where exactly did Vera think she was going, in the tone of a cop to some suspected criminal, and Vera mumbled *the bathroom* with every single student gawking at her as if she was a criminal. Ms. Dewer understood it was Vera's first day and that not everything made sense, but she couldn't use the bathroom now because it was on restricted use, *the bathroom was a privilege*. Vera retched, she was not playing, she was going to be sick, and Ms. Dewer, perhaps foreseeing the mess she'd have to clean up, let Vera go to the bathroom without giving her a hallway pass, and Vera kept her head down and took the first non-classroom door she found, which led not outside, to freedom, as she hoped, but down to a basement of overhead pipes and damp concrete and that annoying yellow buzz. She explored the inner recesses until the Janitor who twisted her wrists too tight found her playing with the water valves, and the Vice Principal who never let her finish a sentence found her *the most emotionally disturbed student of the day*, and that was the night she had a nightmare about comets ripping apart her body in the field behind her house. In a cold sweat she stumbled to the third floor turret, the Mystery Machine, and slept on the couch and continued to every night after that and had no more dreams of fire and blood. She loved her little attic and the room loved her back. That's why it made her uneasy to feel—more than anything at this moment, sitting at the desk, staring out the window—that she needed to escape even from here.

Nothing could help her. Not her mother or father. Not her best friends, Ayla and Helene. Neither of them had a brother. Not her favorite book or painting, not a movie or a song, not a priest or rabbi or imam or philosopher or something called a Unitarian minister, which came up when she typed how to write a eulogy into Google.

Certainly not her brother, who helped her with everything, and who the eulogy was for.

She had no idea what to say.

There was a loud triple knock on the door.

Vera Juliana Lyons, blinded by sleep and in need of a bed, fixed her eyes on the cover of an old dictionary resting on the top corner of the trestle desk. It was beat-up and crimson red. It smelled of wet wood and seemed to weigh three thousand pounds. A life raft. She was drowning. She hung onto it with cold white knuckles.

There was an impressive silence in the Mystery Machine, and Vera became aware of the Music two floors below, hard-driving drum and piano rock 'n' roll, and then she heard the staccato clicks of high-heeled shoes on the other side of the door as they faded down the steps and were swallowed up by the song.

She had been holding her breath and didn't know—that's why her armpits were damp and her foot was tapping a steady 6/8 beat. She reached for the dictionary and began to scan the pages. When she was eight-and-one-quarter years old, Vera decided to actually start reading books instead of having Bremen read them to her. She'd leaf through the book and play the dictionary game with him, where she'd pick words that were unpronounceable and see if he knew them, or random words, or words with an attractive sound to the syllables, only half-digesting the definitions, soon sprinting back through the leaves as fast as her mind could run.

goad n. A pointed instrument used to stimulate a beast to move faster. –vt To prick; to incite; to instigate; to urge forward or rouse by any thing pungent, severe, irritating or inflaming.

ephemera n. [L. from Gr. daily; a day.] 1 A fever of one day's continuance only. 2 The Day-fly; strictly, a fly that lives one day only. There are several species.

intonation n. 1 The manner of sounding or tuning the notes of a musical scale. 2 In speaking, the modulation of the voice in expression.

fucus n. [L. See Feign] 1 A paint or dye; also, false show. 2 plu. fucuses. In botany, a genus of Algae.

Tonight, Vera Lyons had climbed the stairs at the end of the second floor hallway and shut herself up in the turret of the house before any guests arrived for the Funeral. The room was circular and well ventilated, fifteen feet in diameter, with seagreen walls that went up to her father's shoulders. The conical top was made from nine large oak beams, angled in at 45° and joined together in one point above. Bremen tacked a nylon cord and hung a lamp there. It was a porcelain man with winged feet and a winged helmet, carrying a spiral staff with a light socket at the top, and an on-off string you pulled at the bottom. *The Fool lights the way* was all she could remember him saying of it. The lampshade was cotton-white and always seemed to illuminate—she loved that word—the room with a different quality of light depending on the time of day and the angle of the sun through the window. Her fingers suddenly went stiff and ached like an old woman. Her eyes fluttered up from the pages. She set down the book, cracked her knuckles, each one sending an echo around the room, and felt exhausted.

At the south pole of the Mystery Machine there was a wooden rocking chair, and a low Jacquard woven couch with a repeating black and gold bird pattern, their wings primed for flight. Merlin had shredded it over the years. At the north pole there was the attic window and her trestle desk, with an IMAX globe to the east, near the door. At three intercardinal points about the room were small boxy bookcases with a single aloe plant on top of each. A Persian knock-off rug lay in the center. The Hope Chest, a family heirloom, was parked in the west.

“Why do you call it the Mystery Machine?”

Vera Lyons was nine and a half, playing Astronomer, sitting on the rug, examining samples of a meteorite that exploded two weeks previous in a fifty-mile streak over Mifflin County. She had begged and begged to explore the debris zone. Along with those space rock samples, she had two thickly illustrated books—one on minerals, the other on crystals—bought at the Geology Museum gift shop and dog-eared to the max, in addition to the abundant field notes she took on their trip to Blue Mound last weekend. The borders of the rug were littered with tomes on celestial mechanics that Bremen believed were too technical. Vera protested and won out and didn’t come close to understanding them, but at least now she knew words like *gradient* and *parallax* and a whole lot more about gravity and light.

Bremen had been playing his bass when she asked the question. He stopped with a rude twang, aggravated, just enough for Vera to feel self-conscious. She hated that feeling. Then Bremen switched to a broad smile that meant he was probably laughing at you on the inside. Vera hated that, too.

“Would you rather I call it a classroom? Or an attic? Hey, V. Let’s