THE HOUSE

“Let me look at your hands” she said. I opened my hands, cracks of blood and dirt, a blistered callous. I had worked for seven hours straight, stacking concrete blocks against the softened slope I had scarred the day before. And I thought how much harder this was when I was seventy but now, at thirty, I could handle it with the ease of an almost young man. Or so I told myself.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you. You can stay here tonight. In there. There are towels in the bathroom. We’ll talk about this in the morning.”

I opened my hands. The moth was still alive and the toy horse was caked with dirt and blood.

I opened my hands and a snake of sunlight streaked across my palms and was gone.

I opened my hands and a door to the night was revealed.

“Thanks. Yeah, ok.”

He saw that a worn bathrobe had been laid out on the bed. A raggedy robe, torn at the elbows, an unraveling hem. It looked exactly like his father’s old bathrobe, the bathrobe he had kept after he had died, the bathrobe that hung in an honored back corner of his closet.

As was his habit, he put his nose deep into the fabric, convinced that he could still smell his father’s odor of cigarettes and aftershave. It was there. And it was thoughtful she had laid this out for him, for he would have nothing to cover himself once his filthy dirt- soaked clothes had been abandoned on the bathroom floor before his shower.

Once cleaned and robed, he brought his begrimed clothes downstairs in search of the laundry. “Just put them in the sink to soak” she said, waving towards the kitchen. She was sitting in the parlor, intent on a book of puzzles. Doing as he was told, he came back to the stairs to say thank you again and good night. She looked up at him, held him with a look of scrutiny and lit a cigarette. “That robe was my husband’s.”

And with that, as if dismissed, he went back upstairs to bed.

That night, I dreamt she came into the room, undressed, and got into bed to lie against me. Come sleep with your teacher now, she said. I got up to look out the window. A large brown sea lion, slick wet from the sea, had ambled onto the front porch to escape the prowling orcas. The phone rang and I came.

When I answered, no one was there.

Morning sunlight, struggling through the dusty bedroom window, woke him at five. His body ached from the prior day's labor and his mind still echoed the remnants of his dreams. Propping himself up, he scanned the small room. Faded wallpaper: little vignettes of old English country life, cows and water mills. A small wooden desk and chair, very old and worn, tattooed with scratched words and names. The bathrobe was still on the chair where he left it when he got into bed. No sign of his clothes—he wondered if she had found time to wash them. He would go downstairs to see, self-consciously naked within the old robe. Maybe she will have gone out or maybe she would still be in her chair, cigarette in hand, reading her puzzle book, right where he left her the night before.

His washed clothes were neatly folded on the dining room table, next to a pair of work gloves. Next to the gloves, a sheet of posterboard with the words "wear these today" scrawled in what looked like red-lipstick. "Put them on, I want to see if they fit." He hadn't seen her standing by the stove. He put the work gloves on. "Here let me see." She came over to him and roughly grabbed his hands, feeling to see if they were snug or loose. The tie to his robe came undone and his robe fell open. She dropped his hands and looked him down and up, then locked his eyes with hers and said "you should go get dressed now, there's a lot to do."

I had maybe another four hours of block stacking to do and the wall would be finished. Then there were the trees I needed to plant, fifteen of them in twenty gallon buckets lined up beside the front porch. The day would be warm. I looked up to the sky and saw a distant passenger jet, cruising at altitude, heading to somewhere, and there I was inside that jet, nursing my third scotch and soda, musing about the nature of mind and the problem of God.

I realized then that I would need a change of clothes, that I must have packed a bag and brought it with me, that it must be in the car. But I didn't know where I had parked the car, I couldn't remember. Maybe she will remember, she must have told me where I could park. I'll ask her when I'm finished planting these trees.

When the last tree was planted, he went up the front steps to the house. He knocked first before entering. Just to be polite. She was sitting in her chair, reading, smoking, her head in a soft haze that shone blue in the slanting afternoon light. Without looking up, she said "put your dirty clothes in the kitchen sink again to soak then go up and have your bath. Might as well take them off in there so you don't track mud on the stairs. Dinner will be ready in a half hour." He did as he was told, quietly undressing, trying not to make a mess with his sweat-soaked, dirt-caked clothes. Then, still without a word, he went naked up the stairs to his bath.

Showering, he thought about time. How his day of work had passed and was now gone, having disappeared from this world like a mountain lost to the curve in the road. What had he thought about, stacking those blocks and planting those trees? His absorption in each task had been total and each totality brought a satisfying completion and a quiet, lulling peace. Other thoughts he may have had had no more consequence in his mind than the twitterings of distant birds. And he realized, as the hot water streamed down his torso, that he had no desire to question why he was here, or to ask where his car might be, or to wonder if he even had a car. He was here doing this work because she told him to and he did what she said.

A plate of spaghetti had been set on the table for him. To the sound of humming laundry, he sat in his bathrobe and ate his dinner. She sat opposite him, perpendicular to the table, smoking, watching. A small ash tray dish in front of her. "The weather will be good again tomorrow which is a good thing because you need to start building the fence. All the posts and boards are stacked in the yard. Your clothes will be ready in the morning." And with that, she stubbed out her cigarette and got up from the table. "You should go to bed soon." She left the room.

That night, I dreamt I was with my parents in our house on the dead end street. Father, in his tattered brown robe, sat reading in his chair, a folded napkin by

his side. Mother was in the kitchen. I could hear her, but couldn't see her, she wasn't in the picture. The sports car, then, drove up to our driveway. It was her, my teacher, she had come for me. She sat there waiting, watching. I was embarrassed for my Father to see for she was twice my age but I had no choice but to go out to that car, to get in as she lit her cigarette and drove us speeding away. Soon you will see she said and though I found her hard to look at, I saw myself fearfully eager to finally understand.

The dusty morning found him again waking with a spinning head, bewildered by unremembered dreams. He got up from the semen stained sheets, hurriedly put on his robe and went down to his folded clean work clothes sitting neatly on the table next to a hard boiled egg. Breakfast.

Once again, he found himself absorbed contentedly in this labor. Each hole dug, each post set marked a timeless clock whose hands never moved. Each moment was the same as the one before and the one after until there was no before or after. Just dig one hole, set one post, until the fence was done or it wasn't. He understood now that finishing was never the point. When it was time, whatever that meant, she would call him in and tell him to take off his clothes in the kitchen as she watched and then go upstairs to get clean. Then he would come down in the old bathrobe that smelled like his father and sit naked within it to eat his diner of pork chops and green beans as she sat across from him, smoking, watching, sometimes talking about the work that needed to be done, sometimes talking about her late husband whose robe this used to be. It was all so simple and right and he wondered if he should wonder again about anything at all.

That night, I dreamt I was standing on a platform, made of the same posts and planks that I had used to build the fence. It was a stage of sorts, four feet off the ground, and I stood on it, naked in the old robe. Its sleeves had pinned my arms back behind me and had tightly wrapped my wrists. And I stood there, exposed, to her, sitting below in front of me, eating a pie freshly baked from the oven. She ate slowly, looking at me, watching. "You have to make sure you keep those posts vertical, you have to measure them with the level on all four sides, only that way can you be sure. Then and only then can you pour in the cement and you can't let them move an inch while you do it. Here let me show

you.” Then she got up from her little table and put on the leather workman gloves. She came up to me and roughly grabbed hold of my cock and began pulling it and pulling it until it swelled large and I came spewing bloody semen, filling buckets she had placed on the platform before I had arrived.

The dream shocked him awake. It was the middle of the night. His sheets were damp with sweat and semen and blood. And he knew what he must do. Quietly he descended the stairs on the balls of his bare feet. His clean clothes were there once again, folded on the table. He slipped off his robe and put it respectfully on the back of the chair. Quickly he dressed, found his shoes, and went out the front door. And ran as fast as he could, down the sloping path, hurdling the stacked block wall until he found the street and the way away. Running in the dark, to the sounds of barking dogs, to the sounds of distant downshifting trucks, to the sounds of breaking bottles and muffled cries. Laughter and Scream. Then he tripped and fell exhausted, tumbling off the side of the street down a short embankment, settling at last at the base of a large pine with plated bark. Fatigue closed his eyes and closed his mind and dreamless he slept.

He woke shivering with dew to a bright morning sun and the smell of smoke. He rose to see where the fire might be and saw her house in the distance, completely ablaze. When he got up to the street he saw his car, right where he had left it, by the side of the road. His wallet and keys still sitting on the seat. By the time he drove back to the house, the roof had collapsed and most of the walls had fallen into the conflagration. By the next day, he thought, all will be ash. He drove away. The spell was broken.