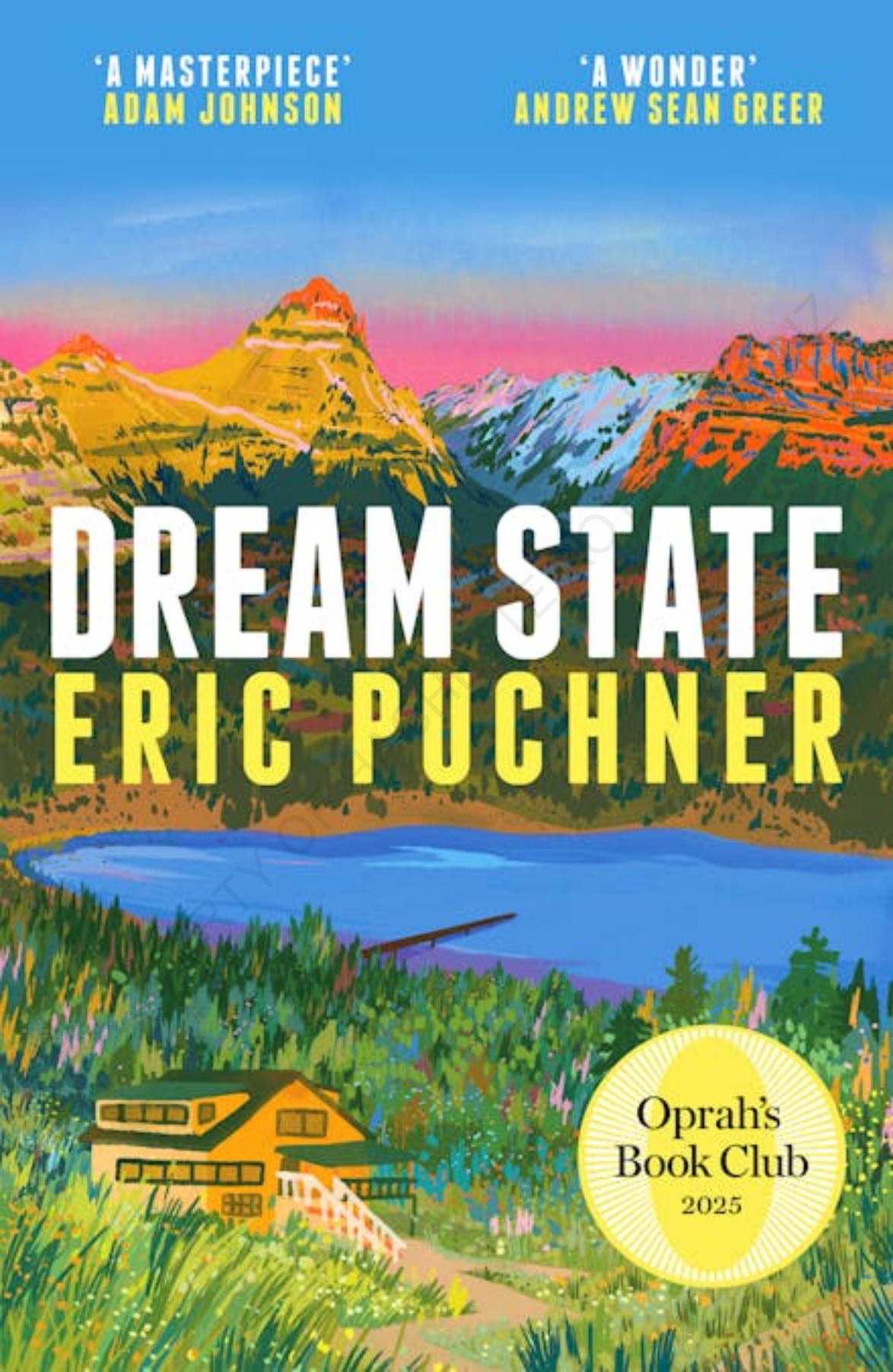
'A MASTERPIECE'
ADAM JOHNSON

'A WONDER'
ANDREW SEAN GREER

DREAM STATE

ERIC PUCHNER



Advance praise for *Dream State*

'A book of tears, laughter, longing, regrets and filled to the brim with life. *Dream State* is a wonder of character and craft'
Andrew Sean Greer, author of *Less*

'A masterpiece. A glittering, evocative achievement'
Adam Johnson, author of *The Orphan Master's Son*

'*Dream State* delivers everything I want in a novel: a love triangle, a moving friendship story, a delicious setting (including some of the best skiing scenes I've ever read in my life) and rumination on how we search for meaning in our lives . . . an absolute masterpiece'
Elin Hilderbrand, author of *The Perfect Couple*

'A gorgeous exploration of time, grief, love, and the way that the commitments we make turn us into the people we become . . . brilliant'
Danielle Evans, author of *The Office of Historical Corrections*

'It explores several monumental themes – love, family, identity, human transience, climate change – but always with a scrupulous attention to the fate of individuals, and always with a powerful sense of intimate connection . . . a remarkable achievement'
Andrew Motion, former Poet Laureate

'*Dream State* is a delight. Every scene, every character, every sentence, is infused with Eric Puchner's intelligence and wit. An exquisitely rendered novel about the vagaries of fate, and friendship, and love'
Alice McDermott, author of *Absolution*

'Funny and wild, here is some of the most beautiful writing that I have ever read'
Matthew Klam, author of *Who Is Rich?*

Eric Puchner is the author of the novel *Model Home*, a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and winner of a California Book Award, and two collections of short stories. His fiction and personal essays have appeared in *GQ*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *Best American Short Stories* and more. He has received an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and is an associate professor in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. Eric lives in Baltimore with his wife, the novelist Katharine Noel, and their two children.

DREAM STATE

ERIC PUCHNER

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1

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For Katharine,
and for Sy and Clem

I have had a dream—
past the wit of man to say what dream it was.

—Bottom, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The northwest Montana depicted in this book is
a blend of real and imagined geography.

1

JUNE–JULY 2004

ONE

A visitor to Charlie Margolis's house in Montana—which *really* belonged to his parents, who spent their summers there—might not have found it much to look at. The house was cramped and musty and low ceilinged. There was beige carpet from the seventies, bric-a-brac on every windowsill, second-hand furniture that smelled incurably of smoke. Someone had taped a hand-drawn sketch of a mallard to the lintel above the stairs, reminding you to duck. Board games, stacked into ziggurats, cluttered the floor. An antique sign—SWEET CHERRIES U-PICK-M—hung on the wall of the narrow kitchen, where every appliance was brown. Brown was the stove. Brown was the refrigerator. Brown, brown were the microwave and dishwasher. Brown was the toaster but rarely its toast, which popped up at random, unforeseeable intervals, like a jack-in-the-box. There was a charming porch—recently rebuilt, with a gorgeous prospect of the lake—and yet you couldn't soak in the view, or hear the wakes of speedboats lapping the beach, because the yard was cut off from the shore by a major trucking route. (The whoosh of semis and logging trucks, the fart of Harleys speeding by, was the sound of summer.)

Still, Cece loved it more than any place on earth. There were orchards behind the house, ancient apple trees planted by Mrs. Margolis's grandfather, varieties of fruit with names like racehorses: Sweet Sixteen and Hidden Rose and Northern Spy. There was a hammock where you could lie in the shade and read while sun flickered through the pines. There were raspberry bushes, magically replenishing, like something in a fairy

tale. (In July you could go at them like a machine—fill six, seven buckets—and the bushes wouldn't look any different.) And the cherries! Somehow there always seemed to be a tree within reach. Fingers stained red, bloated with fruit, you'd run across Route 35 and jump into the lake to clean off, whooping lustily at the cold, feeling like a character in a Russian novel. At least that's the way Cece felt, as if she'd opened a door in her imagination, entered some pre-digital world where lusty whooping was all the rage. She loved the place as much as Charlie did. They loved it so much they were getting married there, more than a thousand miles from home. Some of their friends were upset—it was expensive to fly in from either coast, and not at all easy—but Cece didn't care. She couldn't imagine getting married anywhere else.

Now here she was, her first day in the house by herself. She'd flown out from LA a month early. Charlie's parents were back home in Culver City, and of course Charlie couldn't leave the hospital for more than a week: he was a cardiac anesthesiologist, fresh off his residency and tethered to the OR. So it was up to Cece to make sure the wedding came off. To save money—but mostly because it felt more genuine to her—she was planning the whole thing herself. She stared at her laptop, combing the pictures of square dance callers before snagging on one that featured a young guy in a cowboy hat looking vaguely hungover. She was attracted to the wedding band's name, Rod-O and the Feckless Fiddlers. That was the advice she'd been given about square dance bands: the more ridiculous the name, the better it would be.

"What does the 'O' stand for?" she asked Rod-O on the phone. A TV blared in the background. The band she'd originally booked—the Fiddle Faddle Stringtet—had canceled the week before.

"Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I just liked the way it sounded. I'm from Mamaroneck, New York. I needed something to stand out."

"You're not even a *real* Montanan?"

"What's 'real' even mean these days?"

Cece frowned. "Can you turn down your TV for a second? It's very loud." It sounded, from the British accents, like he was watching *Masterpiece Theatre*. At ten in the morning.

"I was a struggling nutritionist. Now I'm a square dance caller. It's all part of the cosmic wheel of life."

"Are you free on July seventeenth? That's the date of the wedding."

"I'll have to check my schedule. It's a busy summer. There's a festival in Burlap."

"Burlap?"

"That's the name that springs to mind."

"Can you look into it then and call me back?"

"Hang on. This will only take a second. Doot da doo. Okay, looks like, hmm, yes, might have to juggle some things around . . . I'll have to run it by the Fiddlers, but I can probably swing it."

Cece hung up, wondering if Rod-O was displacing his own fecklessness onto his fiddlers. But she was determined to give people the benefit of the doubt, particularly in a place she didn't know or live in.

Salish, Montana, was one of those western towns caught in a strange moment of transition. It had begun as a Native American trading post, then had reinvented itself for many years as a logging center, and recently had reinvented itself once again as a thriving tourist destination for outdoor recreators. There was a microbrewery and a sushi place called How We Roll and a cycle shop with an espresso bar, but there was also a gun store and a bar called the Stagger Inn and a pawnshop whose employees talked openly about "faggots." At the Lazy Bear Bar & Grill, you could go to Margarita Monday and find a sales consultant

and a fishing guide or two and occasionally even an actual cowboy. But mostly you'd find people who'd washed in from larger cities—in search of fun or outdoorsiness or a different-but-not-too-different life—and didn't know quite what they were doing there. Like Rod-O on the phone, they had a bit of a tough time explaining who they were.

Cece changed into her bathing suit and walked down to the dock, darting across the highway when there was a gap in traffic. Even at ten o'clock, there was a steady stream of SUVs and semitrucks and rental cars. But the rush of the road evaporated as soon as she crossed the boatshed lawn and got to the lake, which steamed quietly in the sun. The water was so bright she had to squint. The Mission Mountains rose to the left of her, bristling with pines, and then farther across the blue expanse of water were the ghostly peaks of the Salish range, hovering in the distance. Before coming here three years ago, Cece had never seen anything like it. She'd grown up in LA, where the only "lakes" were artificial, the water—if you could even get to it—murky and opaque. The water in Salish Lake was so clear that you could see straight down to the rocks, picking out minnows and lost lures as if they were at the bottom of a swimming pool. The swim ladder shone as brightly below the surface as above it; in fact, the submerged half looked somehow sharper, truer to the eye, though the two halves didn't match up. It was like a more perfect world that had snapped off from the first.

Cece dove into the lake, then popped up hooting at the cold. In Montana, you hooted in the morning and whooped after lunch. Or so Cece postulated to herself. She enjoyed coming up with aphorisms like this and was indifferent, as a rule, to their truthfulness. She floated on her back for a while in the steaming water and then climbed up the ladder shivering in the sun. Vigorously, she grabbed a towel from one of the Adirondack chairs and dried her hair. A man was standing on the lawn, watching her from the base of the dock. She should have been startled,

even frightened, except that the lake was so beautiful it seemed somehow rude—ungracious—to imagine anything sinister. The man was wearing coveralls and a trucker cap that looked like it had been chewed up by a donkey, then spat back onto his head. He had one of those pitiable mold-length beards, less a fashion choice than a flag of surrender. From his expression, it looked like he hadn't seen a woman in a bathing suit for a while.

"You're steaming," the man said.

"Excuse me?" Cece said.

"There's, um, smoke coming off you."

It was true. Steam rippled from her arms. The man kept his distance, standing there with his near-beard, and so Cece wrapped the towel around her waist before warily approaching him. Garrett Meek, Charlie's best friend from college. He'd grown up in Missoula and had recently moved nearby, to an apartment in Woods Bay. Cece, who'd been hearing about Garrett for three years, eulogized in comic anecdotes, had not pictured a dour-looking guy dressed like a mechanic.

"I was on my way to work, so I thought I'd stop by and see if you needed anything."

She crossed her arms, partly to hide herself. "You mean Charlie called you and made you come by."

He blushed. "No. I mean, he called, yes, and told me you might need some help with a few things." He glanced at her arms. "You'll freeze to death swimming in the morning. It warms up by noon."

"A person afraid of cold water is a bystander of life."

"Who said that?"

"Me. I did. Anyway, the lake is so beautiful in the morning."

"It's a graveyard," Garrett said. "The native fish have all disappeared. They stocked some lakes with Mysis shrimp, back in the eighties, and now they've invaded everything and fucked up the food web for good."

Cece frowned. Who was this guy? Why he'd moved back to

Montana from the Bay Area was unclear, and Cece didn't ask. Charlie had said Garrett was having a bit of a hard time—what that meant exactly, Cece wasn't sure, except that in guy-talk "a bit of a hard time" generally meant something much worse. It meant depression or addiction or both. She knew a friend of theirs had died in college, a skiing accident. The death had been rough enough on Charlie, but apparently Garrett had never really recovered. Now he was working at the airport, which spoke for itself.

"Charlie had me lower the boat lift for you," Garrett said, nodding at the old Crestliner moored in its slip. "I did it last weekend. It's good to go."

"Why?"

"I think he had the idea I might take you fishing or something, in case you got bored."

"I thought you said it was a graveyard."

"There's more than enough lake trout," Garrett said, frowning. He said "lake trout" the way someone might say "child rapist."

"Well, it's so great to finally meet you," Cece said. "Charlie won't shut up about you, you'll be happy to know. Especially if he's had a beer or two." She checked her watch. "I've got the caterer coming at ten thirty."

Garrett stared at her.

"We're supposed to discuss some things—the menu—so I'd better get changed."

"Oh. Here. Almost forgot."

Garrett reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic baggie, which he handed to Cece. Weed. An eighth or so, it looked like. She used it for a sleep aid, mostly, but of course hadn't dared to take any on the plane. So Charlie had arranged this favor and hooked her up. He was the cardiac anesthesiologist with weed connections. Cece thanked Garrett Meek and offered him some money, explaining that her wallet was in the house,

but he mumbled something she couldn't make out, shaking his head. Incredibly, Charlie had asked this morose baggage handler to be the officiant at their wedding, insisting that he had a way with words. "The most eloquent man you'll ever meet," Charlie had called him. "Eloquent man," in Cece's experience, tended to be a bit of an oxymoron. She had objected—strenuously—but it seemed to mean a lot to Charlie, and Cece was arranging every other detail of the ceremony, so she'd given in.

Now she wished she'd stuck to her guns. Just standing in front of Garrett was like a flash of bad news. The light sort of got sucked out of the sky. She wanted to get rid of him, to say goodbye in a way that might discourage further visits, but he was staring impolitely into space.

"You've got an osprey on your property," he said.

"Where?"

Garrett pointed at the trees along the beach. Sure enough, wedged in the crotch of a dying pine, as if a beaver's dam had lodged there in a flood, was a tangle of sticks—a nest—from which a beautiful bird gazed back at them. A band of brown striped the bird's eyes, like a tiny blindfold. Its beak, bent straight down at the tip, seemed to be melting. Peeking from the nest were two chicks, homely as dinosaurs.

"How long before they're big enough to fly?"

"Seven, eight weeks," Garrett said.

"So they'll be there for the wedding," she said happily.

"Unless a bald eagle gets them first."

Cece looked at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Baldies like to pluck them out of the nest sometimes. Makes for a good fight."

"How awful!"

Garrett shrugged. "Eagles need to eat too. They don't have the same, what do you call it . . . cuteness response."

Did he mean to be so insulting? Cece gazed out at the lake, searching for bald eagles. A stand of cumulus clouds, darkened

underneath like charred biscuits, had banked over the mountains. As she scanned the horizon, a beam of sunlight spoked through one of the clouds, projecting a distant movie onto the lake.

"Holy smokes," she said, wishing Charlie were there to witness it. From their apartment in LA, you could see a mini-mall with a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"I wonder when it was that a caveman, Australopithecus or whoever, first looked at the sky and thought, *That's beautiful. I'm going to stop what I'm doing and look at it.*"

"I don't know," she said. "It could have been a woman."

"A woman?"

"A she-Australopithecus."

Garrett looked at her and frowned. Was he sexist? The last thing she needed in her life was some dorm-room philosopher from Charlie's past. What a strange and awful man, she thought. His coveralls smelled like BO. She felt suddenly depressed, as if the Eden she'd looked forward to all winter and spring had been contaminated by this smelly man who'd forgotten how to smile.

"I'll check back in a day or two," he said. "To make sure you haven't gone crazy or something."

Cece had the sense Garrett was doing this—keeping an eye on her—out of an obligation to Charlie. She smiled vaguely, watching him cross the boatshed lawn to his pickup, which made a truck-show rumble when he started it. How did someone pissed off about Mysis shrimp justify driving that thing around? And what did it mean that Charlie liked him so much? Not "liked," but *adored*? Cece would have been surprised to learn they were second cousins, let alone best friends. For a moment, the man she was about to marry seemed like a stranger.

Cece went up to the house, shivering in earnest now. Once inside, she felt immediately better. The cedary smell. The warm rug on her feet. The view of the old wire clothesline in the backyard, a forgotten sweatshirt swinging like an acrobat in the wind.

Yellowflower, the house was called. It actually had a name. (There was a notebook on the coffee table called *The Yellowflower Bible*, filled with divine instructions.)

Cece opened her laptop and checked her email: two from Charlie, both in the last hour. *Miss you already, about to head into the OR.* At work he killed people and brought them back to life. More specifically, he froze people's hearts so that a cardiac surgeon could repair them, then thawed the hearts again to see whether the surgery had been a success. *Did Garrett M come by? I told him to bring you a present. Cool guy, right?*

Actually he depressed the shit out of me, Cece wrote back, then came to her senses and deleted what she'd written. It was clearly important to Charlie that the pair of them get along. She'd do her best to be polite.

He seems great, she wrote instead. *Maybe a bit lonely?*

Cece went up to the bedroom, where she struggled to unstick the door. None of the doors shut properly; when you pried one open, another would telekinetically open in a distant room of the house. She loved this too. She changed into some jeans, and an old ragg-wool sweater she'd stolen from Charlie's closet at home, before starting to unpack the last things from her suitcase. She'd lied about the caterer; he wasn't coming till the afternoon. She had the whole day to relax and recover from getting in late last night; with the layover, the drives to and from the airport, the trip had taken six and a half hours.

She coiled a pair of brown socks into a cinnamon bun and then put it in the top drawer of the Margolises' dresser, which smelled like mothballs. A woman with a messy sock drawer was a woman in crisis, she thought to herself. Or maybe the opposite was true: a woman who coiled her socks was secretly unraveling. Cece pondered this. It was at times like these—when her life snagged for a second, the distractions of the wedding momentarily deserting her—that she felt a vertiginous panic in her chest, as if she were about to leap from a plane.

She reached into her pocket and took out the baggie Garrett Meek had given her. In general, she regarded people who got high before noon as hopeless losers. Why? She had no idea. Anyway, it was a medical thing. She plucked a couple buds from the plastic bag and packed them in the little pipe she'd cleaned out scrupulously before sticking it in her Dopp kit. Then she lit the bowl with a Blue Tip match she found in the bedside table, sucking in the flame so that it looked like a magic trick, the match burning upside down.

She felt immediately calmer. The sun poured through its hole in the clouds, fracturing into crepuscular rays. The silver movie, so vast and luminous it looked like a mirage, was still playing out there on the lake. Cece thought about the Australopithecus, glancing around to see if any sabertooths were on her trail and then forgetting herself for a moment because the sky looked strange and beautiful. Yes. The Australopithecus might die soon, she's in grave danger, and yet she stops for no animal reason to take in the view. *Hey, stupid!* the other Australopithecuses grunt. *You're going to get yourself killed!* But she doesn't care. She risks her life to stare at it. Then she runs back to her cave, feeling this new, perilous strangeness inside her.

"Hey, stupid," Cece said out loud, to herself, then messed up the socks in her drawer.

TWO

Garrett knelt in the pit of the 737, watching Burelli load bags of various shapes and sizes onto the belt loader. There were six ramp agents who worked for Maverick Air, but Burelli was the most sadistic, choosing to load even the bulkiest duffels horizontally on the belt. It was like some diabolical video game. Garrett would kneel at the top of the belt while the bags came at him, one after another, an assembly line of suitcases and backpacks and garment bags, some of them as heavy as slain deer, and in the split second between them decide—depending on the airport code on their tags—whether to stack them with the pieces going through to Houston or to heave them deeper into the pit, where they'd get unloaded in Vegas and carted off to their connecting flights.

That was the idea anyway. Hunched in the bowels of the pit was Félix, a French Canadian who'd moved here from the Magdalen Islands, on the heels of a girlfriend who worked as a ranger at Glacier National Park. His English consisted primarily of the word "fuck." He did his best to field the volley of bags Garrett threw at him and stack them into successive walls of luggage, greeting each bag with courtly wrath. "Fuck you, Vegas," he said. "Fuck you, Denver. Fuck you, Boise." (He pronounced "Boise" to rhyme with "blasé.") If he couldn't see the tag, he'd say, "Fuck you, Samso*neet*," and then continue his excoriation of America.

Sweat stung Garrett's eyes, but he didn't have time to wipe them. His knees throbbed, he was sick from exertion, he couldn't swallow from the dryness in his throat. Bag after bag came at

him, some upside down so that he couldn't read the tags; by the time he hefted each bag around to plot its destiny and heaved it in the right direction, another one had smashed him in the face. It was like being buried alive. Eventually he gave up looking at the tags and just started tossing all the bags to the left. If a bag destined for Tucson got stranded in Houston, so be it. Attachment was the root of suffering.

When the belt was empty, Garrett sat back on his ass, panting for breath. His coveralls stuck to him like Kleenex. As a discount airline, Maverick Air prided itself on forty-minute turnovers, but lately to cut losses they'd been scheduling more flights and trying to get them out even faster. Garrett sat there rubbing his knees. He'd left his kneepads in the pit of a Chicago-bound plane and hadn't had the guts to tell Mr. Purifoy, his boss. His back was killing him too, from heaving bags around on his knees.

He climbed out of the pit and walked down the belt loader to where Burelli was standing. Burelli took off his earmuffs and revealed his bad ear, which he'd damaged in a bar fight before Garrett knew him. It swelled up now and then and began to close, like a tulip at dusk. As usual, when confronted with its source, Garrett's anger dried up immediately.

"You're burying us up there," Garrett said, trying not to look at Burelli's ear.

Burelli eyed him suspiciously. "You don't seem too peeved about it."

"I'm not."

"Maybe you should be."

"Perhaps," Garrett said.

"'Perhaps.' Jesus. Did you grow up in Wizardpants, England?"

"I grew up in Missoula."

"You don't talk like it," Burelli said.

Garrett shrugged. "I'll try to enrich my vocabulary."

Disappointingly, Garrett did not get punched. He put his ear-

muffs back on and then walked over to the baggage cart, where he'd left his wands. He preferred it inside the earmuffs, where the world had the fragile quality of a dream. It was like wearing a space helmet. He tended to feel this way anyway, as if he were visiting from another planet, but the earmuffs made the feeling especially pronounced.

Garrett sat in the baggage cart, waiting for the passengers to board. Soon the engines would start up and they'd have to unchock the wheels and Burelli would man the tug to push the plane out—but for now Garrett could dream undisturbed. He could see the passengers in the terminal, lined up at the gate and preparing to fly back to Denver or Paris or maybe even Tokyo, carrying whatever they'd unwittingly picked up: bacteria in their stomachs or insects in their luggage or seed pods stuck to their socks. They were redistributing the world's flora and fauna, creating a single ecosystem like the one that existed in the days of Pangaea, when the earth's continents were one. Which meant that most of the world's species were dying off. And, of course, Garrett was helping them. Why? Because it was the only job he could find, given his résumé: a college dropout with an erratic work history, whose most promising reference was the counselor at a halfway house.

Garrett watched the first passengers funnel through the gate. It was a small enough airport that there wasn't a Jetway, and something about the people parading across the tarmac, half-blinded by the sun, made them seem cinematically doomed. And then it happened. The sky flattened like a TV screen; the people herding toward the boarding ramp began to look funny, bobbing up and down as they walked; a nauseating implausibility washed over everything, as if it were coming not from Garrett but from some cosmic leak in the sky. How outlandish they looked, teetering along on two legs: the bald man with the scabs on his head; the boy with the peeling pink gumdrop of a nose; the pregnant woman waddling along, palming her stomach like

a basketball. Garrett took off his earmuffs, but it didn't help. "Onion," the people said, chatting on the ramp. "Onion onion onion onion onion." Snow began to fall. Always the snow: huge flaked, snowier than the real thing, like angels having a pillow fight. It was pretty and abominable at the same time.

After his shift, Garrett showered at home and then drove out to his father's place, following the Swan Highway toward the mirage of sunlit mountains in the distance. Even with his sunglasses on, the snowcapped peak of Mount Aeneas blinded him. He had his window down—it was ninety degrees out—and the air smelled dank and viscous, musky from the chartreuse fields of canola. Fences everywhere, undulating like waves; behind them grazed long-necked horses, their heads planted in the grass, so that from a distance they looked like headless, two-tailed beasts. The ranches were all fake these days, owned by one-percenters—Realtors called them "lifestyle ranches"—but this didn't make them any less beautiful. Garrett had moved here ten months ago and had yet to become hardened to the landscape. Of course, it was tough to separate the beauty of the place from his nostalgia for it. Especially this stretch of road. His dad lived in his grandparents' old house—Garrett had driven this way countless times as a boy, from Missoula—and so it was like seeing two things at once wherever he looked. It made his heart ache with longing, though what it was he longed for he couldn't say.

He turned up the road that led to his dad's house, crunching through gravel that pinged the bottom of his pickup. Garrett rolled up his window to keep out the dust. His father was dying; there was no way around it. Pulmonary fibrosis. IPF: the kind nobody could figure out why you got. Anyone else would have sunk into despair, but fortunately Garrett's father had no interest in being depressed or reckoning with his place on earth or making amends for the mistakes he'd made during his fifty-seven years on the planet. He wanted to get laid. He'd spent the sixteen

months since his diagnosis driving out to Snookums Lounge in Kalispell—the nearest gay bar—and trying to get lucky. More than once Garrett had come out to the house unannounced and been greeted by a potbellied ex-linebacker type with afternoon bedhead. Garrett did not know what to make of this carnal turn, or of the linebackers, except that it made a kind of sense given what was happening to his father's body.

Garrett parked next to his dad's Mustang convertible. He'd leased it the day after his diagnosis. Cautiously, so as not to surprise his lower back, Garrett reached behind his seat and pulled out a twelve-pack and a savory pie he'd bought at the IGA in Salish.

"Pie and Budweiser," his father said, greeting him on the porch. He was wearing a bathrobe at four thirty in the afternoon. "I forgive you."

"For what?"

"I don't know. For being so much younger than me."

"It's a Dorito-and-onion pie."

"Dorito and onions?"

"It's better than it sounds."

"That would be impossible," his dad said. He took the pie from Garrett's hands. "Whoa, it's still warm. Fresh from the oven."

"Actually, I bought it before work," Garrett explained. "It was kind of sitting in the truck."

He made an undistinguished mother, but Garrett was new to the role and so cut himself some slack. It helped that his dad shared these low expectations for him. They walked into the living room, which doubled as his father's studio—or used to, when he was still painting. The only remnants of its former life were a few drips on the floorboards where the drop cloth hadn't met the wall. That, and the couch shredded into a hairy avant-garde sculpture by his cat, Barnabas, the most pathetic feline Garrett had ever seen. Barnabas had lost a leg in an incident with

a motorbike but didn't seem to realize he was crippled, meaning that he was forever leaping onto things, then falling off.

His father disappeared into the kitchen with the Dorito pie, stifling a cough that happily didn't turn into an attack. Garrett had a feeling he was the only man to have visited the house for a while. His father didn't look his best. He was skinny and slow-moving and his cheeks had started to hollow, as if he were sucking on a straw. Also, a weird thing was happening to his fingers. They were swelling at the tips and beginning to look like miniature tennis rackets. This was not uncommon, apparently. (Dr. Shrayber called it "clubbing.") The change had seemed gradual at first, but recently Garrett had noticed old acquaintances gawking at his dad or keeping their distance, wondering if he was contagious. His father was convinced half of Salish thought that he was lying about having IPF, that God was punishing him with "gay cancer."

His father came back with two slices of the pie, and they sat out on the porch with the plates on their laps. The beer was lukewarm, but they drank it anyway. What did you do with your dying father whose midlife coming-out had ruined your mother's life? Apparently you got drunk. You sat on the porch of the house, as if your childhood had happened to someone else, in a far-off land, and behaved like old friends. It helped that Garrett felt like he was dying himself.

"Tastes kind of like piss," he said, sipping from his beer.

"Do not insult the king of beers," his father said. He was a staunch defender of Budweiser. Anything with actual flavor he deemed "hipster beer," part of his Ironic Cretin act. "Anyway, it tastes nothing like piss."

"How would you know?"

His father looked at him.

"On second thought, don't answer that."

Barnabas scaled the fence separating the yard from the drive-

way and started to gimp along the top of it on three legs, making his way to the corner post.

"Bet you he'll make it this time," his father said.

"How much?"

"Five bucks?"

They watched the animal totter along the fence. Two-thirds of the way along, he fell off dramatically and landed in a hydrangea bush. Whoever said cats always land on their feet had an inadequate sample size.

"Crap," said his father, whose belief in Barnabas had cost him a fair bit of money. Barnabas hobbled out of the hydrangeas and then lay belly-up in the sun with his legs splayed in exhaustion. His stump pointed at the fence.

"Do you think he believes he's a person?" Garrett asked.

"On the contrary," his father said. "He believes we're cats."

"How do you know?"

"He stares at me during my coughing fits sometimes. I swear he thinks I have a hairball."

His dad went inside again and emerged with a five-dollar bill. Garrett might have felt guilty if he didn't suspect his father *wanted* to slip him money. What else was he going to spend his pension on? The restless man had left Missoula and moved up here to his own father's house, where he wouldn't have to pay rent and could work undisturbed, though what this disturbance back home consisted of Garrett couldn't imagine. It wasn't like he was spending time with Garrett; he'd been a rotten father, or at least an absent one, more interested in escaping his life than living it. He'd taught fine art at the university for thirty years, forever talking about the day he'd retire and move to New York City, where he could get out of "academic prison" and work on his own paintings—"fictories," his father called them, encaustics of old sawmills and copper mines, layered with wax until they looked ghostly and half-remembered—and yet this had turned

out to be another story, a myth in the larger fictory of his life, like the "conferences" he was perpetually running off to or the nights he claimed to be painting but was really out cruising for men, sometimes entertaining them in the studio he'd built in the old stables behind the house. He'd admitted everything, soon after Garrett went off to college. Garrett's mother—living now in Albuquerque, remarried to a periodontist—would never forgive him.

"I met Charlie Margolis's fiancée," Garrett said, pocketing the money. "She's here for a month, planning the wedding."

"Where's Charlie Margolis?"

"In LA. Saving people's lives."

His father nodded. "Interesting."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Is she a babe?"

"No. Jesus." His father used vintage words like this—"babe"—on purpose. It was an older-person joke. "Anyway, I'm officiating the wedding, so her 'babeness' is irrelevant."

His father laughed. The laugh coarsened into a coughing fit, then dwindled to a wheeze before abruptly begetting another fit. You just had to wait it out. Sometimes it took ten minutes for him to weather an attack. Meanwhile, Garrett opened a fresh beer and handed it to him.

"I thought you didn't believe in marriage," his father said finally.

"I don't," Garrett said.

"What are you going to do? Talk about the anesthetization of the soul?"

"Charlie asked me to do it. We were college roommates for two years. With that whole gang of guys at the Mill. Everyone will be at the wedding." This wasn't true, of course—the "everyone" lingered for a second, like an unpleasant smell.

"And?"

"What could I do, say no?"

"The answer to that particular question—'What could I do, say no?'—is always yes."

Garrett frowned. It was too late to refuse now: the wedding was in a month; he'd filled out the ordination request form on the internet; he was an official Universal Life Church minister. He had the certificate at home—signed by one Chaplain Br. Martin—to prove it. True, he despised the idea of marriage, but Charlie had asked him so fervently, as if he were conferring upon him some rare and special honor, that to avoid alienating him Garrett had said yes. He didn't have too many friends left in the world.

"Anyway," his dad said, "what makes you think you have any ministerial skills?"

"Everyone has a spark of divine wisdom inside them."

"Says who?"

"The Universal Life Church. Or at least their website."

"Sounds like a day to remember." His father picked up the last morsel of Dorito pie on his plate and shoved it into his mouth. "Just download one of those wedding scripts—you'll be fine. Anyway, it's only the vows that matter."

"Like yours and Mom's, you mean?"

His father looked at him. "I loved your mother," he said. "That's not fair."

Garrett ignored this. It had taken him years of incremental forgiveness to reach this perch of acceptance. He didn't want to fuck it up now. The fact that his father had married his mother knowing full well he was gay, that he'd lived with her for eighteen years while they raised a son together, pretending all the while he was a happy husband with a libido problem—Garrett could put this into context. It was a different time, the eighties, and we were talking *Missoula* after all, not as far from Matthew Shepard country as the vegans on Higgins Avenue made it seem. Garrett

had seen enough queer bashing at Missoula High to understand why someone might not admit that he was gay, perhaps even to himself. And it did seem that Garrett's dad and mom had been, if not romantically entwined, *entangled.* It was one of the reasons Garrett hated marriage so much—that it could force people, basically good and decent ones, to cheat and lie and wound each other for life.

He fished another Budweiser from the twelve-pack, aware that his dad was watching him.

"That's your third beer already," his father said.

"Would you like to see some ID?"

"I'm just worried about you. Look at your hat."

"What's wrong with my hat?" Garrett said.

"Just be careful, all right? You don't want to end up like one of those college dropouts whose best friend is his dad."

This was so obviously already true—that Garrett's dying father, who'd deserted his mother twelve years ago, was his best friend—that they didn't dare look at each other. His dad coughed, once, like a normal person. Garrett suspected it was to hide his embarrassment.

"Look," his dad said, clearing his throat. "I know you've had a rough time. Your friend dying like that. I can only imagine. And all the . . . *trouble* you had in San Francisco. I can understand wanting to get out of there."

Garrett peered into the keyhole of his beer can.

"I mean, it's not like you moved here just because I did."

Garrett blushed. He could feel his father's eyes upon him.

"You *did* get the job at the airport first, right?"

"That's right," Garrett lied.

His father looked relieved. "Good. Because I feel some"—he held up his clubbed fingers—"*urgency* about this. I want to make sure you're okay." He stared into his own can now. "I didn't do the best job of that, when you were younger."

"You were . . . distracted."

"I should have gone to more Little League games."

"One would have been nice. Like when we made it to regionals."

"You made it to regionals?"

"Wow. You could at least *pretend* to know that."

"I taught you to ski," his father said defensively. "You're a damn fine skier. We had some nice times out on the slopes, didn't we? I used to stick hand warmers in your boots to keep them warm in the Jeep."

"I think Mom stuck those warmers in my boots."

Garrett said this to annoy him—also, it was true—though in all honesty he'd loved those ski trips and looked forward to them more than anything. They were the one time he felt close to his father—or that he had a father at all. (And the skiing too; the skiing! How harmless it had seemed, like dreaming you could fly.) But he was feeling a bit hurt. Shouldn't his dad feel, well, *touched* that he'd settled ten miles from his house, in a crappy apartment in Woods Bay? Grateful that his son was around to check on him? Instead, his dad seemed worried about *him*, Garrett, as if he were one of those thirty-year-old shipwrecks who move back in with their parents.

His father coughed for real this time, covering his mouth with his fingers. Much to Garrett's dismay, the world began to flatten again, that cosmic disgust settling over the porch and making his dying father seem like a facsimile in a museum. The angels resumed their pillow fight. It was his dad's fingers—their strangeness—that had sent Garrett over the edge. Hümanz! In the inpatient ward, he'd been surrounded by them twenty-four/seven, these revolting creatures who'd made him sit in their onion-groups and say onion onion onion. It had snowed from the ceiling, for weeks, though not enough to make them shut up. Depressive psychosis, they'd diagnosed it as—or psychotic

depression, one of those fun terms you can reverse like a belt. Curable, supposedly, thanks to Eli Lilly and Company. Comparatively speaking, he was as sane as a cheerleader. And yet the episodes persisted; they'd never gone away entirely; the only full cure, it seemed, was to avoid his fellow species.

His father stood up (outlandish) and then walked over to the railing (outlandisher) to spit into the bushes. Even Barnabas, marooned on his back in the yard, seemed less alive than the grass he was lying in.

"I worry about you, that's all," his father said, sitting down again. "You wear that hat and you're not always the, I don't know . . . *sunniest* guy to be around. I think you scare people."

Direly, Garrett crunched his beer can and threw it at Barnabas, who startled from his nap and rolled onto his legs. The snow evaporated.

"See?" his dad said. "Even Barnabas is afraid of you."

"That's not true."

"It's the hat."

"He sits in my lap!"

"Strictly out of pity."

"It is not pity! He purrs with delight."

"Let's see whose lap he chooses right now," Garrett's dad said. "Yours or mine. Bet you a ten-spot."

"Barnabas," Garrett called, taking off his hat.

Barnabas, responding to his name, hobbled closer.

"Here, Barney!" his father called. "Come on, kitty! Meow."

"Meow meow."

Barnabas mounted the first step to the porch. In the distance, looming above the house, Mount Aeneas began to take on that magic-hour glow that seemed brighter than the sky, illuminated somehow from within, as if the earth were using it for a lantern. Barnabas paid no attention to this. He looked at the two enormous cats on the porch, meowing at him. He wanted nothing to do with them and scoped a path to the house that would

evade them both. The sick cat, Fills the Bowl When Scratched, had sudden retching fits. Plus his lap was bony. But the other one, the healthy cat, gave off something strange. Barnabas could smell it from the steps. A tang of fear, as if he expected to be eaten.