

s p o k a n e

He, being me, being one who didn't and doesn't like the I, the I standing for columns supporting nothing but self, stood at the nave of the world, hanging laundry, bleached sheets for one's daybed, one's deathbed, one's napping spot. One lies with oneself in one's bed, as one will lie with oneself in one's grave, as one lies to oneself about one's bed and one's grave, about what lies under one's bed. The sun shines. One drapes one's arm over the edge of one's mattress. The water rises to one's fingertips. The water recedes. The sun shines. One gets out of one's bed to hang one's laundry, washed and soaked and scrubbed and rinsed in one's porcelain basin, hung upon the gleaming wire with wooden clothespins, the blonde woodtaste pleasurable to one's tongue, one keeping a clothespin handy in one's mouth, one dumping the soiled water from the basin into the drain of one's world. One isn't the navel of one's world. One hunkers near the epicenter of one's world and one struggles to outdistance the quakings without leaving one's landscape. One emanates from one's origins. One remembers the shadows of one's arms on the billowing topsheet, while one hung one's pillowcase on

the parallel wire, the pillowcase embroidered with one's name, one's name in cursive, from the first letter of one's first name to the last letter of one's last name, the middle letter of one's middle name being r, the r being stitched in green while the rest of the letters were stitched in gold, although the frequent washings have faded the gold to beige and the green to gray, as gray as one's eyes, one's eyes showing the colors of clouded sky, one's spirit showing in one's eyes, one's landscape suffering under the lack of rain, the lack of snow, the lack of anything but sunshine and perfect weather. One has a platform of pavement. One has a trestle of wood, extending into a hole in the horizon. One has steel tracks, laid by intrepid fellows, going in thirty-two different ways. These things one knows. One has a daybed. One has a laundry line with two T-poles and two taut wires connecting them. One has a squeaky water pump and a metal bucket. One has a porcelain basin big enough to squat in, to wash clothes in, to bob for apples in, if one had apples. One has a copper drain in the heart of the cement platform, the copper color gone to coppery green. One has a vat of bleach. One eats nothing, excretes nothing. If one were to trace one's heritage, scarce anything in the archives, scarce anything in the cartography, would predict this scenario of daybed and swept sky. One is alone, but one isn't lonely, although one isn't without loneliness. One selects this world, day to day, from an array of choices, from ghetto to condo to palace, trailer to cul-de-sac to penthouse, options galore, permutations of survival and fulfillment. Situations aren't permanent, existentially or circumstantially, and one will leave one's world for another's, someday, when the need arises. One's trestle, with its anglings of beams and logs, with its odors of timber and creosote, makes one feel at ease, settled, at home with untravel. One grows flowering weeds around the edges of one's platform, shaking the seeds from one's scalp, baptizing them with water from one's bucket. One gets out of one's bed to hang one's laundry, the breezy flapping of white sheets and embroidered pillowcase resembling

unfurling sails and a mast flag, one's platform, as boat, not budging a smidgen. To do and hang laundry, one needs water, a basin, bleach, elbow grease, posts and wire, clothespins, sunshine, drying time, patience. One possesses all of these, in abundance. He, one, likes lifting his arms toward the sky, likes smelling cleanest cloth, likes tipping the basin so that his daily history swirls with the soiled water down the platform's drain. He, one, disbelieves in the decline of the out there, of the what next, of the who-knows-what-might-happen wilderness, although he accepts wonder's destination as the hole in one's horizon, across the trestle and good-bye. Time brings people to their knees, all people, of all faiths, everywhere. One drops to one's knees routinely, regularly, with sincerity, getting a jump-start on the inevitable, putting kneecaps to pavement for anyone to witness, if there were anyone to witness, one slumping into a heap of self, one wishing to distill oneself into a stone, a speck. One, as speck, would be in constant kneel. One raises one's arms to fasten one's sheets to the wire. One raises one's arms, one raises one's heart. In this way, one lifts one's spirit, one cross-purposes oneself from fetal speckdom. To be satisfied with where one is, one must be satisfied with what one is, as what one is is somewhat dependent upon where one is, and vice-versa, one vicing one's verses, one versing one's vices, one greening the far grass. At the nave, one dreams. Along the rim, one longs. One would double oneself, or halve oneself, or disperse or dispense oneself without absolute loss of self, the diminishment of self at any one spot, with the exception of one's daybed, one's napping spot, where one would stay concentrated just enough to rumple and soil the sheets, so that they would need washing, and therefore drying, and thus hanging.

He, being me, being one who didn't and doesn't like the I, the I standing for columns supporting nothing but self, stood in the yard hanging laundry, fresh sheets for the prodigal

brother. He, being me, the brother coming home, being one who didn't and doesn't like the I, the I as substitute for the eye, the tool of observation, stood on the shoulder of the road outside of town, amid the loose gravel, and stared at the distant house on the hill, the family belvedere, framed against a sky as blue as his brother's eyes were gray. This brother, he with the dufflebag across his shoulder, not he of the gray eyes, was traveling, was coming home, from the cities across the heartland to the east, his neutral-colored clothing reeking of industry and struggle and potent inevitable advancement, for those with will and spunk and ambition, for those not him, for those not his brother. If one were the younger brother of one's brother and not the older, or if one were the older brother of one's brother and not the younger, if one were to come home to oneself, as if one were two brothers, the stalwart and steadfast one, the stay-at-home brother, with clothespins in mouth, the musty wood-taste pleasurable, with arms raised toward sky, the clean sheets, washed by the younger brother for the sake of the older brother, billowing toward the house, and the brother of travel, duffelbag across shoulder, porthole spectacled, gold wire frames, the round lenses agleam in the sun, staring at the house on the hill, the unfinished roofline against permanent sky, the reaching figure, his brother, wearing overalls without a shirt, the summer dwindling to breezes of imaginative indifference, one would have no desire to unbrother oneself. Younger brothers observe older brothers in a way that older brothers never observe younger brothers. The reverse, of course, is true as well, and it's likely similar, but different, with sisters. The younger brother, fastening the corners of the embroidered pillowcase to the wire above his head, knowing nothing of sisters or of being the eldest or of eastern cities, gazed down the slope and across the river, to the far-off figure of his older brother, clad in beige, throat to ankle, duffelbag burdened, the duffel holding his bulky winter clothes and his sketchpads of ordinary cityscapes, uninspired pencilings of architecture and urban objects,

his glasses flickering as if they held water like the river bending into the young afternoon. He, the older brother, stood squinting toward the house on the hill, the duffel's strap beginning to bother his collarbone. The younger brother, after clothespinning the opposite corner of the pillowcase, waved, his bare arm feeling strong in the air. With this wave, affectionate and authentic, he distanced his older brother back down the road to where he, the younger brother, initially spied him coming along toward home after several seasons away, the younger brother recognizing the older brother's gait as he crossed the river bridge, the older brother recognizing the younger brother's reach toward the laundry wires. The younger brother, surprised that he was not willing to relinquish his solitude and sovereignty, not yet, although soon enough, it was inevitable, he wasn't so stubborn as to fight fate, delayed his brother's homecoming, sending him back over the horizon, out of sight, an hour and a half walk out of town, along a bramble-choked bank where the river gathers the offerings of two distinct tributaries. Here, not stunned by the sudden loss of ground but weary to think he must traverse the familiar terrain again, the river road cutting through fields of rural neglect and endeavor, the older brother tried to keep his stride measured and fluid, his reddish walking boots gathering dust from the asphalt road's shoulders, his stomach beginning to feel the day's lack of food. To go forward, he had heard, one must sometimes go back. Although it's counter-intuitive and anti-rational, one supposes it to be so, a condition of the created world. One wakes in a squalid heartland motel. One gathers one's things, one's sketchpads, one's wrinkled clothes, a gift for one's younger brother wrapped in a stolen pillowcase, the pillowcase threaded green and gold and stained by private living, lifted from a modest eastern flat where one had stayed too long, and one catches a bus toward the western ocean, a day and a night and a day and a night and a morning away, one disembarking from the bus in a riverside town, facing a three hour walk to a smaller riverside town on a different river,

an incomplete town with a shutdown excelsior factory and a struggling paper mill, one's hometown, one's conjectural birthplace. One's world is half improvised, half determined. He, the older brother, projected his thoughts toward him, the younger brother, who had taken the emptied laundry basket inside the house, set it inside the doorway and gone into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of juice. The younger brother misses the older brother more than the older brother misses the younger. One wouldn't know if this were also true for sisters. The younger brother watches the older brother leave home in search of fame and fortune and love and faith, and the younger brother watches the older brother come home in search of food and shelter and love and faith, and neither brother ever recovers. He, the younger brother, propped against the kitchen sink with the glass of undrunk juice in his hand, concentrated on remembering the shadows of his arms on the concaving sheet as it billowed from the wire, the wire parallel to where he was hanging the pillowcase, the pillowcase threaded green and gold, embroidered with his name, his name in cursive, from the first letter of his first name to the last letter of his last name, the middle letter of his middle name being r, the r being stitched in green while the rest of the letters were stitched in gold, the sheets bleached white by the younger brother on behalf of the older brother, hung to dry by bare arms, his arms, of his body, all his life, his fleshed arms, not the shadows of his arms, which would bear-hug his older brother upon his arrival. Gazing out the kitchen window, down the slope, across the narrowing river, the younger brother observed the town, a town of unfinished rooflines and riverend cul-de-sacs, a town like most towns, a town where one often exists in one's town, or outside one's town, or overlooking one's town, with and without knowledge of its intricacies. He, the younger brother, he of the gray eyes, eyes the colors of cloud-covered sky, scanned the horizon beyond the town for his older brother, aware that his brother was likely still nearly an hour away from crossing the river bridge, unless he'd

hitched a ride or negotiated a short cut, but he squinted nonetheless, searching for a glimpse of his absent brother, the mobile brother, the brother who left him alone in the echoey family belvedere so that he, the older brother, could become a national traveler, an artist of ordinary sketches, of cityscapes and industrial structures, of cityfolk and streetscenes, drawings on blank postcards he had sent home, matching those he accomplished in his tender bound books, the younger brother recognizing the sketches as run-of-the-mill, as adding little or nothing to the history of observation. The younger brother conjured the older brother in his mind, the pointy adam's apple, the delicate blond hair, the cobalt irises surrounding tiny pupil dots, the largish hands and their longish fingers, the ever-present spectacles with their half-dollar lenses, the fragile build, the bony shoulders, and he felt a twinge of regret at having durated his brother's walk from the bus station, knowing he wouldn't have eaten properly, that it was now past lunchtime and hours from supertime and that his brother would resist the notion that larders open perpetually for wayward brothers coming home, even if, like his, the brother's appetite had long been suspect. Then, with the younger brother watching, the older brother emerged from a farmer's truck, climbing down from the passenger's side, having caught a ride as far as the river road into town, the younger brother catching sight of his brother's beige clothes, observing as he hoisted his duffelbag out of the truckbed and motioned thanks to the kind driver, stepping aside to let the truck go on across the bridge. He, one's brother, his brother, the younger brother's older brother, at the river bridge, was now striding along the shoulder of the road that curved with an offshoot of the river around the outskirts of town, toward the hill with its unfinished ancient domineering house atop its uppermost nub, the hill and house commanded by the younger brother, he of the overalls without a shirt, he of the overcast eyes. He, the younger brother, who would've been surprised by his older brother's alacrity if he hadn't recalled having himself half-absently sup-

plied the thought of his hitching a ride, now wished he'd taken a catnap in the sunlight of the upstairs oriel while he'd had the chance, to refresh himself before the confrontation, even if the confrontation proved to be genteel and without incident, an affectionate reunion of brothers, competitive and blooded and collaborative. He, being me, the brother coming home, being one who deemed and deems the I inadequate, the I needing the we, the collective I, stood on the road outside of town, amid the loose gravel, duffelbag strap cutting into his shoulder, and stared at the house on the hill, wondering if his younger brother would now allow him access. He, being me, the brother at the kitchen window, being one who shunned and shuns the I, the I limited to will, not able to love or faith alone, stood at the sink with a half-drunk glass of grapefruit juice in his hand, having watched his older brother progress to that spot on the river road's shoulder, the sunlight glinting off the older brother's spectacles, making the younger brother wince. This brother, he with the juice and the bare arms, not he of the fragile build, was stationary, staying at home, in the family house atop a knoll overlooking the river and the town and the surrounding countryside, his overalls fragrant with domesticity and chores and potent indigenous contentment, for those with goodwill and patience and fidelity, for those not him, for those not his brother, for those not one nor the other, not either or neither.

—*Tim Ramick*