

A
low
CLOUD
reflex

A Short Story by
Russell Warner

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This is the Picture

In which there is a shattering of the distance.

A hundred yards or so east of a wide gray line that is highway 316 in Georgia, two crows occupy a small patch of ground in a grazing field. From a distance, it is difficult to make out what they are pecking at, heads stabbing at the ground and bobbing back. Above them and the fields and skeletal trees, a low-lying blanket of gray clouds has unfurled, tilled and furrowed like crop rows. In the low contrast light the birds seem as black as holes in the pasture. The dying grass around the scavengers is November brown that beneath the cold and tungsten sun seems only ashen—a hundred thousand strands of ash ready to be broken, crushed, and dispersed at the slightest weight. Nothing but two crows, in the whole of this landscape, is moving. This is the picture.

Off from these winged holes and their pecking, through the stillness, wind, and the hum of the highway a little ways away, there comes a long drawn squeal of rubber tires smeared across concrete. The scream increases in its volume, louder and longer, almost as though the pitch might reach up forever and refuse to die. But it reaches the lid of cloud

cover through which only ultraviolet escapes. The two crows cock their heads. There is a crash—a shattering of the distance. Then silence. The two crows fly away.

Have We Met?

In which Allen Surrenders to Himself.

"Gooooood morning."

Enwrapped in the overcast sky, enwrapped in the eulogy of the low light of his room, Allen rubs his eyes. He isn't speaking to anyone—just remarking on the lateness of his waking: 11:36am. Days like this one keep you in bed. An errant memory of Jodie laughing at his sarcasm comes to him and he still sighs shyly. He was never used to being the center of anyone's attention but she shown spotlights of flirtation and joy at him, always leaving him overwhelmed. Producing an audible groan and then forced to laugh at his sloth, Allen rolls himself over to cooler parts of the sheets. His clock's red digits buzz like guilt in his face and Allen looks to them for pity. Perhaps someone would be so kind as to blow a fuse or cut the power?

Brushing his teeth in front of the mirror, Allen saw that he had not slept well. There were no dreams to remember. There was nothing but a vague darkness beyond turning the light out—a consciousness of being unconscious. Allen's thoughts drift toward death; that it must be an unconsciousness of being unconscious. Then he brushed his tongue, the bristles tickling, followed by leaning over the sink to gag because he had pushed the toothbrush too far back. Wiping tears away, he smacks his lips and sticks his tongue out flat to examine the million bumps and curves and crevices.

Standing with his wiry arms bent at his side Allen's glance drifts to his chest, pale from a lack of sun. He takes a modest pose, looking over the contours of his pectorals and abs, and decides it has been way too long since he went to the gym. He grits his teeth and elicits a growl. "Oh yeah." Turning sideways, he flexes and poses again. "Oh yeah," with more emphasis, intimidating himself in the mirror. "You want some?" he says to the reverse Allen, leaning in to the mirror menacingly, toothpaste tacked to the corners of his lips. He relaxes and laughs. "No, I don't. Thank you." Leaning back in aversion with his hands up in

surrender, he says, "No really. Please. No more," and washes the toothpaste off his face.

A Shattering in the Distance

In which Frank Frederick hears a car accident in the distance.

From the back of his spotted brown Saddlebred, a weathered cattle farmer checks his heavy silver braced watch. Then he looks around the fields for his cattle. With rain maybe coming he knows most of the herd has already made its way back down towards the creek bed. He imagines the sense of unease that the animals must have with the weather like it is. In fact, he does not need to imagine it. Since where the ground is still wet it's mashed with hoof prints he knows they began moving about two hours ago at 14:00. Frank Frederick still thought in military time since his days in the Army. He glances to his watch again. His vet will be out to meet him in thirty minutes or so. He clicks his tongue and pulls Leland back to the left to make their way down toward the creek bed. Dr. Turner will know where he and the herd went.

Then a noise turns Frank's head. The sound's beginning leaps out of the moist silence rolls over the low hills in a tide. Frank's mind begins to put the picture together. He can't see anything the highway is up and over the next hill about a half a mile away. As the sound rolls on like the sky, Frank squints his eyes like a man in pain, as if to deafen himself from what he may or may not hear next. A second short percussive smash follows the screams of the tires, and Frank lowers his head a touch in admission. Seconds pass and Frank is only left with the sound of the wind curling in the back of his large ears. Still he waits, listening for more though he knows it is over.

He slips a hand into his flannel vest and pulls out a hand-held CB. It cackles for a moment as he adjusts the squelch and presses the call button. "Marilyn?"

There is frustrating silence for a moment as the wind settles, and Frank chews his lip and adjusts the squelch knob again, checking his watch right afterwards, to be sure of the time. "Marilyn?"

"Yeah?" a voice calls through the static. She still sounds irritated from this morning. They had argument about insurance, although they had both just been in a mood because of the weather.

"There's been an accident. Call the highway patrol. I'm gonna' go take a look."

"Ya' didn't see it?"

"Nope. Heard it though. Didn't sound good." There is silence for another moment before the wind comes rolling in low again, pressed for space by the weight of the heavy clouds. His hat shifts in the breeze. He's not sure but thinks he can hear a low whine coming to his ears from just beneath the hollow sound of the breeze. As it comes and goes he wonders if it's a trick of the tree branches, or the sound of some errant engine part dizzily scraping against other twisted pieces of metal. Before he can decide if it's his imagination or not, the radio cackles to life again. "All right. I'm callin' 'em, hon'."

"I'll come in right soon as I take a look. Ask Doc Turner to jes sit a spell."

"All righty. He won't be in for a bit yet. You be careful."

Frank smiles. She doesn't sound mad anymore. "Yes ma'am."

A Dark Glance

In which a dark soul spies Allen.

Smiling as he walks out across the gym parking lot, in a light wind beneath the looming gray, Allen muses that he actually enjoys his own stink. Then he smiles even more brightly when he remembers the time when Jodie had told him that she liked his stink too. *Shit. What am I still doing in town? This is stupid. Why does she have to be like that?* A warmth comes over him, as butterflies arrive in his stomach, turning to goose bumps in the cool air. He should drive down to see her. Right now. Right this second. She would be happy to see him; the argument would pass with his presence since that's what it was really about. He nods slowly with a verbal, *Mmm yeah* when he remembers that Jodie will be working until five o'clock today.

Allen takes his keys out of his gym bag and unlocks the door to his old brown Buick. It was a heavy solid car from a bygone era when manufacturers didn't fret about carbon monoxide and global warming. It's ridiculous rectangular brown bulk had a certain personality that made Allen always glad to see it; reliable in its cut. He'd had it since he went to college, probably close to

seven years now and it was used then. Still, even though he had the money to replace the car, he had not "gotten around to it" just yet. He hadn't moved on, though the photo from that morning reminded him that the horizon was near his nose. He tosses his gym bag in the passenger seat and inhales the car's mixture of sweaty velour and coffee.

If Jodie was getting off at five he could surprise her then. Days like today weren't meant to be spent alone, no matter if she'd told him not to come. She'd said it in anger and he knew she didn't mean it. He pulls out of the parking lot and scans the restaurants in the strip mall across the street for brunch possibilities. One spot used to be a Jimmy John's Subs. Now it was the Westside Café. Not that it looked like a café. It didn't look any different from Jimmy John's except that it was white when it used to be green with yellow trim. What exactly makes a place a café? The decor? Probably the prices. Allen stops his musings long enough to concentrate on making a left turn onto Lexington. The traffic was light. Not many people were out. Probably the weather. Lexington was a wide road and mostly flat; four lanes, without too many buildings on either side. Allen rolls down the window and for the first time notices the

impenetrability of the sky. The rolls of gray stretch off in every direction. Not a shred of blue pierces the lid. They must go on for miles. I wonder if it looks like this where Jodie is? As he looks, a computerized charade of a satellite weather map appears in his head. There is a label that reads "Allen" and points to a huge swath of Northeast Georgia covered in satellite green clouds and a second label, "Jodie" that is perfectly clear near Atlanta.

He comes to a stop at the intersection of Lexington and Oconee, shifting the transmission into neutral. For the last two weeks the old Buick had been idling funny and at a stop letting the car rumble in neutral kept it from vibrating. Near a telephone pole by the side of the road, idling as well, a homeless man is leaning. He isn't looking at Allen—just staring at the ground. Allen looks once and then tries to stare at the traffic light, waiting for it to change. Every slight movement made in the corner of his vision has him feeling an urgency to look. There is no one else but him and this shadow. For a moment he considers rolling up the window, but doesn't want to offend the old man.

The light turns green, shiny and surrounded behind by gray, and Allen shifts from neutral into

first gear. A heavy truck speeds past him with a heavy rumble. He glances one last time toward the old man as he lifts his foot off the clutch. This is a low cloud reflex: a tinge of pain at the sight of loneliness on such an oppressive and desaturated day. But now the old man is staring directly at him, the ancient visage long, drawn, and cold, burrowing straight through Allen. The black face's large eyes are cold white spheres in a seemingly hollow, withered face. Allen drives away, muttering, "Fuckin' ..." and shakes his head.

Weather from the Athens-Banner Herald

*In which Allen looks at the weather report in
the paper.*

Rain For Most of the Early Week

Athens, GA—As a new warm front moves across Alabama and Georgia this weekend, expect mild temperatures with moderate to heavy rain beginning Saturday and continuing on through Tuesday.

Cracked Open By Her Sunlight

*In which Allen decides that he is more than
just in love with Jodie*

The dying wildflowers in the median, a late season easy purple, still stand in contrast to the November gray onslaught and they, with their defiant faces smiling up toward a buried sun, remind Allen of Jodie. Where once flowers had just been

pretty, now they served as a constant reminder of her, a new feeling stirred within him. He was about to thrust himself into the unfurling distance of a soft love. Without explanation and at any moment he would part; cracked open by her sunlight until blue shown through.

The Five Star Café

In which Allen gets some brunch and continues to attempt to work out the definition of a café.

Allen makes his way up the sidewalk to the Five Star café. *Ab bab!*—and this one different from the last. The taste of an omelet has crept into his mind behind all his aimless thinking. He starts to salivate at the potential taste of salt and green peppers, butter-burned mushrooms and onions. Even the color of the food, bright flecks and sparks against the day's backdrop—*overdrop?*—seem attractive. The door jingles open with a light tug and Allen makes his way to the counter. He glances over his shoulder to see if the bell that has rung is a real one. It was a small silver one just above the hinge side of the door.

"Could I get a vegetable omelet, to go?"

The girl behind the counter nods, a strand of red hair falling over her eye. She blows at it while pecking at the register. "Will that be all?"

Allen nods.

She totals the order. "Five dollars."

Fishing through his wallet, Allen plucks a five from some ones and ATM receipts, making a mental note to stop at an ATM on his way out of town. He tries to think of how much gas is in the car but can't remember.

"It'll be a couple of minutes," the girl says and carries the order away to the kitchen.

Seating himself at a table near the counter, Allen looks around at the other patrons. He thinks through the list of things he needs to take to Atlanta with him. He might need to check the car's oil. The fact that it was idling so low bothered him—not that it was an emergency. The car had been doing it for a month now. If he had time, there was some paperwork to do. That could wait until Monday though. He folds his arms in front of him and decides to just enjoy the weekend and let work wait. After a moment, his smell drifts up to his face and he realizes he should take a shower before he

leaves as well. Other than that there was nothing pressing today—nothing but the sky.

Allen stares blankly out the window at the trees across the street, losing their leaves. He sees the name of the restaurant spelled backwards on the glass. Considering his record after the workout and eating a meal, he'd pass out in his armchair for a little while. He laughs at the time Jodie found him doing just that once when she was visiting. The old-man-favorite-chair jokes persisted for several days much to Allen's chagrin.

His thoughts are interrupted by the young girl at the counter entering the room with a Styrofoam box in hand. He gets up, takes it from her, receives a pleasant smile and gives one back. "Say. You don't know what exactly makes a café a café do you? I mean, the difference between a café and, say, a diner... or something?"

The girl pauses. "Uh... no."

Allen nods politely and the girl seems dissatisfied with her answer. She likes Allen's face. "I mean, like, I guess a café doesn't have waiters... maybe... it's supposed to be outside or something."

Allen nods and smiles again.

She smiles again.

"Thanks. Have a good one."

Invisible Battalions

In which part of Allen Lawson's fate begins to form.

A warm front forms out in the plains states and begins to roll a transparent wave where the crest congeals into a foam of clouds boiling off from the difference in temperatures. Even air, empty air, has within it the potential for turbulence. As spirals, eddies, and the devils of empty cold and empty warm skies collide like invisible battalions, born is the froth of clouds. High, low, wispy and thick these fluffs and free floating textures billow out from the fronts and swirl and churn, curl and swell until they spill out to cover fifteen hundred thousand square miles.

East it drifts from its birthplace, over cold deposits of stillness too lazy to move but solid enough to shoulder the vapors and pass them at a high altitude across the land. The billion ton mass of crystallized water pours out towards us, cutting out the sun, turning gray and threatening rain.

A Pleasant, Pregnant Moment of Silence

In which Allen and Jodie discuss his trip down to Atlanta.

"You really want to drive down here."

"Of course I do," Allen said.

"Okay. It just seems like you do all the driving," Jamie replied. She was keeping her voice down because she was at work and had been all day and there was a customer looking around.

"The other day you got all pissed because I *didn't* want to drive down."

"I know."

"Well, *somebody* has to drive."

"Yeah..."

"Incidentally, you left some pictures at my place."

"I did?"

"The roll from the botanical gardens?"

"Oh yeah! I totally forgot about those."

Allen thinks about keeping the picture of his reverie almost afraid now that it would give the secret away if she looks too closely. "Anyway... today's just so... I just really want to see you."

"Yeah?"

"Wednesday night was just stupid."

"Yeah." They both pause for a long while. "Well, you know, you can 'make it up' to me."

Allen laughs a little, the phone crackling, the signal maybe bent by electricity hanging in the atmosphere. He liked it when Jamie baited him, and he can almost hear her smile through the receiver because she knows he knows. "I love you," he says instead of taking the bait and smiles, staring at the Styrofoam carton that his brunch had recently occupied.

"I love you too."

The pair enjoys a pleasant, pregnant moment of silence.

...

"Listen, I gotta' get back to work."

"Okay. I'll see you around five."

"You sure you remember where it is?"

"Yup."

"Okay. I'll be there."

Allen laughs again. "K'bye."

"Bye."

The rhoden... aram modi... menicus
*In which Allen thumbs through photos that
Jodie left at his place.*

Allen trudges back to the bedroom to get his gym bag. Just beneath the bag, sitting at the foot of the bed, is an envelope of pictures. Without opening it, Allen sets the pictures of he and Jamie at the Atlanta botanical garden on top of his dresser. Official keeper of all-things-sentimental she must have left them behind last weekend. As an afterthought, Allen picks the envelope up off the dresser and sits on the edge of the bed to flip through them.

[Interesting Flower #1: large purple flowers that look like cups.]

Allen stares blankly.

[Interesting Flower #2: really light blue with lots of small flowers]

He strokes his chin scientifically and emits, "Um-hm."

[Not an interesting flower.]

Allen looks perplexed. *Why photograph that one?* Jamie had thought they were all mesmerizing though.

[Interesting Flower #3: large clumps of small yellow flowers shaped like dust mops.]

"Ah yes, the rhoden... aram modi... menicus." Then he snickers. His fake Latin was exceptional.

He pauses at each flower whereas before he would have tucked one and another of the photographs away looking for photos of people doing things. He didn't know anything about the numbers of petals or the difference between a pistil and a stamen. There was nothing to recognize except for the brilliance of the colors in the sun that day. It had been beautiful, clear and blue and left Allen to wandering absently. But if he had been walking in thought of some kind up ahead of her, Jamie would holler after him, "Oh my God! Look at these gorgeous *Dendrobium* orchids."

[Allen leaning into the frame of the picture with his eyes closed in bliss at the scent of several large saucer-like flowers.]

He furrows his brow and tries to remember the smell. There was an essence of brown sugar that he could remember but he didn't know what to name it.

In most of the pictures he was in, he was mugging the camera, his smiles exaggerated, his eyes wide as if nothing could bring him greater joy than... *yes, flowers*. Then, Allen found one picture that Jamie had taken without his knowing.

[A curved line drops from one edge of the photo to the other: a hilltop overlooking a pond. Near the crest of the hill, beneath a tree, sits Allen, lost in thought.]

He remembers that thought, a decision about the future that he was pondering and an unspoken prelude to their argument three days ago. Things with Jamie were moving forward and he had been thinking about that. His face in the photo looked relaxed, the distant horizon in the photograph printed next to his nose.

Jodie Waiting

In which Jodie works and waits for Allen at the flower shop.

"Thank you. Have a nice day," Jodie says and brushes her hands on her apron to get the dirt off.

The customer nods politely and takes his newly acquired fern out of the shop with him. Jodie leans on the counter with her head cradled in her hands and smiles after him because he seems so tickled to have bought a plant. He was older, maybe sixty, and she wonders if it is a plant for him or if he bought it for his wife—mostly because she wants to believe it is a gift. And she wants to believe that they are an old married couple and that the gift has no occasion, no anniversary or birthday—he just bought it for her.

Ron Jameson taps Jodie on the shoulder and she comes out of her daydream in front of the cash register.

"Okay," he says. "I'm getting out of your hair."

Jodie is relieved but smiles. "That's okay."

"Honestly, I just feel like I'm in your way when I'm here."

"Oh, you're not," she pats him on the shoulder.

Jameson laughs. He preferred to just use the shop as a place to dicker around—someplace other than his house. He was glad to have Jodie running things, even though he knew he irritated her with his constant futzing and he really was just trying to help or at least not feel useless. The two of them did what they could to accommodate each other. "Well, at any rate, I'm leaving."

"Okay."

"You're all right?" Then, he feels stupid for asking.

"I'm fine. Git." She giggles and gives him a light push on the shoulder.

"All righty. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a nice day." Jodie smiles as Jameson leaves through the back door because she is halfway tempted to tell him that customers aren't supposed to use that door, or something like that.

She spruces the stock a bit, waiting for the next customer. Despite the weather, a number of people had been in and out. Then again, maybe it was the weather making people want a little bit of color. Glancing out the shop window to the street, she looks at how gray everything is. At least the temperature was nice. It had stayed around sixty-

five all day. Looking to the phone, Jodie has the sudden urge to call Allen now since Jameson is gone. She wants to tell him that everything is okay and that she was just upset and was missing him. He could be so nonchalant, like it didn't matter if he was coming down for the weekend. She'd told him not to come, hadn't she? But whatever. When he got here he could "help" her in the stock room. Jodie stares at the hot pink azaleas as she smiles.

He Belongs to the Weather

In which Allen has no control.

The sky overhead has crushed all movement. The horizon is always *out there* and far away, until low clouds roll in and cover you and quietly the world becomes a bowl at the bottom of which you sit. You do not contemplate the distance but just the gray of what is near. It is never harmful to ask on such a day, *Why do I bother?* as the sky pulls you under. He is looking at this world covered over until he sees the brilliance of the red brake lights in front of him. *What's he doing? He's stopped! Shit!* He slams the brake—grabs the wheel—pulls hard right. The rearview mirror: nothing but a truck grill. *Fuck!*

Hold on. Oh God, I love you, Jodie. But now he belongs to the weather.

Questionable Fortune

In which Allen imagines an alternate fate.

Shit. Allen had completely forgotten to check the gas before he left town. As luck would have it, the gas gauge was down to the last quarter. Of course, he was relatively sure that the next station was only a few minutes away, but still the sudden realization had jolted him. He had noticed just in time. The stations along 316 got sparse before Atlanta. If he had missed the next station, he would not have made it to Atlanta; that much was for sure.

Allen could see himself standing along the side of the road, leaning back on the trunk of his car, staring up and watching the wrinkles and creases of the clouds. He would wait for help but not with any sense of urgency as the sky moved over him. His mind would wander.

Spinning Hurling Turning

In which Allen's fate is sealed in the space of a moment.

The attendant turns around with his back to the counter and asks Allen without looking at him, "What color?"

"Oh. Uh... black, I guess."

The attendant turns around with the black lighter in his hand and tosses it to Allen.

Leaving the attendant's calloused and oily hand, the lighter begins its arc twisting in persistent rotations as it moves through the air and over the counter, its black color like a hole against the white of the counter, the lights, the colored packs of cigarettes. Moving upward and outward the lighter makes its way across the counter and continues up past the smudged and dirty glass where beyond and out of focus, Allen's Buick sits waiting. With each one hundred and eighty degree rotation the lighter moves both up and forward, blurring it's oblong shape into an out-of-focus circle, spinning rapidly and persistently. A semi drives past in the window behind the attendant's head. The truck rushes by in a seventy mile an hour blur, wind invisible and all around it pushing backwards from the cab in tight

pulled lines and dispersing at the end of the truck spiraling and flying off in a thousand chaotic directions; noise vibrating behind a thin black line bent into the infinite single side of a circle turning and spinning and hurling at Allen.

Milliseconds Too Late

In which Gary Travers cannot stop his truck in time.

Looking for someone to talk to and joke with was a natural instinct driving on a day like today. The massive, gray, nimbostratus rows have a mesmerizing effect as they line up with a road that is the same color and has been since South Carolina very early this morning. Gary Travers hears a really good joke about short women with large breasts on the CB. He laughs hard for a minute—laughs like he hasn't laughed in a long time. He has to close his eyes he's laughing so hard, and in the next instant realizes two cars have stopped dead ahead in the left lane and he must slam on the brakes. He does so. Had the moisture and light rain not brought the oil in the road to the surface he might have stopped in time.

The eighteen wheels of his shipping truck do not respond gracefully as the rubber tread halts and slides across the concrete of the highway, smoking, screaming, leaving a trail of parallel black lines across the gray concrete until finally an old brown Buick halts the progress of the heavy truck, absorbing the leftover momentum into its rectangular body as it is hurled down the road, careening off the car in front of it and flipping over on its side.

And He Will Not Be Named Bailey
In which Allen decides to get a dog—a dog he will never have.

ca • fé (ka-fey) n. a coffee-house; a restaurant, usually licensed for the sale of light refreshments only.

"Well, there you go," Allen says and sets the dictionary back on the bookshelf.

At 3:12pm, the pressure system had gotten to him and he decides to leave. And then he decides to

get a dog. No matter the kind of Allen-logic it was because he was going to be in Atlanta an hour before Jodie got off work, he wanted go to the humane shelter and get a dog. Allen had been meaning to get a dog for a while. But every time he went to Atlanta, it only ever occurred to him to go see Jodie. Whatever she wanted to do, they did—not that Allen minded—Jodie was the native. She knew everything fun in Atlanta to do.

She took them to the botanical garden and he had been skeptical of whether looking at flowers for an afternoon would keep his attention. It had hardly mattered given the weather. Jodie never stopped talking about them though, which was amazing, considering that she worked at a flower shop. How in the world could she look at flowers day in and day out and then on her weekends too? It amazed and intrigued him. If someone asked for a tour of his loan office, he would rather shoot himself. In a way, it made sense to Allen that Jodie loved flowers so much. They were kindred. She belonged among them. He smiles at the thought and that he might have enough romantic courage these days to tell her that later.

As he puts his shoes on he thinks about getting a dog again. I'm totally serious. He is completely

serious and he thinks about the kind of dog he'd want. Whenever he thought of dogs, it was always that generic yellow American dog that came to mind. That wasn't the kind of dog he wanted. He wanted something more dashing. It was strange too, that he didn't want a puppy. Most people wanted puppies. Allen really just wanted a dog—already trained and grown up. He'd name it Bailey. He'd always liked that name and if Jamie had anything to say about it, they'd never have a son by that name.

A Good Day?

In which a fact is noted.

On November 23, in the entire state of Georgia, only two people die. Just two.

Crushed All Movement

In which Allen is hit by Gary Traver's semi.

The sky overhead has crushed all movement. Even at sixty miles per hour he is going nowhere. And he is lost in his head. The horizon is always

"out there" and far away, until low clouds roll in and cover you and quietly the world becomes a bowl at the bottom of which you sit. You do not so much contemplate the distance as just the gray of what is near. It is never harmful to ask on such a day, "Why do I bother?" as the sky pulls you under. He is looking at this world covered over until he sees the brilliance of the red brake lights in front of him. *Is he okay? He's stopped! Shit!* He grabs the wheel to pull hard right. The rearview mirror: nothing but a truck grill. *Fuck! Hold on... Oh God, I love you, Jodie.*

Bailey is Not Bailey

In which Bailey is not adopted right away.

Bailey's name isn't Bailey—it's James. James had to be in the humane shelter for more than two weeks after November 23. But since he was such a beautiful Irish Setter, there was no question among the volunteers at the shelter that he would eventually be adopted. They did a good job of keeping his long hair shiny and clean and he was a genuinely happy dog. That's why Linda Davis adopted the dog whose name isn't Bailey and named

him James: he was a beautiful and genuinely happy dog. It was low clouds that named Bailey James.

The Clouds Bring Him Home

In which the sky embraces Allen Lawson.

A new vibration is behind his eyes—a leftover buzz of having been missing in the darkness—the unconsciousness of being unconscious. Something is pinched in his neck, tugging at his shoulders. Black slowly becomes gray and the vibration recedes. There is no pain, though his neck is at an odd angle as though he were standing on his head and then fell asleep. His feet are suspended beside him. A new feeling comes over Allen: an urgency to open his eyes. Everywhere cold objects are pressed numbly against him, or rather warm objects are pressing the cold that is him. The shift stick is pressed into his thigh. The steering wheel is wrapped around his left arm like a paperclip. His back is still against his seat.

Dizziness begins in his stomach and the urgent need to open his eyes becomes a sickness that overcomes him. His stomach shifts and he feels a

warm liquid run down the side of his face and the length of his right arm hanging weightlessly in midair. One eye opens halfway and the darkness turns to a white haze. The other eye is glued shut. His left hand comes into focus through the one eye, resting limply against the steering wheel and the horizon's line inexplicably running vertically. The clouds push like a bulldozer against the roadway vanishing sideways. Allen tries to move his left arm, move a finger. It feels as though he's been sleeping on top of it, empty of blood, heavy and immobile. As though he were lifting a weight at the gym, it is trapped in mid-lift. This time he cannot let go. His psyche is not involved in the struggle. He cannot relax the muscles and as he tries a pain shoots up his arm, through his shoulder and clutches the side of his head like a vulture.

Something gives way and Allen's head slides down off the seat back against his right shoulder. A pale light warm with ultraviolet rays washes over his open eye. Clouds drift by in the driver's side window. Black contoured shapes of the mirror, the door handle, the eerily bent shape of the shattered door, frame the blanket of sky. The smell of winter moisture mixed with gasoline and blood tickle Allen's nose. He tries to breathe in deep and the

vulture's claws ravage his chest and neck. Allen's left hand spasms as the pain washes over him and he loses the feel of it completely, his reflexes catching some imaginary lighter hurled from his memory.

After a moment, Allen can't feel the tension of his seatbelt or the presence of the shift stick anymore. He is unsure if he is there and closes his eyes, disappearing into himself. Something gives way a second time and Allen feels his chin pressed into his chest. He can feel his shallow breaths coming more slowly and more costly, as though his involuntary reflex to breathe were winding down. He has to seize every breath he takes. He can neither stop nor start them, each one becoming a wash of consciousness, each one pounding another thought into his brain. I'm going to be late to pick up Jodie...

"Hey!"

A new voice calls to him—though it sounds like it is passing through water.

Through a thin line of haze Allen sees a black shadow's head peering in the driver's side window, the gray sky racing above it, flattening it. "Hey!" The voice is closer. "Hang on, partner. The po ... nce are on th ... all right?"

Allen believes he nods though he cannot know if he does. There is no need for what he hears in the voice, he knows. No worry. No fear. In a moment of ambiguous desire Allen tries to move his left arm toward the shadow, to comfort it. Patience. The shadow sees the gesture and speaks. "I ... know. Stay ... ut ... ight? You ... ay put." Some response makes its way from Allen's distant mind to the world but can find no mouth through which to travel. It lingers and disappears. Allen does not know that he smiles.

"...at's ... ight ... put."

Looking from the shadow to the clouds, Allen can see their lines more clearly now. The light from the sky is dimming. Curves and knobs and dents and wrinkles and bends and forks and valleys float above him, barely moving? A third time, something moves and Allen feels his world roll around him, his head, his eyes, all rock back without resistance. The world and the sky spin away as Allen's vision sweeps across the dashboard and his leg to the passenger's seat where his gym bag lay resting on the concrete below him. He suddenly feels desire again, desire against pain, to look at the clouds again, to look up.

"... o no no!" comes the shadow's voice. Allen can see his vision reversing in a nauseating

disorienting blur, feels his head turning, something grasping him ... the shadow. “ ... eep your head up, okay?” The shadow has reached for him, grasped his cheek, and between the silhouetted arm and head, Allen can see the sky again. His mind relaxes, something inside his chest caves and a sad, sad joy—the last joy—washes over him. He wants to thank the shadow for helping him see the sky. For a brief moment he can feel the man touching him and the cool wind of winter spirals down the man’s arm and pours across Allen’s face. Still, the colors—desaturated, blurred—Allen opens his eye to the clouds. The world becomes a white plane of clouds, empty and bright as if the sun were beneath him. The effort drags Allen’s one eye shut and darkness encompasses him again.

“ ... ”

The pressure of the sky comes into Allen’s heart and softly embraces him like Jodie. It sleeps with him. For a last moment, Allen wonders if he is the clouds before he drifts away.

And the Picture is Gone
In which the sky opens up.

A L O W C L O U D R E F L E X

As the two crows move from the ground to the sky with heavy long flaps of their wings, a raindrop disturbs an ashen grass blade. Another drop falls, and then another. As the minutes pass, and the crows become small black points in the gray furrowed sky, the rain steadily increases. More and more raindrops fall until the sound of a rush is upon the field. It rains heavy until the crows are far out of sight and then for several minutes more.