

Brian Burke / HANDS

1

As a small boy he plays outside his house—in *his* yard—and he crouches down on his knees, digging in the dirt. He sees all this—himself—through a camera, a camera positioned so low that his childlike form, oversized head, frail undersized body, loom large in the foreground, while above and behind, huge white clouds begin to boil. They tower overhead, higher and higher, the danger accelerating furiously. The undersides darken, and the entire sky threatens to tumble over and crush him.

Oblivious, he continues to play. His bare arms are thin; he wears a striped T-shirt, wide shorts—much wider than his skinny legs—and running shoes, scuffed, the laces undone.

Clouds, black now, blot out the sky; but the boy still digs his fingers in the soil, smoothing down roadways, forming hillsides.

He knows what is coming next, what must come—and he kicks out in his sleep. He begins to sweat, and emits struggling, guttural sounds. Strange grunts—aware too of a voice, a sense that suggests it is too late to save himself.

Blasts of thunder shake the ground, stun the boy and spin him around, backward, pinning him to the earth. For the first time he sees them, enormous clouds, brutal and black to the ground. Panic speeds his heartbeat and his breathing, seals off the cry jammed in his throat. He races to the back porch—safety, he thinks—his scraped knees pumping. And the hand-held camera follows.

A bolt of lightning strikes the yard and another cannon-shot of thunder knocks the boy to the sidewalk below his porch. His knees bleed, and he wonders why no one comes to rescue him.

And it's all so agonizingly slow. Please—he's sure he won't survive another lightning strike, another crash of thunder. Please. Hold off for just a few seconds more. It's too dark, the blackness so strangely vivid.

He scales the porch steps on his hands and knees, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, his unformed chin trembling. Flailing wildly with his hands, he tears open the screen door, lets it slam shut behind him, and stands terrified, humiliated in the darkened kitchen.

He opens his eyes. No one looks up. His father, so large behind the kitchen table, plays solitaire. His mother stands at the counter, a long gleaming knife in her hand. With quick, efficient strokes she slices through stewing beef, cutting away the fat.

In a turn of his head the counter is clear and his mother and father disappear.

Early morning; the kitchen is warm and brightly lit. He goes to the cupboards above the sink and climbs upon a chair. Standing on his toes, he stretches and reaches out with his fingertips for the box of cereal on the second shelf, the one just beyond his grasp. It is not the cereal he is after, but the plastic baseball player concealed inside. The box glides silently forward onto his straining fingers, where it totters, then tumbles to the counter-top.

He rips open the box, clumsily tearing the boxtop; filled with dread, he checks to see if it still has trade-in value — it's worthless, and he tilts the oversized package over a deep blue bowl. But instead of cereal flakes, out pour hundreds of plastic coins, each embossed with the picture of a baseball player, followed by a flood of marbles, dozens of them, hundreds, thousands, that bounce off the counter and his chair onto the floor. And, finally, one flake of cereal.

He tries to catch the marbles in mid-bounce, to stop them from rolling noisily across the hard kitchen floor and waking his parents; but there are thousands of them, multiplying into millions of marbles ricocheting around him, impossible to silence, and his hands are too small.

2

He approaches his parents' house in a steady, droning rain, protected beneath a bobbing black umbrella, soon to be blown inside-out. Poisonous plant-life encroaches on both sides of the roadway. It's once again a dirt road before him, like it was when they had first moved there as a young family on his sixth birthday. As always, when the house finally appears through the rain and low cloud, it seems to cling to the hillside — the only house not

completely overgrown now with the rampant vegetation—like an air bubble.

Wordlessly, he enters the house through the back door, his cold hand sparking as it touches the copper knob, and he passes by his parents, who drink tea at the kitchen table. He heads directly on down the basement stairs, and hides in the dark as thunderstorms explode outside. He stays curled up in an abandoned, over-stuffed armchair, his eyes squeezed shut and his fingers in his ears, until he dares to think the storm might be over. He never—must never—open his eyes to find out; instead, he takes his fingers out of his ears, just barely, and listens.

Images of a cyclical conspiracy raging outside parade through his head, as he hides and listens to the sound of his own pulse beating inside his ears, the tides of his blood rising and falling. Something in the ocean—he has never known what—kills whales. Dead and water-bloated, they rise and float overhead, piling up against the mountains. Their swollen underbellies are slit from below by the mountain ridges. Poison rains down, drenches the hillsides, and seeps into the soil, into the rivers and streams, and finally back out into the ocean. Plant-life thrives, feeding on the contamination. It overgrows the slopes and foothills. On the other side of the mountain lies a whale's graveyard. This is what he tells himself, eyes squeezed shut, fingers pressed into his ears, ten years old again, not daring to move.

Occasionally, when he pulls his fingers out of his ears to listen, the storm still crashes over the house, and he crawls deeper into the armchair. Other times, the storms end and he climbs back upstairs, leaving through the kitchen, where his parents still sit quietly, drinking tea at the table.

3

He holds his breath and walks quietly among coffins. Clear bright moonlight shines through a man-sized hole in the window above him and onto a large double casket. The heavy wooden lid lies ajar, and he stares down at the peaceful faces of his mother and father—his mother so serene, his father more at rest than he has ever seen him before; finally a trace of relaxation in the usually tense, harsh features.

But he searches for a smaller, lighter coffin—and he sees it resting shoulder-high on a shelf, in a dark corner away from the light.

He straightens the lid on his parents' casket, satisfied with the firm solid fit. Someone has to make everything secure.

That sense, surrounding him, always present, repeats itself again: save her.

He raises his daughter's coffin from the shelf and carries her swiftly through the city streets. He can hear the sound of tires on wet pavement; he can see his breath pluming before him in the night; but it has not been raining and stars shine as pinpoints overhead. Moisture must seep up from below.

They are stealing the childhood from your child—hurry, before you are found. Before you are caught.

Over the swaying suspension bridge; he slips only once climbing the steep, wooded mountainside. Sky awaits, black and visible beyond the tree-tops towering high above him.

On his knees he digs with his hands in the dirt, scooping deeper, deeper, until he stops, perspiring, to listen for it. Listen: to the wind shifting through the branches of the conifers. And music: a tinkling of crystal or windchimes carried on a scent of pine and fir, rising above his frantic breathing.

His daughter's tiny mouth opens in a small oh. He leans close, making a wish for the faintly sweet baby's breath. With thumb and forefinger he gently presses her thin blue lips together, leaving small blue bruises the size of his thumbprints. With firm hands he lays his baby at the bottom of the freshly-dug grave and folds a white wool blanket over her.

They should be coming now. In desperation he loses his footing and crashes down the mountainside. Scratched and bleeding, he stands, turns sharply. Listens. Only wind rises from the darkness beyond him. Only wind. But he runs. Faster. Breath tears from his lungs. Shouts struggle to escape his strangled throat but are lost in the roar and rush of water and his blood. Over the skyline the first faint flush of lightning. He tumbles to his knees again on the rocking suspension bridge and crawls, hands gripping the rope he cannot see.