

## THE CHINESE BOY

Scaff is passing through the drive-thru bank with his daughter when he first sees the Chinese boy, and the love that has stalked him silently all his life and until now has only come upon his dried footprints many years old (*ah, Scaff was here*) finally catches up with him. The boy's face inside the little bank building comes up suddenly, blooms in the light and dies away, smooth and pearlescent, with that look of belonging somewhere else Scaff will never get to, in an element he cannot breathe. The shadows there are so heavy Scaff can barely see. The pressure in his chest is unbearable.

October closes around him, floats him, almost weightless now, along its shining edge, the light so beautiful as it recedes into winter that the trees are trying to hoard it, *mine*, in their own black hands. But it only breaks apart wherever they try to touch it. Brightness disintegrates, the one trick it always knows.

On this day, Scaff sighs into the cool air and sees his own breath disappearing ahead of him, he cannot stop it. O, wait for me, he wants to say, but to what? To whom? So through his front window he watches the sun go down, blood-faced and bucking in the evening's

arms, *not now!, not yet!*, until whatever it wanted so badly to finish is ended by the black hills beyond the town. All night long Scaff picks up the bits of what it said to him alone, though he only stares into the darkness, the stars collecting in his palm, a tiny mountain of light that shifts and cuts him as he tries to climb.

At dawn, Scaff is still in his chair with the rubber wheels, Scaff the difficult, the unlikable, the failed, watching the black birds mock his life, whatever corn all eaten now but one scant, yellow handful. The bentness of his wings is evident in how easily the birds put him behind them, hundreds at a time, lifting up lightly into the air as if they are glad to see the last of him, acute with love as he is. Burdened so late. A lapful of leaves. His hands do not know what to do with themselves. His yearning can assure him of nothing at all.

Behindhand friend to a zealot of loneliness, he bangs the bars of morning with the tin cup of his brooding. He is trying to bend the steel of circumstance with his small hands, but it will not bend. Everything from out of nowhere looking in the window, he rocks himself in the outgrown cage of his life, the same leaf falling just beyond his reach, over and over, like the smudged, red key to everything he needs.

Scaff's daughter Tonya is the Elephant Girl of Littleton. Six and a half feet tall at least, and big as all grief, with rings of pale skin that bulge up and back along her arms as she lifts them up or hangs them down. Every day she climbs the red and orange circus stool, stickered with every A from school, though she is forty-six years old now, and does tricks for her father. A cup of tea. A bath. A trip through the town in the sunshine. *Papa, look at the leaves. Look at the moon, so full.* But her tricks are just the same old same old – he has seen them a thousand times – and Scaff only stares out the window, his crooked little shoulders saying *enough*.

Scaff at the age of eighty-three has recently begun to look back upon his life. *Ah, Scaff! Who knew that everyone who can't die young will arrive at this one day?* His soul in jeopardy, he has begun to try to say to his daughter some few nice things. One pleasantry a day because it is the right thing to do, like a terrible green medicine, sour in his mouth: *that soup was not bad; a hot bath can't be beat.* Scaff writes these on an erasable message board; since his stroke, he cannot speak. He pushes the board toward Tonya to say *I have traveled through the world on business all these years, and yes, of course, I have brought you a present, you can open your eyes now.* But Tonya does not profit from this as you might think, for she was trained with the hook of indifference, and over time the reward becomes the reward, whatever it is, and when Scaff scrawls his kind word, she only looks at him questioningly, as if