Mikey and Dad made signs for Tang’s first hospital crib, signs with words and crude pictograms as on ancient cave walls: “Smiley-face I love you stick-man heart. I heart baby love Mikey big brother. Stick-man. Scribble. Dad heart Baby.” Wrought in bold crayon on rolls of receipt paper from Dad’s office, the signs were taped to the glass barriers of Tang’s hospital crib. Tang didn’t wonder who had made the signs, or ask whether the people who had made the signs would visit. He slept a lot. At the time, Tang was just a red thing in a blanket. Dad and Mikey’s words and pictures were there, though, keeping Tang from seeing the breathing nursery, the rows and rows of other cribs, the fist-thumping, howling, peeing babies, red-nosed, cross-eyed, and toe-tapping; babies dreaming of nipples and milky nestled warmth, babies indistinguishable from one another so they were just babies, braceleted and catalogued and sorted, babies who had come from grown babies and who would grow to make more babies, who would in turn be babies just like those that Tang—being a baby, surrounded by signs—never knew. “Baby,” said the signs, “I love you. Scribble. Heart.”

Thirty-six years after the day of Tang’s birth, a pocketed golf shirt lies in folds on Tang’s bathroom floor, blue on white. Tang’s belly rises under the bathwater. He fingers each hair there. He feels himself below. If he had the discipline, he thinks, he would write his autobiography. It would be called The Life of something. Though he hasn’t decided the life of what yet, he would begin by recording the omens that forecast his birth, proceed with the highlights of his life, noting the tragic events and struggles, and conclude with his untimely yet heroic death, all in an organized, systematic way. The problem is, because of the way things are, or the way things have happened in his life so far, the autobiography as he wants it to be wouldn’t be true.
Thirty-six years ago Mom’s body buckled and jerked up and down, in and out, and breathed (whoop and whoosh) and the pains came closer and closer (whoop and ohhhh) and she gasped (and gasped again). There was a flush of red liquid and casing. Mom held the thing that came out. All the people Tang would meet he hadn’t met yet. He wasn’t worried. He didn’t consider that, merely by living, he could become responsible for several deaths.

Mom said that when Tang was born she closed her eyes because with them open she felt like she did at the opera—too many voices in that room. Too many dressed up moving bodies and too much drama. Closed, there was quiet. Like after the opera, when the song’s been sung. And Tang was Mom’s son; he hated the opera.

Mom named her second son Whiting, her maiden name. Mikey, who was fortunate enough to be named after Dad, and who was three at Whiting’s birth, called his brother Tang.

“Hi Tang,” he would say to the red thing in the crib.

“Tang’s a hothouse flower,” Mom began to say as Tang grew. “Tang’s a shy little guy. He’s my little helper.”

Tang’s secret desire at the age of thirty-six is to be put into canned cranberry sauce. Then things would be simple. The consistency of his dwelling would be jelly-smooth. The shape, cylindrical. The color, dark red. He’d like to step into a can of cranberry sauce and be entirely surrounded. Rather than dying, he imagines artificial preservation there, and—sometime later, when humans perfect themselves and understand how to map the future so that nothing goes awry—scientists could open his can. Thup. They would plop him into a bowl. He’d step out and start living. He’d do well living in a perfect world with perfect humans who could plot the future with precision. Until then, cranberry sauce would be preferable. He’d live best inside a can, tasting fruit, fed by the deep, velvety red.
This morning—before Tang came home from work and took a bath—he went to work as Superintendent of Greens at Sunnyside Country Club. The *dimples greens* and *dewy turf* weren’t enough to distract Tang from the trenches dug by yesterday’s hacker with a three iron. No. On the eighth tee, he found several dislodged bits of earth. He carried each divot back to its place; he fit each divot into the wedge from which it came. Not everything, Tang thought, can go back where it should: today Mom couldn’t slip candles into canned cranberry sauce as if it were chocolate poundcake, and Mikey couldn’t sit next to Tang to snuff out those candles and take Tang’s wish for himself before Tang could blow—because on May 5th, thirty-six years ago, Tang was born.

This morning, the stomp of Tang’s shoe on a divot said, “Let there be growth.” And when Sunnyside’s Superintendent says, “Let there be growth,” there will be. Just like if Dad says he’s coming for cake today (for the first time since Tang can remember), there will be cake, and Tang will bake the cake in his own house, measuring each ingredient precisely, so that Dad will see that he is right not to be where he was on Tang’s other birthdays. Dad’ll be with Tang, whose life is orderly and measured, planned, calculated, and lived without mistakes.

Where Dad has been on Tang’s past birthdays:

1. a New Age Healing Conference
2. his ex-roommate’s son’s bar mitzvah
3. a St. Vincent de Paul clothing drive with the Sisters of St. Aloysius Parish

“I’ll be there,” Dad told Tang three weeks ago on the phone, “May 5th. Your birthday, Whiting—another birthday!”

When Mikey turned eight, sixteen days before Tang turned five,
Mom baked two chocolate cakes: one nice big birthday cake for Mikey, one nice big birthday cake for Tang. Mikey mashed his fork into his. They smeared the fresh chocolatey mess of Mikey’s cake over their lips and licked while Mom put toothpicks in Tang’s cake and covered it in clear wrap. “Tang’s cake stays in the freezer until May 5th,” Mom said. “No buts.”

But every night for sixteen days, Tang’s cake emerged from its icy country; Tang’s cake baptized Tang in candle-flame and pink frosting. Everyone stood around it and sang, so Tang felt the same as the cake and perfectly happy.

Every morning for sixteen days, Tang realized his cake was freezing. It was losing its flavor, night after night. Every morning his toes scuffed the carpet and slapped against the tiles and then the light came on and his breath formed clouds in the arctic air. The cake hardened. He knocked on it. “Close the freezer, Tang,” Mom called. For sixteen days, droning days, arduous four-year-old days, nothing happened and seconds were things to count but that didn’t bring Tang to Five. For sixteen nights, Tang counted one, two, three, four, Five, one, two, three, four, Five, and there was the shape in the other bed where Mikey was eight under the covers.

Then Tang was Five. Mom, Mikey, and Melanie—the five-year-old from next door who liked to draw monsters and pick scabs—would all see him blow out his candles. They would all come to dinner. And Dad would be Somewhere Else, which was magical.

At dinner, if Tang pinched his nose he could stomach the sauerkraut. The pork could be swallowed if cake was coming.

“Cake!” he yelled, “Cake!”

“Cake, cake, cake,” Mikey and Melanie chanted, “Cake, cake, cake.” Melanie held her fork like a sword and grimaced.

Tang slid off the chair and ran to the counter. No cake. He looked at his mom.

Mom got the pinch in her forehead and followed Tang to the freezer.
Breathing her musky Mom-smell, Tang patted the creases in her skirt as she opened and then closed the freezer door. The light went out and the clouds dissolved and she said, “Tang. Sweetie, we forgot to let it thaw.” Thaw meant no cake; thaw meant, “You can cry.”

Tang cried as Mom took inventory of the pantry. He cried as her hand on the back of his head came through the crying, and her apron went wet and warm in his eyes. “How about a cranberry cake?” Mom asked.

Buck-toothed, buzz-headed Mikey (green army men in tow, pockets heavy with pork he spit into his napkin) inched his chair closer to the table. In the center of the table sat a sticky cylindrical monster, a purple gelatinous brute stuck by five birthday candles. Melanie, in braids and a backwards baseball cap, sat on her heels and sniffed the cranberry cake. Mom lit the candles and turned out the light.

The heat dissolved the monster’s skin and a thin blood-like liquid wept down its sides. Here was Tang’s cake. Tang sang. Mikey and Mom sang. Breathing before the dim light, the shredded cabbage from dinner and the sulphur from lit matches and Mom’s Woolworth’s brand perfume put a pull in Tang’s throat and he thought he would wish for Dad to come.

Mikey came closer to the table. Mikey inhaled. His lips puckered. The room was dark again, and so was Mom’s voice. “Oh, Mikey, he didn’t need any help.”

An infinitely small, infinitely hot ball of gas and dust came where Tang’s head should have been. The ball would burst if he thought of punching Mikey’s fleshiest parts with his fists, tearing off his nose. The ball would burst, so he wouldn’t think of it. Tang’s fists got smaller. His eyes got hotter.

Footsteps stomped on the front doormat, the door opened and closed and a tall man’s silhouette stood near the table. Tang’s fingers covered his eyes when Mom scraped her chair across the concrete floor and turned on a light. “Oh, you just missed the singing!”

The man slapped Tang’s shoulders. “Getting to be a man, eh,
Whiting?” Tang’s small fists rubbed his hot eyes. His chin moved up and down. He nodded as Mom eviscerated the beast, his cake. (He knew that the beast, his cake, was only cranberry sauce and meant Thanksgiving or Christmas, even if Mom said it meant Birthday.) Tang nodded as it wriggled under her butter knife. He was getting to be a man.

This birthday morning, Tang found the controller and turned on the sprinkler heads. The water sprayed up from the earth. There was a single first arc of water. Then several arcs from the same sprinkler head. Then Tang imagined all the arcs that ever came to Sunnyside: the smooth curve of a flying divot, a Canada goose calmly arcing over the pond, soaring Coke cans, flung cigar cases, projectile wooden tees, the Canada goose assailed by a hurled pitching wedge, the whirling arcs of every ball driven colliding in an affray of arcs, enormous arcs, repeating, ubiquitous, terrible arcs.

The reverie arced out of control. To make it pleasant, Tang thought of an arc of water. A single arc of water. The only sight: arcs of water. The only sound permitted in his head was the sprinkler’s gentle thrashing spit, and a small, perfect, single arc of water.

Tang’s goals for this morning:

1. To keep the bent grass from drying
2. To verti-cut
3. To make small slits in the greens and tees, to relieve the thatching
4. To let water sink into the roots
5. To keep the greens

Yes: the only sounds this morning were the sprinkler’s spit gently
splashing, and Tang’s feet flapping against the blades of grass in the rough, flinging dew onto his grease and grass-stained pant legs. Tang stalked the course from rough to fairway to tee, hunting three sorts of evil:

1. gypsy moths in trees
2. gray leaf spot
3. an outbreak of fungi on the greens

Teenagers in caps and cut-off frayed shorts (biceps and triceps toned by the equipment hauling) came to Sunnyside in pickups and station wagons and clustered around the toolshed, talking and laughing. Tang pointed and said, “Those greens are uneven.” So they went out again, on rusted mowers with gravelly moans and kicking motors. They rode on verti-cutting equipment for the greens, stalked to the controllers not yet visited, turned on the sprinklers. Tang sat on the bench by the tenth tee, and put his head in his hands.

Tang killed a chipmunk once. Age eleven. Mom took the can of Raid from the highest cupboard and—since Dad and Mikey weren’t home—called, “Tang!” Tang came. “A hornet’s nest is a man’s job,” she said, so he took the can and walked the rottting porch boards, down the front steps littered with firecracker stubs, and saw the carefully-hewn work of those bodies wedged between two porch rails. Hornets walked the outside, exited from holes, climbed in, and hummed out again. They were always climbing in and humming out. They were always mating or feeding or hatching. They were everywhere, growing and dying and coming back.

Mikey wasn’t home because he was fourteen and had a crush on Karen Weathers. Tang, at age eleven, didn’t have crushes. He didn’t even talk to his next-door neighbor Melanie, though they walked the same route to school every day, and she sat in front of him, drawing skulls and dragons and cemeteries and castles, other worlds that she wrote in capitals across the margins of her notebook during History. Melanie wasn’t a girl.
anyone would like, Tang knew, even if someone liked girls like Mikey did. Mikey always said, Karen says and Karen likes and Karen thinks, and if it weren’t for something Karen said or liked or thought, Tang knew, Mikey would have been there to help him kill the hornets. He would have stood there to do the man’s job, holding a can of Raid and laughing at Tang for being a baby and not looking. Mikey would have killed the hornets himself, so Tang wouldn’t have to do it.

Tang thought of how Poa annua invades the bent grass. How people in plaid knickers carry the annual bluegrass seed on their cleats from Twin Oaks to Green Valley to Sunnyside. How they plant it, stab spike incisions over the fairways, and with each step another bit of Poa annua begins to grow. How Poa annua even invades the fescue in the roughs. How the land might go brown in a short dry spell. How Poa annua and its billion white seed heads cluster on the roughs, Poa annua and its billion white seed heads gather and cluster and shove and move, growing always on the greens. How these little white seed heads, Poa annua, everywhere, put out roots, crave rain, make the greens bumpy underfoot, these little white seed heads becoming weak blades—but Poa annua can’t be stopped forever. Kill it and it’ll return. It’s an endless cycle. The golfers will bring it back. Tang can kill the Poa annua, but it comes back.

Mikey wasn’t there to kill the hornets. And in the weeds below the nest, a hornet climbed a dandelion. Each foot sunk firm in that yellow tuft. Here was something Tang couldn’t feel, some mystery only hornets understood—this collecting and mating and dying and building colonies that grew and complicated. Tang held the Raid close to the nest. His finger pressed the plastic trigger, and the spray hit the hornet nest.

He watched the hornets slowly curl, how a body would slowly shiver and try to move close to the others before it fell. He saw how hornets rain from the nest.

When the rain stopped, a chipmunk came from a bush. It stopped
at the pile of bodies. Cheeks puffed, it ate the hornet bodies as if they were nuts.

“Hey!” Tang yelled. “Hey!”

He did a dance. Under the bush shadow, the chipmunk hid. Tang saw Melanie standing at the edge of her yard, in the dirt between their houses, tearing the needles from a pine tree and watching Tang. She traced her toe in the dirt, making a circle. Then she rubbed out the circle, and glared at the chipmunk.

Tang’s hands dropped to his sides. “Hey!” he yelled. But he couldn’t stay there to yell. The chipmunk would return to eat more when he wasn’t there. In its chipmunk stupidity, it would eat the whole pile of bodies, its stomach rumbling with so much Raid, and it would die. Then maybe a beagle would eat the chipmunk, and the beagle would die, and a vulture would swoop down and pick the beagle’s infested Raid-bones clean, and the vulture’s body would leak Raid into a cornfield, Raid weeping into each stalk of corn, and a small farmer’s son would be sent outside by his mother to harvest corn (‘It’s a man’s job,” his mother would say) and his mother and sisters would husk that corn for dinner, Raiding an entire farming family. But if Tang hadn’t sprayed, Mom would be mad. She would be stung. It was pain both ways, no matter what Tang did.

Tang went inside. When he looked out the kitchen window, Melanie was crouching there in the yard, biting the insides of her cheeks, squinting, looking for the chipmunk.

This morning, two boys sang and sprayed pesticide over the Poa annua. As Tang walked past the cart shed, their voices carried: “Oh, Poa annua, now don’t you die on me,” they sang to the tune of “Oh, Susanna.” Humming the tune of “Oh, Susanna,” Tang found hornets building a small nest near the wooden rafters. He looked at the hornet nest.

Tang then Raided the hornet nest just as he had at age eleven,
only without thinking of the deaths. He knew that in order to achieve the product that is Tang, healthfully in the bathtub (scrubbing his calf at age thirty-six), it was necessary that he sprayed those hornets, that Melanie had seen him kill the hornets, and that Mikey blew those candles from his cake. It was necessary.

It was necessary that in high school when Dad stopped sending money, Tang found a job in a gas station mini-market. In order to be in a bathtub now, warmly holding Dove soap and his own hairy feet, it was necessary to have stolen a pack of cigarettes from the mini-market each day, to compensate for his small paycheck. It was necessary that in high school when Tang’s friend Greg offered a joint, Tang took it.

After high school, Tang used to go to Woolworth’s where Mom worked, increase the volume on the store’s Tokens music, and hold Mom’s elbows, drumming them to the tapping beat of “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” on the Elle and Better Homes and Gardens magazines lined up in front of her counter. This was necessary too. When Mom sent Tang outside, Tang would laugh and gesture at Mom from outside the window. He would walk from Woolworth’s to his friend Greg’s, and when Greg offered a joint, he would accept. Tang would then offer Mikey a joint, feeling, for the first time, that he was older than his brother, and had more experience. He offered Mikey other things to try, too. Tang skipped days of school to try new things with Greg, and sometimes with Mikey.

When Dad came to his graduation, Tang let him say that he had become a man. At Penn State, Tang majored in math and physics. He became interested in Newton’s billiard-ball description of the universe, as well as Sigma Alpha Epsilon toga parties. And all of these details were unavoidable. It wasn’t in Tang’s power to change the course of events that brings him to the bathtub where he now sits, holding Dove soap on his birthday—Tang knows. All of these details, were they even slightly altered, would result in an entirely different configuration of events in the present.
It was necessary:

1. That Tang studied the work of Edward Lorenz, who named the butterfly effect. The butterfly effect helpfully informed Tang on the small changes leading to larger ones in weather patterns.

2. That after Mom had been promoted to manager of Woolworth’s, Tang flapped his wings and hooted outside the admissions office, then read the work of Benoit Mandelbrot, who said that chaotic systems in nature make it less predictable, less like a game of billiard-balls.

3. That Tang found fractals in clouds and coastlines and galaxy clusters and Pat’s Philly Cheesesteaks.

4. That Mom called Tang on the phone. “They said Mikey’s using hair—” she began, and her voice cut out after the hair-sound which preceded the Owen-sound that should have come after, though Tang didn’t need to hear the Owen-sound because the hair-sound was enough.

5. That Tang ate mystery meat at the cafeteria and slept during class and thought of Mikey and heroin, but didn’t call Mikey.

6. That Tang copied the words of Homer Smith onto the back of a failed test: “If you like fractals, it’s because you are made up of them. If you can’t stand fractals, it’s because you can’t stand yourself,” and tacked this sign to his dorm room door.
7. That Tang spent hours behind the door to this dorm room after Mom called and said, “He has AIDS.” Behind the door, Tang thought of heroin and the way books provide rational and spiritual guidance in times of uncertainty. He hauled out the work of Descartes, Shierpinski, and Newton, reading these thoroughly before watching a chef cook meatloaf on television.

8. That Tang failed to call home, slept with a girl the night he met her at a party (thinking, at the time, of next-door neighbor Melanie, who had worn only black and been known as a silent art student and field hockey player during high school, though he had often watched her in the halls and contemplated the back of her head, how her hair, not in braids, webbed from her head in a spidery mess), slept with more girls the night he met them at parties (no longer thinking of Melanie’s braids or art, but of himself), and blared the hits of Led Zeppelin when Mom said, “Tang. Mikey’s—” and her voice cut out like the light cut out when she shut her eyes at Tang’s birth, hearing too many voices. (It was in this case unnecessary that she finish her sentence because, again, it was the chipmunk eating Raid or the hair-sound without the Owen-sound; Tang could predict what came next. It was the chipmunk eating Raid; yelling wouldn’t take it back. Tang told Mom he didn’t know what they would do. They cried some, and hung up the phone. Then they did what everyone did; they made their dinners. They went to bed.)

After these necessary events, when Tang went to bed, he curled into the shape of a shrimp. Feeling melodramatic, he played Pachelbel’s
Canon. Hearing each fallen note, each complication and each instrument’s entrance, he made no sound, then dropped out of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, packed his Subaru, and left college for another part of the state.

Tang moved into a smaller apartment, watched televised golf with interest, saw the garden of land on which Norman played, reenrolled at Penn State with his mother’s sanction to study agronomy, and became Superintendent of Greens at Sunnyside Golf Course: a satisfying and spiritually-fulfilling position wherein Tang began to fight complication, entropy, and decay, while maintaining a pristine stretch of land for people to golf.

Soon, Tang began to lather and shave three times each morning. Examining his face for each stray hair, he listed what he would forget: forget Mikey, forget the butterfly effect, forget Melanie, forget Descartes.

Forgotten:

1. Voltaire
2. Science
3. Stephen King
4. the girls
5. Pachelbel’s Canon
6. needles
7. Led Zeppelin
8. the chef
9. Mom
10. the chipmunk

In order to achieve inner peace, Tang began to consult New Age Healing Methods. In front of his mirror each morning, as he studied how his chin became amorphous and his hair seemed to creep up higher off
his forehead, he learned to recite the Five Spiritual Principles of Reiki as dictated by Reiki Master Dr. Usai:

1. Just for today do not worry
2. Just for today do not anger
3. Honor your parents, teachers, and elders
4. Earn your living honestly
5. Show gratitude to everything

The Five Spiritual Principles of Reiki were mostly easy for Tang to follow, but he struggled with showing gratitude to everything. Numbers one through four he fulfilled in everyday life.

For example, just for today, he makes sure not to worry about what it might be like when Dad comes for cake. He honors Dad. Even if Dad is always mysteriously on his own, and has remained that way even after the deaths of Mom and Mikey, he honors Dad, and earns his living honestly, turning on sprinkler heads and checking for grey leaf spot. If Dad comes today and says, “Whiting, you’ve become a man,” Tang won’t anger. Tang has trouble showing gratitude to everything, though, because he can’t identify everything. Everything is too big. And the everything he senses—Mikey and Mom and Dad and the lists he composes, the details he’s inevitably forgotten, that are equally important—it’s tough to be grateful to all that.

Tang eliminated unnecessary clutter from his life. He decided that he would become so adept at feng shui that he would not only successfully eliminate everything discussed above from his mind, but would also forget the icy country, the cranberry sauce, Mikey’s lips puckered, the tall man who came when his fists were tight, and Mikey—he would forget Mikey entirely—so that when Aunt Lucy called and said Mom had fed a hose in the car window—well.
Then he had room for such new information, though he aimed to clear that away soon, too.

Statistically, it’s young males who choose the hose method. Tang ate canned peaches. Donning black for Mom’s Big Day, Tang whistled the alphabet song, hummed “O Fortuna,” and concluded with a spunky a cappella rendition of Broadway’s “Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat.”

According to the principles of feng shui, one should keep nothing under the bed. Excessive storage can make a room uninviting; it creates stress.

Now only Michael Senior and Whiting remain. This morning after walking the course, Tang ate a lunch of baked beans. A note from three weeks ago hung on the refrigerator next to a receipt with a phone number written on it: Dad coming, my birthday.

Tang vacuumed the white carpet, sprayed Windex on the mirrors, and wiped. The Whiting Austin reflection—peeling left nostril, receding yet well-combed hair, and mole-flecked forehead—appeared beneath the soapy film. He used a feather duster to brush the beige curtains. The vacuum ran again. He set the table in a way that would say to Dad, “Yes. I have indeed become a man. Without anyone but myself.”

Tang sniffed. Blew his nose. Tripped over a cord. Dusted again, and combed his hair. Combed again. Again. He became good at combing hair. Preparing spaghetti, he tried not to look at the pasta. He checked that the front door had been unlocked. Checked the pasta. Tried not to think of the strands tangled. Tang heard the doorbell ring.

Dad would enter Tang’s home. He would stand with his hands in his pockets, take one hand from the pocket and extend it, and then Tang and Dad would make eye contact. Tang would smile first, and then Dad’s handshake would become a hug.
The UPS man stood on the front step. He held a box the size of a small television set.

“Hello,” Tang said.
“Hello,” the UPS man said.
“Fine,” Tang said, and smiled. The UPS man smiled back.
“Good,” he said. “Nice day today. Not so humid.” He handed Tang the box.

“No, nice day,” Tang said. “Good change. Not too hot.”

“Let’s just hope it stays,” the UPS man said, pointing to the place where Tang should sign.


A key broke the tape and cut through the Overnight Delivery sticker. Tang dug through packing peanuts. A shape appeared: a small, vanilla-scented candle in the shape of a dove. A note. Tang frowned at these. He read the note and laughed.

Laughed. Laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed. On his welcome mat, laughter gave way to cackles, guffaws climbing up and down scales, chords of mirth, rounds of hilarity. Tang laughed and laughed, and then stopped laughing. He set the dove on the dining room table next to the white candles and read again: “Won’t be able to make it after all—Beach Boys coming for concert! Happy birthday and love. Dad.”

Tang poured spaghetti down the drain. Smiling like a little boy, he performed a do-si-do with the empty pot. Pasta fell like worms. He opened a can of cranberry sauce and plopped it onto a plate, then felt the odd cranberry taste slither down his throat.

Tang successfully and swiftly unlaced his shoes. Scuffed his bare feet across the carpet and slapped them across the tiles into the bathroom.
The last time Tang can remember being this warm was when he had a new buzz-cut like Mikey had when he was eight. Mom sat on the edge of his bed and said, “Tang, I don’t know why.” She touched the prickles at the crown of Tang’s head, and he burrowed his face in her sleeve. “He just can’t be here. Do you remember when he gave you the Phillies cap?” she asked.

“Kind of,” he said.

“You can go see him in your head,” she said, “Anytime. Let’s think of one day we remember.”

“Maybe.”

“We’ll go see him just like he’s in a room in our heads. Just like he’s down the hall in our heads.”

More than anything, Tang wants a type of room that you can just set on fire after you’re finished living in it. You just dispose of it. You light the match. You leave. The room is in flames.

When Tang lies in the bathtub, he tries not to think about anything for a few minutes, but begins to think about not thinking about anything, and then starts to think about writing his autobiography again. His autobiography will be safe: it will be about the greens. Tending them. He begins to make detailed notes, always in the third-person. He wishes the people Mom said are down the hall in his head would move. He wishes he could spray his memories with Raid and watch the shells of people fall out, twitching and then lying silent on the floor.

“We’ll go see him just like he’s in a room in our heads,” Mom said. And the problem for Tang is, he can’t get out of the room with Dad. Mikey’s and Dad’s signs are everywhere. Mom has a room to herself. Many rooms. Tang lives in a mansion with glass walls covered by Mikey’s stupid signs: “Brother I love you stick-figure smiley-face! Stick figures holding hands!”

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Sun heart sun.” He lives in this mansion where hundreds of Michael Austin Seniors and Mikey Juniors are shelling peanuts or throwing darts or playing Horse like they did during the times Dad was home. Unfortunately for Tang, humans haven’t perfected themselves yet, haven’t discovered how to plan the present so the future comes out right, haven’t invented a way to live in canned food. The disposable room isn’t on the market. Feng shui and Reiki and Shierpinski—Tang forgets them. When Tang writes his autobiography, he can’t say anything in sum; he can’t say anything big; he keeps considering details. Tang could mention that he indirectly killed his brother and, through that, his mother, and could speculate on whether, if Dad had been at home more, or come today, Tang would have accidentally caused Dad’s death, too, but this seems ridiculous and Tang puts down his pen. He picks it up again.

Goals:

1. To find some room that was there at the beginning—before birth, before the labor, before the lists, the complications, the thinking of how A leads to B

2. To find this room and prevent all the rooms that came after

3. To find, in this very warm, very feng shui room, whatever it was (a ball of gas and dust, a seed) that was there at the beginning (without divots, hornets, or Poa annua).

Tang lets his list float on the water. He imagines himself emerging from the bathtub, dripping a little pattern on the mat, dripping more patterns on the mat. He sees a woman’s body in the pattern dripping on the mat; he imagines a woman in a room in a house somewhere else. He
will complicate things. He will finish his autobiography in a fantastic way, with adventure and romance and suspense. He will walk to the phone.

On a receipt tacked to the wall, there’s a number Tang hasn’t dialed before. Mom gave him this number awhile back, after Mikey died, but before she did. “Call her sometime,” Mom had said. “Her mother gave me the number. She’s not living too far from you, you know.” Tang dials the number, thinking of a house dripped into the pattern on the mat, a house and another house dripped into a pattern, a house with a small, blue room, and a woman standing with her back to a window near a mat, stretching a new pattern with her arms above; a new person dripped into the pattern; the person in the pattern on the mat being like another person, somewhere else. No person being in a pattern alone. Tang holds the phone to his face. Tang listens. Someone answers.

“Hello?”
“Hi, is this Melanie?”
“Who’s this?”
“It’s Tang. Tang from next door when we were kids.”
“Tang! You know—I was just thinking of you.”
“Well. I was thinking of you too.”
“Well, how’s the life of Tang?”
“It’s—what I wanted to know—how’s the life of Melanie?”